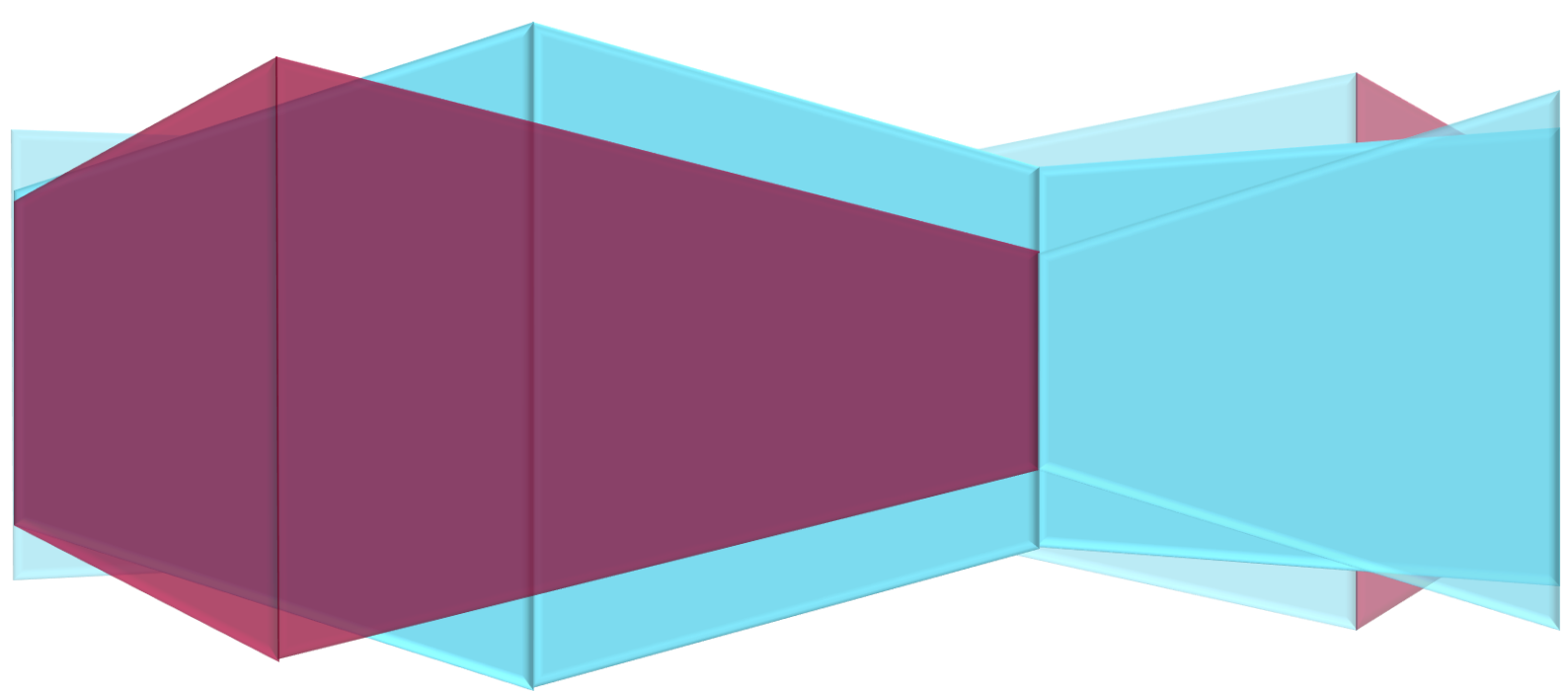


Online Fandom: exploring community and identity formation within football fan forums

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
the University of Central Lancashire

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By Daniel Nuttall



STUDENT DECLARATION

I declare that while registered for the research degree I was, with the University's specific permission, an enrolled student for the following awards:

The Teaching Toolkit (University of Central Lancashire, 2013-2014)

Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (University of Central Lancashire, 2013-2014)

I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submissions for an academic award and is solely my own work.

Signature of Candidate:



Type of Award:

Doctor of Philosophy

School:

Sport & Wellbeing

ABSTRACT

There have been recent calls for further academic attention to the online activities of football fans. Despite the growing number of studies that have utilised online interactions between fans as a source of data, none have focused on computer mediated communication (CMC) between fans as the actual subject of enquiry in itself.

The aim of the thesis is to analyse the role that the internet plays in modern football fandom and, more specifically, the way that fans communicate with one another on the internet. Allied to this, it aims to assess whether or not genuine communities of fans are established online as a result of the interaction between fans via CMC. In doing so, the thesis proposes a distinct conceptualisation of an online community in order for the term to retain conceptual and analytical value and, thus, avoid the imprecise and rhetoric use of the broader term of community within the academic study of football fans.

The underpinning research is based on a prolonged ethnographic study of an online community who frequented two internet message boards for the fans of Burnley Football Club. Each is home to several thousand members and discussion posts. This study encompassed a period of participant observation, between 2011 and 2017, and eight semi-structured interviews with significant community members who were identified during the observation process. The qualitative data gleaned from this research was then coded, line-by-line, to distil key and recurring themes.

The findings of the research suggest that CMC is facilitating the maintenance and recreation of traditional fan identities, practises and communities in modern football. The community in question, brought together by a shared interest and identity, is characterised by meaningful relationships, reciprocal behaviours, distinct norms and values, the formation of insider/outsider statuses, and identity to an online space and fellow community members. Whilst those members interact in a variety of ways, CMC has continued to be central to their engagements with one another following the formation of the community.

Key words: online community, football fandom, identity, computer mediated communication, ethnography.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

STUDENT DECLARATION	1
ABSTRACT	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	6
LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGES	8
ABBREVIATIONS	8
INTRODUCTION	9
18 th May, 2014.	10
Clarets Mad & Up the Clarets	13
The Aims and Originality of the Thesis	14
Structure of the Thesis	15
CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW	20
Introduction	20
Early Studies of Football Fans	20
Moving Beyond Deviance	22
‘Virtual’ fandom & use of the Internet	31
Satellite Fans, Transnational Fandom and Migrant Diasporas	40
Conclusion	45
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUALISING ONLINE COMMUNITIES	47
Introduction	47
Defining the Online Community	48
‘Online’ and ‘Virtual’	51
Conclusion: distinguishing ‘online’ and ‘place’ in conceptions of internet communities	56
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS, METHODOLOGY AND REFLEXIVITY	60
Introduction	60

Methodology	61
Reflexivity and research philosophy	62
Conducting ethnography online	63
Defining the field	65
Research Ethics	71
Methods	78
The Data Collected	84
Conclusion	86
CHAPTER FOUR: MATCH-DAY DISCUSSION THREADS	89
Introduction	89
Custard World	90
The Shared Experience: Clarets versus Latics, 21/04/14	96
Replicating the match-day experience	103
“Et nous chantons Madge Allez!”: Digital innovations in the match-day experience	107
Conclusion	114
CHAPTER FIVE: “Why feel the need to openly express your sexuality?”: community values, conflict and homophobia.	117
Introduction	117
Hate in the Beautiful Game	118
Football v Homophobia, September 2013	120
The Racism Comparison	126
Consequences for the forum	128
“He Tweets what he Wants...”: The Andre Gray Controversy, August 2016.	132
Inclusive Masculinities?	138
Conclusion	147
CHAPTER SIX: EXILED FANS	148
Introduction	148

Burnley: Twinned with Flacq, Mauritius	150
Home Advantage: transnational fans and maintaining identities	157
The Rise of the Advice Community: support mechanisms, football and fan culture.	161
Conclusion	172
CHAPTER SEVEN: IDENTITY TO PLACE, AND POWER INEQUITIES WITHIN ONLINE COMMUNITIES	174
Introduction	174
“The Forum is Dead; Long Live the Forum!”	175
Identity Crisis? Personal and spatial identities in online communities	179
“It’s like being in an argument, but only one voice is heard”: Questioning the Representativeness of Content, Power Equity and the Administration Of Message Boards.	186
Conclusion	193
CONCLUSION	196
Limitations and Future Research	201
REFERENCES	206
APPENDIX	220
A - Participant Information and Consent Form (Interviews)	220
B – Initial Research Post (message board)	222

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LIST OF FIGURES AND IMAGES

<i>Name</i>	<i>Page</i>
1 - Giulianotti's (2002: 31) Ideal-Type Categories.	23
2 - Recent Internet Use in 2011 and 2017 by Age Group, UK.	32
3 - The Online Community Concept.	58
4 - Bruckman's (2002) Modes of Disguise.	76
5 - Custard World Forum Banner	91
6 - Ashley Barnes	108
7 - Michael Kightly	108
8 - Burnley are Promoted	109
9 - Eli's Forum Banner	110
10 - Madge Celebrates in Style	111
11 - Davemanu2000	153
12 - Clarets Mad Adverts, 2018.	177

ABBREVIATIONS

BFC – Burnley Football Club

CMC – Computer mediated communication

EPL – English Premier League

INTRODUCTION

The town of Burnley, in the North-West of England, and its surrounding area is home to approximately 87,000 people (Burnley.gov.uk, 2017). This small town was an integral part of the thriving cotton industry of Lancashire, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries (Walton, 1988). Since the Second World War, however, it has been characterised by economic strife; notably the collapse of the cotton industry, followed by the closure of other key industries and factories (Clarke, 2001). In recent years the town's name has become synonymous with a number of social issues, including racial tension, riots, high levels of unemployment, and widespread poverty. Perhaps, however, it is most famously associated with its football club. To many of its residents and outsiders alike, the two are irrefutably connected, and the importance of the football club as a local social and cultural institution is unrivalled within the town.

Burnley is also the town I was born in and, despite moving away to the idyllic countryside of Suffolk as a youngster, I have been drawn back to the town and have once again been part of the 87,000 for more than a decade now. In truth, Burnley was never too far away. Growing up as 'the northern kid' at school, trips back home to see family, and support of the town's football club, meant that it has been the focal point of my identity for as long as I can recall.

During the years away, opportunities to see the football team play were limited. As a nine-year-old boy I managed to catch their only home defeat during the 1990/91 season, a rather dismal one-nil match against Chesterfield in the Fourth Division, but most of the games I saw were away matches against local opposition. Local to me, anyway. In fact, my first ever Burnley match was away at Peterborough United in 1990 where we raced to a two-nil lead by half time. As you've probably already guessed, we eventually succumbed to a three-two defeat. Many Saturday afternoons were spent on Teletext¹ tracking the fortunes of the team until I returned to live in Lancashire as a young adult, under the guise of higher education, which allowed me to be a season ticket holder at the football club for the first time.

¹ Teletext was a television information retrieval service created in the United Kingdom in the early 1970s. Teletext was a means of sending pages of text to a television with vertical blanking interval (VBI) decoder capability. It provided a simple to use text-based information service, typically adopted for the news, weather, and TV programme schedules.

During my last couple of years as a resident of Suffolk I made two wonderful discoveries, whilst studying for my A-Levels at West Suffolk College. Together, these changed my connection to Burnley Football Club and, more importantly, to fellow fans. The first was a small network of computers in the college library which had the internet. This was at the end of the 1990s when home computers and internet use were spreading but still uncommon; only 9% of UK households had the latter, compared to 90% today (ONS, 2017a). Each computer could be booked for an hour at a time and it was during these short, precious sessions that I found websites with lengthy match reports from the perspective of Burnley fans who had actually attended the game. Not the solitary, bland paragraphs that were typical of national newspaper coverage of lower league football games, but extensive and (often necessarily) critical accounts of the match and match-day experiences fellow fans had.

Through websites such as the Clarets Independent Supporters' Association and The London Clarets, I made the second important discovery. Many of the people responsible for the content of those sites were involved in an email group, where discussion chains between Burnley fans were possible and an email account was established which would automatically send emails to all of its members. Now I had access to opinions which expanded on the website content I had only just recently discovered and, more importantly, I could ask questions of fellow fans about the team, club and everything else connected to Burnley.

The internet had granted access to Burnley and its football club to a young man in Suffolk like he'd never experienced before. It had also allowed him to interact, daily, with fellow Burnley fans for the first time, forever changing his connection to the club and the sport from then on.

18th May, 2014.

On this day, I made the short trip from Burnley to the neighbouring town of Padiham and, more specifically, to the Arbories – home of Padiham Football Club. It was my first visit to the ground, despite living less than two miles away, although I wasn't there to see a match involving the regular users of the ground, 'The Storks'. Instead, the match on offer was between the Vintage Clarets, a

team made up of former professional players who had represented Burnley Football Club over the years, and Clarets Mad, a team consisting of players who were members of the internet message board of the same name.

A crowd of over three hundred amassed to see the Clarets Mad side narrowly defeated by their former heroes by three goals to two; the decisive goal being a controversial penalty during the second half which helped the Vintage Clarets complete their comeback from two goals down. Although the result of the closely fought contest would have brought relief to the former professionals, who just about saved face on the day, and pride for the amateur side who had run such experienced players close, to most of the people attending that day its significance paled in comparison to the primary purpose of their visit to the ground.

It was, after all, the latest and perhaps most emotional 'Clarets Madiham' day yet – a regular charity football match which had been initiated by a long standing and respected member of the Clarets Mad internet message board, Tony Nuttall, who began the tradition in 2006. Rather than being organised by Tony, who was better known to other message board members as NUTZ, this match had been arranged in his honour after he passed away in June 2013 following a battle with cancer. He was just fifty-four years old. To make the event as purposeful as possible, money was being raised for the Macmillan Cancer Support charity; the participating players had each donated £50 for the privilege of being involved and, although there was no entry fee for the match, donations were being collected on the day. Prior to the match, a page was also created on the popular internet platform Just Giving, to allow those who were unable to attend to make a donation and to remember an important member of the Clarets Mad community². Over £1500 was raised on the day of the match, with a further £1230 being raised online.

The crowd and team representing Clarets Mad included friends and family of Tony Nuttall, but the majority were members of the internet message board. As a researcher, this in itself, as well as many other features of this day, was

² Founded in 2001, Just Giving is an online fundraising platform which provides a convenient method for fund raisers to create their own web pages to convey their charitable aims and personal stories. The site also facilitates easy electronic payment methods from donating visitors to the page. The specific page in question can be found at <https://www.justgiving.com/remember/123328/Tony-Nuttall>

fascinating. Whilst a few of the faces on the day were familiar to me, including the message board's chief administrator and editor, ClaretTony, and regular contributors BigDave and Redbeard, the majority were not. Yet I knew many of them; the team sheet for the Clarets Mad side included MDWat, JDRobbo, the_quoon, and several others who I had conversed with personally, via the forum. They were not just names or monikers, but characters and personalities that had become familiar to me after observing their interactions (with one another and many other forum members) for the preceding three years as a researcher, or as a member of the site myself since 2005. It was evident on the day that many of the crowd members knew one another very well; the familiarity between people in the crowd was clear to see, although many had never met one another (face-to-face) before.

The PhD process, like many other substantial research enterprises, is fraught with doubt and anxiety about the validity, accuracy and purposefulness of what is being studied. The 18th of May in 2014 was, however, the day that I experienced, first-hand, the authenticity and purpose of the research project I had devised. Hundreds of football fans had gathered here, among others, to remember a key contributor to the community they belonged to; they, along with many others who could not be there that day due to other commitments or their distance from Burnley itself, had taken to the internet in order to donate money in Tony's honour; people had given up their time and money in order to organise, photograph, cater, or participate as players and spectators, in an event to recognise someone significant to them and the message board as a whole; the Just Giving page and discussion threads on Clarets Mad were awash with eulogies about Tony and his contributions to the message board; the internet had been used, via discussion forums and social media, to publicise the event and stimulate attendance. The interactions between these football fans and the subsequent relationships they had formed were meaningful to them. For the majority, these interactions and relationships had been initiated, or conducted entirely, online.

Whilst I had observed the way that football fans had gathered online and started interacting on the basis of their shared affections for the game, or a specific club, that meaningful relationships had been formed between members of the Clarets Mad message board in particular, and that members of online forums

had engaged in reciprocal and altruistic behaviours beforehand, the 18th of May remains a watershed moment in my research. It was the day that confirmed to me that the internet had had a significant impact on football fandom, and that this relatively new phenomena (relative to football's history, anyway) was potentially pivotal to the emergence of fan *communities*.

Clarets Mad & Up the Clarets

The community that forms the basis of this research project is that which frequented Clarets Mad, first, and subsequently Up the Clarets, following a move to a new internet message board in early 2016.³ Both are forums for the fans of Burnley Football Club and each is home to several thousand members, discussion threads and individual posts.

The genesis of Burnley FC is synonymous with the origins of professional football in the industrial towns and cities of the north of England. Established in 1882, the town's football club was a founder member of the English Football League and, like many other clubs in Lancashire, it became a focal point for the expression of 'a northern populism based on the identity and achievement of local industry' which 'involved the workers own sense of identity and pride' (Joyce, 1991: 167). The club's successes and failures were deeply connected to the wider civic and economic identities of the town's population and, although the cotton industry on which that was based has long since passed, Burnley FC continues to represent the town as one of its pivotal social institutions.

The majority of the football fans that interact on these forums are supporters of the club. Nicknamed 'The Clarets', Burnley FC is a closer representation of a typical English football club than those adopted in most of the academic studies of fandom to date. Such projects have a tendency to focus on elite clubs, such as Liverpool, Manchester United, and Chelsea, particularly when analysing the impact of globalisation and commercialisation on the game (King, 1997 & 2003; Nash, 2000; Sandvoss, 2003; Reimer, 2004; Hognestad, 2006 & 2009; Kerr & Emery, 2011 & 2014). However, these hugely successful clubs (in both sporting and commercial terms) and their international supporter bases are not

³ Clarets Mad: <http://www.ClaretsMad.co.uk/forums/>
Up the Clarets: <http://www.upthclarets.com/messageboard/>

representative of English football clubs, the experiences and practices of their fans and, therefore, English football fandom as a whole. It is easier to point to and overstate the demise of traditional fan practices, particularly match-day attendance and the importance of local identity, when the fans under analysis support one of the elite clubs mentioned above.

In many ways Burnley FC is the archetypal traditional English club and most of its fans practise many of the celebrated features of traditional fandom. The club have used the same ground since 1883, the fan base is largely drawn from the town itself, and the majority of the club's directors are successful local businessmen. The rhetoric of the community club could certainly be applied here. Although not untouched by the forces of globalisation, commercialisation and neo-liberalism, which have significantly altered the English game since the Premier League was established in 1992, two relatively recent fan publications epitomise the chasm that exists between Burnley FC and the elite clubs within the game; "It's Burnley, not Barcelona" and "Russians Don't Land Here" (Thomas, 2003; Thomas & Firmin, 2007).

The Aims and Originality of the Thesis

The aim of this thesis is to further our understanding of the role the internet plays in modern football fandom. More specifically, it aims to explore the way that fans communicate with one another on the internet and, as a result of that interaction, answer the question as to whether or not genuine communities of football fans are created online.

Although the interactions between football fans have been used in academic literature before, the originality of this thesis is a result of the extensive and prolonged ethnographic engagement with a single group of fans, whose predominant form of interaction is via computer mediated communication (CMC). It is also original as a result of maintaining a focus on the CMC between fans as the actual subject of enquiry in itself, rather than using those interactions as a means to explore other issues within the game.

Conceptually, the offers an explicitly outlined, precise and workable explanation of what is meant by the term 'online community'. The aim, here, is twofold;

firstly, to identify the key elements of social interaction which constitute an online community and use these to analyse the content produced by a specific group of fans; and, secondly, to avoid the imprecise, vague and rhetoric use of the term community within the study of football fan culture.

In addressing the aims above and attempting to add to the existing body of knowledge on football fans, the thesis will answer the following questions; why do football fans choose to interact online and what is the nature of CMC between them? As a result of that CMC, do communities of fans emerge and, if so, what norms and behaviours can be observed within such communities?

Structure of the Thesis

In order to adequately contextualise a study of online fandom and community formation, chapter one explores the existing academic literature relating to football fans. From the earliest and, somewhat unwittingly, criminological studies of football fans, which explored the troubling and deviant behaviours of hooliganism and racism, the literature review then analyses more recent explorations of fandom within the sport. These latterly produced articles have outlined how fan practises have altered, particularly since the 1990s, and have provided some key theories and findings regarding the impact of globalisation and commercialisation on football. They debate the emergence of new fan identities and relationships to the game, notably the rise of the consumer fan; whether recent developments regarding media coverage are undermining or upholding traditional fan practises; the emergence of satellite fandoms and the impact this has on the importance of traditional and local identities to football fan groups; and, crucially for this study, the role of the internet in modern football fandom. The literature review will also address the way that computer mediated communication (CMC) between football fans has been neglected within academic research of the game and, therefore, how its potential to further our understanding of that fandom has been, hitherto, omitted from studies of the game.

As an appendage to the literature review regarding football fandom, chapter two explores the conceptual basis of this thesis. The term community is one that enjoys popularity in both academic and non-academic discourses of the game, but is also one where the precise meaning of the term is rarely explored in any

depth and its use when discussing fans is rarely explained. This chapter analyses some of the key conclusions of a lengthy academic debate as what the term 'community' means and identifies specific elements of the concept to be taken into my own study, before it explores the recent literature focussing on online communities in particular. The aim of the chapter, overall, is to draw upon existing conceptualisations of the online community in order to provide a precise understanding of what constitutes an online community, without falling into the trap of dichotomising social interactions as either 'online' or 'offline', particularly when the lines between such distinctions are becoming increasingly blurred in western societies.

Having positioned the study and explained its aim to further our understanding of football fan culture and the contribution online fan communities make to this, chapter three outlines the synergy this study has with an ethnographic research design. It draws upon the distinction made by Mills (2000) between methods and methodology in order to outline the *process* that was undertaken in order to complete this research, as well as the *theoretical* discussion of those methods and their appropriateness for the topic in question. That theoretical discussion explores the ethnographic enterprise and its configuration when studying an online community; it engages with contemporary debates over the key tenets of ethnographic research, how these can be upheld in online scenarios, what constitutes the 'field' within predominantly online studies, what ethical considerations need to be resolved during research design, what position I have adopted as researcher and, subsequently, what impact this has had on my findings.

Following this, the processes used to acquire data are conveyed, which were predominantly based on participant observation and experiencing as well as interviews with key participants. An explanation as to the form of the data gathered and difficulties experienced during the research itself is also explored. The chapter questions the use of neologisms, such as netnography, which separate online and offline interactions rather than approaching communication within online communities more holistically; it then advocates the use of a fluid and discursive social network analysis, rather than a predetermined, spatial and nodal approach, to distinguishing the 'boundaries' of online communities under study; and, finally, it proposes an overt approach to ethnographic research

which prioritises protection of the identities of research participants, particularly in an age of powerful online search engines which make research participants easier to trace when verbatim quotations are used.

Having observed Clarets Mad for several years, chapter four starts to convey the findings of that research by exploring one of the most popular and ritualistic forms of interaction on the message board. As is the case for the majority of football fans in any context, match-days are of particular importance, and that has been true for the members of Clarets Mad for many years. The members of Clarets Mad have created match-day threads from almost the inception of the forum itself; bespoke discussions which primarily focus on the match involving Burnley Football Club that day.

However, having experienced and observed these discussion threads for a number of years, it is evident that the content of such threads represents so much more than a simple conveyance of match facts, statistics and information snippets. Analysing these scheduled gatherings reveals a great deal about the relationships which football fans form online, the reciprocal generosity of content creation, how message boards like this allow members to generate a shared experience of being a football fan, how traditional fan practises are replicated online and, finally, how CMC facilitates digital innovations in modern football fan practises. The chapter also aims to provide an insight into the creation of fan cultures and values which, through CMC, distinguish between community insiders and outsiders.

Continuing with the analysis of match-day discussion threads, to begin with, chapter five continues to explore the insider fan practises, norms, values and knowledge which have developed over the years since Clarets Mad was first formed. The aim of the chapter is to explore the evolution of these, ensuring that we do not view them as static phenomena, and to understand how they intersect with developments and discourses within the game and society at large. To illustrate the process, the chapter analyses fan interactions regarding the subject of homophobia; a form of prejudice which, within football, has received an increasing amount of attention from the media, the game's authorities and the government alike. In the context of Burnley FC and the fans who frequent the message boards under study, this subject was discussed on

numerous occasions, particularly when, at the start of the 2016/17 seasons, one of the team's players was given a four-match ban, fined £25,000, and ordered to attend an education course organised by the Football Association because of homophobic comments he made in 2012 on the social media platform Twitter. Discussion threads relating to this controversy, and to homophobia in general, reveal a great deal about the way in which the norms and values of the online community are (re)negotiated and how conflict and opposing viewpoints can be incorporated into conceptualisations of football fan communities.

Chapter six returns to one of the personal motivations for exploring internet fandom for this thesis, exiled fans. Having been one myself, for many years, and benefitting from the way that the internet facilitated my interaction with fellow Clarets, I was keen to explore the experiences of other fans who were not geographically connected to the club and for whom regular match-day attendance was not feasible. In doing so, the chapter aims to address a significant issue with the existing literature on football fandom which understands distant and transnational fandoms as a negative consequence of the globalisation and commercialisation of the English Premier League; new fans, who lack authentic connections and identities to the clubs they support and who are symptomatic of the eroding traditional values, identities and practises on which the game is based.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the experiences of 'exiled' fans, not just transnational fans but also those outside of local area where the majority of Burnley FC's supporters hail from yet are still within the UK. This will be done to broaden our understanding of football fandom and fan experiences by, firstly, exploring the status of transnational and exiled fans within fan communities at large and, secondly, understanding how CMC facilitates interaction between such fans and enables many of them to *maintain* existing identities rather than undermine them. In doing so, the analysis of exiled fans also enables us to explore other aspects of online fan communities more holistically. It reveals a great deal about the relationships and communities that are created via CMC. An in-depth scrutiny of those online interactions also allows us to assess the role of online communities and relationships in the lives of modern football fans, and the networks of advice and support that such communities bring to them.

Chapter seven completes the findings section of the thesis by analysing a significant development for the group being studied during the research period of this thesis. As mentioned previously, the community in question left their long-standing home, Clarets Mad, in the early weeks of 2016 to reconvene at a new location, Up the Clarets. Whilst Clarets Mad continues to exist and a smaller group of fans utilise the forum to interact, the vast majority of community members being studied no longer contribute to discussions at that internet locale.

The causal factors that resulted in that change will be documented within the final chapter. More importantly, by analysing the change of message board locations a great deal is revealed about two key elements of the community concept advanced in chapter two. Firstly, it allows us to further our understanding of the newly formed identities that result from CMC; to one another, as well as to online places they frequent. Secondly, the community members at the forefront of the change and wider community reactions to their decision provided the research project with a significant body of data regarding power and status inequities between group members.

The conclusion of the thesis draws together the key findings from the research, addresses the extent to which the initial aims have been met, and analyses the limitations of the study with future research in the field at the forefront of its concern.

CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focuses on the development of academic explorations of football fans. Beginning with a critique of the earliest studies of football fandom, which explored the deviant behaviours of hooliganism and racism, the chapter then moves on to assess more recent contributions to the field which have broadened our scope significantly. Such studies have enabled us to move beyond a fixation with explaining the cause of such troubling behaviour and contextualise such problems within football fan practises as a whole. In particular, more recent contributions have explored the way that English football fandom has changed during the 1990s and beyond, chiefly as a result of the formation of the Premier League and the concurrent globalisation and commercialisation of the domestic game. The literature review will analyse (some of) the reoccurring themes of these texts, which focus on whether or not new forms of fandom are replacing former engagements with the game, whether traditional fan practises and identities have survived the dramatic changes that have resulted from the formation of the EPL and, also, what constitutes authentic football fandom.

Among the developments discussed here, the fleeting academic coverage of internet's role in modern football fandom is explored. The literature review also addresses the way that CMC between football fans has been neglected and how further study of this area is required in order to develop a rounded understanding of modern football fandom and fan practices. The literature review also argues that there are several key problems with the way that academic studies which have used CMC, as a source of data, which need to be addressed.

Early Studies of Football Fans

The study of sport fans, and in particular football fans, has been dominated by two key issues. Many early academic studies of sport were investigations into the deviant behaviour of English football fans. This reflected key issues at the time, when football was starting to receive genuine (albeit limited) academic interest and credibility as a subject worthy of research and exploration in the

1970s. In particular, this interest centred on the problem of hooliganism – the violent and disruptive actions of football fans, which was considered a widespread and disturbing development at the time, one which received a great deal of media attention and social commentary. Academic studies vigorously debated the origins of such issues, suggesting it was an expression of resistance that embroiled broader class-based issues (Taylor, 1971; Clarke, 1978); that it reflects wider social class cultural values and that much of the ‘problem’ is overstated or even invented by the media (Hall, 1978; Marsh, Rosser & Harré, 1978); or, more controversially, that the frequency of such disorder is actually declining when a historical trajectory is chartered, and what remains is the product of small pockets of working class groups who do not reflect wider refinements and improving attitudes to the use of violence (Williams et al, 1984; Dunning et al, 1986, 1988 & 1991; Murphy et al, 1990). The latter explanation was developed by one of the most influential research groups on the origin of football hooliganism, the *Leicester School*, whose collective works combined the statistical analysis of historical media coverage with contemporary observational studies in order to assess the applicability of Norbet Elias’s ‘civilising process’ thesis (see Lewis, 1996, for a thorough review and critique of the Leicester School).

As the study of sport struggled for recognition in academia at large, the emphasis of such work centred on issues which were considered to be significant to areas of social life beyond the frivolous worlds of sport and leisure. In the 1980s and 90s, explorations of violent disorder were supplemented by research into the issue of racism, as football was seen to be a vehicle for the expression of divisive and offensive attitudes regarding black and Asian people, in particular (Cashmore, 1982; Williams, 1992; Vasilli 1994, 1998 & 2000; Holland, 1995; Jarvie & Reid, 1997; Bains & Johal, 1998). Again, this reflected what many considered to be troubling issues in wider society at the time. Football was however, seen to have a particularly acute problem with racism and a highly racialised culture. Football grounds became active recruitment zones for right-wing political movements such as the National Front and Combat 18 (among others), who targeted the young, working class and male demographic to spread their message. Despite this, as Russell (1997: 60) remarked with reference to the historical study of the game, ‘until all scholars appreciate that people’s

leisure activities were not just some fringe activity or ornamentation, but often a vital and defining part of their existence, the function of popular recreation and culture will simply not be understood’.

Indeed, as Sandvoss has subsequently illustrated, the fixation with deviant behaviour has meant that the large volume of work on football fandom was, until recently, criminological in nature rather than sociological (Sandvoss, 2003: 9). As a result, it should be pointed out that our understanding of football fandom as a whole is not only limited, but potentially distorted by the sheer volume of work on hooliganism and racism (Malcolm, Jones & Waddington, 2000). It has been argued that the narrow field of academic enquiry and subsequent conflation of racism and hooliganism has had a significant and damaging impact on our understanding of fandom and social policy (Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 2001). The emergence of the racist/hooligan couplet, which essentially viewed racist attitudes as just another underlying motivation for the use of violence, restricted explorations of racism by limiting it, conceptually, to studies of violence. As such, ‘no distinction is made between the social processes underpinning patterns of racist and ‘hooligan’ behaviour and no attempt is made to signify the differences between those patterns’ (Back, Crabbe & Solomos, 2001: 26). Overall, it could also be argued that our understanding of these troubling social problems is likewise limited; how are we to contextualise such behaviour, chart its frequency and importance, or understand its place in football fandom, if that fandom is not explored in a more holistic fashion?

Moving Beyond Deviance

Whilst hooliganism remains a popular topic, studies of the problem no longer dominate academic enquiry into football fandom as they once did. A broader range of topics began to be addressed as academics started to acknowledge the extensive changes to the game, particularly in the 1990s, and the subsequent influence these had on football fandom and its cultures. More recent research has broadened enquiry by looking at, amongst other things, fan identities (Brown, 1998; King, 1998; Robson, 2000); the various ‘types’ of football fan that exist (Giulianotti, 2002); collective fan action (Cleland, 2010) and the impact of commercialisation and globalisation on football fandom (Sandvoss,

2003; Crawford, 2004; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004, 2005 & 2009; Giulianotti, 2005).

Of these studies, Giulianotti's taxonomy of spectator identities is one of the most widely utilised and most influential theoretical models (Giulianotti, 2002). Giulianotti taxonomy of football fans is visually illustrated by distinguishing, horizontally, between traditional fan types (on the left) or consumer fans (on the right), and vertically between 'hot' (at the top) and 'cool' (at the bottom) forms of football fandom. The taxonomy also incorporates the nature of fan identities; their relationship with and proximity to football grounds; the authenticity of the spaces they use to consume football; the relationships they have to other fans and, also; the strength of those relationships and the degree of solidarity between fans. There are also suggestions regarding the way fan types communicate with others and what their principle means of consuming football are. Fans are analysed according to such criteria and then labelled as a 'supporter', 'follower', 'fan' or 'flâneur' according to the extent of 'authenticity' of their fandom (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010: 609).

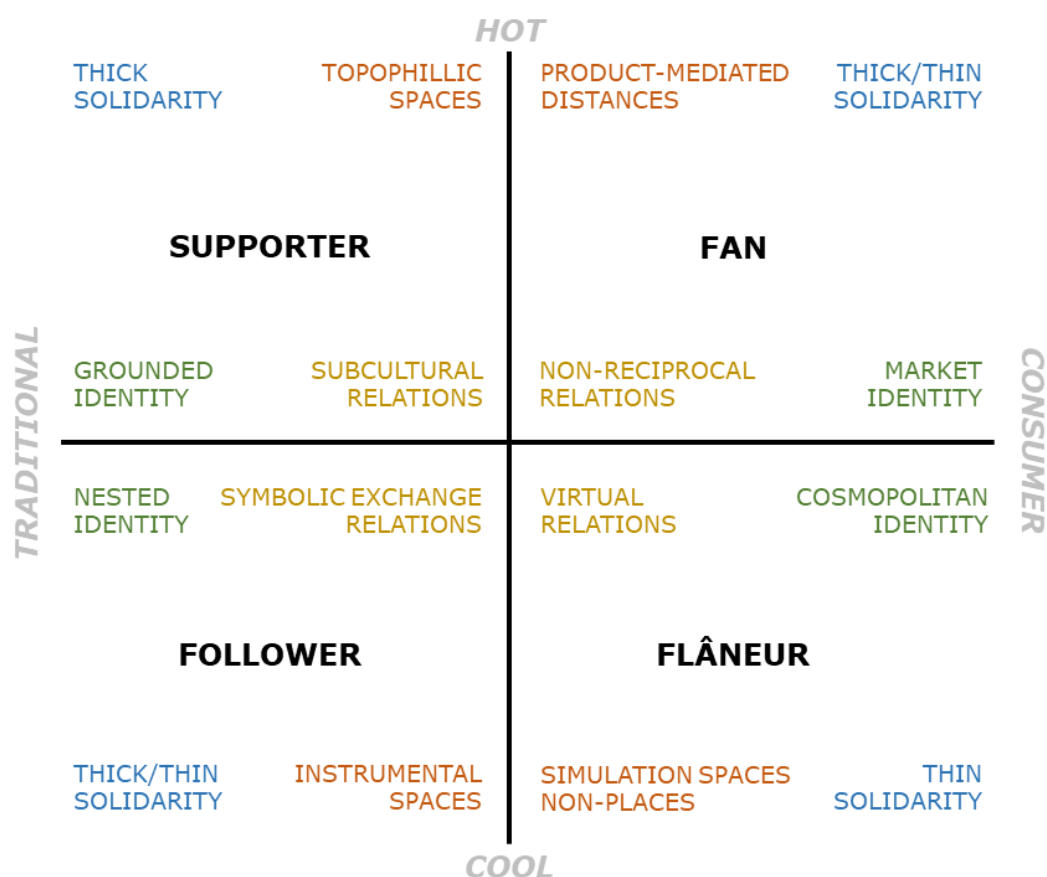


Figure One: Giulianotti's (2002: 31) Ideal-Type Categories.

With regards to the internet specifically, Giulianotti's work suggested that CMC and use of websites for information were behaviours that were characteristic of the flâneur, not the authentic football fan. He asserts that use of the internet is a virtual, passive and detached experience of football. Furthermore, coupled with other modern fan practises like television viewing and the purchase of club merchandise, Giulianotti argued that the internet was threatening the very nature of traditional football fandom and, thus, could be potentially damaging to the future of the game. As clubs and leagues alike focussed their attention on these more profitable avenues, traditional fans were being priced out and alienated from the sport. Giulianotti's argument was that the alienation of 'genuine' fans would harm the game's future, as flâneurs and other such transient fans would soon become bored and find other forms of entertainment and the sport's traditional fan base would no longer be there to fall back on.

In response to Giulianotti's work, and that of others who prioritised 'traditional' forms of football fandom and used such subjective judgements to assess the authenticity of football fans, the research of Crawford and Sandvoss aimed to further our understanding of modern football fandom by looking beyond the assumption that 'real' football fans are only those who attend live fixtures and are connected to a particular team by geographic or family ties (Sandvoss, 2003; Crawford, 2004). Crawford, in particular, was highly critical of the polarised fan groupings offered by previous taxonomies, as they have a tendency to elevate specific fan practises to be considered more valuable than others, especially those tied to a romanticised recollection of the game's past. Whilst local identity and the expression of that through regular attendance at matches are still important features of football fandom, to Crawford they are no more *real* or *authentic* than any other fan practises and identities. Crawford, King and Sandvoss have argued that fans should be seen as consumers, and that fandom is based on a series of consumption practises – be it live match attendance, purchasing merchandise, watching their favourite team/s via satellite television – none of which should be prioritised over another in the study of modern football fandom (King, 1998 & 2003). Although, to Crawford, the expression and formation of identities is a significant aspect of modern sport fandom, he argues that 'being a fan is primarily a consumer act and, hence, fans can be seen, first and foremost as consumers' (Crawford, 2004: 4). Drawing

upon the work of Maffesoli, Crawford argues that traditional community ties such as the family, social class and locality are declining in importance and being replaced by commodified and consumer driven 'products' which allow people to select their identities with less constraint. Curiously the consumption of football via the internet is neglected by both Sandvoss and Crawford, despite their lengthy attention and thorough analysis of other forms of (less interactive) media consumption of sport. As Williams (2007: 131) has also pointed out, Crawford's findings may also be distorted by his focus on the elite British ice hockey league. In a sport where community ties and local identity expressions are not central to its history, the conclusions drawn from research into such sports may overstate the demise of traditional fan practises when the data from that research is not assessed in the isolated context of ice hockey alone.

More recently, there have been a series of calls to alter the emphasis of football fandom research based on a number perceived problems with the existing literature. Firstly, several authors have argued that in the desire to reject essentialist notions of fandom (which prioritise 'traditional' practises) and see sport fans as consumers of an increasingly global product, studies like those by Crawford and Sandvoss have been too dismissive of local, geographic identities and their centrality to fandom for many football supporters. Likewise, the research has almost entirely dismissed the importance of 'traditional' fan practises and behaviour (See Gibbons and Dixon, 2010 for a review of these criticisms). This accusation is particularly true of Sandvoss, as the bulk of his research into the impact of commercialisation and globalisation is based on atypical, elite clubs, from two of the most financially powerful leagues in world football.

To Sandvoss, modern football in Europe is becoming increasingly homogenous in nature as larger city-based clubs come to dominate competition and, through a desire to enhance their commercial operations on a global scale, have increasingly neglected local ties, communities and heritage in order to attract consumer fans from afar. The cultural significance and meaning of such elite clubs and their stadia were, according to Sandvoss and others, dwindling (Bale, 1991; Connell, 2016). As television coverage becomes increasingly central to the modern game, fans are being duped into the consumption of a sport with none of the ties or meanings on which it was initially developed. Additionally, football

fan identities are now no longer rooted in place or social class – nor are they truly collective in nature – but they are individual identities which are ‘selected’ and ‘chosen’ from a mediated transmission of images and narratives; none of which require the interactive, physical and participatory fan practises on which the game was traditionally based. Sandvoss suggests this is a form of ‘neutrosemy’; a process through which fans take ‘texts’, which are polysemic and can be interpreted in multiple ways, and reinvent their sense of self through the media they are subjected to.

To what extent the findings of Sandvoss can be applied to the majority of football fans in Europe is unclear; but his focus on two elite clubs, Chelsea and Bayer 04 Leverkusen, from two of the most globalised and commercialised leagues in world football does, perhaps, enable us to explain why the importance of local identities and traditional fan practises have been summarily dismissed in his work. His work is also contentious with regards to the lack of agency given to fans within the modern game, as they passively accept the watered-down version of the game offered by the commercial relationships formed between television companies and elite clubs. It gives no credence to the notion that fans adapt to the changing nature of their chosen sport and find new meanings and identities beyond those that the game of football was traditionally reliant upon, or the resilience of traditional meanings and identities despite the changing context.

Secondly, Sandvoss, like several of the key contributors regarding football fandom outlined above, are fixated with club-fan relations. In particular, the reasons that inform a fan’s choice of club to support and the authenticity of that choice have been central points of discussion. Whilst others have provided valuable assessments of the club-fan relationship, by analysing the increasingly active nature of fan groups in an era which is characterised by inclusive approaches from clubs themselves (Cleland, 2010), many of the studies which centre on club-fan relations ignore several fundamental aspects of football fandom and, in particular, the nature of football fan identities. It is apparent that fan-fan relations have largely been neglected by previous research or, when mentioned, have been addressed ‘in passing’.

Part way through the completion of this thesis, and some time after early versions of the literature review were written, Best (2013) produced a cutting and insightful review of the 'consumer' approaches to football fandom. Focusing on the work of Blackshaw, and others who had been inspired by Maffesoli's post-modern concept of neo-tribes and Bauman's liquid modernity thesis, Best was highly critical of the selective application of such theories to football and the distorted conclusions that resulted. Like myself, Best was concerned at the way in which such studies were based on the analysis of a small number of elite clubs. The conclusions that were drawn from such studies were, therefore, not truly representative of football fans at large. Consumer based understandings of football fandom 'overlook fan solidarity; the significance of the connection between fans, their social interaction, long-term feelings of belongingness, comradeship and their emotional commitment to the team' (Best, 2013: 89).

Best goes on to highlight how the conceptualisation of fandom as a practise rooted in self-gratification, fleeting commitment to a brand, and the consumption of meaningless and detached products of global massification, does not encompass the majority of football fans at all; the majority support clubs that are unsuccessful, which are chosen on the basis of local or familial ties, and for whom support is enduring despite the continual failure of the team to win competitions and the anxiety that being a fan of such clubs can cause. In contrast, Best draws upon the Durkheimian notion of *altruism* and Stebbins's concept of *serious leisure* to argue that 'football fandom is often an enduring group activity practised over a considerable number of years. Football fans as serious leisure participants tend to develop a solidarity made up of beliefs, values, moral principles and norms that make withdrawal from supporting the team problematic and allows fans to overcome the costs...of supporting an unsuccessful team' (Best, 2013: 89).

Best's arguments help to remind researchers about the pitfalls of drawing conclusions from case studies which are not representative of football fans as a whole. Much of his paper is supported by informal observations and anecdotes from his time as a supporter of Leeds United and, whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with this, no specific examples or data are offered to validate the claims Best is making. A bespoke and structured approach to observational research and data gathering would assist Best and others in providing evidence

to support the claims that football fandom is not characterised by consumer driven tendencies within the 'swarm'. It would also help to substantiate the paper's claims regarding the norms, values and moral principles that underpin the enduring support of most football clubs.

This kind of research was undertaken several years before Best's critique was published, albeit in the specific context of television coverage of football matches that were broadcast in public houses. Weed's research goes some way to plugging this gap by utilising data gathered from a structured period of observation to assist in a critique of consumer based understandings of football fandom. Over a series of papers, Weed has analysed the changing role of the public house in modern football fandom (Weed, 2006, 2007 & 2008). Whilst the pub has had a lengthy connection with the British game, Weed suggest that, since the 1990s, it has increasingly become a popular location for the viewing of live matches. His research was based on an ethnographic study of a single pub during a major international tournament – the World Cup of 2002.

Rather than seeing the consumption of live matches via television as a symptom of the way that traditional fan practises and norms are declining, Weed suggested that watching the matches at a pub provided a way for fans to engage in a 'shared communal experience' which, for those who cannot attend the event, would otherwise be lost. Weed argued that the combination of the consumption of football via satellite television with the pub represents a conscious attempt by many fans to recreate the atmosphere and conditions of the 'traditional' football terrace - before the advent of the Premier League, all-seater stadia, the increased policing of fan behaviour and hugely inflated ticket prices. It is not just inclusion for those who cannot afford to attend and who might be displaced as a result of the commercialisation of the game, but it is also a *preference* for some fans who value the opportunity to drink alcohol and smoke whilst watching the match, stand in their friendship groups throughout and use language and humour of an adult nature – all things which have been controlled since the Taylor Report was published in 1990.

This echoes earlier work from Williams and Perkins (1998) who suggested that English football fans were utilising pub broadcasts as a way to try and replace the lost atmosphere of sterile stadium experiences, which were becoming

increasingly common following the advent of the Premier League in 1992. Live broadcasting within the pub then, to Weed and Williams and Perkins, creates an environment which allows traditional fan practises to flourish and continue, rather than it being symptomatic of their decline.

Other studies have similarly dismissed post-modern claims that traditional fan practises have demised. Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock (2009) studied the emergence of MyFootballClub, an internet-initiated and funded takeover of the semi-professional club Gravesend and Northfleet FC. The scheme offered fans the chance to work collectively in order to raise the initial funds required and subsequently be involved in the major decisions of the club – the hiring of players and managers, team selection, planning for the future, etc. The authors argued that MyFootballClub offered an opportunity to fans to convey their collective dislike of the commercialised elite level of the game and express this via 'football-based organic community bonds that were supposedly disrupted by media, but doing so within media...which demonstrates how media sport synthesizes apparent contradictions, so that members can recreate football-as-folk-culture fantasies through the processes of mediation and commodification that are otherwise blamed for killing 'the people's game'' (Hutchins, Rowe and Ruddock, 2009: 323-4).

More recently, Dixon (2014) has argued that the 'authenticity' of live match-day experiences is also questionable as the popularity of television coverage, and the increased number of features offered by that technological advances in that medium, have altered the match-day experience offered by clubs and the desires of fans themselves. Whilst the live experience is still prioritised by fans who use attendance as a claim to authenticity themselves, what they are actually experiencing is far removed from traditional fan engagement with the sport.

Using the concept of disneyfication, first outlined by Bryman (1999), Dixon suggests that the live experience offered to the modern football fan is now characterised by a breadth of consumption opportunities which are akin to the model advanced by the American theme park and entertainment giants Disney. Fans experiences are now dominated by pre-match, half-time and post-match entertainment, mascots, diverse food and drink options, and a plethora of other

related activities beyond the match itself. Large screens for replays and differing angles have also been introduced into the stadia, alongside additional coverage via social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook which are used to interact with fans and broaden the options available to them. In comparison to the romanticised version of football's past, 'being there' is possibly the only thing that modern live experiences can offer to the fan as match-days, in English football, have changed substantially since the advent of the Premier League.

What Weed's research has enabled us to do is question whether changes to football have entirely eroded some of the fan practises heralded, by fans and academics alike, as being paramount to the traditions of the game and its culture. Dixon's findings have taken that one step further, by questioning whether the nature of some of those fundamental fan practises are almost unrecognisable in the modern game. Coupled with the findings of others, notably King (1998), Nash (2000), Stone (2007) and Gibbons and Nuttall (2014), Dixon has accurately summarised many recent contributions to the authenticity debate as those which are 'beginning to argue that concepts of tradition and authenticity are in-fact malleable, changeable and fluid' (2016: 49). Is there a constancy of fandom we can point to in modern football, or has it completely changed beyond recognition?

With regards to the use of CMC between fans, it is important to assess the extent to which changing fandom is reflected in the nature of such communications, like Dixon has discovered, or whether those communications epitomise some of the traditional fan practises and behaviours that Weed has explored in his analysis of viewing television coverage of the game. It is interesting to see how the virtual terraces of the internet, and CMC between fans within online communities, facilitate the expression of geographic (and other) identities, and how the close-knit nature of internet communities is able to re-create elements of fan communities from the past. Are online fan communities attractive because of their modernity? Because they allow fans to engage in familiar, historically grounded practises? Or like the findings of the recent authors outlined above, are the lines sufficiently blurred for us to conclude that CMC between football fans encompasses a mixture of the two?

'Virtual' fandom & use of the Internet

It has been acknowledged by some authors (Gibbons & Dixon 2010, Gibbons & Nuttall, 2012; Dixon, 2011) that CMC amongst fans, via the internet, has been rather curiously under-researched when looking at football fandom. Several years earlier Auty (2002: 273) argued that 'although the impact of the internet has been thoroughly examined in almost every other sphere, especially with regard to decentralisation and bottom-up democracy, it appears that no-one has fully analysed the impact of the web on football', yet this dearth has yet to be adequately attended to.

Auty's oft quoted remark about the dearth of research on the internet within football research is as poignant over a decade later. The number of internet users in the UK continues to rise, even in the age groups where internet use is most common. As Figure Two shows, 98.9% of 16-44 year olds regularly use the internet, up from 95.5% in 2011. These figures represent a sustained growth of internet usage and suggest that, rather than merely being a 'fad' at the turn of the millennium, the internet is becoming an increasingly important part of the ordinary lives of the vast majority of UK residents. Indeed, the Office for National Statistics reports that 89% of the UK's population uses the internet every day, or almost every day (ONS, 2017b). Despite this, sustained and thorough research on the internet and football – particularly fandom – is still in its infancy, although many have acknowledged its part within the broader emergence of 'new media' in transforming the interaction of fans with the game (Cleland, 2010).

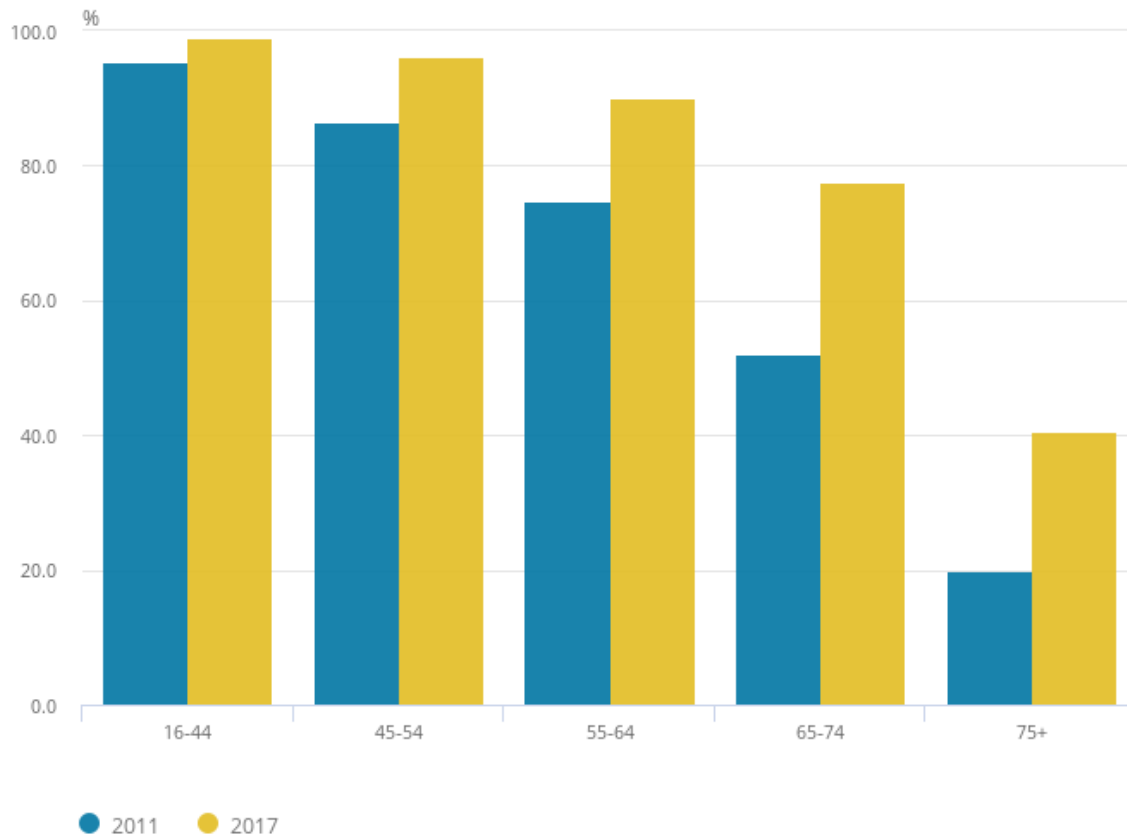


Figure Two: Recent internet use in 2011 and 2017 by age group, UK. Office for National Statistics (2017b). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/itandinternetindustry/bulletins/internetusers/2017>

It is still more typical of academics to use the internet as a source of data rather than as the object of research itself. Message boards, in particular, have been popular and convenient means of gathering rich qualitative and quantitative data. Amongst the first to use fan interactions on the internet in this way was Mitrano, who studied the reaction of ice hockey fans to the relocation of an elite, professional and franchised club – the then Hartford Whalers (Mitrano, 1999). The aim of the study was to explore the social and psychological impact of the decision to relocate a sports team on the fans they leave behind. Specifically, Mitrano hoped to gather data on the experiences, feeling and emotions of the fans with regard to decision to relocate the team, their thoughts on the relationship between the team and its owners and, crucially, their own relationships towards the relocated team from a fan's perspective. The findings suggested that, through the metaphors they employed, fans of the Hartford Whalers went through a similar process of loss and grief with the relocation as

would be expected during bereavement. To reach such findings, alongside interviews and analysis of local media reportage Mitrano scoured internet discussion boards in order to gather reaction from those who demonstrated that they were 'deeply committed' fans of the club in question.

Mitrano's study should be credited for its use of such sources to present fan perspectives on the issue of franchises and the relocation/removal of meaningful social institutions. However, his pioneering research suffers – as many subsequent studies also do – from two key problems with regards to the use of message boards as a data source. Firstly, there is no attention to the specific nature of the data that has been gleaned from the internet, in comparison to the newspapers and interviews Mitrano also analysed. Were these message boards merely mined for seductive vignettes, or was the context of the medium/community in which such comments were made analysed in order to fully understand them? Secondly, Mitrano provides us with a rather arbitrary definition of 'deeply committed' fans as those 'who attend games frequently, regularly read accounts and profiles of the team in newspapers and magazines, watch their team on television, and discuss aspects of their team via talk radio or the internet' (Mitrano, 1999: 136).

Not only would it be impossible for future studies to replicate Mitrano's method in other contexts, but his study is also based on the highly subjective prioritisation of particular fan practises above others. Interestingly, the regular spectating of games via television and communication via the internet are seen as desirable practises and demonstrations of deep commitment, which is at odds with most academic studies of English football and illustrates that practises considered to be 'proper' vary from one cultural context to another. Nevertheless, as Gibbons and Dixon (2010) and Crawford (2004) have already illustrated with regards to English football, subjectively elevating one form of fandom above another leads to a distorted and misleading interpretation of fandom.

More recently, several authors have adopted message boards as a data source for studies of football fan identity. Ruddock (2005) analysed discussion threads from the message board *Knees Up Mother Brown*, one of a number of online forums for the fans of English club West Ham United who, at the time, were

playing in the top tier of English football. Like Mitrano, Ruddock used message boards to gain access to almost instant fan reaction to a controversial incident involving the club in question. Whilst concluding the signing of notorious English footballer Lee Bowyer, who had received a ban from the game for drug use and later accused of racially aggravated assault, West Ham United fans used the forum to debate the value of such an acquisition and the potential implications for the club, themselves and other fans considering that Bowyer was, supposedly, racist.

The CMC Ruddock analysed led him to some important findings regarding the identity of football fans, particularly the importance of the game and the club they support to their lives overall. Even when several fans were faced with the signing of a player who represented the antipathy of their personal values, political ideals and their notion of citizenship, many nevertheless prioritised the good of the football club, the standard of the team and its performances and, hopefully, the club's future success above the other aforementioned aspects of their identity. Ruddock concludes that, for a number of football fans, aspects of identity that we would normally consider to be fundamentally important, such as politics, values and citizenship, play a secondary role to their 'leisure/pleasure' identity. In this specific case, Bowyer's character flaws and potentially racist views were subsumed by his playing talents, with many fans prioritising the latter in a situation where conflict between their political and leisure identities became irreconcilable and, thus, mutually exclusive.

Millward's research (2006) aimed at expanding the scope of academic work on football fan identity, moving away from the local and national identities which have dominated previous studies, by investigating the possible emergence of a wider European identity amongst the fans of Liverpool FC - an elite English football club that regularly competes at the highest level of European competition and is the most successful English club in European football to date. Influenced by the writings of Goffman, Millward uses internet message boards in order to access narratives about the club's past, those defining moments which 'frame' fan discussions and practises centred on the club itself. He concludes that despite the critical importance of Liverpool's past success in European competition and the club's status as an elite European club, narratives regarding the past merely suggest affection for European competition exists amongst the

fans of Liverpool FC, but a collective European identity is not something that has developed.

Millward (2008) again utilises message boards to gather data for further research into Islamophobic dispositions among football supporters. Breaking down the contributions made to two internet forums statistically, Millward uses the CMC between Middlesbrough fans, and also between Newcastle United fans, to assess the extent of islamophobia following a match between the two clubs in 2007. During that match in question, the Middlesbrough striker Mido scored against Newcastle United and was subsequently booked for celebrating in front of rival supporters. He had been subjected to chants from Newcastle United supporters which referred to him as a 'Muslim bomber'.

Millward's findings suggest that the way both Middlesbrough and Newcastle United fans understood and discussed the chanting towards Mido, as well as his reaction, demonstrated an opportunistic way to express their feelings of rivalry toward each other. The framework adopted by Millward and his statistical breakdown of the internet posts of Newcastle United fans suggested that, whilst overt examples of islamophobia were absent, the majority of the contributions to a discussion thread were defensive of islamophobia itself or they were used to question the validity of an anti-islamophobia discourse. Less than 4% of the comments made were actually critical of the Islamophobic comments made by Newcastle United fans at the match itself.

Conversely, almost 80% of comments made Middlesbrough fan forum thread were critical of the Islamophobic conduct of their rival supporters and far fewer Middlesbrough fans were defensive of islamophobia itself, or critical of an anti-islamophobia discourse. However, this was at odds with other discussion threads on the same forum which contained a strong Islamophobic sentiment following the London bombings of July 7th, 2005. Rather than being a whole-hearted critique of the islamophobia of Newcastle United fans, Millward concludes that this was a strategic and opportunistic way for Middlesbrough fans to 'points score' against their rival supporters.

A further study of the potentially pejorative terms used by football fans explored controversy surrounding the use of the word Yid by supporters of Tottenham Hotspur Football Club; a term of endearment used in acknowledgement of their

historical association with the local Jewish community (Poulton & Durell, 2016). In a campaign video the meaning of the Y-word, as it was referred to by Kick It Out, was outlined in an attempt to educate fans about the term and discourage its use due to the potentially offensive nature of the word 'Yid'.

Adopting Brontsema's (2004) insights into linguistic reclamation and the complexities and fluidity of pejorative terms, Poulton and Durell (2016: 731) conclude, however, that the campaign was inextricably flawed as it failed to 'recognise that words constantly change and evolve...[and] can take on new meanings, just as new words can develop old meanings. This is dependent on *cultural context* and the *intent* behind the use of the language'. Whilst attempts to eradicate the anti-Semitic abuse of Tottenham Hotspur fans were welcome, the targeting of those same fans as the *perpetrators* of such an offense displayed a distinct lack of understanding regarding the cultural and linguistic processes which underlie their reclamation of the word Yid.

In order to substantiate such conclusions, Poulton and Durell analysed discussions relating directly to the release of the Kick It Out video which occurred on two separate internet message boards populated by supporters of Tottenham Hotspur. This purposive sampling strategy allowed the researchers to collect reactions from Tottenham Hotspur fans about the relative merits and failings of the campaign itself. The authors justify their approach by referring to the precedent set by other notable academic explorations of football fandom and how Millward (2008), in particular, has been successful as a result of adopting the blueprint for virtual ethnography outlined by Hine (2000). Despite this, there was no interaction between either of the researchers and the members of the forums they used for the study. It is also unclear as to whether the data was collected at the time of being produced, or after the discussions had reached a conclusion.

Two significant issues arise from their use of internet based fan interactions. The first is that the discussion threads they selected restrict the scope of their research and the conclusions they have drawn. So much could have been learnt from a longitudinal study which triangulates their chosen theoretical approach and the data they collected, concerning reactions to the Y-Word campaign video, with the *actual* use and meaning of the word Yid during day-to-day interactions

between Tottenham supporters online. Doing so would have provided a valuable contextual reference point to analyse further the nature of reactions to the Y-Word campaign video and the extent of linguistic reclamation in this case study. Secondly, the nature of the two message boards that were chosen offered a valuable opportunity to explore online fan interaction more thoroughly. Although this was, perhaps, beyond the scope and intentions of the authors' research design, they do outline a significant difference between the forums – the first is quite typical of internet message boards in that it was open to access for both reading and contributing, whilst membership of the second message board is acquired by invitation only and this has led, as the authors' acknowledge, to fans knowing one another more intimately than is the norm. The impact of this dynamic was, however, left unexplored. Once again, it is a shame that a more thorough engagement with discussion threads and forum membership was not utilised, to further explore the nature of fan reactions to the Y-Word campaign video as well as the use of the Yid term during ordinary fan-fan interaction.

Whilst several authors have, therefore, used internet message boards as a convenient data source - to assess fan reaction to various developments within sport or the emergence of new identity positions - few have analysed in adequate depth the nature of the data source itself, or the communities that emerge from internet message boards. As outlined thus far, internet message boards have merely been mined for information regarding phenomena or issues which have occurred externally, rather than being the focal point of research themselves. This is an oversight which needs to be addressed, as internet communities and CMC are becoming increasingly important aspects of modern football fandom. Similarly, it should be noted that academics who take data without a comprehensive understanding of its source, cannot be said to fully understand the information they extract from such sources.

Nevertheless, two further strands of enquiry have emerged from the use of internet message boards and analysis of their content. The first has been an exploration of the internet's capacity to co-ordinate resistance or activist movements within sport. Whilst such studies are not directly related to fandom per se, they are enlightening as a result of their 'bottom-up' perspective and conclusions regarding the way in which ordinary people conglomerate via the internet. Such studies have investigated the Anti-Olympic movement (Lenskyjs,

2002), the emergence of supporters' trusts in English football (Auty, 2002) and the creation of fan-organised clubs, in order to reassert the identity of fans who are neglected by the commercial and global incentives of elite clubs (Brown, 2007; Hutchins et al, 2009; Rowe et al, 2010; Ruddock et al, 2010; Ha-Ilan, 2018).

Again, this body of work does not develop an in-depth understanding of those communities, or apply a theoretically informed conception of community either, but it has been useful in illustrating that; (1) the internet is capable of mobilizing large numbers of people very quickly, due to the large number of people with internet access and the speed of internet communication; (2) the internet can, potentially, democratise sport as it facilitates the expression of opinions and perspectives from people who might, typically, have no other outlet to convey their thoughts and; (3) as Wilson argued, using the internet may make such resistance movements stronger by uniting disparate people – those who share ideals but are divided by space, or those who share a place of origin but are similarly divided by physical space (Wilson, 2007).

Finally, whilst using internet message boards as a source of data, some studies have touched upon the behaviour of sport fans and how that behaviour might alter as a result of CMC. End suggested that the lack of real physical contact and a degree of anonymity increases the frequency that fans may adopt abusive language toward one another, or engage in 'flaming' (the posting of hostile, insulting and derogatory remarks) rival fans more frequently (End, 2000).

McMenemy, Poulter and O'Loan developed this further during a study of the expression and extent of sectarianism online, between fans of Scottish football clubs Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers (McMenemy et al, 2005). The authors concluded that a negative aspect of the internet's capacity to give public voice to large numbers of ordinary people is that criminal behaviour can flourish online, due to weak and underdeveloped legal jurisdiction regarding CMC – which, in this case, provides a context in which some fans express sectarianism without fear of reprisal.

Alongside the above studies, which focus primarily on the interaction of rival fan groups, Palmer and Thompson's ethnographic study of Australian Rules fans, specifically a group of supporters of North Adelaide Football Club, analyses

behavioural changes within the group itself (Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Palmer and Thompson's findings are enlightening as they conclude, from a rather functionalist perspective, that CMC between members of the 'Grog Squad' – named after the centrality of alcohol consumption to group membership and practises – is very different in nature to the interaction of those same fans on a given match-day. The match-day experience, Palmer and Thompson report, centres on hyper-masculinity; where excessive alcohol consumption, sexist attitudes, and aggressive and lewd behaviour are openly encouraged and celebrated.

However, Palmer and Thompson's analysis of the interaction of Grog Squad members via internet forums reveals two important dynamics. The forums are not only used to discuss football and Grog Squad behaviour at recent games, but serve a broader social function in that they are used to help fellow members answer 'off-topic' queries, provide them with contacts and recommendations for local services and tradesmen, and discuss issues of a sensitive and personal nature. The latter, in particular, is rather fascinating as Grog Squad members openly display a caring and empathic side toward one another, which is at great odds with the hyper-masculine basis of their interaction at live sporting events.

Palmer and Thompson's study is of great value, particularly as it highlights how CMC can alter fan behaviour and practises, whilst simultaneously collapsing several false dichotomies purported in previous studies – namely online/offline fandom, traditional/modern fan practises and also leisure/'real' life spaces. Palmer and Thompson's research is found wanting, however, by the fact that the analysis of the Grog Squad's internet forum lacks sufficient scrutiny and is almost an afterthought to the match-day ethnography they engaged in. Palmer and Thompson do not outline a methodology regarding the use of online data, nor do they apply a conceptual definition of community.

It would also have been particularly useful if the study had provided more detailed information about the online and offline Grog Squad members, in order to analyse differences between the two groups. Do all 'Grogies' contribute to the forum? If not, is there anything discernible about those who are engaged in online communication? Away from the forums, how are members of the online community regarded by those who attend live events but who are not members

of the forum? Finally, as a result of the functionalist nature of their conclusions, Palmer and Thompson do not fully analyse the CMC within message board posts to ascertain whether conflict or inequality between community members is detectable, whether positions of power exist and whether they, in turn, are then used to influence dominant discourses within discussion threads. It is precisely these lines of enquiry and detailed level of analysis that is missing from the existing literature regarding online football fandom.

Palmer and Thompson's study is typical of many recent studies in that it refers to online 'communities' frequently, yet the term is simply used to depict a group or conglomeration of people via the internet. A much tighter and theoretically sound notion of community needs to be adopted if we are to understand these conglomerations accurately; one which takes into account the fact that they exist primarily (but not exclusively) online and one which accounts for the purpose and function of the community for the majority of its membership. Otherwise, our understanding of their importance to football fandom is lost and the term community has no worthy distinction, analytical value or conceptual application to studies of fandom.

Satellite Fans, Transnational Fandom and Migrant Diasporas

One of the potential reasons for exploring online communities further is to gain an insight into the way in which disparate football fans can gather together and express collective sentiments and identities despite the geographical division between many of them. Indeed, in an increasingly globalised economy where labour related migration is becoming more common, the status of 'exiled' fan is also endured by larger numbers of football supporters than ever before. The literature relating to globalised fandom possibilities does, however, tend to view such developments as challenges or even threats to the authenticity and longevity of the English game.

Much of the literature relating to the impact of globalisation processes on fandom practises focuses on the emergence of, as Giulianotti and Robertson (2009: 143-4) termed it, 'self-inventing transnational fandoms'. In particular, academics have been fascinated by the emergence of supporters associations

which demonstrate allegiance to clubs outside of their national borders, especially those which compete in the widely broadcast English Premier League.

This follows the work of Hognestad (2006 & 2009), whose overview of competing conceptualisations of 'globalisation', and their application to the study of football, points to the erosion of a national focal point of football fan identities and discourses. He argues that 'due to the many strong territorial local football communities, combined with the growing transnational and deterritorialized composition of player squads and supporters, national frames of references are losing their relevance in local and international club communities' and that academic studies of football fandom seem reluctant to move beyond the antiquated elevation of nations as the central 'frame for structuring and reproducing identities' (Hognestad, 2009: 366-7).

Among such studies, Nash (2000) has explored the way in which key fan practises and values have become transnational; pointing to the role of television, in particular, as a vehicle through which English fan culture has been adopted, mimicked and celebrated throughout Scandinavia. More specifically, his analysis of Scandinavian supporters of Liverpool FC highlighted that loyalty to the club, rivalry to competitors, the totemistic adoration of Anfield (the club's stadium) and vociferous and masculine expressions of such identities were widely adopted and prioritised among such fans. This, despite it being contrary to the fan cultures of domestic Scandinavian football, which were considered sterile in comparison, whilst also requiring many Scandinavian fans to consciously subjugate their national and regional identities in order to demonstrate the intensity of their identity to Liverpool FC. Doing so allowed them to gain a degree of 'authenticity' in the eyes of local Liverpoolians and fellow Scandinavian supporters.

Similarly, Reimer's (2004) exploration of Manchester United's popularity in Scandinavia isolates the broadcasting of matches from the end of the 1960s as having a particular significance. This, coupled with a fascination for British fan culture, the synergy between Scandinavian culture and the British style of play and, latterly, the emergence of successful Scandinavian players like Peter Schmeichel (Danish) and Ole Gunnar Solskjær (Norwegian), led Reimer to

conclude that, borrowing from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson, a large scale imagined community had formed across the region.

That imagined community is also the focus of Kerr and Emery's (2016) analysis of Liverpool FC fans in Scandinavia, which analyses the 'brand' of Liverpool FC and the strength of supporter identification with that brand. Taking the perspectives of fans into consideration, the authors determine that media coverage of live matches is the single most important factor in stimulating identification with a club, whilst watching those live matches is the most popular form of consuming the club for Scandinavian fans.

However, the 16 pre-determined responses to their survey question about 'origins of Scandinavian identification with Liverpool FC' do not incorporate the potential role of online communities or social media. When these phenomena were raised as potentially important, with regards to the consumption behaviours of Scandinavian fans ('visit unofficial LFC websites' was ranked as the 3rd most popular practice), Kerr and Emery omitted further exploration of the nature of such consumption, the interaction between fans and the contribution this may make to the overall imagined community. Beyond the simple acknowledgement that fans do interact online and that it is more popular, in their sample, with younger fans, we learn little about the nature and significance of CMC to, what the authors refer to as, satellite fans.

However, the focus of such studies is once again on elite clubs. Although the research by Hognestad (2006) and Reimer (2004) acknowledges that the British Football Supporters' Association of Norway represents fans of 45 separate clubs, including fans of non-league Barnet FC and lower league clubs Macclesfield Town FC and, at the time, Wolverhampton Wanderers FC, the focus of research is on fans of elite EPL teams, with Liverpool (Farred, 2002; Kerr & Emery, 2011 & 2016; Nash, 2000; Hognestad 2006 & 2009) and Manchester United (Reimer, 2004; Hognestad, 2006 & 2009) frequently used as the case studies or supporting examples. It is telling that, in Hognestad's (2009) later contribution to the topic, he attempts to demonstrate the transnational nature of the game by highlighting that 'top English clubs Manchester United, Chelsea, Liverpool and Arsenal currently (June 2007) have squads of players from between 14 and 17

differing nations, and all five continents are represented' (Hognestad, 2009: 368).

What of clubs, like Barnet, whose 'brand' is not as widely televised or internationalised? What of clubs, perhaps like Macclesfield Town, whose fan base is made up of those who are, typically, from the immediate vicinity? And what of clubs, such as Wolverhampton Wanderers, whose lack of recognisable success has not engendered a global fan base? Once again, the chosen clubs present a distorted view of English football which omits the experiences and reality of most fans of English clubs. It is difficult to truly assess the impact of transnational trends and global communications when the chosen case studies are those most affected by such developments and whose fans, therefore, have atypical experiences of the game.

Giulianotti and Robertson are among the few who acknowledge the possibility of exploring the persistent identities and club affiliations that might exist among migrant fans, although Kerr (2009) and Kerr and Emery (2011) had also noted the presence of expatriate fans participated in their survey, but omitted their responses as it was outside the remit of their studies of foreign fans. Alongside self-inventing transnational fans, Giulianotti and Robertson suggest that '*diasporic groups...*(are also) able to sustain their allegiances through personal or collective memories, and who come to rely on global digital media communications in order to maintain or to reactivate deep forms of solidarity' (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009: 143 – my emphasis). In doing so, such fans demonstrate that locality is not a geographically fixed entity and that 'migration promotes the intensive 'deterritorialization' of the local, as reflected in football by the international appeal and supporter bases of leading clubs' (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2007: 124).

Their chosen case-studies are, however, rather narrowly focused on the way in which television broadcasts are used to remain connected to such localities, and express identity to them. Despite also acknowledging CMC and the potential importance of the internet, their analysis of North American Supporters' Clubs (NASCs) of the two biggest Scottish clubs, Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers, is limited to the way that high-speed broadband connections can be used to facilitate greater degrees of access to the live coverage of matches involving

their beloved teams. The nature of internet-based communication and interaction is not fully attended to, and thus an exploration of the way that these have impacted on modern football fandom is omitted. This is true of many studies regarding transnational fandom, where the influence of television is widely acknowledged, the impact of low-cost and frequent flights connecting Europe's major cities is analysed, yet the role of the internet is either ignored or given a fleeting acknowledgment (Kerr, 2009; Kerr & Emery 2011 & 2016; Nash, 2000; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2006, 2007 & 2009; Hognestad 2006 & 2009; Reimer, 2004).

Allied to this, Giulianotti and Robertson (2009) refer to migrant fans in collective form only and are focused on exploring the practises of those fans with close physical proximity to one another, if not their club of choice, thereby restricting their analysis to face-to-face communication and social gatherings. It is almost as though migrant fans of Celtic and Rangers can only express a connection to their chosen teams if they are part of a diasporic community.

Not only that, but through the relativisation, accommodation, hybridisation and transformation that characterise the glocalisation of Scottish fandom within NASCs, Giulianotti and Robertson (2007) depict an almost sub-cultural fan grouping, distinct from mainstream Celtic or Rangers fandom; their social gatherings, relationships and expressions of identity take place in isolation from Celtic or Rangers fandom as a whole. Consequently, this underplays the significant role and contribution many migrant fans have to that wider fan culture, as well as the possibility that CMC facilitates their persistent involvement in fan practises still connected to Scotland and the continuation of relationships with fans who attend live matches and/or reside in Glasgow itself.

Giulianotti and Robertson (2007 & 2009) also suggest that a nostalgic outlook is pervasive among fans; that the fandom practises of such groups are characterised by glances through the rear-view mirror - at their past, and at what has been left behind. As the authors demonstrate, the role of football in the socio-cultural reterritorialization that took place in foreign lands has had a lengthy history, as attested to by the origin of many clubs in Europe and South America which were established by British soldiers, sailors and merchants who settled there (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009: 146; Walvin, 1994;). Whilst more

recent migrants may well engage with live broadcasts to awaken 'collective memories and communities of sentiment' within 'relatively dormant supporter diasporas' (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009: 144), what of the many migrants who do not live within ex-pat communities, or those whose involvement in the fandom practises of their chosen club is as dynamic and contemporary as the host community left behind? What of fans who have moved away from their home town but still reside in the UK? It is 'exiled' fans such as this, to which this thesis will attend to in more depth within chapter six.

Conclusion

The focus of football fandom studies have altered significantly in recent years, moving away from the early era of academic work which 'following the precedent of sociology...tended to focus on the exceptional, the subcultures attached to hooliganism or football fanzines, or the impact of structurally imposed factors such as race, gender or class' (Stone, 2017: 456). The concerns of more recent research projects have mirrored concerns in the sport itself; as a result, an assessment of the impact of globalisation and commercialisation has characterised debates about elite English football since the advent of the Premier League in 1992.

More specifically, influential authors have stimulated intense scrutiny over the notion of authenticity in football fandom and fan experiences. This initially raised concerns about the vitality and long term future of the British game as the core values and identities it has been based on for over a hundred years were, to some researchers, starting to erode in favour of ephemeral, fashion-based and consumer identity positions. This was followed by work rebuffing the notion that developments in the modern game, such as television broadcasting of live matches, are eradicating traditional fan practises. Instead, they are seen to be offering alternative ways to *maintain* such traditional engagements with the game or, more controversially, others have argued that the media's influence has been so pervasive, that the long heralded fan practises on which authentic fandom is supposedly based (such as attendance at live matches) are so far removed from the romanticised and traditional view of watching the sport that they are, in fact, no longer a feature of modern football.

Despite this, the role of the internet has largely been ignored. Academic scrutiny of the media's influence continues to be fixated with the broadcasting of matches on television and associated activities. Sixteen years has passed since Auty (2002) first acknowledged this significant gap and six since Gibbons and Dixon (2012) reaffirmed it; yet researchers have rarely explored the nature of CMC between football fans in any depth.

Although academics have successfully challenged the notion that CMC between fans is symptomatic of the negative consequences of globalisation, bringing with it inauthentic, meaningless and temporary interactions between fans, there is still an overwhelming tendency to reduce that CMC to convenient data which is used to evaluate broader concerns rather than the origin of the CMC itself. Quick and easy to compile it might well be, but without a thorough analysis of the context in which it is produced, or the nature of the relationships between those who are communicating online, such data is full of potential pitfalls for the researcher and there are so many missed opportunities to explore its genuine meaning further.

In conceptualising online groups of fans as communities and exploring the relationships of its constituents thoroughly, this thesis intends to evaluate the role and importance of CMC to modern football fans and explore the way it is used by globalised fan groups to maintain a connection to their team, locality and to one another.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUALISING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Introduction

Within the literature on football fandom, the *notion* of community has held a prominent position. Of the traditional fan practices and interactions that are held so dear, the communal basis of that fandom, its connection to the local and its position within the community at large have a conspicuous place. There are however, as Blackshaw (2008) points out, a number of significant problems regarding the academic literature of the game, its communities, and our understanding of football fan interaction on the whole. Delanty (2010: 139) argued, with reference to virtual communities, that '[t]here is a growing social, scientific and philosophic literature...however, it is largely underdeveloped and theoretically vague, rarely making assumptions explicit'. With the odd exception, the very same can be argued of the body of research into football communities. A number of studies adopt the term community, either referring to the *rhetoric* of community or, worse, conflating it with any other term that refers to groups of people. Few researchers have *conceptualised* community and examined, with the required scrutiny, whether or not the fan groups they study genuinely constitute a community.

Additionally, an idealised, romanticised and rather functionalist notion of football communities of the past permeates the historiography of the game, giving credence to Elias's argument that 'the use of the term community has remained to some extent associated with the hope and the wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages' (Elias 1974, cited by Hoggett 1997: 5). As a result, recent developments in football and their impact, notably those concerning the commercialization and globalization of the sport, are often judged against this yardstick, perhaps unfairly so.

It is thus unsurprising that the academic exploration of *online* communities of football fans has been hitherto neglected. When they are referred to, community often becomes a catch all term that lacks conceptual meaning. Additionally,

whilst several studies have tapped into online 'communities' for convenient qualitative data, often to supplement the main body of their research on football fandom, these online communities have yet to be explored as the actual topic of research in themselves. The aims of this chapter are, therefore, to develop the recent call to take football fan interactions on the internet more seriously; focus such research within the sociological framework of community; critically analyse the competing definitions of online community and, subsequently, derive a conceptual model through which further studies of online football fandom can analyse the nature of fan interactions more purposefully.

Defining the Online Community

The concept of community has been a highly contested field for over a century in sociological enquiry. Since Tönnies first articulated a distinction between local social relations (*gemeinschaft*) from society as a whole (*gesellschaft*), the specific elements that combine to form a community have been debated with enduring vigour, although a consensus has never been close to being reached. Bell and Newby (1971: 27) argued that it seemed as though 'every sociologist... possessed his (sic) own notion of what community consists of, frequently reflecting his ideas of what it should consist of'.

Almost half way through this century or so of debate, Hillery (1955) brought together the various competing definitions of community, broke them down into their distinct elements and tried to highlight areas of common ground among them. The fact that Hillery unearthed over ninety definitions of the term community was not the only fascinating aspect of his research; it was, indeed, overshadowed by his conclusion that the solitary factor linking these wide-ranging approaches was 'people'.

Despite this, Hillery was able to demonstrate that three other distinct elements were frequently used as the basis of community definitions, namely 'area', 'common ties' and 'social interaction'. The emphasis on place was of particular importance to many of the early sociological studies of community, among them, the influential work of Talcott Parsons was predicated on a conceptual understanding of community as 'the aspect of the structure of social systems

which is referable to the territorial location of persons and their activities' (Cited by Bell and Newby, 1971: 32). Prior to this, the 'Chicago School's' emphasis on locality was particularly acute. From an ecological perspective, which excluded notions of social interaction as being important to the basis and operation of a community, common residence was seen as the primary basis of a community's existence. All forms of social solidarity, the relationships that were formed, shared interests, and even the behaviour of members, were a by-product of the locality; each reflecting the physical environment in which the community existed.

The centrality of place in community studies was, however, to diminish as sociologists began to question how mere proximity could lead to establishment of meaningful social relations (Stacey, 1969), and challenge the assumption that membership of these communities was both obligatory and somehow natural. The dwindling primacy of place was accelerated by the 'symbolic community' thesis advocated by Cohen (1985). Whilst he was by no means the first scholar to advocate a move away from place in our understanding of community, Cohen has been, without doubt, one of the most influential and frequently cited community theorists.

Communities, to Cohen, rather than being centred on a connection to a specific geographic locale, were instead communities of meaning; formed by a perception of shared identity with others whilst maintaining distinction and difference from outsiders. His thesis was clearly influenced by contemporary discourse on the perceived breakdown of traditional social and economic structures, which were often seen as the basis of local communities in previous studies. In defining the term, Cohen argued that 'the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and a repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity' (Cohen, 1985: 118 – cited by Crow & Allan, 1994: 7). Essentially, the *origin* of community is based on identity; shared customs, interests, habits, etc., that create the boundaries distinguishing both insiders and outsiders. These are then reinforced by symbolic acts and rituals, making the community a *process* through which the shared meaning and identity of a community's members are perpetually (and symbolically) articulated.

The key focus, therefore, of Cohen's thesis is on the basis of inclusion and exclusion – both how the boundaries of a community are created and upheld. His definition of community also encourages us to see these boundaries as fluid rather than entirely fixed, that the criteria for inclusion and exclusion is one that is continually negotiated, that such boundaries are created by a number of complex processes and, finally, that there are significant constraining influences on those who are included within the boundaries of the community (Crow & Allan, 1994: 7).

The adoption of Cohen's ideas have resulted in a significant shift in the way that academics have conceptualised and studied community. As we will delve into shortly, they have been particularly influential on definitions and interpretations of virtual communities, due in no small measure to the initial perception that 'place' in CMC has no relevance. However, it should be noted that for all the important suggestions the symbolic community approach may offer, some substantial problems arise when adopting this conceptual approach. Problems which have, unfortunately, been replicated by several studies of online communities.

Firstly, Cohen's definition of community is as all-encompassing as a definition comes; there are few forms of group formation and communication that cannot be labelled as 'community' when adopting this approach. The key problem here, therefore, is that the specific conceptual function and purpose of the term community is all but lost and the line drawn between communities and other groupings is blurred beyond the point of meaningful recognition. Secondly, as Blackshaw (2008: 330) has argued, the *process* of community advocated by Cohen is also so wide ranging that meaning can be derived from almost all social practises and activities, and then labelled as 'symbolic' of the wider meaning and identity on which the community in question is supposedly based. Blackshaw is particularly damning of Cohen's influence, going as far as to argue that 'community theorizing has [now] become such a vague and ambiguous activity and it is not unfair to suggest that his contribution to the literature is undoubtedly part of the reason why community has become such an overworked, catch-all concept' (Blackshaw, 2008: 329).

'Online' and 'Virtual'

If the study of traditional communities was blighted by the sheer number of definitions of the term and a lack of consensus over conceptual basis of the term, it must be noted that the literature regarding online communities is more notable for the distinct lack of theorisation. As we highlighted earlier, research within the subject of sport has often used online communities for data and assumed that a 'community' exists as a result of the CMC that they encounter, but sport scholars have rarely outlined a workable model to explore the existence of community amongst their subjects. This is symptomatic of most online community research projects, not just those that centre on sport. The omission of a conceptual discussion of community is frequent and it is commonplace to simply borrow a definition of virtual community from some of the pioneering scholars in the field (particularly those of Hine, 2000; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). That is not to say that these specific definitions lack value, but it is an acknowledgement that the choice of a definition is almost never accompanied by an explicit discussion of its comparative merits.

Whilst there might not be the plethora of online community definitions that Hillery discovered when surveying the literature regarding traditional communities in the 1950s, the definitions of online communities offered thus far are distinct – some emphasising the importance of a specific element above all others, whilst others see online communities as a phenomenon arising from the interplay of several key factors and processes.

Another challenge facing students of online communities centres on the very specific nature of definitions of community that have been offered by disparate disciplines. As DeSouza and Preece (2004: 579) noted, 'intuitively everyone seems to understand the concept of 'online community' but so far there is no agreed upon definition. This is due to the strong multidisciplinary interest that this topic inspires. Sociologists tend to focus on networks of social relations, ethnographers on the roles and activities of small groups of individuals, and technologists on the structure of the underlying software supporting the community'.

One of the earliest conceptions of online communities that has been so readily adopted by academics from a wide range of disciplines is that of Rheingold (1993). His seminal text, *'Virtual Communities: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier'* was a valuable insider's account of one of the earliest and most successful internet communities – The WELL. The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) was a message board website that was devised with the intention of enabling people to continue conversations they had started face-to-face, at conferences especially (Rheingold, 1993: 1). Since Rheingold wrote the text, the number of people using the internet has risen enormously. The diversity of people who have access to the internet has also broadened considerably. As a result, several of Rheingold's findings are particular to the point in time that he conducted his research and are not always applicable twenty years on as the nature of the internet, its users, and the online communities that are formed have altered significantly.

Rheingold did not provide a convenient outline or definition of online communities as such, but rather a theoretical understanding of, and approach to, this emerging phenomenon. It is clear that, to Rheingold, online communities constituted a separate entity to real-life communication and community formation. Communities like The WELL were not extensions of real-life interaction, but simply would not exist without their formation taking place on the World Wide Web. Whilst real-life interaction may result from the relationships people formed online, the genesis of those relationships is within a distinct internet-based community; separate from the ordinary and 'real' lives of its members.

Delanty (2010: 139) has argued that Rheingold's approach reflects the scope of the internet in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At this point, internet usage was largely confined to a numerically small, affluent, male, young, and technology savvy strata. Internet use, therefore, 'was restricted to a small section of society and thus its interconnectedness for the wider population was not there to analyse' (Delanty, 2010: 139). This had the effect of exaggerating the distance between CMC in online communities and everyday interactions within Rheingold's thesis. We are now in an age when 69% of women and 60% of men in the UK use social networking sites (ONS, 2018); it is clear that online

interactions are an important part of ordinary everyday communication for the majority of the population.

If we analyse Rheingold's approach further, his ideas still hold a great deal of value and several elements of his thesis remain important considerations when trying to define and research modern online communities. Firstly, it is apparent that the distinctive nature of online communities needs to be established. Whilst we have already noted that CMC is an increasingly important feature of everyday communication and that Rheingold's 'alternative reality' approach is overstating the distinction between online and 'real-life' interaction, we should, nonetheless, be careful to isolate the characteristics of online communities that distinguish them from other types of communal grouping and interaction if the term online community is to have any conceptual value at all.

A distinction between the factors which bring people together online and those that signify a genuine community has developed is an evident consideration in Rheingold's writing. On the face of it, Rheingold's model of community would seem to echo Cohen's focus on the centrality of identity to community formation and their symbolic enforcement of that identity position. Indeed, there seems to be a conscious attempt to distance online communities for the traditional notions that locale is central to community formation. Rheingold (1993: 9) reiterates the words of those pioneers involved in the development of the internet who predicted, in the 1960s, that online communities would be 'communities not of common location, but of common interest'.

Furthermore, Rheingold argued that online communities are 'where our favourite subjects are being discussed' and that 'we get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive. In this sense, the topic is the address...[and] your chances of making friends are magnified by order of magnitude over the *old methods* of finding a peer group' (Rheingold, 1993: 12 – my emphasis). He goes one further by suggesting that one of the most positive developments to emerge from CMC is that the connections people make and the relationships they form will, in fact, be stronger due to the shared interest and/or identity that brought them together in the first instance. Stronger than, that is, relationships established within traditional communities, which are based merely on 'accidents of proximity' (Rheingold, 1993).

However, place retains an important role in Rheingold's conception of online communities and a 'sense of place' amongst community members was a focal point of the interaction between members of The WELL and their collective identity. This replicates, as Delanty observed, a characteristic which is inherent in traditional forms of community (Delanty, 2010: 139).

Building on Rheingold's ideas, Wellman and Gulia, and Castells were quick to dismiss the distinction he made between online and 'real-life' interaction. To them, the rapid development of the internet and its increasing popularity had resulted in a collapse of the distinction between online and offline worlds in the everyday lives of most people. As such, Rheingold's thesis was ultimately based on a false dichotomy and needed some significant revisions.

Wellman and Gulia embarked upon this task whilst maintaining an overwhelmingly positive outlook on CMC and online community formation. They aimed, however, to provide a more specific outline of what online communities actually were and explain how people drawn together via shared interests and identities began engaging in community activity. They argued that technology not only facilitated contact between people with something in common, nor did it merely make this contact more convenient and far-reaching, but the technology itself led to the emergence of *specialised* relationships of co-operation and support. Whilst diverse, multiplex relationships could develop from this, interaction between community members at large centres on a distinct and narrow sense of collective identity and/or shared interests.

In an oft quoted definition, Wellman (2005: 53) defines online communities as 'networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity'. In other related work, Wellman and Gulia (1999) added that these were often 'personalised communities' as members of online communities would join to develop interpersonal networks and interact online based on their own individual sense of identity and interests. As a result of this, Wellman and Gulia also argued that the allegiance members felt to any given online community may be stronger than those of traditional communities based on locale, as they were voluntary rather than obligatory in nature.

If we analyse Wellman and Gulia's suggestions further, important distinctions emerge between the origin, function and development of online communities.

Firstly, like Rheingold before them, Wellman and Gulia outline a clear difference between the factors that help to *form* an online community and the characteristics that *emerge* as a result of interaction between its members. For example, whilst a shared sense of identity may be at the root of interaction between members (based on, say, political allegiance, social class, support for the same sports club, etc.) the online community also *provides* social identity for members; an identity amongst members to the online community in itself.

Secondly, Wellman and Gulia highlight the distinct phenomena that emerge from CMC and need to be detected by researchers if they are to determine whether or not these interactions are evidence of a genuine community existing online. Rather than throwing the term community at all forms of group interaction online, Wellman and Gulia are deliberate in drawing our attention to several *reciprocal* features of that interaction, of which support and the sharing of information are key to their conceptualisation of online communities.

To be critical of Wellman & Gulia's outline, it could be argued that in an effort to challenge the false dichotomy of 'online' and 'offline' interaction, their definition of online communities does, perhaps, go too far and as a result loses a distinct 'online' element. In reality, their definition could be applied to *any* community, irrespective of its online or offline origins. If we are to continue to discuss online communities as distinct from traditional or face-to-face community formations, there must be meaningful criteria on which a distinction can be made. This is by no means to suggest that we return to a dichotomous way of understanding human interaction as being 'online' or 'offline'. Rather, it is an acknowledgement that only when the majority of interactions between members of a community occur via CMC, when the meaningful relationships within a group are established online rather than face-to-face, or when one of key features of the community and the identity of its membership is the online setting in which their interaction takes place, can we genuinely claim to be analysing an online community.

Generally speaking, of the definitions of online community offered, there is a tendency to overstate the extent to which people interacting online are encompassed within the community and, perhaps, the homogeneity of members. Certainly, with regard to the latter point, conflict, power inequalities and hierarchies of status are aspects of online communities that receive little

attention. Taking these problems into account, Castells (2000) developed Wellman and Gulia's notion of the personalised virtual community further. Whilst he was encouraged by the potential of online communities to be a site of positive social action, Castells was sceptical about the strength and longevity of relationships established online.

Indeed, Castells argued that meaningful relationships were not formed at all, but that the majority of CMC between people was part of the continuation and maintenance of existing social relations. Castells argued that the ties people form online are 'thin' and thus online communities are ephemeral in nature – people interact, usually briefly, without resulting in long-term, meaningful social relations. This was, as Castell's argued, due to the distinction between two types of online community members. Whilst a small number of genuine community members exist, the kind of internet homesteaders to which Rheingold referred, they are significantly outnumbered by a large swathe of transient community *users*, who only casually and sporadically interact within the confines of the community, if at all.

Castell's reminder that not everyone interacting online, even within an online community, can be considered a fully-fledged community member is a valid and important consideration. However, his conclusion that online communities as a whole are based on ephemeral and thin relationships and interactions is difficult to substantiate. He himself identifies a core membership of genuine 'homesteaders' exists within online communities. It is here, in this core of committed, long-term, regular and inter-related contributors to an internet chat-room, message board or forum that some of the core components of community (as suggested by Wellman and Gulia, 1999, among others) can be located.

Conclusion: distinguishing 'online' and 'place' in conceptions of internet communities

Whilst several authors have argued that the origin of communal interaction online and the unifying force amongst group members may be a shared interest, identity or something held in common, this does not help us to explain how the specific conditions of community *emerge*. Many people interact with one another

on the basis on a shared interest, in face-to-face communication or via the internet, but it does not follow that a community is formed on the basis of this. As we noted earlier, Stacey argued along the same lines when she suggested, with reference to traditional communities of place, that physical proximity does not necessarily lead to the establishment of social relations (cited by Crow & Allan, 1994: 5). What we must look towards are the key features of social interaction which signify that the transition from 'network' or 'group' to community has taken place.

Alongside some of the criteria on which Rheingold, Wellman and Gulia, and Castells defined online communities, I propose that distinct norms, identities, and the centrality of CMC be emphasised into order to conceptualise online communities successfully and realign our approach to researching them. Whilst place may not be a fundamental pre-condition to the *formation* of social groups online, the emerging significance of a particular cyber-place or space may be a crucial sign that a group has transformed into a community. Whilst a great deal of group interaction occurs within a particular virtual place, it is when this place becomes a part of the identity of group members that it is central to the formation of an online community. This may be true of values, norms and rules too. Although they are not, necessarily, a fundamental reason behind people seeking out one another online, they emerge through interaction between group members and, therefore, become sufficiently powerful over time to create a level of unity and solidarity that can be labelled as 'community'.

In light of the analysis of existing literature in this chapter, and drawing upon several of the criteria put forward by key authors in the fields, this thesis defines an online community as (see figure below): the result of CMC between a group of people who were brought together, initially, by a shared interest, identity or something in common. From this CMC, reciprocal behaviours characterise many of the interactions between its members and there is the emergence of distinct norms, values, meaningful relationships and insider/outsider status. Alongside this, an identity to an online space and fellow community members also emerges. Whilst community members may interact in a variety of ways, CMC remains important to their engagement with one another.

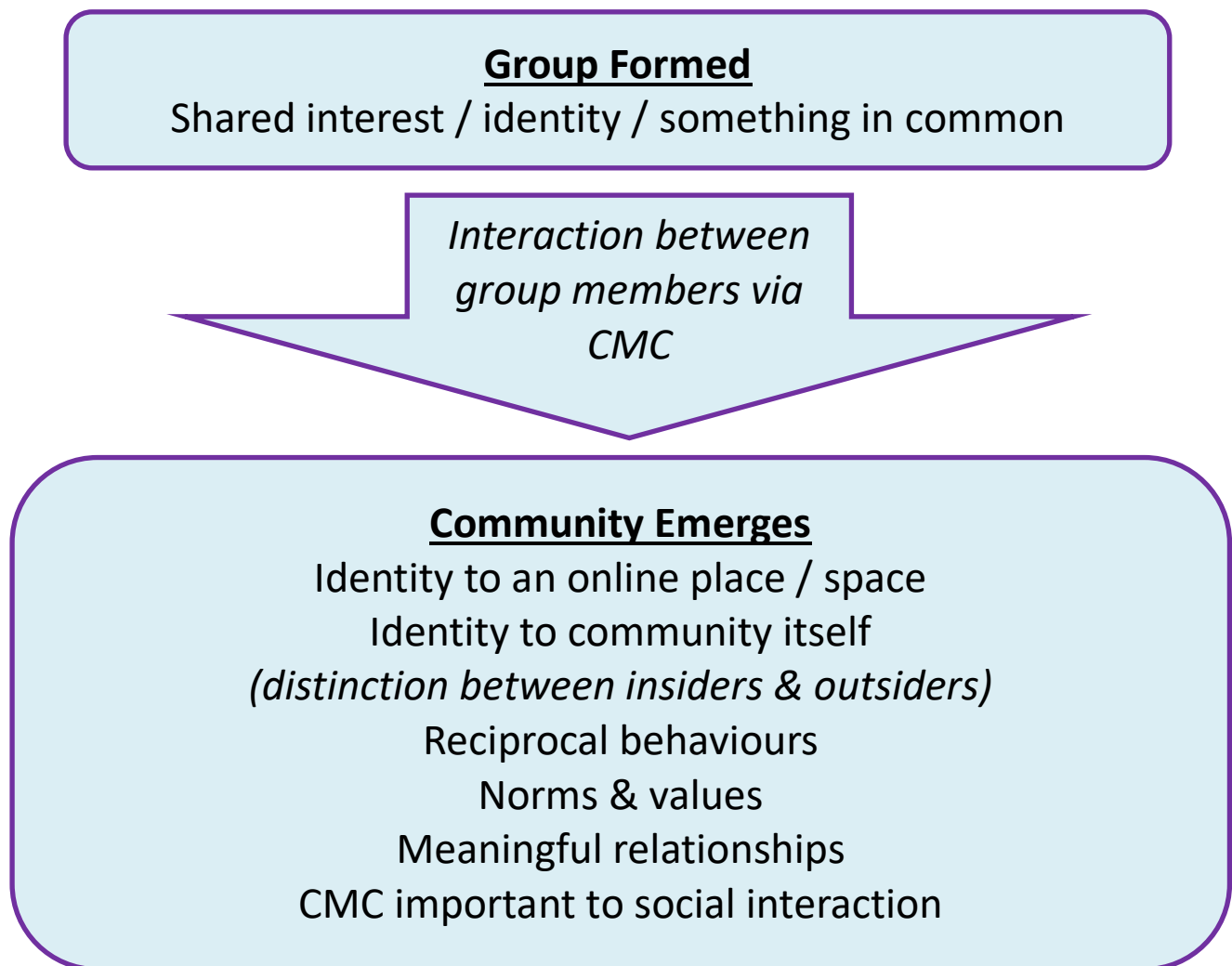


Figure Three: The Online Community Concept.

To clarify, a collective understanding of the term 'identity' is adopted throughout the thesis. Stemming from the seminal work of Benedict Anderson (1983), the stages of community formation outlined in figure three, above, are based on an understanding of identity as an *imagined community* whereby 'members...will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1983: 49). Anderson (1983: 49), who sought to define nations and chart their historical development, explained that 'all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined'. This last point is particularly key in highlighting the subjective nature of identity formation and its meaning to those involved within imagined

communities. Members may 'invent traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) and create narratives about the community they belong to which, in turn, informs us about the style with which their connection to fellow members is imagined.

Figure three proposes a working definition of online community which allows the thesis to scrutinise CMC between football fans more effectively. However, through a inductive and reflexive research framework, which I will address in the next chapter, an understanding of the criteria on which I have defined 'online communities' and the process through which these criteria emerge are fluid and contestable. Each will be continually analysed through the research process and modified accordingly, should the findings of a prolonged and immersive engagement with a specific online community require it.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS, METHODOLOGY AND REFLEXIVITY

Introduction

In his classic text, *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills (2000: 58) explained that 'methods are the procedures used by men [sic] trying to understand or explain something' and that 'methodology is a study of methods, it offers theories about what men [sic] are doing when they are at work at their studies'. This distinction has been influential to both the construction of the research approach for this thesis and, specifically, to the structure of this chapter.

It begins with an exploration of the central tenets of ethnographic research, drawing on the corrective call to arms offered by Willis and Trondman (2000), before moving on to challenge the dichotomous approach to studying online interaction that has become typical of internet specific adaptations of ethnography. Within sports studies and football fandom research, the internet as a whole is a rather underutilised resource. Explicit discussions of methodologies and how they can be adapted for use on the internet are lacking, particularly with regard to observational research projects. For instance, the second edition of Gratton and Jones' *Research Methods for Sports Studies* textbook and Veal and Darcy's *Research Methods in Sport Studies and Management* discuss the use of websites as a resource, conducting internet based searches and even the use of online questionnaires (or e-surveys), but the internet is largely neglected throughout the rest of the texts. This, despite chapters on interviews, observational analysis and ethnography (Gratton & Jones, 2010; Veal & Darcy, 2014).

From here, I will then provide details of the reflexive approach adopted within this study, which advocates an explicit conveyance of the researcher's impact on the research process as a whole. The section on methodological considerations concludes with an analysis of what constitutes the 'field' within ethnographies conducted online, as well as an examination of the key debates regarding ethical research within such fields. The remainder of the chapter details the procedures adopted in order to acquire data, which were largely based on interviews and participant observation and experiencing, an explanation of the form of the data

collected and a deliberation over the problems and difficulties experienced throughout the research process.

Methodology

In their widely cited attempt to realign ethnographic research, Willis and Trondman (2000) identified a number of distinct criteria which must be fulfilled in order for an authentic ethnographic study to take place. Amongst other more specific requirements, Willis and Trondman's suggestions can be broken down into two categories. The first, hallmarks of the ethnographic enterprise, represents an attempt to emphasise that such research should, fundamentally, focus on culture, utilise qualitative data, be based on an immersive engagement with a community or culture, respect the irreducibility of human experience and attempt to represent the perspective of the insider.

The second involves the use of theory in such works; Willis and Trondman are clear that ethnographies should be problem rather than theory driven, utilise reflexive forms of social theorising, be based on analytical insight rather than mere description and ensure a balance is struck between theory and data. In doing so, researchers will avoid rigid, all-encompassing theoretical approaches but, even more importantly, the empiricists fallacy that data can speak for itself (Willis and Trondman, 2000: 12).

At the outset of my research I felt that ethnography, generally, had great synergy with the aims my own project and the conceptual understanding of community I outlined in the previous chapter. In particular, the features of that approach that stood out as valuable to my study were the 'hallmarks' of ethnography highlighted above. The strength of the ethnographic approach lies in its ability to connect the researcher with their subjects, allowing them to interact with one another, whilst providing the researcher with first-hand experience of the culture under scrutiny (O'Reilly, 2009). I identified that a prolonged and immersive engagement with Clarets Mad was crucial in order to try and understand the formation of social norms, values and meaningful relationships between community members. It would also allow me to explore

the meaning, motivation and extent of reciprocal behaviours that distinguish communities from other group formations.

However, it was not until my encounter with Willis and Trondman's (2000) ethnographic philosophy that my approach was refined and I truly married my conceptual understanding of community with both the research problem and the methodological approach. Their emphasis on the use of theory, to provide meaning and academic rigour to ethnographic studies, was welcome, as I had a theoretical outline of what an online community was before embarking on data collection. However, their attention to the balance between theory and data and call for ethnographers to adopt reflexive forms of social theorising changed my understanding of the research process as a whole.

Reflexivity and research philosophy

A reflexive approach is central to any understanding of the relationship between the researcher and their subjects. Although my research prior to this project involved some degree of reflexivity and an understanding of my position as a researcher, the extent of my self-awareness was rather limited and the explicit outline of that self-awareness limited further still. However, 'the deeper the involvement of the researcher with research subjects the more relevant it [reflexivity] becomes' (Veal & Darcy, 2014: 42). As such, the period of data collection itself involved an extensive consideration and analysis of my position as the researcher, typified by a posthumous exploration of my field notes which focussed on the impact I had on the community in question and the interaction between its members.

Before then, I also began to deliberate over the stance I had, as a researcher, and the extent to which I had shaped the research project up to this point. Until my encounter with Willis and Trondman's article (2000), I had, on reflection, adopted a very traditional, deductive approach to research. Although this was not articulated explicitly at any stage of my proposal, it was clear that a deductive stance was embodied in my conceptualisation of the research process for this thesis. As such, even though I felt that I understood the synergy between my intended research and the 'hallmarks of ethnography' outlined

above, I was on course to compromise some of the strengths of ethnographic enquiry by adopting a rigid deductive approach - essentially by 'testing' whether or not 'community' was present amongst my subjects.

Whilst this kind of research may have been possible through the adoption of pivotal ethnographic *methods*, notably a prolonged engagement with a community, it would surely have compromised the ethos and principles which underpin ethnographic *methodology*. Certainly, the insiders' perspective I would be able to offer would have been very limited indeed as much of the data I collected would have been determined by my own presuppositions. In turn, this would also have tainted the data collected and the authenticity of the ethnography itself by increasing the imbalance of power between researcher and research subjects, through the prioritisation of communications between community members based entirely on my own configuration of what was valuable or important (O'Reilly, 2009: 57-63). I would argue, further still, that the interactive possibilities bestowed on the researcher by ethnographic research would also have been compromised by adopting such an inflexible methodology; again, they would have been limited by the scope of my own enquiries into what specific comments and behaviours represented, rather than allowing my interactions with the community to be amongst the comments and behaviours that were actually analysed.

Conducting ethnography online

Like much of the work done on internet communities, the earliest ethnographies incorporating CMC began with the premise that such interaction was separate from the 'real' world and different in nature. Robinson and Schultz (2009: 687) refer to these pioneering ethnographies as those studies which aimed to show how the internet provided users with online environments not for the extension of 'real-world lives, but as liberating alternatives and substitutes for aspects of their identities'.

However, neologisms like 'netnography', or the specific variants 'virtual ethnography', 'cyber ethnography' or 'internet ethnography' continue to enjoy widespread recognition and adoption despite the fact, as Markham identified

(2005: 798), 'ethnographic inquiry appears to be shifting from the study of online-only environments and virtual identity to the intersection of computer-mediated communication with everyday life'. Such terms are unhelpful as they only serve to further the dichotomous approach to the study of online interaction.

I myself adopted netnography as the term to describe my intended methodology for this very thesis; it made sense at the time to take this divergent form of ethnography in order to study the community present at Clarets Mad. However, it was through reflexive forms of social theorising, triggered by the literature regarding community and internet based football fandom (see previous chapters) and a desultory engagement with the community in question, that I realised the insular nature of online-only methodologies and their inherent flaws.

It puzzled me that, after challenging the dichotomy that distinguishes between 'real' and 'virtual' lives, so many academics studied the internet by adopting distinct and separate methodologies to explore CMC. If we highlight the inherent fallacy of studies that have distinguished CMC as virtual, as opposed to real, we clearly cannot advocate a methodology based on the same inaccurate premise, as it undermines our conceptual position (Beneito-Montagut, 2011). After all, as the champion of netnography himself observed, 'not only has it become social acceptable for people to reach out and connect through...computer-mediated connectivity, but these places and related activities have become commonplace' (Kozinets, 2010: 7), whilst Garcia et al (2009: 54) 'found very few ethnographic studies of online settings in which members have no offline contact'.

It would, therefore, be more accurate and less fanciful to suggest that we are merely conducting a significant element of our ethnographic study online. Whilst specific internet-only adaptations of ethnography are useful in some select instances, they are not applicable to *all* studies that incorporate CMC as a focus for research. As Beneito-Montagut (2011: 719) argues, they are only adequate 'if the inquiry takes place in virtual worlds, such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*, but not if we inquire into everyday communications and interactions carried out online' which are 'intrinsically linked to the face-to-face communications'.

Meaningful discussions about the method should, therefore, centre on how the key methods of ethnography can be adapted to online settings, how the fundamental principles and strengths of ethnography can be upheld when observing CMC, and how core concepts (such as the field, *entrée*, observation, interaction, etc.) are affected by the nature of the internet (Gupta & Ferguson, 1998; Robinson & Schultz, 2009). We turn, now, to a *methodological* discussion of the field and research ethics in order to address the way in which the nature of the internet affects the ethnographic enterprise, before discussing the rest of these considerations within the section relating to *methods*.

Defining the field

When defining the online field, several authors have been critical of the direct mimicking of traditional ethnography in trying to focus on a specific website or location. Primarily, this is because the remote, isolated and distinct cultures that dominated the formative studies of ethnography are rarely a reality online. After all, one of the trademarks of the internet age is the heightened connectivity between people from disparate parts of the globe. As Markham (2005: 801) argued, 'when studying physically based cultures, the location of the field is typically predetermined...for the Internet ethnographer [however], the process of locating and defining sensible boundaries of the field can be convoluted and elusive'.

Markham, here, focusses our attention on two key discussions; the first is based on the approaches that have been adopted thus far, in order to try and establish the parameters of ethnographic research which is conducted online. This is central to an understanding of how the nature of the internet and CMC impacts on the ethnographic enterprise. Any researcher trying to replicate the physical confinements of traditional ethnographies by, say, focussing exclusively on a particular website or URL, would leave themselves open to accusations of 'arbitrarily or prematurely excluding one arena or another' (Garcia et al, 2009: 54). The heightened ease and fluidity of movement between one (internet) location and another means that 'address' based boundaries are no longer applicable. The second discussion point, therefore, analyses whether or not it is actually feasible to outline boundaries at all, or whether they are even

meaningful, in an age where CMC is so ingrained into the everyday lives of so many.

Markham (2005) herself is an exponent of the notion that ethnographers conducting internet based research can define the boundaries of their subjects according to discursive patterns. She takes a holistic approach to information on the internet, which is not confined to specific websites or internet addresses, but is determined by 'defensible decisions about which paths to follow' regarding the terms used to conduct internet searches, the search engines adopted to do this work, and the language used for such interactions (Markham, 2005: 801). This, in turn, presents the researcher with a number of contributors to the discursive field, from which further decision making is required to determine whose data should be used and who the researcher should interact with.

Whilst a discursive field has many potential applications and could be used in the ethnographic study of CMC in a variety of ways, it is limited with regards to the study of community. Markham (2005) herself refers to the rapidly 'shifting cultural contexts' that exist online and how membership of these discursive formations is transient and fleeting in nature. The approach, whilst making a valuable attempt to capture the global capability of the internet, is based on the analysis of CMC which is ephemeral in nature and, therefore, rejects the possibility of long-term and meaningful relationships as the basis of such communities, as well as long-term and meaningful contributions from community members.

Following Markham, Garcia, Standlee and Bechkoff (2009) argued that a topic-based field is a potentially fruitful way for ethnographers of CMC to conceptualise the parameters of their work. They argue that 'rather than deciding in advance to conduct an ethnography of an online site or community, the ethnographer should first choose their topic of interest, and then define the field in terms of whether and how that topic involves different modes of communication or technological locations' (Garcia et al, 2009: 56).

Garcia et al's conceptualisation should also be commended for trying to move beyond the confines of a singular location and for trying to envisage the field according to the possibilities bestowed on the researcher by the internet. It guards us against the exclusion of 'offline' interaction between our subjects, as

well as CMC that takes place outside of such narrowly designated fields. We can conclude, therefore, that the arbitrary selection of specific websites, and a focus on the communication taking place within, prevents us from building an accurate representation of the role of CMC in the lives of our subjects. Nor could we claim to be fully informed as to how online communities are constructed and sustained, or how involvement in online communities is part of a wider range of online fan practises, as 'various intersections between different sites and uses' would be omitted (Beneito-Montagut, 2011: 719). However, it is less clear, with Garcia et al's suggestion, how the ethnographer would avoid falling into the trap of making arbitrary decisions about which internet locations to explore once a topic has been chosen. This is a problem which is eliminated more successfully by the explicit outline of key terms and search engines advocated by Markham's discursive model.

The adoption of Garcia et al's approach would also seem to exclude the possibility that the topic of interest could actually be the formation of online communities based on specific websites. Whilst such studies should be careful to not omit interaction that occurs between the community members outside of a designated internet locale, the emergence and formation of communities on the web is an interesting social phenomenon to explore in itself. It is highly likely that some community members will interact via personal communications, social media outlets and other internet forums, among other potential avenues, but where a central 'hub' brings together people who share a 'topic of interest' or those who engage in particular 'discursive practises', a specific website or internet address *can* provide the starting point or spring board from which the purpose and meaning of other interaction (away from that immediate locale) can be identified, analysed and have its true meaning explored.

Two further approaches to defining the field are, perhaps, more applicable to the study of online community formation. Wellman & Gulia (1999) and Kozinets (2010) have both outlined the potential use of social network analysis as a tool to determine the extent and nature of people's online relationships and connections. Social network analysis involves the identification of a series of *nodes*, typically individuals or small groups, and their *ties*, which refers to the relationship which connects these nodes together. The purpose of social network analysis is to explore structures; specifically, hierarchies, power relations,

central figures and cliques which determine the nature of relationships between nodes (Kozinets, 2010).

Kozinets advocates the use of social network analysis as a means to explore further the structure and organisation of a predetermined field. To him, it 'considers an entire social network based on...boundaries of that network. In a netnography, the boundary of a social network might be an online site where the cultural activity was found, or where the community defined itself' (Kozinets, 2010: 51). In the same vein as studies criticised by Garcia et al (2009), above, the use of social network analysis is constrained here by the continued fixation with an address or location (albeit an internet one).

However, I would argue that, conversely, the real potential social network analysis has for the ethnographer of CMC lies in the fact that it gives a researcher the ability to *construct* the field, as an on-going process *during* data collection. Whilst a particular community may centre its activity on a specific website or forum, it is through the exploration of the ties between group members that will inevitably envelop communication away from the central hub of activity itself and, therefore, encompass other forms of CMC, personal communication and offline interaction too. It may also enlighten the researcher about other mutual connections which extend the parameters of the study and thus make the field a fluid, dynamic and evolving one throughout the research process.

Because the field is conceptually understood as fluid, dynamic and evolving entity, creating static visual displays of nodal connections, or sociographs, would be a rather contradictory endeavour. Although social network analysis is most commonly employed to provide visualised matrixes, to provide a static pattern that illustrates interconnectedness derived from quantitative research methods, that is not the aim of this research or the way that social network analysis is employed. Qualitative approaches, alternatively, seek to move away from 'mapping' and trying to 'measure' the strength of connections as these impose an understanding of the strength and importance of a relationship upon research subjects (Knox, Savage & Harvey, 2006; Ryan, Mulholland & Agoston, 2014). For this research project, an etic approach such as this would contradict the emic principles of ethnography I outlined previously. Instead, the aim is to

explore the meaning that connections and relationships have to research participants and, in tune with anthropological uses of the term 'network', use that metaphor to allow us to 'discover how people's interrelationships with one another produced particular kinds of understandings about the world in which they lived and the people with whom they interacted' (Knox, Savage & Harvey, 2006: 123). As such, the term networks provided anthropologists with 'a generic notion of connection that seemed to hold the potential for understanding social cohesion in settings of disruptive social change, without limiting the analysis to functionalist explanations based on kinship, religion, or economics' (Knox, Savage & Harvey, 2006: 124).

The final conceptualisation of the field that has relevance to the study of social relations online is the user-centred approach put forward by Beneito-Montagut (2011). In his research, Beneito-Montagut followed six participants online in a micro-level observational study, after interviewing the participants first to establish their patterns of internet use and the reasons behind their internet activity. The field, therefore, was established by the internet addresses frequented by his subjects, as evidenced by their contribution to them and the interactions they had with others within these locales.

Whilst this method does, once again, allow for the field to be constructed during the data collection process rather than being arbitrarily predetermined there are, methodologically speaking, a few key issues with Beneito-Montagut's approach which need to be addressed. In doing so, I hope to highlight how a user-centred approach can be integrated with the other conceptualisations of the field in order to take advantage of it.

It is rather curious that Beneito-Montagut only follows his subjects online after making such a vehement statement about the falsehood of online/offline dichotomies and then subsequently advocating a method that fails to transcend such polarised thinking. It would have been more fruitful to study how the subjects interact offline as well as via CMC. For one thing, by only observing them online, the researcher can only begin to understand their *contributions* to CMC, and not how they engage with the internet interactions between significant others.

For instance, one respondent may wrongly be defined as an infrequent user of CMC as they rarely *contribute* to sites like Facebook, yet they may be *observing* communication between mutual friends and family for several hours a day, which would not be captured by Beneito-Montagut's approach. This user's interaction may be more methodical, considered, and informed, rather than frequent, reactionary, emotive and spontaneous. It might also be the case that the majority of their responses to such material occur offline, via face-to-face personal communications.

As such, it is important to devise methods that allow the researcher to contextualise the CMC that they observe and explore the participant's relationships and interactions in more depth. Observation of CMC alone is not adequate when trying to explore online communities, particularly when the extent of some reciprocal behaviours and meaningful long-term relationships are likely to be hidden to the researcher who relies solely on this method. This is particularly true when trying to conduct a social network analysis to establish the parameters of the field, as it would be limited by the narrow focus on merely those interactions we can observe online. Whilst a micro-level user-centre approach does not lend itself to offline observation very well (it would be highly intrusive and awkward to say the least), post-observation interviews (which I will return to in more depth, shortly) will allow the researcher to follow up the cues they have picked up from CMC and explore the 'hidden' extent of communication and relationships further.

To conclude this segment and draw upon the four approaches outlined above, my own study will ensure that the boundaries of the community being studied and, thus, the field of research, are not constrained by focussing on a single internet location (Markham, 2005; Garcia et al 2009). The topic of interest, as Garcia et al (2009) would refer to it, is based on the formation of online communities via football forums and the case study for this research provides us with the starting point through which fan interactions and relationships can be explored. Using this CMC as a source of data, I will conduct a social network analysis of community members that constructs the field as data is collected (Kozinets, 2010). This on-going process will be used to understand the online and offline connections between community members and, thus, the parameters of the field, whilst the study progresses. This conceptualises the field as

something fluid in nature; its boundaries are neither established before research begins or ever entirely 'complete', even when the research ends. This meso-level study will be furthered by the observation of offline interaction and in-depth interviews with key participants, in order to explore the boundaries of the field further and contextualise the CMC that has been observed online.

Research Ethics

At the outset of this project my intention was to study the chosen community covertly. Although I was aware that academic scrutiny was not always welcomed by online communities, I had dismissed this as being specific to those researchers who were exploring sensitive subject matter. It seemed logical that you would need informed consent to study a forum that dealt with very personal or health related issues and that covert observation of such sensitive topics was clearly questionable in ethical terms (Eysenbach & Till, 2001: 1103). However, where there was no obvious offense to be caused by covert research and where the impact such observation would have on the community being studied was minimal, covert research seemed entirely appropriate to me.

Not only that, but I felt that covert research was actually preferable. Whilst the traditional ethnographer of face-to-face interaction has a clear presence, which can be observed by their subjects and which may also influence their behaviour, the ethnographer of CMC may choose to hide themselves from their subjects entirely, eliminating their impact on the behaviours observed and, thus, the data collected. Allied to my naïve deductive outlook, outlined above, this seemed to be the most scientific way to gather the 'purest' and more reliable data.

However, the Research Ethics Committee of the university rejected my initial proposal and, thankfully, asked me to substantiate the academic rationale behind my desire to conduct the research from a covert stance. Ultimately, their recommendation, here, was that I should declare my presence and conduct the research overtly instead.

Going back to the drawing board, I first consulted the guidelines offered by the British Sociological Association (BSA). The BSA was quite clear in its declaration that covert research and deceit of any kind is something to be reserved for research projects with highly unusual settings;

"The use of covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. For example, difficulties arise when research participants change their behaviour because they know they are being studied. Researchers may also face problems when access to spheres of social life is closed to social scientists by powerful or secretive interests" (BSA, 2002: np)

My own research did not fulfil such criteria and I was left questioning what it was about my own research, which on the face of it was not harmful or intruding into acutely private subjects, that meant covert research was unacceptable.

At the same time that I had written my research proposal and submitted it to the Research Ethics Committee, I had begun exploring the various definitions of community and online community that informed the chapter preceding this one. With both things in mind, my understanding of what constituted 'sensitive' topic matters altered significantly and the potential harm of covert research, even into something as seemingly innocent as football fan interactions, became abundantly clear. If I conceptualise an online community as something based on, among other factors, meaningful long-term relationships, reciprocal behaviours and people's identities, I am establishing the significance that such communities may have to the lives of the football fans on which my study is based. Whilst this might not be as ostensibly intrusive as the study of an internet forum for those suffering from life threatening illnesses, or victims of violence, for example, academic observation and scrutiny of those relationships and interactions still has the potential to upset or offend those involved. Essentially, I am analysing people's everyday lives and to do so in a clandestine manner would be quite questionable, ethically, so an overt stance was adopted as a result (see the section on *entrée*, below, for further details as to how I achieved this).

That said, the literature regarding internet research ethics is divided on this and other related topics. As Gaiser and Schreiner (2009: 29) acknowledge;

'some researchers maintain that because no one has established clear guidelines for conducting online research, anything is fair game...the lack of codified etiquette and guidelines for conducting research in cyberspace make almost anything permissible'.

Academics have discussed whether or not CMC is public or private in nature (Eysenbach & Till, 2001: 1103; Elm, 2004 & 2009: 77; Kozinets, 2010: 141; Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009: 29; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012: 24); whether online community members themselves consider their interactions to be private (Eysenbach & Till, 2001: 1103; Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002: 7; Elm, 2009: 77; Kozinets, 2010: 141; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012: 31); the subject of anonymity and whether that is something we can still feasibly protect, particularly when we consider the power of modern search engines (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002: 8 & 12; Bruckman, 2002; Kozinets, 2010: 145; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012: 31); whether informed consent is necessary and who we acquire this from (Elm, 2009; Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009: 30); who actually owns the material contained within internet forums and social media (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002: 9-10; Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009: 26); and, finally, what is the legal status of data within online settings and the researcher who uses it (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009: 29; Kozinets, 2010: 145-46). The conclusion on these matters varies, but, disappointingly, has a tendency to lean itself towards that which is most convenient for the project in question.

Whilst it is not possible to cover all of these debates again, here, there are three points I wish to explore further in order to outline the ethical considerations which were key to this project. Firstly, that the perception and expectation of participants should direct the ethical stance of ethnographies conducted online, not the specific mandates given by each discipline or even the law. Secondly, that the nature of online interaction and the data subsequently derived from that demands, from the researcher, a heightened level of sensitivity and attention regarding the protection of participant identities (Gaiser & Schreiner, 2009: 34). Finally, that there are no hard and fast rules for internet research ethics and that each study should be considered individually in order to identify the appropriate ethical stance and level of protection afforded to participants. Context is key.

To begin with, it is worth highlighting the apparent disjuncture between the ethical stance adopted by many researchers and the expectations of online community members. For example, whilst Kozinets (2010), who is a key contributor to the netnography methodology and related ethical considerations, argues against the use of covert observation and deceptive practises, he often refers to the legality of specific research practises as a way to justify their

inclusion. For instance, when faced with the prospect that a participant's identity could be uncovered, he suggests that 'because the online forum is legally viewed as a public place, this should undermine claims of invasion of privacy' (Kozinets, 2010: 146).

Here, Kozinets clearly refers to online communities with the spatial metaphor of place yet, earlier, rather conveniently suggests that 'in some ways participants in online communities can be seen to be creating and contributing to an on-going, complex and publicly available text' which has further implications for the legality of its usage and the extent to which its creators are considered (Kozinets, 2010: 144). He is not alone in doing so and, as Gaiser & Schreiner (2009: 26-7) point out, 'many people believe that "ethical" and "legal" are considered one and the same...[but] there are times when something may be considered legal...but the practice may not be considered acceptable'. It is certainly rather concerning that Kozinets can go from acknowledging the perspective of potential research participants on one hand, when he suggests that 'participants in online communities...may not expect that their remarks will be read by others outside of the community', yet argue on the following page that 'whilst some participations have the expectation of privacy, it is extremely misplaced' (Kozinets, 2010: 141-2).

Whether or not contributors to online forums are naïve in believing that their posts are only being read by fellow football fans and in their expectation that there is some degree of 'group privacy' is largely irrelevant. Contravening such expectations and perceptions might not be grounds for a law suit, or a reprimand from professional bodies, but it should, nonetheless, be something that is respected. Once again, it is important to emphasise the importance of overt research and a clear declaration of the researcher's presence if we acknowledge that such communities have great significance to the lives of many football fans, and that those fans develop relationships and identities through them.

On the face of it, Clarets Mad is as public as internet communications come; it is an open forum that does not require a membership to view its content; membership is open to all and not just the invited; posts remain accessible for a considerable period of time and are not 'lost' immediately, as with instant

messengers, and there is no form of personal messaging or private communication between members facilitated by the site itself. All of the interaction between members is available for everyone else to see.

However, even if it may actually *be* public, it may not *feel* public. As Elm (2009: 77) suggests, 'people may perhaps not be aware of the fact their interactions may be observed...or even if they are aware of the publicness of the arena they may forget about it when involved in interactions'. This is a particularly important consideration for researchers who believe they could be exploring genuine communities. The familiarity members gain with their peers and the regularity of interaction between them may lead to online community members forgetting about the limitations of their privacy. It is the researcher's responsibility to bare this in mind when negotiating our second concern, how we protect the identity of community members, which Gaiser & Schreiner (2009: 34) have identified alongside data storage as a core concern for the online researcher.

Since early academic work on the internet and CMC, the power of search engines has increased significantly and the ease with which people and their interactions can be traced has become notable. Those early works were able to call upon their subjects and quote them word for word, as the chances that the internet layman could discover anything about that person were incredibly remote. Now, however, several authors have questioned whether the anonymity of our participants is something we can feasible ensure particularly if we use verbatim quotations (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002: 8 & 12; Bruckman, 2002; Kozinets, 2010: 145; Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012: 31).

This concern underpinned Bruckman's (2002) assessment of the researcher's ethical responsibilities and led, in turn, to her continuum of disguise (see figure four). This focused on the level of protection offered to online communities and their members based on the use of real names, pseudonyms, the name of the community as a whole, data gathered of a sensitive nature, and whether verbatim statements should be used.

<p style="text-align: center;">No Disguise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community name used. • Online pseudonyms used with permission. • Real names used with permission. • Omits sensitive material when using real names and pseudonyms. • Verbatim quotations used. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Light Disguise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community name used. • Online pseudonyms altered. • Real names altered. • Verbatim quotations used, unless deemed harmful or sensitive.
<p style="text-align: center;">Moderate Disguise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concessionary accommodation between 'light' and 'maximum' that accounts for the use of verbatim quotations, pseudonyms and community name on an individual and context basis. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Maximum Disguise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community name altered. • Online pseudonyms altered. • Real names altered. • Verbatim quotations not used & rephrased statements are checked to ensure they are untraceable. • Identifying details changed & false details may even be introduced.

Figure Four: Bruckman's modes of disguise (Adapted from Bruckman, 2002: 230-231)

Taking each of these in turn, it is difficult to see how any research project into online communities can avoid adopting a 'moderate' stance to disguising certain forms of identifiable information. This is, of course, by far the most adaptable and fluid of the four levels offered by Bruckman and allows the researcher to tailor the level of disguise they adopt to the specifics of their project. It also allows them to alter the level of disguise based on the needs of individual participants, rather than trying to adopt a simplistic 'one size fits all approach' to cater for rather intricate matters.

For instance, disguising the name of the community under study may harm the ethnographic enterprise in itself. In the case of Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets, the very specific context of both forum's memberships, the football club and town on which many discussions are based and relationships the forums have to modern football in Britain, are all central to the meaning of the ethnography in itself. Without this contextual information and the relevance of the study with regard to the existing literature, the purpose of the ethnography would be almost entirely lost. Whilst it may be possible to disguise or substitute the

names and subject matter of many online communities, unfortunately the anonymity of the group as a whole is not possible in this instance.

Likewise, we must not assume, as the 'light' and 'maximum' stances do, that the contributors to online communities must be protected and that they do not actually want to be identified. As Kozinets (2010:145) suggests, many participants are likely to be proud of the reputation associated with their online username, which is often something they have established over a long period of time, and also of the contributions they make to discussion forums. As such, we should clarify, where possible, whether individuals would like to be credited for their contributions and ideas. For this research, when it was not possible to contact certain individuals the default position I adopted was that of Bruckman's light disguise, where the traceability of statements and direct quotations was carefully considered.

Again, here, the context of each research project must be considered. Although the power of search engines has increased to the point that direct quotations should be very carefully considered before they are used, not all forums archive material *in aeternum*. Indeed, it is the case with Up the Clarets that only posts from the previous two calendar years are available. On the Footy Mad forum network, which Clarets Mad is part of, forum threads from the last four calendar years are shown. Although it is impossible to account for how much material from these two forums is stored in internet-archives, I have never been successful in finding a discussion thread that is more than four years old by using some of the most comprehensive and popular internet search engines (such as Google, Bing, Yahoo and AOL). However, we cannot discount the possibility that this might be possible in the future and also that the settings on either forum could change so that older material is made available once more. This has already happened with Clarets Mad which, before the change of editor at the end of 2015, only displayed the last three months of discussion threads. Although it is unlikely that community members could be identified by my use of verbatim statements that exceed the current expiry settings on either forum, the small possibility that it could happen is still there. This means that direct quotations will not be used when potentially sensitive material is being discussed, in order to protect the contributors in question.

In summary, this project draws upon each of the categories outlined by Bruckman (2002) in order to provide a level of disguise which is applicable to the context and the needs of the community being studied. The community name and their internet locations have been used; online pseudonyms have been used except when permission has not been granted, the discussion is of sensitive and/or personal issues, or the pseudonym makes the real name of the community member too easily identifiable; real names have been altered when it is meaningful to do so; and, finally, verbatim quotations have been used unless they are from discussions of sensitive and/or personal issues.

Methods

The bulk of the data gathered during the research process was acquired through a prolonged engagement with a specific group of football fans, whose activities and communication centred on a single internet message board – Clarets Mad, which, as mentioned earlier in the thesis, forms part of the Footy Mad network and was created for fans to discuss Burnley Football Club. This process was typical of the direct and sustained social contact that, according to Willis and Trondman (2000), characterises authentic ethnographic research. This prolonged engagement was also typified by participant *experiencing*, rather than just the traditional notion of participant observation (Walstrom, 2004). Without many of the cues and senses that form part of face-to-face interaction, Walstrom suggests that the online ethnographer needs to be particularly sensitive to the experience of CMC in order to fully understand it and empathise with those involved.

Entrée into the group being studied was achieved in two ways – there was, firstly, a thematic entrée and, thereafter, a relational entrée. The former of these was based on developing an understanding of the members of the group in question, which required me to become familiarised with the topics they discussed and the specific terms and language they used to communicate with one another. In doing so, I became sensitised to the subjects of research, to both the people and their discussions, which allowed for a smoother transition from predominantly ‘observer’ to active ‘contributor’ by facilitating more meaningful and appropriate contributions to the various discussion threads on offer. Whilst I had actually been a member of the forum since 2005, I had

hitherto merely read the posts of others in order to keep informed about the club at large and very rarely contributed to discussion threads myself.

This engagement was stepped up in October 2011 when I began using the forums for research purposes. From here on, at no stage was I purely an observer during my contact with the members of Clarets Mad and I began contributing to forum threads on a regular basis. For some time I only involved myself in discussion threads that centred on topics I felt were not (obviously) controversial in nature. I actively steered my input away from debates, arguments and threads which had the potential to offend. Clearly I could not predict the course of every discussion, but my prior knowledge and assumptions about the group did allow me to scrutinise discussion threads and their potential for conflict with some degree of accuracy. This 'confined', or limited, participant observation characterised my early engagement with Clarets Mad and was done so that I could gain a demonstrable and observable presence on the message board, to develop rapport and a degree of trust with its membership, whilst gradually developing a carefully managed identity of my own. However, no data was collected at this stage as I had not informed the members of my status as an academic or my intention to research Clarets Mad.

As I noted earlier, an important feature of internet research is the increased mediation of adopted practises. This calls for a change in the specific ethnographic methods we use to gather data, as well as a guard against making assumptions about the nature of the relationship between researcher and their subjects. One key aspect of this to consider is the management of the researcher's own identity. This needs to be carefully constructed to suit the community in question in order to limit the researcher's impact on the data being collected.

Markham (2005: 794) argued that 'in online environments, the construction of identity is a process that must be initiated more deliberately or consciously. Offline, the body can simply walk around and be responded to by others, providing the looking glass with which one comes to know the self'. The 'presence' of the researcher is altered significantly as a result of CMC. Particularly in the earliest stages of the project, before face-to-face contact had been made with any members of Clarets Mad, I was aware that many of the

cues used by people to construct an understanding of myself were removed by the nature of the research. This non-corporeal quandary heightened some of the existing difficulties encountered by ethnographers, but presented significant opportunities with regards to identity management.

The first issue raised by a disembodied research process concerns the degree of acceptance gained from the community in question. Without physical cues or encounters, it could not be assumed that the members of Clarets Mad would recognise me as a football fan or, more specifically, a Burnley supporter (and thus, one of them to some extent). My presence is not being observed at a football ground, no one has heard me sing songs in support of my club, and I do not have a shirt or scarf to display my loyalties. One of the key advantages, therefore, of the confined participant observation stage, was that my presence on the board was deliberately focused on discussions of the club, its players and the football world at large. As such, a careful management of identity in this way facilitated a connection to forum members in the absence of observable phenomena and allowed me to establish myself as a football fan and Burnley supporter, with an interest in the affairs of the team and club.

Allied to this, the control I had over my identity was considered. Initially, as a result of the disembodied nature of CMC, I felt that there was the potential for a much more controlled and strategic display of the self. As Beaulieu and Estalella (2012: 4) argue, 'incorporating technology in fieldwork involves changes in the modes of presence of the ethnographers, in the way they construct their identities and the mode they establish and maintain their relations in the field'. Without the aforementioned physical cues and in the absence of existing relationships with forum members, I felt less restrained over the way in which I presented my identity to them.

However, this control was potentially compromised in ways I cannot account for due to my 'virtual' presence on the internet at large. Beaulieu and Estalella (2012) concluded, from their research, that it is actually more difficult to construct and maintain a distinct researcher identity through mediated ethnography. Their project incorporated a blog that encouraged others (research subjects and those from further afield) to comment on their work as it progressed. This had the effect of opening up 'access' to Beaulieu and Estalella's

participants by facilitating interaction between research subjects and those external to the project. The latter, in particular academic acquaintances, often made theoretical suggestions and instigated debates which Beaulieu and Estalella felt were potentially damaging to the data collection process. As a result of this interaction, Beaulieu and Estalella were unable to fully control their identities as researchers and, through comments on the blog, participants were able to discover much more about their professional and private lives than originally desired.

Even though my own work did not invite comment on my work, or facilitate interaction between research subjects and those from my professional and private spheres, I cannot rule out the possibility that this occurred at some stage. The disembodiment which characterises CMC, and the ethnographic study of that, leads to 'the dissolution of the geographical distinction between field (of traditional ethnography) and home [which] complicates the situation for the ethnographer: drawing clear boundaries between personal and professional spaces and identities become more difficult' (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012: 7). My presence on the internet still incorporated a forum moniker, email address and, for those with some computing expertise, my internet protocol (IP) address. Any or all of those could be used to find out much more about me, linking my research subjects to my personal contacts via social media (my Facebook account is linked to my email address), my interests (as demonstrated by membership of other forums and websites as I have the same username for almost all of my internet accounts) and even the location I post from, my internet service provider and associated organisation (via the IP address).

Although no one ever referred to conducting searches like these, or to knowledge they gained of me from outside of the confines of Clarets Mad, the potential that such searches took place is still there and, thus, I cannot state definitively that I was in complete control of my identity and how it influenced participants in the research. Likewise, total control over self-presentation was compromised, at times, by key stages of the research process.

In order to ensure that the study was conducted in an ethical manner (as outlined above) I openly declared my intentions to the forum in April 2012 and, therefore, defined myself in relation to my profession and status as a researcher.

Included in my announcement was an outline of my intended research project, my identity as a researcher, my reason for interacting with the forum (Kozinets, 2010: 148), a guarantee that I would not collect personal information or data, an explanation of their right to anonymity and my duty to protect their identity, as well as my contact details, should they have any questions or concerns (see Appendix B). Although formal in nature, within my discussion thread regarding the research I actively conveyed my connection to the message board and the football club as frequently as possible which, alongside my presence on the board prior to this declaration, will hopefully have 'softened' the impact of my post and helped to maintain the identity I had carefully constructed during the period of confined engagement. Again, however, I cannot state definitively that I was in complete control of my identity, nor can I qualify how this declaration may have influenced participants in the research. I can report, however, that my status as an academic was never raised in forum discussions thereafter and I never felt as though I was treated differently as a result, as an outsider or unwelcome intruder.

In total, I spent six months becoming accustomed to the message board and its members, before embarking on a relational entrée. Engagement with the community as a 'confined' participant observer, first, also allowed me to develop an enhanced awareness of the dynamics of group membership. From here, it was possible to ascertain who the key members of the group were, the comparative status of those members and thus, in turn, who would be potential gatekeepers. In doing so, it became apparent that certain individuals would be able to grant access to the group and permission to study its membership. I also considered which members might, by developing relationships with these members, be able to lead me to fruitful and insightful 'insider' research opportunities over the course of the observation.

There was a very distinct hierarchy on which membership of Clarets Mad was based, including a clearly identifiable administrator for the forum (points I shall return to later, within the discussion chapters of this thesis). According to Bruckman (2006: 88) 'for a small internet site, the site's founder and administrator is a legitimate gatekeeper for approaching users on the site'. Although it is not clear whether Bruckman is defining the size of websites by their membership numbers, frequency of visits or number of available pages, in

this case it did not matter whether Clarets Mad is classified as 'small' or otherwise; even as membership grew over the period of my engagement with the message board, one single member was clearly in a position of power and authority. ClaretTony, a former chairman of the Burnley Supporter's Association, was, at the time, employed as editor of the Clarets Mad site by the Footy Mad network and was responsible for the content uploaded to its Burnley FC section. He was also able to moderate forum posts, ban members, create sub-forums and elevate other members to positions of relative power and control over forum users (mainly as moderators for the forum).

Bruckman (2006: 88) continues to suggest, however, that 'if a self-appointed gatekeeper does not appear to have the respect of the community, it is important not to work through him for access'. Again, the status of ClaretTony and the reaction of community members to his actions and power will be discussed in depth at a later point (see chapter seven). For now, it is important to note that whilst he is often a very divisive figure and opinion about him, often on a personal basis, is also quite divided, those whose forum posts and behaviour resonate with his own are those who are able to achieve a degree of (positive) socialisation into the forum community and respect from several of its senior users.

As such, whilst many forum *users* did not recognise his authority, actively questioned it, or merely dismissed many of his views, for the core community *members* I was able to identify a palpable level of respect and acceptance of ClaretTony's position. He stood out, therefore, as the key gatekeeper to the forum's community and I set out to establish contact with him in order to outline my intended research project, curry favour for it and complete my entrée into the community in question. Even if the users of the forum, at large, did not recognise ClaretTony's status or were dismissive of it, I was mindful of O'Reilly's suggestion that 'it is crucial to get the permission of the most high-ranking officials as early as possible to pre-empt any difficulties later on. Powerful people can close down access in an instant if they choose to' (O'Reilly, 2009: 133). Whilst this was, of course, possible at any moment within the research project, it was less likely if a relationship could be established with ClaretTony and he was sympathetic to the basis of the research itself.

To initiate the period of data collection and observation of the forum as a researcher, I developed a relationship with ClaretTony. In order to achieve this I attended a number of charitable and social functions organised by the forum's membership, whilst taking every opportunity afforded to me to engage ClaretTony in conversation at a number of matches in the latter half of the 2011/12 season. This allowed me to establish rapport with an influential forum member, before outlining the research project to him. In doing so, I was able to avoid 'going in cold' with my research project and, potentially, having permission to conduct it rejected. I was also able to address any questions, reservations or requests ClaretTony had – although it must be said that he was hugely supportive of the idea, was fascinated by my intended study and had no questions to ask on behalf of the forum's membership, possibly as I had pre-empted many of those by informing him of my stance on research ethics and commitment to protecting the community's members in my writing. If anything, he was grateful of the level of diligence and sensitivity I used to initiate the project. We agreed that I should inform the community at large once he, as the forum administrator, had a chance to proof read and authorise the notification I intended to post. After sending this to him via email, there was little hesitation in approving the project and no further questions were asked about my research intentions or stance.

The Data Collected

During the period of direct engagement with Clarets Mad and its users, between October 2011 and July 2017 (which encompassed almost six complete football seasons), I collected extensive field notes based on my observations of, and interactions with, the forum members. These textual notes were predominantly in the form of memos, many of which were attached to documents containing entire forum discussion threads. These documents were created via the QSR Nvivo NCapture internet browser extension, which replicates the content of a webpage (including any hyperlinks contained within) and places it into a PDF document. This PDF can then be imported into the main Nvivo 10 programme itself, which is where memos were added and the information within them was analysed.

Once entries were imported into NVivo 10 the information within them was reduced to manageable themes via coding. The initial stage of open coding was used to analyse the imported files one post at a time as, like the line by line approach advocated by Charmaz (1996), this process enables the researcher 'to refrain from inputting your motives, fears, or unresolved personal issues...to your collected data' (Charmaz, 1996: 37). Throughout this process, the researcher interacted with the data in order to induct and refine codes by constantly comparing posts and asking questions of the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 69-70).

Starting with codes based on the conceptual definition of an online community constructed previously, the imported entries were continually reviewed when new questions arose, in the hope that further insights would materialise and new or refined codes would transpire. Constant comparison was valuable to this analytic process, as coding often resulted from notable similarities and differences between the specific forum posts or, indeed, entire discussion threads. Examples which were similar, conceptually, were grouped together within a specific category, whilst divergent responses opened up new categories of analysis and/or sub-groupings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008: 72).

This form of coding, therefore, amalgamated the processes of open and focused coding advocated by Charmaz, as initial coding was done alongside a deeper consideration of the central themes and categories that emerged from the data for future analysis. However, unlike a genuine grounded theory approach like that proposed by Charmaz, the initial questions that were asked of the data were formulated from a prior consideration and theorisation of online communities.

In order to further my understanding of the key themes identified during my period of observation and interaction, I used such preliminary findings to identify appropriate interviewees and lines of enquiry. In total eight members of Clarets Mad were interviewed, between July 2014 and July 2015. These interviews were semi-structured and conducted with the intention that I would have as little input as possible; prompting the interviewee only when their participation veered too far from the topic of Clarets Mad and its posts, or when they did not discuss any of the themes or discussion threads I was interested in. Three

interviews were arranged online and conducted face-to-face; two at the homes of the interviewees and another in a pub before a home match we were both attending. These were recorded using a digital Dictaphone, although the interview that took place in the pub did not record successfully. The remaining five interviewees were all arranged online and conducted via Skype⁴, which was also used to record the conversation. Two of the members interviewed this way were contacted with the help of Redbeard, who had personal (offline) contact information due to the relationships he had established with some key community members who I was interested in speaking to for this project. A ninth community member was contacted for an interview, but after a couple of arranged interviews were cancelled I did not hear from the potential participant again.

The names/usernames of the interviewees are not outlined here in order to protect the identity of those who made comments relating to sensitive issues and other community members directly and have been quoted in the findings chapters of this thesis. Of the eight interviewees, six were selected on the basis that they were active contributors to the forum and formed part of the community discovered there, whilst the other two were exiled fans (transnational) whose involvement with the forum centred specifically on match-day discussion threads (the focus of chapter four).

The recordings of these interviews were transcribed and then imported into Nvivo 10 in the same way that discussion threads were. They were coded in the same manner, and the data gathered from the interviews underwent the same process of constant comparison and analysis. This was done with reference to other interviews as well as the data collected during observation and interaction with the forum.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to identify the distinct methods that were adopted for the study and convey the methodological considerations which

⁴ Skype is a telecommunications software product that facilitates video chat and voice calls between computers, tablets, mobile phones and other electronic devices via the internet. It also provides instant messaging services.

informed that decision and subsequent research process. The priority of the research enterprise, here, is the community in question and the members that form it.

Underpinning many of the key decisions about research design are the central tenets of ethnography advanced by Willis and Trondman (2000); that the work yields qualitative data from a prolonged and immersive engagement with a culture or community, and that the data gathered is sensitive to the irreducibility of human experience and is able to represent the perspective of community insiders. Despite my distinct conceptualisation of community at the outset, the reflexive approach adopted thereafter also enables the research to be problem driven and adaptive to the findings gained from participant experiencing, not theory driven.

As most of the qualitative data collected was derived from CMC, it was important to ensure that several key ethnographic concepts were considered before research began. This enabled the project to uphold the core tenets of ethnography when the vast majority of participants and interactions being observed took place online.

As a result, the importance of a research *field* is upheld, but it is not determined by a singular locale as it would in a traditional, corporeal setting. For this prolonged engagement it was the topic of interest, how communities of football fans are formed online, that provided the starting point for the field, but the subsequent boundaries of that field are then constructed *during* the research process through a discursive social network analysis; they are fluid in nature and never truly complete at any stage.

The ethical considerations of the research were also approached with the perspective of community members paramount. After a careful deliberation, my impact as a researcher and the covert approach I had initially chosen was reconsidered; a reflexive stance which allowed me to prioritise the participants and account for the importance online relationships and interactions have to their everyday lives.

This, in turn, influences a two-part entrée into the community I was to engage with as a participant observer. Initially, a constrained interaction with the

message board members allowed me to gain a presence, understand relationships and power dynamics on the board, become sensitised to pertinent issues or tensions, and identify key members and gatekeepers to the community that resided there. Once complete, a relational entrée ensued, during which I established contact with a notable gatekeeper in order to have the research sanctioned, before my presence on the board as a researcher was declared and data gathering could begin.

My field notes, together with subsequent interview transcripts, formed the data on which the following findings chapters are based. Those chapters are the result of a thorough analysis of the data in question, line by line coding in order to develop an understanding of the key themes on which the chapters are based, and constant comparison of the data that was gathered - to other examples and to my experiences as a message board member and observer - to validate my findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: MATCH-DAY DISCUSSION THREADS

Introduction

The vast majority of discussion threads on Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets are *sui generis*; whilst at any time there may be dominant discourses or topics of discussion that permeate the majority of discussion threads, no matter what their initial intention or focus, the threads are unique in nature and dissipate once the conversation has run its course. In most instances such discussion threads are started and finished on the same day, eventually surpassed by more topical discussion points or popular threads that receive multiple replies from a larger number of contributors. The opening page of Clarets Mad displays the forty threads which have been contributed to most recently (it is fifty threads on Up the Clarets), meaning that discussions attracting little interest or those that have reached a conclusion will eventually 'drop off' the first page, which is where most forum users focus their attention.

Whilst adhering to the same forum processes and rules, there are a number of *ritualistic* discussion threads which are regular features of Clarets Mad. Although, taken individually, they too run their course and are effectively archived by the structure of the forum, there are several threads that focus on key events (football-centric and forum-centric) which are initiated on a recurring and regular basis. Some have lasted for many years, whilst others run their course after a couple of seasons. For instance, for many years, during the football season itself, the 'Tinned Food Count' was launched the day before a match (typically Friday). During the thread, one regular contributor to the message board would post a picture of a can of tinned vegetables they had purchased and invite others to guess how many items and how many millilitres of liquid were in the can. Once the cut-off point had passed for people's best guesses, the forum members with the closest figures was declared the winner and gained points towards their overall league standing throughout the season. At first glance, especially to forum outsiders, the Tinned Food Count would appear most bizarre indeed. Yet to those who were involved, it was an innovative and light-hearted way for them to interact which added to the weekly build-up towards match-day.

Most of the ritualistic discussion threads on both Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets are less eccentric in nature. The Match-day discussion thread, for example, covers the day a first team fixture takes place on (typically Saturday) and BigDave's review of national newspapers was keenly anticipated by many forum members on Sunday mornings. These, among several others, form the regular, structured opportunities for interaction that inform and entertain the forum's membership. Over time, each has developed its own rituals, insider discourses and purpose.

This chapter analyses the most popular of these, the Match-day discussion thread. Although the popularity of the thread, the number of contributors and the behaviours within such discussions have altered over the course of my observations, it has consistently been the thread which elicits more attention from the forum's membership than any other. Match-days are as important to the community members of Clarets Mad as they are to any other group of football fans, and since the message board was created a large number of Burnley fans have logged into the forum to discuss match-day events as they unfolded.

Through my own participation in such threads, observation of them and the discussion and analysis of my findings here, it is possible to explore further the nature of football fan interaction via CMC. In particular, by delving into the *shared experience* of Match-day discussion threads it is possible to identify many of the key dimensions of community discussed in chapter two. The research findings from such discussion threads reveal a great deal about the relationships that are established, reciprocal behaviours, and the formation of group identities which determine insider and outsider status. Exploring these further also reveals a great deal about how the internet is used within football fan culture and how fans employ digital innovations to enhance their experience of the game.

Custard World

As kick-off approaches on Saturday afternoon, traffic on the website hits its weekly peak and dedicated match-day discussion threads are started by some of the prominent, long-standing and regular members of the forum;

"Come on, getting impatient here! And you know not just any old Johnny can open it (a match-day thread)!"

(notrigsbyscat, 'Match thread?', post 1, 17/11/12)

"We newbies come to learn 3 unwritten rules of the board.

- don't take the initiative to open match-day threads

- don't provoke the powers that be (I've succumbed to this on the MK Dons thread)

- don't pre-empt news stories with the news"

(notrigsbyscat, 'Burnley v Charlton A', post 9, 17/11/12)

Whilst a strict hierarchy of fans, based on tangible authority and influence, does not really exist with regards to the match-day thread, the familiarity that exists between the forum's membership is acknowledged here. The comments above indicate that many of the contributors to, and users of, match-day threads appreciate the forum members who have regularly initiated such discussions in the thirteen years since Clarets Mad was formed, as well as providing the bulk of the content within them.



Figure Five: The Custard World Forum Banner

This also helps to explain the name that was adopted, for many years, for match-day discussion threads, and some of the ritualistic behaviours within them. Most of the forum's members, particularly those who have been actively reading or contributing to forum for more than eight years or so, will be familiar with 'Custard World'. Playfully based on the former name of the club's official radio (and now multimedia) outlet, Clarets World, the Clarets Mad alternative to match-day coverage was established by one of the longest standing members of the forum – holycustard. Some of the specific features of holycustard's quirky sense of humour, and the many match-day thread rituals that resulted from it, will be discussed in due course. For now, it is sufficient to acknowledge that his entertaining style and alternative take on match action initiated the longest running and most popular discussion thread on the Clarets Mad forum. Long after holycustard himself stopped contributing on a regular basis, due to work commitments, match-day threads continued to be titled 'Custard World' and on

the odd occasion that he does converse within such threads, he is assured a warm welcome by those who have contributed long enough to know him;

"Hi HC. We are bound to win now!"

(HappyClaret55, 'Mighty Clarets V Derby Puffs first half', post 55, 26/12/12)

"Custard! Shouldn't you be somewhere being gay? Season's greetings btw!⁵"

(Claretinexile, 'Mighty Clarets V Derby Puffs first half', post 57, 26/12/12)

"Merry Christmas Holy one"

(BeamMeUpScotty, 'Mighty Clarets V Derby Puffs first half', post 59, 26/12/12)

"Happy Christmas HC..."

(3inabed, 'Mighty Clarets V Derby Puffs first half', post 69, 26/12/12)

Once started, often long before the match itself actually begins, the discussion thread is characterised by people 'signing in' to declare their presence, greet one another, and predict the outcome of the forthcoming match. The regular match-day thread attendees are joined by others from the wider community who engage with this ritualistic thread on a less frequent basis; their sporadic involvement is more noticeable when Burnley are engaged in an away fixture that is not televised as access to information about the game and opportunities to engage with other Burnley fans about it are restricted. Many community members attend matches live on a regular basis and they do not, typically, contribute to match-day discussion threads. Occasionally members have posted pictures of the stadium and crowd before the game, commented at half time to let the forum know how the team are playing, or posted their thoughts on the match after it has finished, but these are not particularly common features of match-day discussion threads over the years.

On occasion, some community members become temporarily unable to attend matches they would normally do so and, therefore, reliant upon the match-day threads for a variety of reasons. Whether it is as a result of holidays, family

⁵ Btw = by the way. The reference to holycustard being gay alludes to one of the ritual behaviours characteristic of Custard World discussion threads, which is explored in the next chapter. In this instance, it is an expression of familiarity that refers to some of the dominant match-day discourses of the past that holycustard himself started.

commitments, or something more severe, members of the wider forum sometimes recourse to the match-day thread in order to keep up to date with the event and discuss it with fellow fans. On quite a few occasions over the course of my observations, fans had missed matches due to illness or more concerning health problems, but when well enough to converse on Clarets Mad they opted to do so. The wider concern, sympathy and offers of assistance that followed such instances were very revealing about the extent of the relationships that had formed between fans via the forum itself. A particularly worrying case came just a few days before Christmas, 2012, when one of the most active members of the forum as a whole (but not the match-day thread in particular) signed in from Royal Blackburn Hospital. Clearly worried, many enquired as to the cause of his overnight stay, as well as joking that it must be serious for him to consent to going to that particular town⁶;

"It's a tachycardia and pulmonary embolism, Redders⁷, thanks for asking ☺. The internet connection is the opposite, closed and slo o o o w w w www! ☺"

(awayend, 'Birmingham C v Burnley', post 27, 22/12/12)

"Best wishes for a speedy recovery, awayend"

(MidlandsClaret, 'Birmingham C v Burnley', post 30, 22/12/12)

"A fast heart rate is one thing, but an embolism is serious, isn't it? A medical emergency, I understand. Are the doctors in control up there? And does your Ma have transport for visiting?"

(Redbeard, 'Birmingham C v Burnley', post 36, 22/12/12)

"awayend – whilst being concerned about the Clarets is one thing I'm more concerned about your health. I hope they have got your condition under control and you are feeling a bit better. Look out for a 'Behind The Goal Xmas Quiz' over the festive period. It will be one where TradeClaret is barred from competing on-line so you may well be able to take your time. Anyways, let's hope the Clarets can pinch 3 important points today to set us all up for a bumper festive period"

(Behind_the_Goal, 'Birmingham C v Burnley', post 42, 22/12/12)

"Thanks Redbeard – everything under control here. I'm being looked after like a king and am in fine fettle. Yes, my mum flew over this afternoon with lots of goodies and yes, she's sorted for transport thank you (Star icon). Looking forward to the quiz BTG, but with this bloody keypad thing, as anyone who has had to endure one of these

⁶ Blackburn Rovers FC are Burnley FC's rivals and just 11 miles separates the two Lancashire towns.

⁷ A nickname for the forum member Redbeard.

*b**tard devices will confirm, I might be lagging a little behind with the answers"*
(awayend, 'Birmingham C v Burnley', post 49, 22/12/12)

The CMC above, between some of the core community members Rheingold (1993) and Castells (2000) would identify as 'genuine homesteaders', illustrates that, despite the latter's reservations about the permanence and significance of social relations initiated online, a long-standing and strong sense of familiarity exists within football fan forums. That familiarity is a result of the importance of the connections that are made between members of Clarets Mad and is testimony to the amount of time they spend interacting with one another through the forum.

Here, alongside the shared identity community members have to the club and their collective desire for the team to do well in the forthcoming match, is the evident awareness group members have about the contribution each of them makes to the forum at large, as well as the personal circumstances and important family relations in the lives of fellow community members. Not only that, but the implied offers of help and assistance and explicit concern that is expressed, about the severity of the health issue, are typical of the supportive and altruistic reciprocal behaviours that are seen as central features of online communities (Wellman and Gulia, 2001). Whilst health concerns of this extremity are rare, the everyday lives and interests of the community members are openly discussed – families, work, hobbies, significant events, etc. – and, on occasion, intimate and personal issues are openly shared, either joyous or tragic. Match-day threads, like those within the community at large, have formed part of a support network for its members, or simply a location to vent frustrations.

The number of forum *users* (Castells, 2000), who predominantly lurk in the background, also increases significantly and is evident by the sizeable growth in the number of 'guests' who read the forum at this time but who do not log-in in order to interact with members – statistics for which are displayed at the bottom of the forum page, alongside a panel which outlines the names of members who are current logged in and the amount of time they have been logged in for. For many community users such as this, the focus is almost entirely on the match

and, typically, they will only log in to the forum and contribute when a goal is scored or something significant occurs related to the match directly.

However, the regular attendees and other community *members* often extend their engagement with the event by an hour or two before the game in order to converse with fellow fans. It is evidently not just events on the field and the result that makes the entire online match-day experience for fans. As is typical for discussion threads such as this, within the prelude to the match a great deal of familiarity and affection between regular contributors is expressed;

"Just texted MrsExile to get me another can"
(Claretinexile, 'HullCityPuffs v Mighty Burnley', post 64, 24/11/12 – 1 like)

"Is she still doing your bidding CiE?! Get her to distribute a few on here!"
(IanMcL, 'HullCityPuffs v Mighty Burnley', post 65, 24/11/12)

"You've got no imagination CiE. I've asked mine to get me another bag of crisps, a quarter pounder cheeseburger with everything on it and a portion of chips too"
(Newtownard_Claret, 'HullCityPuffs v Mighty Burnley', post 66, 24/11/12)

"Hope she sent you a suitable reply, CiE!"
(ClubClaret, 'HullCityPuffs v Mighty Burnley', post 67, 24/11/12 – 2 likes)

"Leave her alone, Newtownard – you know she's with me when you are listening to the footy!"
(TheBlueClaret, 'HullCityPuffs v Mighty Burnley', post 68, 24/11/12)

What occurs is quite typical of the extended 'traditional' match-day experience, heralded by many academics and non-academics alike. The 'banter' and camaraderie that characterises gatherings of authentic football fans in public houses, with close proximity to the ground, has been seen as something threatened by CMC and other, virtual and more passive forms of fandom (Giulianotti, 2002). However, the findings of this research echo those of Williams and Perkins (1998), Weed (2006, 2007 & 2008) and Millward (2011), who focussed on fans that had chosen to watch broadcasts of matches at the pub, rather than attend the game as a live spectator. A far cry from the depictions of the isolated and passive fan sitting in front of the television watching football in

their living room, Weed and Millward have viewed the significant increase in television coverage of English matches, since the formation of the Premier League, as something that has facilitated further opportunities for football fans to maintain existing ties with fellow fans and the club they support, despite their changing personal circumstances or the impact wider changes to the game may have had (Millward, 2011). Fans are, in ever increasing numbers, seeing the pub as an authentic alternative to the stadium; to *share* their enjoyment of the game, rather than watch it alone. Internet message boards have extended this further, beyond the limits of physical proximity to one another and have, in fact, created opportunities to experience extended pre-match discussions, rituals and camaraderie for those are unable or unwilling to attend the live event itself and, on occasion, those who do actually go to the game.

The Shared Experience: Clarets versus Latics, 21/04/14

The 21st of April 2014 was one such match-day, albeit an atypical occasion in many ways. Not only was the match taking place on a Monday, due to the Easter Holiday, but Burnley FC were taking to the field knowing that victory, against 5th place Wigan Athletic, who themselves were play-off contenders, would result in automatic promotion to the Premier League. This was the culmination of a remarkable season for the Clarets, whose challenge for promotion defied the meagre financial resources at their disposal as well as the predictions of the bookmakers; most of whom, at the start of the season, had listed Burnley as one of the teams mostly likely to be relegated. Even if defeated on the day, Burnley could still be promoted if their nearest challengers, Derby County, failed to beat Barnsley. Distant Clarets began signing in to the match-day thread, no matter the inconvenience of the kick-off to their own time zone, Easter break or daily schedules;

"Allez Burnley!!! Allez Tony en Sud de France. UTC!⁸"

(Southern_Tony, 'Clarets V Latics', post 11, 21/04/14)

"It's just gone 11.00pm in Western Australia, looks like another late night following the game on here, MrsDav thinks I'm mad. Got to be up early for work tomorrow! Come on lads do the business second half"

⁸ Up the Clarets

(Davclaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 12, 21/04/14)

"Cloudy here in Limousin, south of France, listening and enjoying Phil Bird on Player⁹... A huge match ahead... Up the Clarets..."
(ValleyClaret, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 2, 21/04/14)

"Took a sickie today (first time) at 52 years old. Glad I did. Watching Sky Sports and loving it. Beautiful day here in Aberdeen"
(Grippa, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 27, 21/04/14)

On this occasion, the level of tension expressed by the forum members was unusually high. After FranktheClaret opened the match-day discussion thread, an outpouring of anxiety ensued;

"Afternoon, Frank. I am as nervous as it's possible to be. Please, please, please, let us win"
(HighJohn, 'Clarets V Latics', post 2, 21/04/14)

"I'm tuned into Clarets Player! Very nervous at the moment...COYC! My heart's in my mouth and we've not even kicked off yet"
(ShaneClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', posts 9 & 20, 21/04/14)

"Hello everyone. Very, very nervous this afternoon"
(ClubClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 13, 21/04/14)

"I get even more nervous listening to our games so will try and get a decent stream to watch...will still get sweaty palms though! Come On You Clarets!!!"
(DutchClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 23, 21/04/14)

As a researcher, my proximity to the subject and subjects of my research was brought to the fore on this day. I was acutely aware of my own thoughts and feelings and spent some time on the morning of the match trying to articulate why the occasion was distinct and why I, personally, felt different. Knowing that the outcome of the match was hugely significant for the club that I loved, it was important to take this step back and reflect on the occasion in order to ensure I did not impose added significance to the words of forum contributors, or fixate on aspects of the match-day thread just because they resonated with my own perspective.

⁹ Phil Bird is the main commentator for the club's official radio coverage of their games, Clarets Player, which was formally known as Clarets World.

Whilst I was more excited about attending this match than I normally would be, I was also quite relaxed and confident that, even if today's result did not fall the way of the Clarets, Burnley still had several games left to secure promotion and were strong enough to do it. It would have been easy to misread the previous extracts and amalgamate them with many others on the match-day thread that afternoon, as mere expressions of excitement. I was, however, careful to consider the impact of the occasion, try to distance my own feelings from the words of my subjects and, therefore, analyse their meaning more affectively.

Other forum members who, like I, were more confident about the fate of the team, were also able to acknowledge the feelings of some of their compatriots;

"Good afternoon Casper and Chums. BELIEVE. UTC"
(Claret_doon_soof, 'Clarets V Latics', post 5, 21/04/14)

"hello nervy ones worldwide from a Sunny Amsterdam where yesterday Ajax got thumped 5-1 by Zwolle in Dutch cup final. Could prove to be an important match on the Turf today"
(Dons_Sideshow, 'Clarets V Latics', post 16, 21/04/14)

"MetalHead ... signed in and ready to party!! IN GINGERS WE TRUST!!!¹⁰"
(MetalHead, 'Clarets V Latics', post 15, 21/04/14)

The feeling and awareness of such tension was typical of that at the ground itself that day, as well as amongst those fans catching the live broadcast in their home or the pub. What is clear from the posts above, is the need of many fans who could not attend the game to share that experience with fellow Clarets; to express anxiety over a football match with those who could understand and relate to that sensation, and to place themselves somewhere that would allow them to express their wildest delight with others who also identify with their club - should the outcome of the match be a favourable one, of course.

"Afternoon all. Couldn't make it to the Turf in the end, sadly. As second prize goes, though, sharing this promotion experience - and we will be promoted today, I reckon - with Claretsmad chums will more than do for me!! Come On Yoooooooo Clarets!!!!!!"
(SaintlyClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 18, 21/04/14)

¹⁰ A reference to Burnley FC's ginger haired manager, Sean Dyche.

Many fans who live a considerable distance away from Burnley's stadium, like SaintlyClaret, made this special occasion one of their chosen live matches for the season, travelling from afar to take their place at a potentially historic occasion just as he had intended to do so initially. A few of the regular match-day thread attendees were, therefore, unusually absent. The match was also being televised by Sky Sports, which is again unusual for one of the small town clubs that occupy England's second tier of professional football. The magnitude of the occasion, however, had not been lost on the national and international media, and other broadcasters had also selected the match as part of their Easter sports coverage. However, rather than abandon the match-day thread as a result of this, several community members were signing in early to help each other get as close to the action as possible. A number of posters used the match-day thread to advise one another where live internet streams could be found, or enquire as to how they could improve the quality of what they were watching;

"Hi Frank and John. It's listed as being on here:

<http://cricfree.tv/live/index.php> - Main match on FLS¹¹ tonight. This normally ensures a good link, if you can find it."

(NickytheNose, 'Clarets V Latics', posts 3 & 7, 21/04/14)

"Too nervous to watch it. As wound up about this match as I've ever been. Ties with the Orient match¹². So much is at stake. Thanks anyway, though, Nicky"

(HighJohn, 'Clarets V Latics', post 4, 21/04/14)

"Managed to get it on here. But foreign comms:

<http://firstrows.biz/soccer/burnley-vs-wigan-athletic-pt-frsdfdd9>"

(Dons_Sideshow, 'Clarets V Latics', post 17, 21/04/14)

"The Bein stream sucks, does anyone have a better one?"

(BFCjetta, 'Clarets V Latics', post 19, 21/04/14)

"In English, the cricfree link above is working:

<http://firstrows.biz/soccer/burnley-vs-wigan-athletic-frsdfdc>"

¹¹ The Football League Show. A BBC broadcast of highlights from the 3 English professional leagues below the Premier League. Typically it has one feature match and then a brief roundup of all the other games that day.

¹² The Orient match is widely regarded as the most important in Burnley's history. On the final day of the 1986/87 season, the 9th of May, Burnley needed to defeat Leyton Orient at Turf Moor and hope that either Lincoln City or Torquay United lost in order to stay in the Football League. Going in to the match they were bottom of the Fourth Division and faced the prospect of being the first club automatically relegated to the Football Conference (which was, at the time, an amateur football league). Burnley won, 2-1, and survived, whilst Lincoln City lost and were relegated instead.

(Dons_Sideshow, 'Clarets V Latics', post 21, 21/04/14)

"What are the little crosses about? Please?"¹³

(ClubClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 25, 21/04/14)

The match itself starts to come into focus during these preliminary discussions. The team news is revealed by Dons_Sideshow, who has copied the chosen personnel for both teams from an internet source on everyone's behalf, and several fans reveal their delight that the game is sold out and that a potentially great atmosphere awaits at Turf Moor. Once the match begins, the incidents of the game take precedence within the thread's contributions and three interesting phenomena are observable in relation to football fandom and community activity.

The first of these is that contributors to the discussion thread, most (but not all) of which are active community members, will relay verbatim coverage from other sources. Many of the fans involved already have access to game itself through local radio broadcasting, the club's own audio feed via the official website, text based coverage from sport websites, as well as, on this occasion, televised coverage of the game. However, simply knowing what is happening is clearly not enough for the fans involved, many of whom are more than happy to spend their afternoon relaying their chosen coverage for the benefit of others;

"Well we look sharp on ball up to now fingers crossed as Marney makes first foul"

(DutchClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 31, 21/04/14)

"10 mins in nowt in it. No shots, no corners"¹⁴

(NickytheNose, 'Clarets V Latics', post 35, 21/04/14)

"Wigan fighting for every ball, but our lads have been up to the challenge so far"

(KagoolKlaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 37, 21/04/14)

"Wigan header. Off the crossbar... First sign of a threat"

(IP3LY 'Clarets V Latics', post 69, 21/04/14)

¹³ The crosses referred to here are icons which, when clicked, each close one of the numerous adverts that appear on live streaming pages – this is the main source of income for such websites.

¹⁴ Nowt is Lancastrian slang for 'nothing'.

There is an acute awareness amongst some of the community members that there are fellow fans who are dependent on the match-day thread to keep informed and that, without it, there would be several Clarets who would not be able to maintain their connection to the club and one another to the same degree. This awareness is not limited to just online community members, but Burnley fans more generally. Reflecting upon his selfless contributions to the thread, IanMcL, who has been the chief instigator of match-day threads since holycustard's departure, explained that;

"It's a good forum and mechanism for cheering and you get a lot of fans from different places in the world - Australia, Canada, America, everywhere - and they need this, you know. If nobody else does it, they need it, especially when we're not in the Premiership. So, that's why I did it" (Interview with IanMcL, May 2015).

The evident consideration of others reflects the strength of shared identity felt by some of the key contributors to the match-day discussion thread. As Rheingold (1993) predicted, the connections people make via the internet and the subsequent relationships they establish would be stronger than those of traditional communities due to the shared sense of identity that brought them together in the first instance. Whilst it is in no way possible to prove Rheingold's hypothesis, that online relationships and communities are comparably stronger to those predicated on accidents of physical proximity, the decision, in this case, to regularly create content and relay their consumption of football matches for the benefit of others is indicative of the strength of shared identity between fans of the club and, as the thread became ritualised and many members became regular contributors, shared identity more specifically to the community members of the forum. It is those connections, together, that stimulate the reciprocal sharing of information, as well as the altruistic sacrifice that is necessary to provide one another with this information; the fans that undertake this task are missing parts of the match they are watching in order to relay textual coverage for others;

"Claret World, Player - whatever it is now - I used to totally rely on that. Before all that 2BR was on¹⁵. But now it's Claret Player and when

¹⁵ 2BR is a local radio station to the Burnley area and has often held the rights to broadcast matches involving Burnley FC.

you've got the TV link, yes, you can actually see it and know what's happened and you can actually say 'that's a really good move, led by whoever started it, great finish by whoever has scored'. So, there's a bit more [to it]. You've got to stop watching the telly and type that out in-between, so you miss a bit of what's going on.

There's another one, SouthernTony, especially if I'm not there and at the match, he would come in and do it [start the thread]. When we were really doing well, even if Custard was there, err, sometimes you just get excited and put a bit more on and add a bit more stuff, as everybody did. When there was 200-300 [contributors] at the peak, when Custard was running it, you'd get a lot of duplication stuff – sometimes 6 of the same thing!” (Interview with IanMcL, May 2015).

Whilst the number of contributors is not as high on this day as at the peak of the match-day thread's popularity, as so many are attending the match live on this particular occasion, the information being shared during the match against Wigan is growing at a rapid rate. Throughout the discussion thread, the events at Turf Moor are punctuated by scores from elsewhere in the Football League. Almost all of the matches within the division Burnley operate get some attention, but on this occasion it is the matches involving promotion rivals Queens Park Rangers and Derby County that are of particular interest. Typically, when scores are being reiterated from elsewhere, match-day threads tend to focus on the games involving local rivals – Leeds United, Bolton Wanderers, Preston North End, Blackpool and, crucially, Blackburn Rovers. Opportunities for *schadenfreude* are rapidly dismissed on this particular day, however, as Blackburn Rovers race to a three goal lead, away at Birmingham City FC, inside the opening twenty-five minutes. Unusually, no one seems to care; today, it's much more meaningful that a team from West London or the Midlands is defeated, rather than one just eleven miles away;

"Derby on too but still nil nil. Wovers 2 up"
(SuperBurnley81, 'Clarets V Latics', post 40, 21/04/14)

"Derby score ☹"
(ClubClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 73, 21/04/14)

"Forget about Derby. We will win!"
(HighJohn, 'Clarets V Latics', post 74, 21/04/14)

"Derby 2 up"
(Claret_doon_soof, 'Clarets V Latics', post 86, 21/04/14)

"You get your money's worth watching Sheff Wed. Last 3 matches 3-3, 3-3 and 4-2. Today 2-2 at halftime"
(NickytheNose, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 8, 21/04/14)

"QPR 1 down to Watford...but who gives a sh1t!!!!!!!!!"
(SuperBurnley81, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 15, 21/04/14)

"QPR score 1-1 with Watford"
(Southern_Tony, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 49, 21/04/14)

"Barnsley keeper saves pen with score at 2-1 to Derby ☺ ☺ ☺"
(SaintlyClaret, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 58, 21/04/14)

Replicating the match-day experience

The second of these phenomena is that many of the community members involved make a conscious attempt to replicate as much of the physical match-day experience as possible. Fans type active encouragement for the team, willing them to victory even though the players themselves are clearly unaffected by such passionate displays;

"COME ON YOU SUPER CLARETS!!!!!!!!!!!!!! UTC. PLEASE BURNLEY HANG ON AND LETS CELEBRATE TONIGHT"
(Southern_Tony, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', posts 4 & 9, 21/04/14)

"Come on burnleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey ☺ ☺"
(holycustard, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 7, 21/04/14)

Such encouragement often repeats the chants that fans overhear during the radio or television coverage they are also receiving, or those that are part of the repertoire of Burnley fans at every match;

*"COME ON BURNLEY
COME ON BURNLEY
COME ON BURNLEY"*
(Claret_doon_soof, 'Clarets V Latics', posts 52 & 86, 21/04/14)

"COME ON YOU CLARETS. COME ON YOU CLARETS!!!!"
(HighJohn 'Clarets V Latics', posts 24 & 75, 21/04/14)

"EIEIEIO. COME ON YOU CLARETS"
(IP3LY, 'Clarets V Latics', post 54, 21/04/14)

*"BURNLEY BURNLEY BURNLEY
BURNLEY BURNLEY BURNLEY
BURNLEYBURNLEYBURNLEYBURNLEYBURNLEYBURNLEYBURNLEY
BURNLEY BURNLEY
BURNLEY BURNLEY BURNLEY"*
(DutchClaret, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 55, 21/04/14)

*"EEEEIIIIIEEE EEEIIIEEE EIIIEEE
OOOOHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
UP THE FOOTBALL LEAGUE THEY GO"*
(Academicals, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 93, 21/04/14)

*"Everything's goin' our way
Everything's goin' 'our way, our way*

*Oh, What A Beautiful Morning
Oh, what a beautiful day
Now that we've finally done it
Everything's going our way*

Burnley, Burnley, Burnley."
(Garcia_the_Claret, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 116, 21/04/14)

*"Any thing coyle can do dyche can do better
any thing coyle can do dyche can do it better than him
no he cant
yes he can
no he cant
yes he can yes he can yes he can"*
(holycustard, '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', post 117, 21/04/14)

The occasion is clearly affecting the discussion thread and the nature of the posts within it as the last of the lyrics, above, is untypical of those on this particular day. The desperate will to win and tension of the event has turned the chants of the match-day thread into repetitive attempts to encourage at the expense of all other considerations. Typically, fans use the match-day thread as a forum to construct their own songs, as homage to the team and its players, alongside their reiterations of common chants heard at the ground itself. The following posts, from previous match-day threads, provide examples of this and

demonstrate the creative approach fans take to demonstrating their appreciation of specific players and their support of the team;

*"Michael Duff, Duff.
He's certainly not a puff.
His tackles are very tough.
He's indestructible.
Always defending.
Michael Duff, Duff.*

To the tune of GOLD"
(HappyClaret55, 'Mighty Clarets v Derby Puffs – first half', post 80, 26/12/12)

*"Oh Charlie Austin.
You are the love of my life.
Oh Charlie Austin.
I'd let you shag my wife.
Oh Charlie Austin.
You score lots of goals too*

To the tune of I LOVE YOU BABY"
(HappyClaret55, 'Mighty Clarets v Derby Puffs – first half', post 98, 26/12/12)

Whoooooaaa
Keith Tracey
Whoooooaaa
Keith Tracey
He used to weigh a ton,
But now he score goals for fun (we hope ☺)"
(Firefly5Claret, 'Clarets v Eagles – secundo arfio', post 95, 12/01/13)

Although the anxiety of the occasion, for many contributors, remains throughout the match-day thread, the tension makes way for wild expressions of delight when Burnley score in the 22nd minute of the match. The uncontrollable outpouring of joy that follows an important goal is evident for all to see, albeit in textual form;

[illegible]

"YESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"
 (ShaneClaret, 'Clarets V Latics', post 44, 21/04/14)

“Et nous chantons Madge Allez!”: Digital innovations in the match-day experience

The third interesting feature of such threads is that fans have used the internet and its numerous technological and visual developments to innovate rather than merely replicate. Fan cultures and expressions of identity are rarely static, evolving from match to match and season by season. Online fan cultures have also evolved in order to incorporate many of the potential ways to demonstrate allegiance to Burnley FC afforded by the internet and to create an environment which distinguishes the community as something unique in its own right.

During the match against Wigan, as conveyed above, fans aided one another by using hyperlinks in order to enable each other to get access to a transmission of the match and, subsequently, internet streams that improved the quality of such broadcasts. Each forum post on Clarets Mad allows the member to conclude their contribution with a hyperlink, facilitating easier access to relevant information. Although these are not used frequently within match-day discussion threads there are occasions, like the data shown above reveals, where the interconnectivity afforded by the forum is used by fans to assist one another.

Also on rare occasions when Burnley were in the second tier of English football, and during the seasons I observed when Burnley FC were operating in the Premier League, the rapid availability of visual coverage meant that fans were able to share YouTube links (and those from other video library services) to some of the goals that has just been scored, or ‘Vines’ of the same thing. Vines are short videos (typically 6 seconds in length) that are not data intensive and can, therefore, be shared quickly and easily. The format was devised in 2012 and became popular among the users of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook. As many of the contributors to match-day threads also use social media sites as a source of information about the game, typically for team line-ups (as it is often revealed through the official Burnley FC Twitter account before anywhere else), they too were able to gain easy access to short extracts of footage from the match they were following. In turn, it was not uncommon to see links to vines posted in match-day threads for the benefit of others during the aforementioned 2013/14 season.

Shortly after the goals were scored against Wigan Athletic, one regular contributor to the match-day discussion threads introduced colourful GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) images to display the names of both goal scorers, as they typically did on most match-days when Burnley scored. GIF files have been in wide usage since the 1980s and are now most commonly adopted by internet users wishing to create low-resolution, short animations. In this instance a continuous and seamless animated loop was created in which the text, whereby the name of the goal scorer scrolls rapidly to the left of the image, disappears from the screen and then shortly reappears to the right, from where the cycle is repeated. These snapshots, below, capture a moment during the GIF animation cycle;

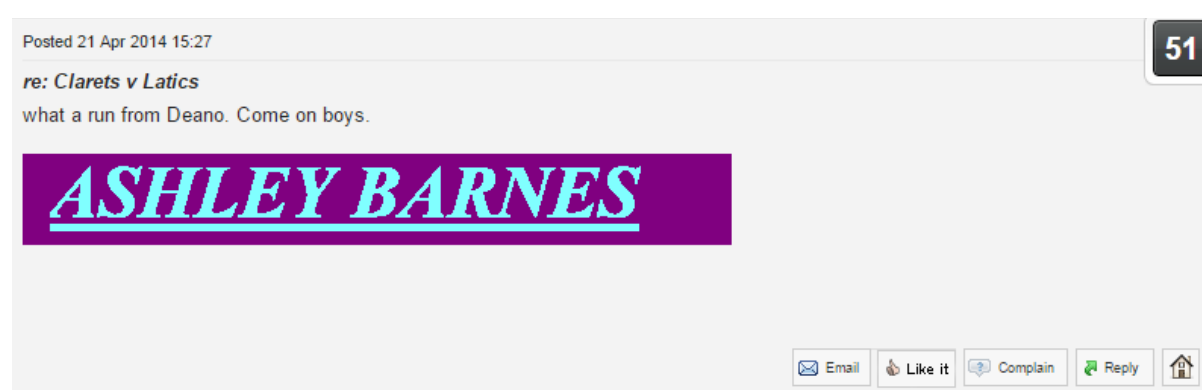


Figure Six: Ashley Barnes: '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', 21/04/14.



Figure Seven: Michael Kightly: '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', 21/04/14.

Displaying (close approximations to) the colours adopted by Burnley FC, these quickly generated animations are used to bring colour and life to match-day threads. Although they are still text based, as almost all of the forum interaction at large is, these animations add weight to the gratitude expressed towards the goal scorers and exemplify the significance of specific events in the match. At

the conclusion of the game against Wigan, the same forum user also represented the outcome of the whole event in the same way;

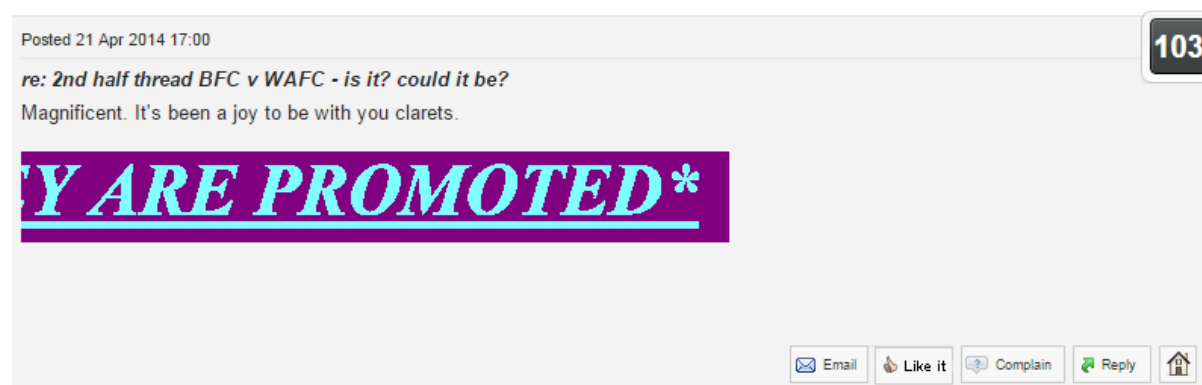


Figure Eight: Burnley are Promoted: '2nd half thread BFC v WAFC - is it? could it be?', 21/04/14.

Alongside these attempts to celebrate the goals that have been scored and, on this rare occasion, promotion towards the end of a successful season, one of the most curious and longest standing of the forum's rituals centres on the invented character of 'Madge'. Madge's presence in the match-day discussion thread has been continuous since her introduction by holycustard and throughout the period in which I observed the forum. She also took pride of place on the final Clarets Mad banner, an image placed at the top of the forum webpage to display its name and purpose, before the community moved to Up the Clarets. Alongside references to some of the notorious forum threads of the past (former manager Owen Coyle's cheapness was confirmed by his use of Casio watches), recurring figures (Ole Gunnar Solskjaer was consistently discussed as a potential signing and, much later, manager, but has neither played for nor managed Burnley FC), ritual threads (BigDave's Review of the Sunday papers), the forum's moderation practises (threads become locked when deemed inappropriate by moderators) and homage to a key former member, Eli (David Evans), who passed away in 2006. Madge is seen at the forefront of the image – complete with microphone, shoulder length hair and a black dress.



Figure Nine: Eli's Forum Banner, 19/06/12.

Madge is an invented character who acts as a mascot within the match-day discussion thread ritual. Based on the body of French singer Alizée Jacotey, originally there were two GIF images that were used to extend the entertainment value of the thread by using the little known (in the UK, at least) singer's dance routines and actions as the basis for Madge; an unusually delicate and overtly feminine Burnley fan, whose commitment to the Claret cause was unquestionable.

The opening post of most match-day discussion threads is replete with Madge, travel bag in tow, making her way to the game in question. When Burnley score, 'Naughty Madge' is revealed, displaying her delight with a provocative dance. At the end of the first half a more extensive dance routine is shown to provide half-time entertainment for thread lurkers and contributors alike. There is now an extensive repertoire of Madge GIFs that have been sourced from various external websites, or that have been created specifically for the forum by its members. The images in question have often been borrowed or created because they can be related to football and the match-day experience in general; as demonstrated by GIFs such as the dance routine that provides half-time entertainment and another where Alizée is sat on a bench checking her trainers – or, in the alternate reality of Clarets Mad, she's on the substitutes' bench today and is making sure her boots are ready in case she is needed to play in the team.



Figure Ten: 'Madge Celebrates in Style', 22/04/14.

The creation of Madge demonstrates some of the innovative elements of football fan culture online. The actual development of a character for the match-day mascot, whose appearance is more in tune with and appealing to the adult audience that frequents Clarets Mad, adapts an element of wider football culture and live attendance at matches. It adds a dimension to something that is typically an existing *live* match-day experience, aimed at garnering the interest of young football fans; one which would be unfeasibly difficult to develop if it were not for the speed of CMC and the ability and readiness of the forum's membership to contribute to it. Without the level of interconnectedness provided by the internet, the depth of the character and story of Madge would not be possible.

As all regular contributors and users of the match-day thread know, Madge is from Harle Syke, an area on the outskirts of Burnley that is historically renowned for having a large density of weaving mills. It was here that she grew up before going on to international success as a dancer. Now, she lives with holycustard, under the stairs of his abode in nearby Todmorden, no less. From here, she is allowed out on match-days to follow her beloved Clarets around the country. Her popularity, nationwide, knows no bounds and her stardom has even led to a football stadium being named after her following one of her visits; the Mad(ge) Stad, home of Reading FC.

As well as the images themselves providing a degree of entertainment, and the thought of a glamorous French entertainer being connected to a heavily

industrial part of the locality of the club amusing, one of the most compelling aspects of the Madge character is the bewilderment, of community users and outsiders alike, as to who she actually is. Her presence within the forum's banner is frequently enquired about and on the odd occasion that someone does establish a connection between Madge and Alizée herself, it is strenuously denied.

Essentially, the creation of the Madge character has allowed for the formation of internal community reference points, the prioritisation of insider knowledge and also the celebration of long-term connections. Several community members enjoy the opportunity to perpetuate the story of Madge when others ask who the images are of, and each adds further parts to the story as the discussion develops;

"I bet most Burnley fans have jigged like that at some point since Monday afternoon! It's a cracking clip though.

Madge is number one for CM - even though I have no idea who she really is!!!

(MadMax, 'Madge Celebrates in Style', post 8, 23/04/14)

"Max, Madge is a Harle Syke girl, I'm led to believe."

(NickytheNose, 'Madge Celebrates in Style', post 9, 23/04/14)

"Did a quick spot of googling and found a few vague references to Alizee being a Burnley fan, but I'm still none the wiser! What's the Harle Syke connection, as she was born in France according t'web!¹⁶"

(MadMax, 'Madge Celebrates in Style', post 10, 23/04/14)

"Qu'est-ce que vous chantez?

Et nous chantons Madge Allez!

(Redbeard, 'Madge Celebrates in Style', post 14, 23/04/14)

"Love it!"

(Claretinyorks, 'Madge Celebrates in Style', post 19, 23/04/14)

Although a sharp distinction between insiders and outsiders is not enforced and the purpose of it is not to exclude fans who are not privy to the forum's history, it nonetheless creates a distinction between insiders and outsiders that forms part of the entertainment value and amusement experienced by community members. Without long term engagement with the forum and, more specifically,

¹⁶ T'Web is Northern English slang for the internet.

the match-day thread, an awareness of the Madge character's invention and specific features of her history is difficult to develop. Many forum members, therefore, find themselves outsiders to the amusing nature of the Madge character until they too have developed an appreciation of who she is, what purpose she serves and until they know enough about her background (from snippets like those quoted in the data above) to understand the internal references which are central to the Madge 'joke'. With regards to the notion of community, it is clear from the case of Madge, alongside other examples, that there are distinct processes of socialisation into the Clarets Mad fraternity and that without long term engagement with the forum it is difficult to establish the norms of the community members and transcend the boundary from outsider to insider.

As we have seen, the character of Madge has developed and she has become an institution within the match-day discussion thread; her meaning to the forum's membership has gone beyond the initial use of GIF images of Alizée Jacotey, which was to add a degree of visual titillation to the interaction between fans. The potentially sexualised meaning of Madge is, however, still prominent among those forum *users* who are not familiar with the character or her history. On occasion, some forum users will post their own animated images of women (other than Madge) which are much more obviously and explicitly objectifying the female body in a sexual manner. There is a tendency for such images to accentuate the motion of large breasts and their inclusion is based on both the user's evaluation of the woman's sexual appeal and physical attractiveness, as well as a misreading of the purpose of the Madge character and the GIF images of her that are regularly posted. Others, too, have misread the purpose of uploading such GIFs and have accused the initiators of such posts as being perverted.

"That's all it is. Fun. Sometimes they'll say 'oh, you're a perv' – hang on a minute! We're not pervs. This is just Madge. It's not a French singer you're lusting after! That's a funny thing when people try to turn it around and make an animated gif something other than an animated gif...that's all it is, just a bit of light relief. Nothing else."
(Interview with IanMcL, May 2015).

Whether adhering to the sexualisation of women that is so prevalent in the masculine dominated world of football, or expressing an objection to that, once again it is possible to identify those who are community outsiders based on their lack of insider knowledge and readings of the Madge ritual.

When writing this thesis I did, on a couple of occasions, wonder whether or not I was letting my subjects 'off the hook', so to speak, where the Madge character was concerned. The fact that others misread the meaning of Madge and presented their own highly sexualised images of other women, and that some community outsiders had accused IanMcL and others of being either sexist or perverted for using images of Madge did make me reflect on my proximity to the community and whether or not this had impacted on my objectivity when researching. Did I pass up on opportunities, here, to scrutinise some questionable fan practises?

In each of these reflective moments I concluded that the community members contributing to the match-day thread were sincere in adopting Madge as a mascot, without pernicious intent or with the aim of sexually objectifying her. I did, however, concede that if outsiders could misread the Madge character to the point that they are willing to interject with GIF images that clearly were based on sexual objectification, that the practise of Madge may inadvertently be perpetuating hegemonic masculinity within football and creating an environment which is not equally welcoming to all. Although it is, perhaps, beyond the scope of this particular thesis and is, in itself, worthy of an in-depth and bespoke research project, the way that online fan cultures and digital innovations in fandom contribute to the continued existence of gender inequalities and/or sexism would have benefitted from further exploration. Had I been as attentive and critical during the data gathering process as I was when analysing the data and writing my findings chapters, I may well have made a more meaningful contribution to this important area of study.

Conclusion

Through an exploration of the match-day discussion threads, this chapter has shown how ritualistic, regular, and structured interaction can emerge from the gathering of football fans online. Centred, initially, on the weekly focal point of the shared interest those fans have, the content created by such interactions is

not confined to the match action itself, nor even to football. Instead, the threads are characterised by interactions of a much broader scope; often, they are more personal in nature and, collectively, they express the familiarity forum members have with one another and, in some instances, the meaningful relationships that have formed as a result of prolonged period of CMC as the majority did not know one another beforehand.

The regularity of these threads, during the football season, means that they become 'meet ups' for community members. Although, on any given match-day, the interaction within them might encompass fans who are not frequent contributors to the message board, the majority of the contributions do come from those community members, or 'genuine homesteaders' as Rheingold (1993) refers to them, who formed the community at Clarets Mad, first, and then later at Up the Clarets. For one another, and for fans of Burnley FC on the whole, they selflessly relay coverage of match action and engage in reciprocal behaviours that are clear indicators of the strength of identity and community that exists on this message board.

In terms of modern football fandom as a whole, it is interesting to observe the way that fans both replicate and innovate during match-day discussion threads. At their very root is a desire to share the experience of the match and, ultimately, an expression of the identity they have towards Burnley Football Club. This is, of course, in line with the corporeal match-day experience, of fans who attend live games, or those who gather in the pub to watch it. In homage to the live match experience, contributors to the match-day discussion thread often replicate as much of it as they can in digital form – offering opinion on team selection and the development of the game, providing textual versions of the chants and songs which create atmosphere inside the stadium (and helps to generate so much of the entertainment value and distinct culture of live football) and demonstrating their delight when a goal is scored for their team. All of these are typical of traditional fan practises, considered under threat by some academics as a result of increased television coverage and supposedly passive forms of fan-fan communication.

As we have seen in the findings relayed above, members of internet message boards are able to use the digital nature of their community and CMC to enhance

their match-day experiences, develop innovative expressions of their identity to both the club they support and, ultimately, to the online community they are part of. As the example of Madge demonstrates, online fan communities develop their own traditions and conventions; the knowledge of which often determines, without any intended prejudice or malice, those who are community insiders and those who are outsiders.

Taken together, the findings of the chapter relayed above reveal a great deal about the communities of football fans that emerge online and the online community definition advanced in figure three (see page 58). The shared sense of identity towards a specific club brings fans together, alongside a willingness to share their support for that club and the match-day experience with like-minded people. As a result of this, an analysis of match-day discussion threads has revealed how meaningful relationships have formed between regular contributors and how the nature of their interactions are characterised by reciprocal and self-less behaviours. It has also shown that the CMC between them facilitates digital innovations within football fandom that, in turn, lead to the formation of insider and outsider statuses to the community in question.

The thesis will now analyse match-day discussion threads further, in order to analyse insider conventions further and develop a stronger understanding of the norms and values of the community at large. In doing so, the thesis will provide a more rounded understanding of online fan communities by exploring conflict and debate between its members.

CHAPTER FIVE: “WHY FEEL THE NEED TO OPENLY EXPRESS YOUR SEXUALITY?”: COMMUNITY VALUES, CONFLICT AND HOMOPHOBIA.

Introduction

Match-day threads and other ritualistic or recurring discussion topics are a fascinating development in modern football fandom. They provide us with some of the most intriguing examples of the way that CMC has become a significant component of fan practises and how fans engage with the game and fellow supporters. Whilst the previous chapter has highlighted how significant recurring threads are to the formation and maintenance of relationships between fans, they are also important in shaping the norms and values of the community at large as a significant number of core community members are actively contributing to such discussions. As we have already seen, the match-day thread becomes embroiled in discussion with little significance to the match itself or events occurring on the field of play. Indeed, it is typical of match-day threads to be characterised by everyday social interaction; well wishing, catching up and the discussion of topical news items since the last match-day thread occurred.

This chapter is focused on how match-day discussion threads are connected to wider discourses. It also analyses discussions within the online community at large, and how these relate to broader developments in football and society as a whole. The cynosure of this chapter is on the way that the online community engages with contemporary issues within its discussion threads and how these, in turn, reinforce or realign community norms and values. To illustrate this process, the chapter draws upon a number of discussion threads observed over the period of research which centre on homophobia and, chiefly male, homosexuality. The extent of homophobia in football is an issue that has received a significant amount of attention in recent years, evidenced by the BBC documentary ‘Hate in the Beautiful Game’ (Allen, 2017) and the parliamentary inquiry into the problem of homophobia in sport (House of Commons, 2017) which directed the majority of its recommendations at football. That inquiry began with a reference to a previous parliamentary inquiry (House of Commons,

2012) into the problem of racism in sport, which argued that homophobia was 'emerging as a bigger problem than other forms of discrimination' (House of Commons, 2017: 1). This chapter analyses the discussions and debates that a specific set of football fans engage in over the subjects of homosexuality and homophobia. Doing so will allow us to explore the norms and values of the community at large, the way norms and values alter as a result of emerging discourses within the online community, and the extent of homophobia within this specific case study of modern football fandom.

Hate in the Beautiful Game

Despite the concern regarding prejudice towards homosexuals in football, both among supporters and players, many of the prominent academic writers in the field of homophobia in sport and, more specifically, football, argue that latent homophobia is diminishing and that the sport is much more inclusive of sexual minorities in comparison to its recent past (Anderson, 2009; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2013; Macgrath & Anderson, 2017). To Anderson (2009) and Macgrath and Anderson (2017), football in the 1970 and 1980s was an era characterised by homophobia and, as a result, a singular hypermasculinity was pervasive in football culture as it was in many other sectors of western societies at that time. The association in western nations between the spread of HIV/Aids with homosexual men contributed to a masculine environment in which the constant reinforcement of heterosexuality and the belittling of homosexuals was dominant (Anderson, 2009; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012). Sport was no different to society as a whole, and the persistent need to prove one's heterosexuality was characteristic of sports teams and dressing rooms; 'in the mid-1980s...extreme masculinity in sport took on renewed importance for boys and young men, as it was a central tool in heterosexualising men in a (homophobic) culture' (Macgrath & Anderson, 2017: 316). The emphasis on heteronormativity and the expression of traditional masculinity has long been ingrained into the culture of sport and physical education. This culture and the rejection of publicly gay footballer Justin Fashanu, by his fans, team mates, club and even his brother, contributed to his suicide in 1998 and, subsequently, has been cited as a major factor in the reluctance of homosexual footballers to publicly reveal their sexuality since.

However, Anderson's research has found that since the 1980s inclusive masculinities have become more commonplace in football and that rather than being the norm, homophobia was an ideology upheld by a minority of those involved in the game. Anderson's interviews with players led him to conclude that homophobia is now widely considered as unacceptable in the sport. Not only this, but the players interviewed overwhelmingly suggested that they would be supportive of any team mate who publicly revealed they were homosexual. This, to Anderson, is symptomatic of the changing nature and diversification of masculinity in recent years; traditional masculinity does still have a prominent place, but it now coexists with other forms of (inclusive) masculinity rather than being a singular and dominant conceptualisation of gender.

Much of the existing research into homophobia has centred on the experiences of players and the decision they face about publicly revealing their sexuality. However, research into the attitudes fans hold towards homosexuality and the nature of homophobia in fan cultures has been largely omitted thus far. As Cashmore and Cleland (2012) also pointed out, the bulk of the research to date has focused on the attitudes of young people towards homophobia and has not, therefore, canvassed a broader range of opinions towards homosexuals or anything that can be considered representative of fan cultures on the whole. Cleland's (2013) subsequent findings do, however, add weight to idea of inclusive masculinities being present in football when taking into account the perspective of fans. His survey of fans who frequent an internet message board led him to conclude that homophobic sentiment and attitudes were openly challenged by other football fans online and that, when questioned, most fans emphasised the importance of the player's ability and contribution to the team than their sexuality when assessing the suitability of them for the club they support.

Cleland's findings from internet message boards users are, however, very different from those conveyed by Caudwell (2011) following her observation and analysis of the audible and embodied attitudes towards sexuality within football stadiums themselves. Caudwell's findings suggest that explicit and hateful attitudes towards homosexuals are commonplace within the sport, with

flashpoints of intense homophobic hatred observable – as was the case regarding the abusive remarks made towards Sol Campbell in matches he played in against former club Tottenham Hotspur – which ‘demonstrates the multiple ways homophobia is made visually and sonically explicit within football culture’ (2011: 135). For this study, a long-term observation of the fans who frequent a message board, an exploration of community values at large and an analysis of discussion threads relating to homosexuality/homophobia will allow us to assess the extent to which inclusive masculinities have become typical of football fan culture and also whether explicit or implicit homophobia is largely confined to football stadiums themselves, or whether it can be argued that the problem is pervasive throughout football fan culture and practises.

Football v Homophobia, September 2013

As the previous chapter highlighted, online community members were very adept at using digital innovations in order to express their thoughts and emotions when creating a match-day experience for themselves. Whilst some of those innovations, particularly the use of ‘Madge’, created community boundaries based on insider knowledge and conventions they were ultimately harmless in intent. Although there were very rare and fleeting accusations of sexual perversion in the use of the Madge image (only twice in the period of observation to be exact), such comments and the subsequent rebuttals are symptomatic of key moments when the norms and values of the community at large are brought into question and either reinforced or realigned. The now long-standing ritual use of dancing ‘Madge’ gif images was always defended with a sense of genuine pride in the quirky backstory that explained her presence on the forums and how a familiarity with this narrative was indicative of one’s place within the community at large and how relationships had been formed with key figures from its history. Any concerns over the use of Madge were never vociferous enough to bring the existence of the ritual into question, despite the potentially sexualised and sexist reading of such images. However, another of the key rituals, which originated from holycustard’s sense of humour and style of match-day coverage, came under much closer scrutiny following developments in football at the start of the 2013/14 season.

A campaign launched early in the season, by gay rights charity Stonewall and bookmakers Paddy Power, encouraged everyone in the sport to get 'Right Behind Gay Players'. Together, they sent all professional clubs in the English league system rainbow coloured laces in the hope that players would visibly demonstrate their support to the cause. This formed part of wider discourse within the game at the time, which was increasingly critical of fan abuse and intolerance of homosexuality in football and was in the build up to the aforementioned Parliamentary inquiry.

The campaign was discussed at length by the members of Clarets Mad. The risqué nature and purpose of the campaign's title was commented on initially, with it being confused as a mistake or considered naïve by some, whilst others felt it was a valuable attempt to tackle homophobic abuse by engaging fans directly and tackling some of the abuse in a direct manner. This initial discussion was, however, quickly followed up by a succession of other puns or flippant posts which were typical of the homophobic attitudes and remarks that were readily accepted by many within the forum;

"Reach around the prejudice."

(BadTaste, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13 – 1 like)

"let's take it to the extreme and all dress up as members of the village people! That" be enough to ram (no pun intended) the stereotypes home, eh?"

(Cahill4England, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13 – 2 likes)

"I didn't realise that the campaign name was purposeful. Fair enough. It still sounds crap though. To get the ball rolling (no pun intended, again) in the battle against this kind of bigotry, we need a few players to reveal that they are gay, don't we?"

(Cahill4England, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

"It's just a load of huffing and puffing about sod all to me."

(BranchDMF, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', post 11, 16/09/13)

"Viz have been supporting it for years with their Up The Arse Corner."

(realitysmasher, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

*"This discussion is already a right pain in the a**e"*

(Versatilegraham, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

Whilst such remarks are not on par with the kind of intensely hateful abuse directed at Sol Campbell, which Caudwell (2011) observed in stadiums, they do serve to trivialise homosexuals and their experiences. They are textual forms of the audible and corporeal practises observed in football stadia by Caudwell; they refer to and replicate stereotypes regarding homosexuality and are derisory in nature, if not intensely hateful.

Following such remarks, however, was an intriguing debate about sexuality, the sexuality of footballers, the purpose and validity of campaigns such as this in the game, and the way in which homophobia compares to other forms of prejudice that are less accepted in the game (in particular, racism). A few contributors expressed their belief that they felt there was no need for the measures being advocated by Stonewall and other organisations, with the use of puns or not, as nobody in football was bothered about gay players any more. Several others, however, delved further into the culture of the sport and, in support of the campaign, felt that targeting the 'macho' world of professional football was the perfect way to address the issue of homophobia. 'Abbot_Claret' and 'PulpFaction' were particularly keen to emphasise that the masculine basis of football, the tribal nature of fans and the potential abuse gay players would receive from fans and fellow professionals was too much for them to face. These were the key reasons why almost all gay players (and fans) remained closeted. They pointed out that, as some of the early contributions to the discussion suggest, the open articulation of jokes and puns related to homosexuality within the discussion thread actively contributed to a culture within football that is not tolerant at all;

"My opinion is that homosexual players are terrified about "coming out" because they know that their lives will be made difficult on the terraces and via social media platforms by hateful supporters who express deeply personal vitriol in the name "support" for their chosen club. It was just like the era of racist shouting from the terraces, and even from players on the pitch, the same would happen to gay players. Who can blame homosexual players for wanting to remain closeted when the abuse they'd suffer is so obvious?"

We need to work together in making a football that facilitates people being able to watch or play irrespective of sexuality, race, religion, gender, etc.

Unfortunately, as quite a few of the contributors to this discussion have shown, we have much to do in order to educate those who see

homosexuality as a perversion or disease, something which will, apparently, corrupt our children. It's true that many are just sniggerers who wield jokes about bums because they are unable to handle discussions about the real issues here. However, I still think there are plenty of people who would express vile sentiments and think nothing of abusing gay footballers at Turf Moor all under the pretence of supporting Burnley FC."

(PulpFaction, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 17/09/13 – 3 likes)

Once the discussion had opened up and became more constructive and serious in tone, the thread was used by one member to launch an attack on the campaign and anti-homophobia agendas at large. The comments sparked a divisive debate over the campaign and homophobia in general that characterised the rest of the thread. Many of the comments centred on a perceived conspiracy to promote homosexuality in British society;

"What next? Are we go start teaching our kids to associate rainbows with homosexuality?."

(cheapwine, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

"This is total cultural fascism, here. If you don't like the promotion of homosexuality then you have got a small mind, you've got an actual fear of people, you're mentally ill, your brain needs to be reprogrammed."

(cheapwine, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

"Seizing upon the rainbow colours and saying they represent homosexuality is cultural theft, it is promoting your agenda through false affiliation, as such, manipulating people and their minds by forcing them to think specific things when they see the rainbow. There is nothing gay about rainbows or those colours."

(cheapwine, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

Those in support of the campaign reacted to cheapwine's contribution with scorn, albeit with an unfortunate reliance upon stereotypes and prejudices of their own when they chose to focus on the 'backward' and 'outdated' nature of his remarks;

"You are a dinosaur"

(Papershop, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

"Let's hope people like you are literally dying out and as with almost every new generation, society evolves a few steps as the population progresses from what came before it. That'll mean we are more likely

to see past the ridiculous prejudices and differences that the likes of you can't."

(Backwordz, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

Some, were, however, supportive of cheapwine and questioned the validity of 'promoting homosexuality';

"Tolerance is about accepting stuff, even if you do not agree with it. That's not what Stonewall are after - they want people to accept homosexuality as a desirable lifestyle, when it's no different from numerous other approaches to life such as heterosexual monogamy, bisexuality, bigamy, adultery, and shaggin' your brother's wife like our good friend Ryan Giggs. If you don't accept what they want, you're obviously homophobic."

(Canon1300, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13 – 1 like)

Cheapwine expanded on his thoughts later in the thread, suggesting that;

"The Government are helping this minority group in their desire to form a cultural elite, under the misguided and false banner of 'protecting human rights'. This way they are paying lip service to human rights, making them look great in the media while stabbing the rest of the country in the back. It is fascism under the guise of democracy, something some members of this message board are oblivious to."

"Middleclass dogooders help the minority social group and the government. How? Because of their self indulgent self congratulation. Ironically, they think they are the open-minded! They get to feel good about human rights while finding another excuse to patronise and indoctrinate the masses, who need apparently need reeducating."

"Paranoia or a conspiracy? I don't think so"

(cheapwine, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13)

And also;

"If you teach your kids that a rainbow flag means gay, that will be seared into their mind so that if they ever see a rainbow, whether they like it or not they will automatically make that false association. You won't give them a choice as they believe adults and trust our teachings. So now crayons are gay. Colourful toys are gay. This is just madness, to pass on to our kids such ways of thinking"

"The rainbow flag has nothing to do with the whole spectrum of sexuality or humanity. The idea of there even being a sexual banner is questionable. It sends out a terrible message to people that anything sexual goes, goes. It's all fine and acceptable. I don't think it is..."

(cheapwine, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13 – 2 likes)

This is in tune with several other posts which conflate homosexuality with other forms of sexual activity. At the distasteful end of the spectrum, it's compared to necrophilia, paedophilia and incest. At the bizarre end of the spectrum, promotion of homosexuality is seen alongside the legitimising of infidelity (and is seen to somehow sanction the actions of Ryan Giggs, who was infamously reported to have had an affair with his brother's wife). Perhaps more typical is the way fans coalesced homosexuality with the increasing sexualisation of society on the whole, as evidenced by the passionate outpouring from 'MajorClaret';

"To me, the rainbow laces campaign is a crap idea. The notion of a "rainbow flag" for homosexuality is also cringeworthy. It feels, ironically, aggressive, militaristic and goes against any legitimate claims they have for inclusiveness and can actually compromise their calls for equality.

*What really f**ks me off about the whole gay rights thing is that it has legitimised disgusting behaviours. People, for some reason, think it is OK to be openly sexual in public. What's worse is that if you don't like these vile displays, you're somehow backwards and narrow minded. That's simply not on.*

I do not want to see you snogging in the streets. I do not want to see you rubbing up against each other in public, like bloody teenagers. I do not want the local park to become a no-go zone to decent members of society in the misguided name of 'equality', because you have sexualised it."

(MajorClaret, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', 16/09/13 – 2 likes)

It is interesting to note that, although some very strong opinions were put forward and there was a clear dislike for what was perceived as a promotion of homosexuality in society at large, the outright abuse of homosexuals and use of pejorative terms was not witnessed during the discussion at all. Whilst people contributed in support of the campaign or voiced their opposition to it, the unacceptability of hateful and/or abusive remarks was acknowledged by the community members at large. In general, those who opposed the campaign and voiced their concerns about the promotion of homosexuality were not engaging in jokes or puns about homosexuals – they were acutely aware that this would, potentially, have undermined their position and the points they were trying to make. Whilst it must be said that those puns and flippant remarks about

homosexuality were not challenged by community *members*, such contributions were, nonetheless, made by forum *users* whose reputation and identity with the community at large was not being put on the line as a result of their conduct within the discussion. For those members of the forum's community who had an online identity within the forum itself and whose contributions to the community formed a significant part of their fandom, the views they expressed in opposition Stonewall campaign were conducted with this in mind.

Their respect for the community at large and adherence to the community's values is evident here. One of the many unhelpful premises that underpins academic conceptualisations of community is that they view members in a homogenous manner; whereby the actions and perceptions of the community's membership are uniform, positive and help it to function. This is, however, clearly too simplistic and idealistic. Within any community, local or online, conflict and divergent opinions are likely to occur. It is through the analysis of these conflicts and the attempt to resolve them that some of the binding values and norms of the community can be detected. Here, understandings of homosexuality and tolerance of it vary between members. However, community members do acknowledge that debates over prejudice of any kind are sensitive, that contributions must be constructive when discussing such issues, and that abuse of groups within society is not acceptable.

The Racism Comparison

Discussions comparing homophobia to racism emerged in the debate and, interestingly enough, focused on black people and terms which are used to be offensive to black people, rather than Asians. Considering the context of the town at large, this in itself is rather fascinating. It relates to the extent to which certain hateful terms are perceived as being more/less acceptable than others. Whilst 'nigger' was used here in a purely objective and non-abusive manner (always accompanied by quotation marks to distance the author from actual use of the word), to illustrate the kind of term that is no-longer acceptable in the game and to highlight that at one time it was not considered an issue by many in football, no one contributes 'paki' or other slang terms for the Asian population. This is also an indication of how important or severe a type of abuse

is to a group of people. Here, the willingness to use some offensive terms above others suggests that racism towards black people and homophobia is not considered as damaging or insensitive as that towards the local Asian population.

It is important to ask why, at this juncture, as it is highly revealing about the norms and values of the online community and also the way in which members acknowledge the boundaries of what is and what is not acceptable to discuss. Considering the recent political history of Burnley (the town as a whole), and that the club's fans have been criticised for racist chanting about Asian people, on the face of it you would expect the comparison between homophobia and racism to draw upon examples pertinent to the local area. However, many of the contributors to this thread posted in the knowledge that raising local racial politics specifically and using terms which have brought the town, club and fans into disrepute, would more than likely result in the closure of the discussion by forum staff or attract comments from those who had political motives irrelevant to the overall discussion. Perhaps, also, they avoided using those terms that are likely to offend fellow community members and cause upset or distress which, again considering the wider political landscape of Burnley, is likely to centre on abuse of the Asian population and/or refer to racial divides which have dogged the town (and others in Lancashire) following increased migration in the 1950s (Peach, 2006; Clarke, 2001).

Allied to this is the fact that many forum members, as we have noted, were happy to make jokes and reiterate puns on homosexuality. It is purely hypothetical to suggest this, but had there been an equivalent thread which touched upon racism rather than homophobia, it is highly doubtful that those same members would have made the same kind of jokey references to racial stereotypes and inequality. Over the course of this thread, for example, where racism was compared to homophobia throughout, no one contributes with a joke or pun relating to race at all, yet those relating to sexuality were commonplace.

Consequences for the forum

As we explored in chapter four, the most popular and active of the reoccurring and ritualistic threads on Clarets Mad is the match-day discussion, where fans converge before, during and after the match in order to keep up-to-date with the score and discuss on-going developments. One of the curious features of such threads is that the opposition team are commonly referred to as 'puffs' – a purposefully misspelt epithet which is added to the names of opposition players as well as the club itself. For instance, in the 2013/14 season, title threads such as 'Burnley vs Brumpuffs' (aka Birmingham City FC) and 'Burnley vs Charlton PatheticPuffs' (aka Charlton Athletic FC) were typical, as was some of the match coverage such as 'Trippier (Kieran Tripper, of Burnley FC) fouls puff. Puff takes free-kick' and 'MachedaPuff (Frederico Macheda, of Doncaster Rovers) is injured after Mee (Ben Mee, of Burnley) sorts him'.

This ritual is almost as old as the forum itself and is a lasting legacy of the first wave of match-day threads which were started by forum member 'holycustard'. His dedicated coverage of match-day developments was delivered in a unique and humorous manner lauded by many of the threads regular users. The popularity of the coverage and the function it served for the community as a whole ensured that match-day threads were amongst the most popular over the course of a season, attracting a significant number of contributors (both community members and users) and lurkers alike. Referring to the opposition as 'puffs' was part of holycustard's repertoire and consistent use of the term has now led to it being considered a tradition within the forums, one that has been adopted by several community members and forum users, even though holycustard himself has rarely initiated such threads and only sporadically involved himself in them since the 2011/12 season.

The term is clearly used in a light-hearted way, as signified by the purposefully misspelt version that is constantly re-iterated. Having been involved in match-day threads consistently for a number of years, the author cannot recall a single instance when it was used intentionally in a hateful or abusive way towards homosexuals, although it is used in a derogatory manner. It is also the case that many of those who use the term or encounter it on match-days are unaware of

its origin and original intentions on the forum, although some of the main protagonists here (such as IanMcL and Subbuteo07) have been members of the forum for most, if not all, of its existence. That said, the term 'puff' has been used as a homophobic insult in recent history and, whatever spelling has been adopted, its hateful essence and damaging impact has been explored in several studies of homophobia in the British education system (Rivers, 1995 & 2011; Trotter, 2006)

However, there are two notable issues arising from this community ritual. The first is how it was perceived in the wake of the 'Hate in the beautiful game?' discussion thread and the second is the way in which the ritual represents and helps to sustain a culture of homophobia in the sport.

At various stages of the 'Hate in the beautiful game?' debate, community members began to refer to the 'puff' ritual and question whether or not it would be able to continue in the wake of a campaign to tackle homophobia. This in itself is interesting, as it signifies that – for several members – the use of 'puffs' was distasteful to themselves, or that it could be construed as offensive to homosexual supporters. Some raised a genuine objection to the unquestioned adoption of 'puffs', whilst others were more sarcastic in their contributions, effectively questioning whether the rainbow laces idea and Right Behind Gay Footballers campaign would mean that, as a community, members would have to go as far as to stop using the term 'puffs' even though it was (to them) perfectly harmless.

"Could this be the end of holycustard's reports?"
(Subbuteo07, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', post 34, 17/09/13)

Another member's post signifies his objection to the term, but also, as a long-standing community member, his awareness that it has been used for a long time within the forum and that its place in match-day threads is held dear by many;

"Dare I suggest that we make a start on this board by not referring to the opposition as puffs?"
(BranchDMF, 'Hate in the beautiful game?', post 95, 17/09/13 – 2 likes)

The first match after the 'Hate in the beautiful game?' debate was the following day, a home fixture against Birmingham City. Empowered, perhaps, by the growing movement against homophobia in sport and the extensive debate on Clarets Mad itself, 'Walton' reacted strongly to use of 'Brumpuffs' to describe the evening's opposition. He suggested that it was;

"Hugely disappointing that at the outset of a football-wide attempt to stamp out homophobia in the game, people continue using the cretinous 'puffs' when referring to another team

*Grow the **** up IanMcL".*

(Walton, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 26, 17/09/13)

Many of the forum members reacted in a dismissive manner to Walton's outburst;

"He didn't call them cretinous puffs. Read it again."

(Imsmiling, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 33, 17/09/13)

"Walton, it's tradition, started by the holy one. There's no malice. Stop being so anal (oops!)."

(ClubClaret, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 30, 17/09/13 – 8 likes)

"Walton needs to grow up. PC gone mad. If it offends you don't read the thread."

(Subbuteo07, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 52, 17/09/13)

"Walton knows we are only pretending. Birmingham are gay though ☺"

(holycustard, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 67, 17/09/13)

"Can't believe people on this board. Stop getting offended, you big puffs. :zzz:"

(Committedclaret, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 87, 17/09/13)

The originator of the thread, IanMcL, who is arguably the most active contributor to match-day threads in the absence of holycustard, also defended his use of the word and attempted to distance it from any form of abuse;

"Spade's statement re the use of 'puffs' is accurate. No malice – more lightweights and we are certainly not homophobic. Up the Clarets."

(IanMcL, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 37, 17/09/13)

"Puff = powder puff. Lightweights, etc. Nothing to do with homophobia, let's move on."

(IanMcL, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 56, 17/09/13 – 6 likes)

Of course, not everyone was convinced;

"That's a tenuous defence of an unnecessarily ambiguous insult".

(Backwordz, 'Mighty Clarets vs Brumpuffs', post 58, 17/09/13)

A few more jibes are aimed at Walton and holycustard deliberately tries to provoke him further by referring to him as a puff, directly. Neither of the next two match-day threads included 'puffs' in their title, against Nottingham Forest and Leeds United, although 'puffs' was used to describe players in the thread itself and the furore that characterised the match-day thread against Birmingham City was clearly in the minds of community members, as CaspertheClaret signified in his opening post for the match against Leeds;

"Walton, hope you haven't got a problem with the title thread".

(Backwordz, 'Yarkshire gets vs Burnley, post 1, 21/09/13)

Since the season in question and the debates surrounding homophobia and, more directly, the use of the term 'puffs' within the match-day thread, the term is now no longer in common usage. Those threads have led to a realignment of fan practises online resulting from community members discussing and debating topical issues within the game which have, in turn, changed the norms and values of the collective too. Although abusive remarks about homosexuals were always absent, as their unacceptability was clearly understood by the community's members, the use of flippant remarks and pejorative terms which serve to reinforce stereotypes about homosexual men do persist. That said, when the use of a recurring and ambiguous term was challenged because of its potentially offensive meaning, its status was re-negotiated and the community at large quickly adapted their practises, despite considerable resistance, in order to uphold their inclusive values and their collective desire to avoid offending forum users and community members alike.

“He Tweets what he Wants...”: The Andre Gray Controversy, August 2016.

As we have seen, the established community norms and values are often brought to the fore and tested when discussion threads invite diverse, contrasting opinions and a broader range of contributors beyond just the core members that constitute an online community. In football forums, controversial results, incidents, and transfers often incite lengthy and sometimes divisive debates that attract contributions from sporadic posters or even those lurkers who rarely contribute to the discussions that are typical of fan forums, if at all. It is often the case that community norms and values are stretched to their limits or challenged, as contributions to the discussion threads from peripheral forum ‘users’, rather than most of the community members, can breach established notions of acceptable conduct and go against the norms and expectations of the community that exists there.

For some such fans, their opinions on several issues and values may differ, clearly, from the core community members that reside within an online forum, and thus they remain peripheral to that community and contribute infrequently, rarely or not at all to discussions because of the apparent disparity between them. However, moments of controversy, in particular, present opportunities for such fans to express themselves, and opinions which would, typically, elicit derision from regular contributors. That is particularly true when there is some support for their viewpoints among the regular contributors, as the following example suggests.

One of the most controversial incidents related to Burnley Football Club, during the period of observation for this study, concerned the discovery of comments made by striker Andre Gray following a match against Liverpool in August 2016. Against expectations, Burnley defeated Liverpool by two goals to nil in a match where Andre Gray scored, and starred, as Burnley secured their first win of the season. Shortly after the match, Andre Gray’s name began ‘trending’¹⁷ on social media site Twitter. Rather than a celebration of his sporting achievement, the

¹⁷ Trending on Twitter occurs when a term is frequently repeated by Twitter users who adopt a hashtag (#) to draw attention to a topic. The term ‘trends’ when it becomes one of the most frequently used hashtags on Twitter over the preceding 24 hours.

trending related to offensive tweets made by Andre Gray in 2012 which has been discovered by a Liverpool fan who had been reading through his Twitter profile during the game. The tweets received almost immediate and widespread media attention and condemnation.

Alongside sexist and racist comments that were made, the tweets which inspired the greatest degree of scrutiny and criticism were those of a homophobic nature. Some of the tweets were considered to be offensive as a result of the inferred acceptance of violence towards gay men and the way that they directly attacked homosexuals rather than being homophobic 'in passing', or flippant in nature. Among the tweets, Gray had written;

"Ladies stop dressin ur sons as women in heels and makeup..Do you want him to end up like #PeteBurns #Faggot"
(Andre Gray, Twitter, 28/01/12)

"Is it me or are there gays everywhere? #burn #die #makesmesick"
(Andre Gray, Twitter, 09/01/12)

Of course, it would be inaccurate to suggest that there was as neat a divide as community members on one side, against homophobia, versus non-community members who questioned the anti-homophobia agenda in sport or were homophobic themselves. Debate between community members was also rife and there were clear disagreements over the nature of Andre Gray's tweets, the public reaction to it and, later on, the punishment that was given to him. This debate and, at times, conflict, was typical of discussions regarding homosexuality and similar in nature to the previous discussion of the Rainbow Laces Campaign. Responding to a community member who shared a link to an article written for Hiskind.com, an online gay magazine, which condemned the abuse and called for action against homophobia in football, some community members located the problem with the readers, rather than the writer, of the tweets in question;

"I read that piece from hiskind.com yesterday and felt that it was just not needed."

I'm not making excuses for Andre's comments on twitter, because there aren't any. That said, they were from four years ago, not now, so I'm not sure they are really relevant anymore. Lots of people say

*stupid things every day on social media. I find it weird that **people look to be** offended all the time, by something that was said so long ago."*

(DrPepper, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', p22/08/16 – my emphasis)

Here, a community member is separating the issue of homophobia from Andre Gray by questioning the offensiveness of the tweets in two ways. Firstly, as many other remarks on the thread allude to, several fans argued that the tweets are not offensive in themselves, but the controversy over them is representative of a wider problem in society. It was not uncommon for fans to refer to a contemporary discourse which derides those who take offence over the use of pejorative terms as symptomatic of a 'snowflake' generation; itself, a derogatory term suggesting the current generation of young adults lack emotional resilience, have an inflated sense of entitlement to express their views, and are likely to take offence at almost anything as they are unable to cope with opinions which conflict with their own;

"How far back in history do we go in order to dig up the things people have said? Are we genuinely offended by something things we didn't even see in the first place and that we've been unaware of for four whole years?! Gray just needs to do a video reiterating what he said in the official comments made yesterday. That will suffice."

(brunshawroad, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"What Gray tweeted all those years ago was wrong, but he has apologised that should be the end of it. To some, an apology will never be enough and they will try to get more from this that they deserve, but the hiskind article is just crap. Why? It's written in that peacock, centre of attention mode that does nothing to add to the debate in a constructive way"

(raabwest, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"Ooo, look, someone wrote something on twitter. I'm so offended! Even though I didn't even see the comments when they were made and know nothing about it, I'm still so offended."

"Mockrage is the term to describe this, and it's becoming an increasing problem these days"

(DrPepper, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

The suggestion in each of the forum posts above is that the offensiveness of the comments made by Andre Gray is being purposefully exaggerated; whilst many acknowledge that the tweets were of poor taste, they felt that an apology should

be enough from Gray to ensure the issue goes no further and anyone claiming offence is merely doing so to further their own agenda.

In addition, the timing of the tweets is also used to distance Andre Gray from accusations of homophobia. Both fans on the forum and journalists in the national media at large referred to Gray's 'historical tweets' and there was a persistent emphasis throughout forum discussions that these views were expressed by a different incarnation of Andre Gray, who also played for a different club at the time. Much was made of Gray's past and his prior connections with gang culture in his home town of Wolverhampton, as well as his criminal record. Just as Gray himself remarked, in his public statement shortly after the tweets were discovered, fans were keen to point to the fact that the views expressed then are not representative of his current views and that he had worked hard to better himself as a person in recent years. The tweets were written when he was an amateur player at Hinckley United, for a private rather than public audience;

"There's really no excuse for what Andre tweeted but it was at a bad point in his life where he was under the influence of gang culture and was probably repeating a lot of the vile comments used within that just to gain acceptance. Peer pressure is an important thing to consider here. We all come from different circumstances and are influenced by what's around us in different ways."

(AustinTXClaret, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"The reaction to Andre's comments is shocking! He's a young man, one whose strength should be celebrated, not condemned. He has managed to turn his life around, yet the uncivilized society we live in choses to harass him and publicly hang him for comments he made when he was but a boy. Shameful."

(ClubClaret, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

Overwhelmingly, the posts on numerous discussion threads regarding Andre Gray's tweets attempt to play down the severity of what the player had written; few posters devoted attention to the underlying problems regarding homophobia in football and those that did were not given the opportunity to debate the potential harm and consequences of Andre Gray's comments and the prejudice in the game that they represent. However, there were a small number of community members that did suggest that Andre Gray should do more to prove

that he has changed and make a more committed attempt to demonstrate his remorse;

"The comments Andre made on are disgraceful. They might well be from a long time ago, when Gray was less mature and he has since moved in totally different social circles, but the seriousness of the situation warrants more than just a public declaration - which was clearly formulated by our own media department and possibly lawyers. It's not even a proper apology, is it? 'sorry if you were offended' is simply not enough. Andre needs to show his regret through his actions, and one way to do that is to take an active lead in the fight against homophobia in football. The statement put out by the club itself was also rather lame.

I'm a firm believer in second chances and giving people the opportunity to change. But if Andre really has, he has to demonstrate it to the wider world. Actions speak louder than words."
(SlyMarbo, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"Gray shouldn't be MADE to go on the course, but a word in his ear from someone close to him should be:

"Look Andre, you've made such a turnaround in your life from then to now, both as a footballer and as a person - if you want (not you should) this could be an opportunity to champion the cause for other people who are in those circumstances you grew up in right now."

That would turn the situation from something we have treated with minimal effort to turning a bad story and making it into a really positive one. If Gray has come back from that dark place, surely he should want others to do the same, not just being (or being pressured into being) a homophobe and anything else he may have been. He should want to be that example of what you can be.

Whether he likes it or not he is in the public eye now as a Premier League footballer and he can either carry on like he is, good for him and I'm happy he's turned around his life - or he can champion the cause for others. That depends on his personality. He shouldn't be forced to, but you would think he'd maybe want to?"
(ClaretGeoff, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

However, remarks such as these, although problematic themselves in the way that they associate gang culture and poverty as the cause of homophobia, were overwhelmed by numerous replies which downplayed Gray's responsibility to go beyond his initial apologetic statement;

"Whether he is sincere or not, sending him off to some forced re-education programme is not going to make him change his mind anyway, is it?"

(Operahouseclaret, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"Is his apology sincere? I honestly don't know. However, I have no reason to question his word. Whilst he has been at Burnley he has not stepped out of line once and his behaviour suggests he is no longer the little shit he once was. Until he messes up I will take him at his word and believe the sincerity of his apology."

(Backwordz, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"The comments he made on twitter were made ages ago. He has apologised for making them and that should be the end of it. He doesn't have to prove anything and shouldn't be forced to do so."

(DrPepper, 'Andre Gray', 22/08/16)

"Sure this shows that all the time and money invested into such campaigns has been shown to work, right? In this case, we have a man who expressed some naïve and hateful remarks, but has now been educated and made more aware? In my opinion, fighting homophobia is not really his responsibility nor should he have to prove anything to others in this regard."

(Proudclaret1882, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"Are we really expecting Andre Gray to go to a training session with Stonewall and then become the face of the rainbow laces campaign? No one would buy that and would see past the fact it's all about parading in front of the media anyway."

(OooMarney, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

The above comments and debates about the extent of Gray's sincerity within his apology and responsibility to challenging homophobia in football are revealing in several ways, which we shall address in turn. Firstly, they highlight some of the causes of continuing homophobia in the sport; secondly, the way in which online community norms, values and boundaries are redrawn over specific issues and; finally, how the majority of both community members and users have such a strong identification with the team and its key players that the focus on key topics and the debates within them centre on the impact it has on the team/player specifically, rather than the issue at large, as the discussion posts in this section suggest.

At the time of the tweets emerging, I too was concerned about the impact this would have on the team's progress and, when the four-match ban was announced, wondered why the club was also being punished for the actions of a

player many years before he signed for them. This, if anything, was frustration; just when it seemed as though the fruits of Burnley FC's labour were there to be picked, an unforeseen drama emerges which potentially undoes so much work the club has done to rid itself of a reputation that had been blighted by the homophobic chanting of fans at Brighton, as well as an association with the racial politics of the local area in the early 2000s.

More broadly, I was concerned about the town's reputation too. As I identify so strongly with the town myself, I felt this on a personal level. Conversations with strangers about where I was from had only just recently stopped inspiring the question 'oh, isn't that the town full of BNP voters?' or, worse, 'isn't there a big problem with racism there?'. Following this incident, and the BBC documentary, was homophobia the next stick with which the people of Burnley would be beaten? That said, the magnitude of such concerns was kept in check by the issue at large. Because of the rising profile of the club, Andre Gray himself, and the fact that this occurred in the Premier League, there was an opportunity to use this moment to openly discuss homophobia and hopefully further people's understanding of the problem within football. I could only hope, at the time, that the harm this caused the town and its football club was short-lived, and that the gains made from open discussions of homosexuality and homophobia were long lasting.

Inclusive Masculinities?

The experiences of observing Clarets Mad and UptheClarets, over the last six years, and subsequent analysis of specific discussion threads and the context of them has provided both support and also some contradictions to the findings of Anderson (2009), Cashmore and Cleland (2012) and Macgrath and Anderson (2017). An analysis of these discussion threads suggests that rather than having an equal status, recently emerging inclusive masculinities are not equal to traditional masculinity, as Anderson (2009) and others have suggested, and that the latter is still used extensively as a means to acquiring masculine capital in football fan culture.

That is not to say that homophobic remarks do not get challenged by some online community members, as this has been observed on numerous occasions. Nor does the data collected from that period of observation suggest that the severity and extent of homophobia in football is not declining in comparison to the 1980s, as at no stage did discussions come close to replicating the homophobia outlined by Anderson. However, as several of the previously cited experts concerning the Andre Gray controversy suggest, there is still a widespread tendency to dismiss the issue of homophobia within the sport and deflect attention away from homophobia itself by persistently focusing on the impact controversies like this have on the club and its players. This adds to the scale for analysing homophobic discourse presented by McCormack (2011). McCormack argues that the nature and severity of language used about homosexuality can be assessed on a sliding scale from pro-gay discourse, where there is a deliberate attempt to support homosexuality, to homophobic, where there is an equally conscious attempt to abuse, degrade and denigrate homosexuals (for a further analysis. see Cleland, 2013). In the specific context of the football fans studied within this research, both extremities of McCormack's scale were rarely observed and, if anything, the vocal expression of support for homosexuality or action against homophobia in the sport was observed more frequently than deleterious abuse.

However, an analysis of the thread contributions surrounding the Andre Gray controversy, among others, demonstrate that the nature of discussions relating to sexuality were underpinned by traditional notions of masculinity and that the acquisition of masculine capital was on the basis of a traditional understanding of masculinity underpinned by heteronormativity. Whilst the fans themselves may not have tweeted calls for homosexuals to be burned, or expressed their disgust at the existence of homosexuality, the willingness of most fans to accept such latent forms of homophobia as merely part of a player's past, or the ease with which they dismiss such attitudes as being part of a minor or debased subculture, demonstrates a degree of insensitivity towards and lack of empathy with the inequality experienced by homosexuals.

For example, many fans were critical of the club and for not having personnel or policies in place to deal with this before it became a controversial issue;

"I would agree that people at the club need skills like foresight and contingency planning. It doesn't take a genius to be work out that the club should mitigate against adverse publicity. They are meant to do extensive background checks on expensive new signings, surely part of that is a sweep of their public utterances, and if those people are deemed to have changed and are signed up, ask them to delete anything incriminating straight away?"

However, the communications team at the Turf not being the brightest bulbs in the box is hardly new. They do a decent friendly job but someone like Baldwin should dictate this kind of thing to them to make sure all boxes are ticked. Still a storm in a teacup though."
(RumblowsCup, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"I'll add myself to the list of people who are utterly gobsmacked that nobody at the club monitors employees' social media accounts. It's such an obvious thing to do. If only the club had a media manager who might be expected to realise this and take responsibility for such matters."
(Shezhad, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"If he had a PR man don't you think the first thing he'd have said was "give me your social media accounts"?"
(Backwordz, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

Once again, none of the above contributions are directly *abusive* towards homosexuals in any way. They are all, however, focused on the damaged impact homophobic abuse has on the football club and its reputation. Such responses demonstrate a lack of genuine inclusion of alternative masculinities. The contributions call for the *control* and *deletion* of potentially offensive views expressed by the club's players and staff. These are not indicative of inclusive masculinities at all; the discourse above is not concerned with the severity of the tweets and the offense they may cause, nor the potentially damaging impact this might have on the gay community, fans or players. This adds to the argument put forward by Cauldwell (2011: 135) that 'men's sexualities...are produced through a combination of discourse, discursive regimes and embodied materiality'. Although her own study focuses on the direct, explicit, visual and audible references to homosexuality within football stadiums, it is possible to analyse the textual contributions on football forums to explore the implicit and ingrained hierarchy of sexualities that exists within football fandom. This allows us to see, in turn, the multifarious forms of homophobia within the game rather than focusing on the fleeting, shocking and ephemeral instances of direct abuse.

The importance of the issue is also dismissed when compared to other controversies or even the outcome of the football match itself;

"as a wee footnote, I really believe his and Sam's goals should be contenders for goal of the season. Gray sweeping past their defenders was breath-taking, to finish with such precision was beautiful. Cancels out twitter for me."

(Disneyduck, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

"It's totally political correctness gone mad. Andre has given a version of what he tweeted, he has now apologised and so we should move on. In Northern Ireland there are members of the IRA and other groups who have murdered their rivals, apologised and they've been pardoned. In comparison, this is a trivial event."

(RumblowsCup, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

By placing the importance of the issue against the outcome of the game (and unfavourably, too) comments such as these, like the flippant jokes referring to gay stereotypes which are commonplace in threads about homosexuality and homophobia, serve to trivialise the severity of sexuality issues in the sport and perpetuate the inequalities that homosexuals encounter. The following excerpts from the Andre Gray discussion thread support this further. Here, the commonplace argument that issues regarding sexuality are caused by homosexuals themselves is iterated;

"Yes, what you are saying is right. However, I fail to see why Burnley should face the uncertainty of being punished too. The club had nothing to do with the tweets and were not employing the accused at the time they were made, over three years ago."

"It's my opinion that gay players need to lead the change here and start taking a more active role. Whilst they continue to be closeted and refuse to 'come out', then football will just stay the same with its attitudes towards gays. In rugby it's different. There's that flamboyant ref who is open about his sexuality and no one takes a second look...they just don't care about such things"

(Operahouseclaret, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

*"Absolutely. In Rugby League, the captain of Batley revealed his sexuality last year and it didn't cause a big controversy at all. In fact, it passed with little comment. He's an absolute hero around the town and something like his sexuality isn't going to undermine that. We need a top footballer to confirm that he is homosexual. **** **

referring to you!"

(OooMarney, 'Andre's in a spot of bother', 22/08/16)

Discussion threads regarding sexuality occur on a frequent basis, and were particularly common in the football season in question. Although, as a topic of conversation, sexuality was at a height around the time of the Andre Gray tweet scandal, there have been numerous other related discussions. Among them, the homophobic chanting of supporters, the 50th anniversary of the decriminalisation of homosexuality and even the potential of starting a LGBT Burnley supporters' group. The last of these is highly revealing about the norms and values of a large section of the community. Similarly, the contributions of several community members collectively bring into question the applicability of Anderson's inclusive masculinity thesis in the context of football fandom. Shortly after a discussion thread criticising Burnley supporters who attended the opening game of the season away at Chelsea, for engaging in the oft sung 'Chelsea Rent Boys' chant, one community member began a thread asking for assistance and opinion over the establishing of an LGBT supporters' group;

"I'm bisexual and I struggle to believe I'm the only gay fan of the club!

After some of the comments that were made on various discussion posts, I've decided that I am going to do some research into the viability of setting up a supporters' club for LGBTQ fans. It's just an idea right now and as much as I'd love there to be a club like this, I'm not sure a supporters club of just one would be a lot of fun!

I have created survey – it's short and sweet but it'd be great if you had the time to help me out and complete it. And please be nice – I've got feelings too. Don't fill it in with anything offensive, nasty or homophobic.

*https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/******
(AngelicaRR, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

The poster received some short and rather dismissive responses almost immediately ("oh no, not this AGAIN"), but the lengthier replies were indicative of the limited degree of inclusion experienced by gay fans of the club by the hetero-malestream community at large;

"This is summat I've never really got my head around....

Why on earth would you create a group that actively separates you from the rest of us, with the aim of getting the same treatment as those who don't join your group? If you joined the rest of us, would you not just be treated the same anyway?"
(UndoubtableClaret, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"This idea just furthers any divide.

If you do not want to blend in with the rest of society, by all means, crack on with your initiative.

However, if you do, you can't claim to be surprised with subsequent problems – particularly remarks from less tolerant and enlightened subjects."
(Boogieknights, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"Best wishes for your survey but...

WHY do you feel the need to express your sexuality so openly? I don't go about the place shouting out about the fact that I'm straight or trying to set up splinter groups for hetero Clarets.

Unless I'm mistaken, there are tons of LGBT groups. Why form yet another one?"
(EldersElder, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"People are not completely behind this because it is not that obvious what the point is, apart from homosexuals trying to promote their sexual preferences. (I genuinely hope I have worded that OK, I have no intention of causing upset, I'm just trying to add to the discussion here)."
(Olssonisacheat, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"Like O'BrienClaret says we are all Burnley fans and only a minority would see you as different in a negative way. I would argue that's a good thing. I suggest you avoid turning this into yet another campaign, or we'll have to accuse you of being a southerner!"
(BurningBeard, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

It is evident within such replies that alternative masculinities are not regarded as equal to traditional masculinity by the fans in question. Even those community members whose comments can be construed as indications that they are tolerant of homosexual fans repeat a similar message; that the inclusion of gay fans is on the basis of assimilation and avoidance of their sexuality, not a genuine acceptance of difference and diversity. To repeat the above contributions, it is by 'blending in' to the dominant normative behaviours of the

crowd that gay fans can find a degree of equality and acceptance. Highlighting, or 'promoting', your sexuality and distinguishing oneself from the majority of fans because of your sexuality is seen as a negative and, more to the point, the fault of the gay fan for having an agenda that is not befitting of genuine support for the club.

This is further reinforced by the way in which several members, some of them who are highly influential within the community as a whole, questioned the necessity of an LGBT supporters group. Their comments highlighted a distinct lack of understanding of the issues and difficulties faced by homosexual football fans and homosexuals at large. In reaction to a comment made by the forum member who began the post, stating that they find it odd how people openly question the idea of forming an LGBT supporters' group, yet no one questions why the Disabled Supporters' Group, or even the Boundary Clarets Supporters' Group exist, one prominent community members replied;

"That's a ludicrous statement and does you no favours at all. Boundary Clarets run coaches so it's pretty obvious why they exist and a disabled supporters group, members of which have specific requirements, has been set up to help the club determine what facilities are needed at Turf Moor

You've made a ridiculous analogy, because there are evident reasons why those two clubs exist"
(Bevilaqua, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"Disabled groups exist as they have clear needs. I agree that is a stupid analogy. Any supporter's clubs formed on the basis of race, creed, religion, sexual orientation have got to be totally inclusive, as far as I am aware. This way everyone is welcome, but that just defeats the point of having a separate group in the first place. A black hindi group would need to include white Christians, Muslims, etc. A female heterosexual supporters group would need to invite men, homosexuals and so on"
(GrassingtonClaret, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"At least try to outline why such a club should exist if you expect fans to support it. We all understand why a club for disabled fans exists, it's because about working together for better disabled facilities and concessions. We all understand that the Boundary Clarets exist as some fans cannot be trusted to get to the ground themselves. You should set out explanation and help us to understand your thoughts as to why an LGBTQ supporters' group should exist. Why would people get behind the idea and offer support for its existence if you haven't

thought that bit out yourself yet?"
(NuclearBlast, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"We want inclusion! How do we want it? By creating exclusive groups!

Plenty of fans wouldn't mind a group like this and can understand the need for it. However, I personally think it will just further alienate those that might have less tolerant views and that's who you should really focus on - these people are the ones you need to change, not the more liberal minded and forward thinking fans among us.

Come on though? Two men kissing to celebrate a goal being scored is just odd. Whether you are gay, straight or Australian, that's no way to celebrate a goal"
(Sherlock, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

The flood of dismissive and trivialising comments continued, with many referring to dominant groups in society in order to question the appropriateness of the call for an LGBT group. As a point of comparison, they juxtapose the idea of the original poster with hypothetical groups that demonstrate many community members have little to no empathy towards minority and oppressed identity politics. Alongside derisory comparisons, some members referred to dominant groups in the knowledge that they would be perceived as politically incorrect, but perhaps unaware that this is because such groups do not face anything like the subordination or oppression experienced by LGBTs;

"I have plenty of support for the LBGTQ members of society but I do have one question, here. What if someone started a supporters' club for straight fans, what would your view of that be?"
(Claretburns, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"As several other posters have already said, why create a different supporters club? It's 2017. I can't help but wonder what the response would be if I were to start setting up a supporters club just for men?"
(Claretburns, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"Straight and a claret? Woohooo! Me too! It's completely irrelevant but I thought I would let everyone know anyhow."
(brunshawroad, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

"You should start a supporters' club for adulterers! Loads of folk have been oppressed for that!"
(Canon1300, 'Any LGBTQ Clarets?', 05/09/17)

In support of the call for an LGBT group, many make the analogy about BAME groups and whether opponents to the current idea would also oppose a supporters' group which was founded on race/ethnicity. It seems clear that discrimination against homosexuality is not considered to be on the same level of severity as racial discrimination; the recent history and local politics of the town makes many fans aware of the cultural sensitivity to race or the legal sanctions for racial abuse/harassment, but the inability to see the status of homosexual fans/rights as the same highlights the persistence of heteronormativity and a hierarchy of sexuality among football supporters. The frequent jokey comments which a thread such as this inspires, are also indicative of this. Making light of what fans know to be an acutely sensitive subject, race and ethnicity, goes against the accepted norms of the group and the wider culture/social issues which informs it, but with homosexuality the norms of the community do not constrain individuals to the extent that they regard such behaviour as inappropriate.

On a personal level, the thread regarding the formation of an LGBT group for Burnley supporters was one of the most disappointing moments of my memberships of the forum. It made me question both my connection to the community at large and also my objectivity as a researcher. Although conflict and debate between members was something I had accounted for, within the conceptualisation of community I had adopted, witnessing several of the prominent and respected members of the community question the need for such a group made me feel like a connection to such members was diminished. In particular, it was very difficult to read a deluge of comments which revealed that homosexuality within this online community was, for most members, only accepted on a limited basis; as long as it was covert and that gay fans attempted to 'blend in', it was fine. Although I anticipated that some of the forum's membership would be antagonistic towards the suggestion of LGBT representation, or use it as a way to express their openly homophobic views, I didn't expect the vast majority of the forum's membership to adopt an 'assimilation over integration' approach to homosexual fans. As a result, when analysing the data in question I had to keep reminding myself of my own thoughts and feelings on the topic and do my best to distance those from an analysis of the discussion threads in question.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored numerous message board posts relating to the subject of homophobia in football with the intention of showing how the content of the message board under study and the values of its members alter or reflect prevailing external discourses. In doing so, the chapter has been able to address, in great depth, one of the key elements of the online community concept advanced in chapter two. Assessing various discussion threads and debates, surrounding the topics of homosexuality and homophobia, have allowed the thesis to explore the norms and values of a specific online community of football fans and their fluid and dynamic nature.

As we outlined initially, the traditions and practises established by the community were changed in the wake of criticism they faced at a time when issues relating to homophobia were at the forefront of discussions about the game. An analysis of the conflict between community members over the issue and their differing opinions revealed a great deal about the community values at large. In this instance, the importance of identities and status that community members have built up through CMC with others, and their knowledge that abusive behaviours and language would not be tolerated when discussing sensitive issues, meant that conflicting opinions did not turn into destructive interactions, but were largely purposeful and productive in nature and led to the long used term 'puffs' being dropped from match-day discussion threads.

However, numerous subsequent discussions about homophobia and the Andre Gray controversy reveal that heteronormativity, traditional forms of masculinity, and the trivialising of homosexual experiences are commonplace within the fan community in question. The norms and values of the community as a whole prevent outright abuse of homosexuals, but the ease with which derogatory epitaphs are repeated (when, say, compared to racial groups), the frequent use of trivialising puns and subsequent lack of moderation of these, alongside the consistent prioritisation of the reputation of Burnley FC, its fans and one of its key players, over the issues faced by homosexuals demonstrates the extent of ingrained homophobic attitudes within the community in question.

CHAPTER SIX: EXILED FANS

Introduction

The internet is heralded as a significant contributor to the creation of the global village; we now live in an era where communications are so rapid and far reaching that the world is a more unified and connected place than ever before. A large number of regular contributors to football fan forums are able to take advantage of this, particularly those who are distant from the club they support. This includes fans who have no geographic ties with their chosen team or, as is more commonly the case with supporters of Burnley Football Club, they are fans originally from the local area who have moved away but have continued their support of the club. Fans based throughout the UK and further afield (there have been regular contributors from Australia, Canada, Italy, Portugal, Qatar and The United States of America, among other nations) amass to keep up-to-date with key events and incidents. Many, like WestTorontoClaret, buxtonclaret, dallasclaret, Zumerzet_claret and cockneyclaret, for example, openly display their exiled status and identity to the club within their chosen moniker.

The existing literature, however, tends to focus on fans from further afield who are not from the locale of the football clubs they support, or even the same country. As we acknowledged in chapter one, an understanding of the impact of globalisation on football has been skewed by an incessant focus on the growth of transnational football fan groups who have pledged their allegiance to some of the most powerful and successful football clubs in the English game (Nash, 2000; Farrad, 2002; Reimer, 2004; Hognestad 2006 & 2009; Giulianotti & Robertson, 2009; Kerr & Emery, 2011 & 2016). This has led to some overstatements regarding the impact of globalisation, particularly the influence of satellite broadcasting, and an imbalanced understanding of both the role and frequency of transnational fans in the fandom of clubs more typical of the majority of English football clubs.

Many of the papers regarding disparate fans, referenced above, are also focused on the notion of fan authenticity and how transnational fans demonstrate their loyalty to the clubs they follow. Whilst the number of Scandinavian fans of Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal and other elite English teams is clearly

dependant on the exposure such fans received to the English game from television broadcasts, they frequently engage in fandom practises with the aim of proving their authenticity. This is aimed at groups of fellow transnational football fans, as well as, and perhaps more importantly, to fans of their chosen club who emanate from the local area of the club itself. In such studies, there is a clear distinction between 'local' and 'foreign' fans and evident tension between them. The former are keen to emphasise the traditional notion of locality as a crucially important feature of football fandom in order to demonstrate their supremacy as fans, or greater degree of authenticity.

However, this is yet another example of how our understanding of English football fandom is distorted by a focus on elite clubs and unrepresentative fan groups. Whilst domestic fans of Manchester United are the target of derogatory remarks due to the large number of Chinese supporters the club has, and fans of Liverpool use the term 'wools' to label the large number of foreign visitors to their Anfield home, in order to distinguish them from those who herald from the city itself, most English football supporters do not share those experiences. The vast majority of English clubs have very few transnational fans, let alone entire groups devoted to them. Those that do exist, therefore, are often regarded and treated in an entirely different manner to those who follow one of the country's elite clubs; they do not have to fight for recognition as authentic fans in the same way at all. Rather than being dismissed as a threat to the local identity of the club, or as a necessary but not ideal consequence of income generation that all elite clubs are forced to engage in for a competitive advantage, foreign supporters of many English clubs are welcomed with open arms by the fan community at large, regarded as a badge of honour for the club itself, assisted with their calls for help and can, as was observed in this study, reach a 'minor celebrity' status among the members of online fan communities that they interact with.

The aim of this chapter is to explore the experiences of 'exiled' fans, not just transnational fans but also those within the UK who are outside of the local area where the majority of Burnley FC's supporters herald from. This will be done to broaden our understanding of football fandom and fan experiences by firstly, exploring the status of transnational and exiled fans within fan communities at large; secondly, understanding how CMC facilitates interaction between such

fans and enables many of them to maintain existing identities rather than undermine them; and thirdly, by exploring the relationships and communities that are created via CMC among fans with a shared identity as an exiled fan. Through an analysis of the experience of exiled fans, the findings of this chapter also further our understanding of the nature of online communities more broadly. Exploring their interactions and experiences allows us to assess the role of online communities and relationships in the lives of modern football fans in a more holistic sense, particularly the networks of advice and support that such communities bring to them.

Burnley: Twinned with Flacq, Mauritius

On both Clarets Mad and the later incarnation, Up the Clarets, one transnational fan's presence and contributions to the online community have always stood out. Although there is also a small group of fans from The Netherlands, who occasionally post on the forum and make a couple of trips to Burnley games each season, and some other individuals who have taken on Burnley as their favourite team, 'davemanu2000' has become a well-known and respected member of the online fan community. Davemanu2000's real name is Bhurdwaz Mungur, a Mauritian born football fan whose association with Burnley Football Club dates back to the 1954 when the club toured Mauritius as part of a post-season tour in the May of that year, when he was just 15 years old. It was not uncommon for English clubs to do tours such as this at the time, although Burnley were the first to visit Mauritius. The six-match tour included contests against the national teams of Mauritius and Madagascar in front of over 20,000 spectators, and the visit of such a high-profile club (Burnley were one of the leading English teams at the time) has led to a lasting support for the club on the small Indian Ocean island. Although this support has faded in recent decades, the then captivated Bhurdwaz Mungur has remained a staunch Burnley fan ever since and has also visited the UK three times to see his team in action. For many years he has also been a well-respected member of Clarets Mad and Up The Clarets, where he contributes to discussions about the team, its progress, and his fond memories of Burnley Football Club and its history, including the tour of 1954.

Mungur has also, over the years, acted as a host to a number of Claret fans who have visited Mauritius; greeting them at the airport, giving them advice about their holiday on the island, and taking them on tours to key tourist sites. He has even allowed several Clarets to stay in his own holiday home, arranged discounted travel and accommodation for others and he has often used the forum to offer his services to Burnley supporters travelling to his beloved island;

*"All fans of Burnley , i underline only Burnley ,may pay the reduced rate of Mauritian tariff . you may phone me on 230 *** ** ** or write me on : mungur_bhurdwaz@*****.com so that i may come to fetch you at the airport to drive you to the hotel .*

in the past there are many Claret fans who through my personal intervention have been privileged or those who cannot afford hotel bills may use my private sea apartment which has three rooms and all modern amenities . It will be free of charge to all my brothers of Burnley who are near and dear to me."
(davemanu2000, 'Inviting to spend your vacation in Mauritius', post 1, 05/11/17)

His sincerity and generosity are widely acknowledged by other members of the online community;

"I stayed in Mauritius a few years ago and met the man himself. A most generous host and a true gentleman."
(HatfieldClaret, 'Inviting to spend your vacation in Mauritius', post 4, 05/11/17)

*"My wife and I called into Mauritius on a cruise a few years ago and Dave arranged to meet us and take us round the island. He was true to his word and we had a great day with a lovely gentleman who we hope to meet again at some future date.
His reward for looking after us so well was a retro shirt from the 1959/60 season. Dave, take care of yourself and hope to meet up again -- my wife sends her regards."*
(AshingtonClaret46, 'Inviting to spend your vacation in Mauritius', post 20, 05/11/17)

"It's 12 years since we visited Mauritius and Dave hosted us. A true Gentlemen who showed us all sorts of places around the Island. This is a great offer from Dave, if you get the chance - take it! Mauritius is an awesome place, impeccable service and fantastic climate, but with the chance via Dave to have some real local knowledge and advice it is a truly an incredible trip."
(Claret Wizard, 'Inviting to spend your vacation in Mauritius', post 32, 05/11/17)

"Over 15 years now since our visit stopping at the Beau Rivage hotel on the east side of the island where Dave came to meet us.

His island tours with inside knowledge and contacts made it such a memorable holiday we have never forgotten and always recommend. Book early only small and very popular."

(MarbellaClaret, 'Inviting to spend your vacation in Mauritius', post 38, 05/11/17)

"Just to confirm davemanu is a true gentleman and a claret through and through, had the pleasure of going to Mauritius and meeting up with him and staying in his holiday apartment, he couldn't do enough for us and now very privileged to call him a friend that will always be part of our claret family."

(Longside72, 'Proud to be a Burnley fan', post 13, 07/07/16)

Reciprocally, members of the online forum also helped Mungur travel to Burnley for a match against Liverpool on New Year's Day in 2018, when he was able to see them play in the top division of English football for the first time. His last match was the 2009 playoff final, at Wembley, when the magnitude of the game was impossible for Mungur to ignore. Towards the end of 2017 he was in the UK to visit family and as soon as that was revealed on Up the Clarets, arrangements were made to make sure Mungur was able to visit Burnley and see a match. For some, this involved quite a sacrifice; the New Year's Day fixture with Liverpool was one of the most anticipated matches of the season and, alongside its popularity, the holidays also contributed to the match quickly selling out. Despite this, some fans offered to give up their season tickets so that Mungur could see the fixture – regular contributors such as HunterST_BFC and Macca were only too happy to miss out themselves so that Mungur's trip was a success.

Eventually, Mungur did not need to take up those generous offers; members of the online community contacted the club and its Media Manager directly to see what they could do to mark the occasion and make Mungur's visit a memorable one. As well as getting him tickets, the community members in question had arranged with the club to treat Mungur to hospitality before the match and, at full time, to have access to the press conference and meet the players. This he did with *longside72*, one of the many Burnley fans he has hosted in Mauritius over the years and someone who, as quoted above, reflected on the lasting friendship that had developed between them as a result of their initial meeting on the forum.

Whilst the club was generous in this way, their knowledge of Mungur's trip and subsequent offers to assist him were only possible because members of the online community went out of their way to ensure that a fellow community member was looked after. They arranged travel for Mungur to Burnley, who was in South Wales with family just before the fixture, with active forum member Operahouseclaret going to Cardiff to collect Mungur on the morning of the match. Forum members also arranged accommodation in the town at the Rosehill Hotel and took him to a few select locations where fans gather before matches, to ensure he had the full match-day experience. His pre-match visit to 'The Miners' was publicised on the forum beforehand, giving community members a chance to meet Mungur in person in a location steeped in local history and folklore¹⁸. The face-to-face meetings and activities were, of course, the focus of the day, but community members took to the forums throughout the day to post updates about Mungur's visit and to acknowledge that they'd had the chance to greet him during his stay. He was presented with a personalised shirt, which was photographed (below) and uploaded to the forum alongside other pictures of him in full Claret attire, meeting the players, and enjoying his time at the press conference.



¹⁸ The name of The Miners makes clear reference to the industrial history of the town and the occupation of many of its inhabitants in the period of the industrial revolution. Somewhat more curiously, The Miners is also synonymous with the French liquor Benedictine and consumes more bottles of the drink than anywhere else in the world. This began after the First World War when local soldiers, who were stationed in Fecamp, Normandy, as part of their service in the East Lancashire Regiment, returned with a taste for the liquor and demanded the club served it. To this day, many locals drink 'Bene N' Hot' – Benedictine diluted with boiling water – just as soldiers did in the trenches to keep warm and make the precious bottles last longer.

The importance of that trip is something he frequently raises, when conversing with fellow Clarets on the message board;

"Davemanu ,alias Bhurdwaz Mungur , is growing old . Today he is celebrating his 79th birthday .

i am happy that since 1954 i have been a Claret fan . As an ardent fan ,I remained loyal to the Clarets to whatever division they belonged .

i have visited the beautiful town of Burnley thrice .The last time was this year i.e 1st January when some Claret friends helped me to travel from Cardiff to Turf Moor to watch the match between Burnley against Liverpool . it was as if a dream coming true . Burnley played very well and it was in the dying minute that Liverpool scored the winning goal .

i am proud that next season Burnley will participate in the Europa League .they have competent players and the greatest English Manager . no doubt they will do well and wish them so .This is happening during my life time and so proud of it ."
(davemanu, 'Today is my Birthday', post 1, 05/05/18)

That pride and the association Mungur has with Burnley is never questioned by the online community. Despite not being from the town, having never lived there, not being a regular attendee of matches and, ultimately, having started his support for Burnley FC when they were one of the elite clubs of the English game, the authenticity of his support and loyalty to the club is still taken at face value. Yet these are the very criteria through which fans and academics alike have classified football fans and sought to create hierarchies to distinguish one another and ascertain their importance (Giulianotti, 2002). Mungur and other transnational supporters of Burnley FC are, however, not considered to be threat to the identity of the club's supporters and traditional fan practises. Foreign fans constitute a tiny minority within the grand scheme of Claret fandom. Also, the prospect of the 'local' being submerged by the club's growing popularity overseas is not perceived to be realistic among the supporters of Burnley FC and its online communities. As a result, the presence of such fans is welcomed and they are a source of pride for many members of the online forum; they celebrate the fact that someone from another country, especially one as exotic as an Island in the Indian Ocean, would even know about, let alone deeply care for, the small town of Burnley and its relatively unsuccessful football team.

As the posts above indicate, several fans have taken their online interactions with davemanu2000 one step further and met him in person in his own country. From those engagements and his generous treatment of Burnley fans visiting Mauritius, lasting relationships have developed between members of the online community and he is highly regarded by them. In response to 'Dave's' post about his birthday, as with the year before, many fans took the opportunity to congratulate him, wish him well and, interesting, to reflect on the valued contributions he makes to the message board;

"Happy Birthday Dave, your posts always manage to put a smile on my face and this one is no exception. Just remember that 7 and 9 are only numbers, it's what's in your heart that dictates age so you should be fine for many more birthday parties"
(jjclaret, 'Today is my Birthday', post 29, 05/05/18)

"Happy birthday, fella, it is always a pleasure to read your posts. Have a fabulous day."
(evensteadiereddie, "Dave is celebration his birthday on the 5May", post 10, 05/05/17)

*"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO DAVE
HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU
HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR DAAYVE...
HAPPY BIRTHDAYYYYYYYY ,
...DAVEMANUerm 2000
(ok the song needs some work at the end) :D :lol:*

78 is just a number my friend! Many More numbers to come! 8-)

*To my favourite poster over the years.
Have a Great, Great Day Sir Dave.
Wishing You All The Very Very Best."*
(HunterST_BFC, 'Dave is celebration his birthday on the 5May', post 20, 05/05/17)

*"Happy Birthday Dave, love reading your posts, they brighten many a dull winter's day.
Hope you have a lovely day."*
(Boogieknights, 'Today is my Birthday', post 14, 05/05/18)

Mungur's presence and background is also another source of the 'insider knowledge' that has developed on the forum and, like Madge from the match-day threads, an understanding and acceptance of his passionate outpourings on the forum are examples of the many cultural norms that have developed within the online community and can, at times, distinguish between those who are

community members and those who are community users, or outsiders, as we discussed in chapter two (Castells, 2000). For instance, it is only community members who have interacted regularly with Mungur over the years who understand the basis of his username, davemanu2000, which is often misread by outsiders who, in turn, question why a foreign Manchester United fan would be posting on a Burnley supporters' forum. They are particularly curious as to why a foreign Manchester United fan would post such positive support towards the Clarets.

Together with the broken English and inconsistent punctuation which characterise Mungur's posts, community outsiders have a tendency to reply to Mungur with a sense of dismissal (and even at times disdain) and it could be argued, perhaps, that in the eyes of outsiders, Mungur *is* a transnational fan whose presence is unwelcome; a foreign fan with dual allegiance who, therefore, does not understand what the English game and genuine football fandom is based upon and is, perhaps, someone who has only taken an interest in Burnley because of their recent success¹⁹. To such community outsiders, this is typical of glory hunting fans (especially those from abroad) who cannot appreciate the importance of locality and identity to the support of a club;

"Who are ya? No idea what a manure fan is doing on here. Did you even watch it?"

(GarethTaylor82, 'Burnley v Huddersfield Player Ratings', post 11, 26/02/13)

"Why would a utd fan care?"

(Jimscho, 'Statement from Dyche', post 47, 04/07/13)

His username is, however, as almost all community members will know, a combination of his given name and an expression of his religious beliefs and identity. For a number of years, I too misread the 'manu' aspect of his username as being an expression of his national identity. It was through interactions with Mungur and the online community that I came to learn 'manu' actually refers to Hindu deity. As a result of these interactions and subsequent knowledge of the

¹⁹ At the time of writing, Burnley are about to embark on their third consecutive season in the Premier League and have qualified for one of the elite European cup competitions for the first time in fifty-one years. The last nineteen seasons have all been in the top two divisions of the English league system and five of the last ten have been played at the highest level.

community member in question, it was possible, as a researcher, to understand how something as simple as a username can be used by fans as evidence to substantiate their assumptions about football fan 'types'. Also, by observing Mungur's posts and the interactions he has had with infrequent posters and community outsiders, like those included above, it was clear to see that in football culture at large, the criteria by which fans judge one another's authenticity and grant acceptance within a club's fandom are still rooted in many of the traditional fandom practises and identities outlined by Giulianotti (2002). The importance of local identity persists and is considered as potentially under threat by commercial and global developments in the game (King, 1998; Sandvoss, 2003; Crawford, 2004). Whilst this is not true of those genuine 'homesteaders' and the core community members that were identified by Castells (2000), the understanding of Mungur's contributions to the forum and his position as a Burnley fan further emphasise the distinctions that develop between online communities and football fans at large, and the subcultural norms and values which emerge as a result of their (predominately) online interactions.

Home Advantage: transnational fans and maintaining identities

For many fans who frequent football message boards, the discussion forums simply allow them to continue to stay in touch with the club that they support. For local and exiled fans alike, there is an immediacy and focus about the information revealed on fan forums which cannot be rivalled by other sources. Whilst the club's official website may, on the face of it, seem like the obvious choice for direct and focused news about Burnley FC, the reality is that it is often old news by the time it has been reported. The club website usually just acts as confirmation of the events which have been reported by fans on Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets hours, and sometimes days, beforehand. The club website also reports very factual information when it comes to news stories themselves, which are permeated by less formal player and staff interviews and reflections. Whilst the latter provide a unique and exclusive insight, which fans would not

otherwise by privy to, the information fans crave is often speculative in nature, particularly where transfers are concerned;

"Clarets Mad is a fascinating thing...certainly, for me, the internet - for many reasons – keeps me up to date with what's happening with the club. I could get the Sunday times here and, you know, read about it, but there's no way to (guarantee); how much coverage would Burnley get anyway? But it's (Clarets Mad) all interaction with, errm, Clarets! You know, like Clarets Mad has people who regularly write."
(Interview with oldjerseyjohn, September 2014)

"I don't even go on the club site, you know? It's hard to navigate and Clarets Mad is instantaneous club news, as soon as it breaks. I want the news as soon as it breaks, that's my first reason for turning the machine on.²⁰ As always, you know, err, with Burnley...you'll get Man U news every few hours, but Burnley every four weeks."
(Interview with MinnieMouth, September 2014)

As an exiled fan, MinnieMouth is referring to, at the end of his statement here, the dearth of coverage a club of Burnley's size receives in the national and international media. Whilst these forms of media, both in print and online, are not confined to factual news coverage and include speculative developments within the game, regular coverage in such outlets is reserved for elite clubs within English football; those are the clubs that national and international readerships are, after all, most interested in. Many forum members and users alike frequent the site most often when anticipating updates about the club, especially on the final day of each transfer window when there is an observable spike in the number of active posters, as well as the number of lurkers who are hovering in the background awaiting the most up to date developments.

Speculation and speed are important factors, but the nature of the news also diverges from that offered by the club's official website. A great deal of credence is given to the insights offered by fans when they are reporting developments concerning their club. Their opinions, particularly those who come from regular contributors to the message board and those whose previous offerings have enabled them to build up a reputation among the online community as informed and trustworthy, are highly valued by community members and users alike;

²⁰ The user is referring to a PC, but also accesses the site using a tablet and mobile phone.

"I look for people's ratings in the thread and there's certain people's ratings that I look for.²¹ I scroll past dozens of people and look at this person and that person – the ones that make sense to me."

(Interview with notrigsbyscat, September 2014)

"I must admit that the Clarets Mad website, as I say, it's a great way to just keep in touch with, you know, while you just read the club's website they are basically stating facts; they buy a new player and they say 'we welcome him, blah, blah, blah'. Whereas Clarets Mad people say 'well, you know, he's got these good qualities, he's going to fit in here' or 'I followed him when he played for this club and he needs to be motivated' or, you know, whatever they say. You get that opinion which isn't official line. Normally the people posting are either regular posters, or they're a bit closer to what's happening, so it gives me more information."

(Interview with oldjerseyjohn, September 2014)

The last remark by oldjerseyjohn reveals an important feature of the online community to exiled fans in particular. Not only have some posters developed reputations as trustworthy and informed contributors to the discussion forum, but their proximity to the club itself is another central concern. Information is, potentially, coming from a forum member who has contacts inside the club itself, and there are certainly some forum member reputations which are based on their accurate predictions and key contacts, which others deliberately look out for.

Many members of the online forum who are exiled from the town engage with the forum on a daily basis in order to stay connected with their fellow supporters. To such fans, the opportunity to converse with other Burnley supporters in person has become sporadic, or even lost entirely. For many, moving away from the town has had a dramatic impact on their fandom; the daily discussions about their club with fellow Clarets at work, the pub, or in their immediate locale, have now ceased or reduced in frequency significantly. Whilst information about the club is a key motivating factor to log-in to the forum and read discussion posts, it is the chance to *discuss* that information and important developments that makes online fan forums so appealing to such fans.

²¹ On both Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets, each contribution to a discussion thread is accompanied by a small box of information about the poster. It includes their username, the number of posts they've made, the number of times they've been liked and how long they have been a member for. Notrigsbyscat was referring, here, to this information holistically and that by skim reading discussion threads by first looking for specific and trusted users, he was able to access the information he most valued and trusted.

Interaction is crucial here, as is the opportunity for fans to provide, or engage with, critique, opinion or insight because it gives a fan's perspective on things, not just an official line, which has been compromised by their exiled status;

"I actually almost never look at the club's official website, 'cos that's just full of propaganda. I don't read it that much now."
(Interview with notrigsbyscat, September 2014)

"Clarets Mad tends to be dynamic and topics move on quickly. They have a lot of people posting and a lot of intense discussion. A lot of it is about the football itself, and it's interesting to read people's opinions. I agree with a lot, I disagree with others and it's nice, sometimes, to give your own opinion if you think it might – it's like, not so much wanting to pretend that my opinion is more important than anyone else's and more informed than anyone else's, it's sharing experiences."
(Interview with RedBeard, July 2014)

The forum, therefore, presents an opportunity to *discuss* issues pertinent to the club, the performance of specific players and the significance of results as a season unfolds, among many other things. This could, of course, be done face-to-face with fans of other clubs or even other sports in their new found homes, but for many there is a lack of opportunity to converse with those who have a shared sense of identity and an understanding of what it means to be from Burnley and support that particular club. Whilst a significant element of the academic literature regarding transnational fans and football fans who converse on the internet centres on questions regarding their authenticity and, to some extent, how they form *new* identities (Ben-Porat, 2000; Nash, 2000; Hognestad, 2009; Kerr & Emery 2011 & 2016), there is little said about the role of internet forums in the *maintenance* of existing identities;

"Besides fun, there's also the information about the club. Keeping up to date with what's happening. Clarets Mad is really good for that, it's better than the official site a lot of the time. It's a link to home, as well, isn't it? Your background."
(Interview with RedBeard, July 2014)

"It's difficult here, you know like? I tell anyone who'll listen about Burnley and they are all, you know, fascinated by the fact that I am passionate about it, but they don't know, do they? I mean, the Orient game, economic decline, that Burnley's a shithole. They don't know, do they? And all of that is my town and my club, you know? It's more than ever now I'm not there, that I feel it, and online I know loads of 'em do too, I get to speak to this guy from Aussie, or another guy from

*the States, and this guy from god only knows. They **do** know, you know?’*

(Interview with yanquiclairet, July 2014 – his emphasis)

That said, the statement above illustrates that there is a duality at work here, which has been observable in my study of Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets over the years, where exiled fans seek out one another and fans closer to home to maintain their local identities having left Burnley itself, but also develop a collective identity as exiled clarets at the same time. Whilst, for many, the forum has become their means of expressing their identity to the town and its football club and replaced their former outlet for such expressions, which yanquiclairet addresses at the beginning of his statement, he goes on to demonstrate how he, like many other exiled fans, have also benefited significantly from the shared experience of being an exile too. The online community has facilitated interactions between fans of Burnley Football Club from all over the world who can empathise with one another about their sense of (geographical) detachment from the club and express how they, as exiled fans, find themselves surrounded by those who cannot fully understand the significance of their identity to either Burnley, its football club or, most often, both.

The Rise of the Advice Community: support mechanisms, football and fan culture.

As we outlined in the discussion of communities, in chapter two, before the key features of a genuine online community emerge, people are drawn together and form groups which are based on shared interests, identities or something in common (Cohen, 1985; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). In many instances, this can be ephemeral in nature and not all such groups or interactions lead to the formation of online communities. For instance, it is not uncommon for internet users to seek out discussion forums and advice networks to help them through particular issues or periods of their life which are new or short-lived in nature; online discussion forums with substantially more ‘users’ than ‘members’ are commonplace, just as it is for ‘members’ to join, post a few discussion threads pertinent to their own needs and then disappear almost as quickly as they first arrived (Castells, 2000).

I, for instance, have joined online discussion forums relating to fatherhood, migrating to Australia and also information technology issues in the past, to name a few. Once I had searched them for direct answers to the questions I had, I only posted new discussion threads seeking assistance if I could not find what I was looking for. All three of the forum types outlined above were littered with 'users' like me; temporary members whose posts were typical of the vast majority of the interactions taking place within the forum at large. Take, for example, the forum on migration to Australia; there were a small number of regular contributors who ran the forum and had made several thousand contributions to answer people's queries, but the vast majority used the forum for a short period of time until their migration had been completed or was unsuccessful. Most only posted a few times and the nature of the posts was to take information, rather than contribute it. That is not to say that a small number of genuine community members do not exist in this forum and that people have ended up developing lasting relationships and have stayed on to contribute to a forum they had personally found so useful, but this community (if it exists) is a very small element of the overall population that uses the site and the vast majority of discussion threads are very brief and rather one-sided information transactions. As Wellman and Gulia (1999: 127) suggested, such groupings are formed on the basis of personalised needs, they are 'networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support (and) information', but they do not fulfil the 'sense of belonging and identity' for the majority of users that helps to transform such interactions into the basis of authentic communities.

This kind of behaviour existed on Clarets Mad and is also a feature of Up the Clarets too, albeit quite uncommon and subsumed by the nature of the majority of discussion threads on there. It typically occurs when Burnley fans who are not regular users or community members try to acquire tickets or arrange travel for games. There are also occasional posts from away fans who are, more often than not, planning a visit to the town for a forthcoming fixture and are looking for some help with parking, hotels, pubs that accommodate away fans, etc. They will interact with the forum members for a brief period and are unlikely to return until they have another similar request, often acknowledging their outsider status and the potentially intrusive nature of their post by declaring that they post 'in peace';

"Hi there, friendly Hudders fan from t'other side of hills here!! Very much looking forward to our first premier league season!!

I have a query regarding how getting away tickets work for you guys, i see Burnley as a similar sized club to us so reckon this is a good place to ask, we recently released priority for away tickets and it has been controversial to say the least!! The club hasn't ever kept a record of who has traveled to games before, i guess because its never really been needed! We now have over 20,000 season ticket holders so need to divide them up somehow.

The way its been done means those who have only had a season ticket for a few years have got priority over people who have had theirs for 10+ years- simply because they had joined some redundant £20 scheme at the start of last season

Long story short- what i'm asking is did you guys have any similar problems with away day priority when you were first promoted?."
(huddersfan, 'Hudders Fan in Peace', post 1, 17/07/17)

The above post was the only contribution made by huddersfan to the forum, who presumably withdrew and lurked on the forum thereafter in order to take in the responses – albeit disappointing ones, as the discussion quickly became consumed by an ongoing contemporary debate among Burnley fans about the virtues and pitfalls of their own club's loyalty programme. The thread quickly became an opportunity for the forum members to discuss issues relevant to themselves; a discussion which was occasionally punctuated by a direct reply to the original poster's request. As we can see here, football fan discussion forums, to a number of internet users, fulfil the same role as other networks of advice and information. They are bespoke sources of knowledge whose members are considered to be the most experienced and informed about the subject in question. For issues relating to migration to Australia, it makes sense to seek out a discussion forum whose membership is made up of those going through the process or have completed it; for questions about travelling to Burnley for an enjoyable away day, it makes sense to ask those who live there and know the town intimately.

For exiled fans, the forum has also been a useful tool for logistical queries. Such fans have consulted other members for advice about tickets and travel when planning their excursions to see Burnley FC, or when trying to fit in a game or two upon returning to England for other purposes. Such discussions became so

common for one group of fans on Clarets Mad that they eventually created their own Facebook group for the specific purpose of sharing such operational advice. The North American Clarets branched off from the forum, where the founder members initially met, and used social media to create an attuned group so that they could share very specific information which was useful to a subset of the forum members. Whilst they were still very much actively involved on Up the Clarets, for the kind of valuable discussions outlined above, they supplemented this with a smaller group tailored to their needs.

The Facebook group in question now has over three hundred members and fans who have subsequently joined the group discuss more than just flight prices and connections, ticket contacts and local television coverage of Burnley FC. As the club has grown in prominence following its promotions to the Premier League in recent years, media exposure of the club to American fans of the English game has also helped to generate some transnational interest in the club from those who do not have any ties to the club or town in a traditional sense. Even so, at its root, the group is still a specific location for information sharing and planning advice which helps exiled fans coordinate attendance at football matches when they return to England.

Yet football fan forums offer so much more to the community members who reside there, in terms of advice and support. Although most regular contributors are only too happy to help outsiders who request information, they provide a much more extensive 'service' to one another. As the community has developed across both of the discussion forums in question, much of this advice and support has broadened in nature. Football and, more specifically the support of Burnley Football Club, may have been the shared interest that brought these people together, but information is more frequently solicited and, in turn, granted, on a wide variety of topics that have little or nothing to do with the sport itself;

"Me and my partner looking to spend a relaxing few days to a week in and around Cornwall and the South West following this years Glastonbury Festival.

Neither of us has been before so we're after some ideas of places to visit, accommodation, things to do etc. We're quite flexible and may

make a stop or two elsewhere en route home (Newcastle) to break up the journey.

Guest houses, hotels, camp sites all viable and we'll have a car to get around and don't mind putting a few miles in on the road - even if it takes us away from Cornwall itself. All suggestions would be very welcome.

Only certainties so far are a stop off at Stonehenge and some time (even if only a day) in St Ives."
(what_no_pies, 'Cornwall / South West Advice', post 1, 09/01/17)

The discussion thread above attracted a large number of replies, mostly from regular contributors to the forum who were only too happy to help out a fellow community member with their own experiences of Cornwall and advice on where to stay and what to see. When discussing the forum as a whole, interviewees frequently made reference to these phenomena and the responses they elicit due to the importance they had within the online community;

"That (the forum) was the one place you could find out everything that you could find out. Anything. Like, erm, if you've got anything you needed to know about, you ask the question on there and somebody will come with the answer! They not only have the answer, but they are pretty much an expert in that field. There's somebody for everything in giving advice. A lot aren't experts and give you an opinion, but there's always somebody who says "do this, or..." "oh, right, thank you!" That's one of the strengths of the message board that, yes, you come on because you've got one allegiance, but we will share."

(Interview with IanMcL, May 2015)

"Nobody talks about football all the time. You would have to be a really, really, really boring person if all you talked about was one thing, no matter what it was. So I think the fact that the forum discusses all kinds of things and that people just post on it asking for advice on stuff, that they've encountered for the first time, like "I've just got a ridiculous parking ticket, what can I do about it?"; well, there's always someone who has had it and can suggest "you do this, you do that" or something. It sort of, in a way, it is like the local pubs that died out. I think that the forum, the internet forum, is replacing that. If you went to the pub every night there'd be a certain group of people you'd hang out with because you had certain commonalities, but you wouldn't spend your entire time, you know, discussing the one thing you had in common. Other things would be part of your discourse."

(Interview with notrigsbyscat, September 2014)

Much in the same way that Weed (2006, 2007 & 2008) challenged the way in which consumption of televised live matches at the pub was symptomatic of the declining importance of traditional fan identities and practises, and found that it was, in fact, a deliberate attempt to recreate time honoured communal engagements with the game, the comments above from notrigsbyscat also demonstrate the way in which football fan practises beyond the match itself have not been eradicated. Whilst the centrality of the pub to British culture has declined since the 1980s, with estimates suggesting 25% of public houses have closed in Britain since its heyday in 1982 (The Economist, 2017: np), football fan culture has adapted to the changing landscape and utilised the increased availability and scope of the internet to maintain a core aspect of it. If anything, those core fan practises now encompass a larger percentage of football fans than ever before and the communities in question have grown considerably. The group of likeminded individuals at the pub, as referred to by notrigsbyscat, would not have numbered in their hundreds like they often did during the week on Clarets Mad, or still do on Up the Clarets. Nor would they have been accessible to fans like notrigsbyscat himself, or other exiled fans like him, whose opportunity to discuss football, Burnley FC and seek advice from fellow Clarets would have been negated by their geographical location;

"There was one this morning – butterflyvenom's shower is leaking and he's on there asking how to fix it! The there's people asking about cars, car servicing, the telly's broke, what's the best out there for this and that? There's a guy on the forum who has a shop in Burnley, selling white goods, so he's always on giving advice about fridges and freezers, etc."

(Interview with MinnieMouth, September 2014)

I then asked him why he felt that the forum members do this, considering the wealth of information available to them at their fingertips from Google and other such search engines;

"There's a bit of trust in there. You don't think you're going to get ripped off. On Google you don't know if you are getting the truth and on here, no one is deliberately trying to sell you a car or con you, you know?"

(Interview with MinnieMouth, September 2014)

*"That's because it only began as a football forum, I think it is a community and people have seen that you don't have to meet people (in person) to be in a community and **trust** them, for that matter,*

*people clearly trust the experience and what not of people who are posting on the forum, so if you ask a question and they trust, then, that people are going to answer it and will actually have some experience of **that**. Whatever it is. Whilst the people who don't have experience won't be posting bullshit answers that, you know, are designed to knock people off track or give them bad advice. That just doesn't happen."*

(Interview with notrigsbyscat, September 2014 – his emphasis)

It may well happen, in reality, but what is important here is that the perception of a long-time community member and their built-up experiences of the other members has left them in a position of trust in the reciprocal behaviours of one another. Like the comments above, from MinnieMouth, notrigsbyscat *assumes* that the advice and suggestions given by other community members are genuine, yet both are acutely aware of the potential for deception in online interactions and the former is particularly wary of deception from outsiders. It is because of the trust established and relationships that are formed on football fan forums, like this, that leads to fans such as what_no_pies consulting the community for advice on topics beyond football. Of all of the information available online and the review sites which can assist someone in planning a holiday, what_no_pies consulted, as many others do, the opinion of likeminded people that he knew and trusted. People he identified with.

The advice and help that is sought on the forum is most often about minutia such as this; holiday recommendations, IT queries, buildings services, and so on. For some community members, however, the forum becomes an appropriate place to seek support for much more personal issues. A wealth of academic literature exists on the growth of online support groups, the vast majority of which emanate from health professions. These studies have found that online support groups are a valuable resource because of their accessibility, providing information at any time and support from any location (which is particularly important to those whose medical conditions have restricted their mobility). They are not limited by geographical boundaries and, thus, present an opportunity to converse with others who may be experiencing rare conditions or circumstances (Davison, Pennebaker & Dickerson, 2000; Mead, Buchannan & Coulson, 2018). Online support groups also offer anonymity, which is particularly important to those who may need to discuss sensitive information (Coulson,

2008; Mo, Malik & Coulson, 2008), or those whose illness has a degree of social stigma attached to it (Liu et al, 2017; Davison, Pennebaker & Dickerson, 2000) and can empower individuals into making better choices related to their treatment and care (Coulson, 2008; van Uden-Kraan et al, 2008).

The seeking of advice from a community of football fans not only demonstrates the meaning and value of relationships that are formed between the forum members, but the willingness to share some of the most intimate and even troubling aspects of one another's lives adds further weight to the suggestion that genuine rapport and trust has developed among the community members that reside there. To such members, Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets have become safe environments to discuss significant issues. Although they may, additionally, seek out specific support forums and use anonymity to discuss sensitive information, it is interesting to note at this juncture that the fact many members know one another well (and, therefore, there is little to no anonymity when posting) is important to any explanation as to why they discuss such issues on a forum for fans of Burnley FC.

As I write this section, the forum members are currently offering their support and positive experiences to a member who is about to undergo a hip replacement operation. This is indicative of so many discussions threads on both forums during the period I have observed them. Once more, this clearly has nothing to do with football, but the thread was initiated by a member who felt the need to share their anxiety over the impending hospital visit and consequences of the operation with fellow community members;

"After some years of increasing gip with my arthritic hips, I'm due for the first of my hip replacements tomorrow morning ... a legacy of 20 years of scrums, lineouts, and general mayhem on the Rugby pitch. If I'd known then what it would entail in later life, I wouldn't have changed a thing my oldest & closest friends all date back to then, and had some great times ...

Starting to feel a little apprehensive now, despite outward bravado!! Mrs Clarets4me fussing round packing pyjamas, toiletry bag, reading material etc ...

Anybody else had it done or friends, relatives etc ?? I'd welcome some reassuring words at this point !!."
(Clarets4me, 'Total Hip Replacement Tomorrow...', post 1, 05/08/18)

As requested, the majority of replies were from community regulars who offered encouragement and stories of positive outcomes in similar situations, that they themselves had experienced directly or via family and friends;

"Mum had a double (not at the same time) but was literally on her feet after a week or so.. they really try to push you to stay active!"

One other thing she swears by is getting into yoga and Pilates (not a manly thing to do, but it has helped like nothing)"
(cockneyclaret, 'Total Hip Replacement Tomorrow...', post 4, 05/08/18)

"I had a knee replacement and my friend had a hip replacement. You're bound to be apprehensive, that's natural. You will be fine and eventually wished you'd had it done earlier. I say this often but listen to what the professionals tell you in regard to the exercises and rehabilitation, that's the important bit. Good luck with it, it will be well worth it."
(cockneyclaret, 'Total Hip Replacement Tomorrow...', post 5, 05/08/18)

"Best wishes Clarets4me. Knew you were going soon. I see an orthopaedic surgeon on 1st October to start my journey re my hips. I am also of the understanding that it is a routine op and they have you up and about as soon as."
(claretfern, 'Total Hip Replacement Tomorrow...', post 35, 05/08/18)

"As above Chris all the best...your humour will get you through it. Tim noone the Loone from Troon. ATB."
(tim_noone, 'Total Hip Replacement Tomorrow...', post 43, 05/08/18)

Not everyone who replied was a community member; some were infrequent contributors who had experiences of the operation to share or even expertise in the area, including one individual who was involved in the engineering research behind hip replacement technology and recent advancements. Many of the community members who did contribute had no such expertise or experience but knew clarets4me as a result of their interactions on the forum and simply wanted to wish him well, which is a trend that characterises such personal posts on the forum.

This was true of the experiences of IanMcL who, at the time of interviewing him in May 2015, was dealing with the recent loss of his wife. Football became an important coping mechanism for Ian who had decided to get a season ticket at Burnley FC, despite living over two hundred miles away in Salisbury. As he told me in the interview, he had decided to attend as many games as he could to

distract himself from the loss and ensure he filled as many of his days as possible with the things he enjoyed. He had also taken to the forum, before and after the death of his wife, to inform the rest of the community of the problems they were facing and of the loss he felt when she passed away. The reaction of the community and what it meant to him during this difficult period was something he reflected on at length in our discussion;

"That general ability to help and not only that but, when my wife was first on her way out and, then died, I said to people (on the forum) what happened, well, the amount of people - some that would have given me stick the night before, or the day before, or the week before, whatever – suddenly everybody seemed to think that this guy's affected by this and, bang, you know, "so sorry for you", and you think "yeah, it's worthwhile being on here, it's part of something". You might not think you are part of something, but you are part of something that is important. You shall be given your condolences, or what have you, or whatever else you need. That's important."
(Interview with IanMcL, May 2015)

As the quote above and the rest of our discussion revealed, IanMcL was touched by the volume of supportive comments he received in his hour of need. What is also interesting is the acknowledgment, above, that even when some degree of tensions exists between community members or there is a tendency for some of them to disagree with one another on a frequent basis, the level of respect between them and ability for such members to acknowledge the importance of one another, and the contributions they make, supersedes most conflicts.

As a researcher, this was the most humbling and, at the same time, difficult interview of the data gathering process. As well as the recorded interview itself, the way that IanMcL discussed his working life, political views and work, family, and football during my visit to his home revealed to me the passionate and open nature of the man himself. IanMcL wore his heart on his sleeve and freely discussed the things dearest to him in life, and the extent of his passion for them. It was difficult to avoid questioning myself here. Was I intruding at a vulnerable moment in his life? Was the opportunity to discuss such things with me helpful or harmful to Ian at all? As the afternoon progressed and the recorded interview began, I became more at ease with the process as our rapport developed further. Ian was clearly enjoying the opportunity to discuss,

among other things, his support for Burnley FC and his involvement in Clarets Mad.

Alongside the many insightful narratives he provided, from a research perspective, the most powerful focused on the Orient Game and how its significance to the history of Burnley FC itself was no less keenly placed in the history of Ian's own life, too.

"I just had to go, you know? I woke up in the morning and was all set to listen to the match on the radio, well, keep up with the scores, but I just had to go. I said to the wife 'Look, I've got to go to the game, I've got to be there'. I just got ready and went, just like that!"

"It was the strangest match I've been to...the feeling in the crowd, it was like they wouldn't let Orient get an equaliser. There were moments when they were attacking, you know, and it felt like the crowd were collectively blowing the ball away and defending the goal! Like, as if they were out there stopping it from happening. You could see it, out there, you know? It's hard to describe, but I could feel it – sense it. It was as if there was something stopping Orient's attacks and that the unthinkable (Burnley's potential relegation) wasn't being allowed to happen."

(Interview with IanMcL, May 2015)

At the time we were discussing this, it was apparent to me that the almost spiritual depiction of the events that unfolded that day would seem far-fetched, or that his memories and experiences of the game were simple being exaggerated or invented to most people. Yet Ian knew that the significance of the event was something I understood, as a fellow Burnley supporter, and as someone he knew through the message board community, that this was an opportunity to convey his experiences without fear of belittlement or a sense of bemusement from the listener. That willingness, to share a highly emotive and seemingly irrational moment, and the tangible excitement it generated in Ian himself when he was expressing it to me was truly memorable. It was almost as if he had been waiting for an opportunity like this. I'm grateful that our connection, as fans of the club and as members of an online community, helped to facilitate the sharing of such powerful and personal narratives.

Conclusion

This chapter began with an exploration of the experiences of exiled fans, starting with transnational supporters, and their place within football fan culture. Despite having their authenticity questioned, due to the fixation of the literature and media alike on elite clubs and their huge numbers of foreign supporters, the case study in question showed that, this is not always true of your average English club and its supporters. In the instance of Burnley FC and its small contingent of foreign fans, their support of the club is welcomed and celebrated rather than being as a threat to the identity of the club and its fan base. There are few questions regarding the authenticity of their support and, as the chapter showed with davemanu2000, lasting relationships have been formed between transnational fans and others who frequent the message board and their willingness to engage in reciprocal behaviours demonstrate some of the fundamental elements on which a genuine community is based, as outlined during the conceptualisation of this thesis in chapter two.

For exiled fans who originate from Burnley, or its surrounding areas, the chapter went on to explore the way that message board communities provide opportunities for such fans to maintain existing identity positions. Such identities have brought together like-minded people online and have been the genesis of a genuine online community. Rather than being a threat to the traditional local and geographic identities on which football fandom is based, the internet has actually facilitated the maintenance of such identities and allowed fans, from all over the world, to maintain contact and interaction with those who share their connection to the town of Burnley and/or its football club. Although many monologues are available, via local newspapers and the club's official website, the message board facilitates interaction with people who share those identities and can provide insightful news and experiences, opinions and perspectives, which are more in tune with the exiled fan. The sheer number of exiled fans who make use of the message board and, in turn, become part of the community there has also led to the formation of identities relating to that status as an exiled supporter of Burnley FC.

In exploring the experiences of exiled fans, the findings of this chapter have also revealed a great deal about the value of message boards to the community as a

whole. Not only have fans from afar used the board to gain information and seek advice about attending matches, but the forum's members at large have been able to turn to one another for advice and support on a range of issues. Some of those are as mundane and every day as can be - consumer advice, methods for household repair and maintenance, places to visit on holiday, etc. - information and advice for which other internet sites and forums might be useful and tailored towards. Others are more personal and traumatic, which one might think are better suited to discussions with family members. Yet it is the relationships formed between community members, the trust and rapport that they establish with one another, and the value they place on the opinion of those who share a similar sense of identity that leads members of this online community to the message board time and again in order to solve some of their daily dilemmas. The willingness to advise fellow fans, for the same reasons, is also abundantly evident and typical of the reciprocal behaviours I have observed between members of the community in question. The strength of such relationships, their importance to community members, and the reciprocal nature of their (supportive) interactions resonates strongly with the core features of online communities that were identified in chapter two.

CHAPTER SEVEN: IDENTITY TO PLACE, AND POWER INEQUITIES WITHIN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Introduction

During January of 2016, a decision was made by the site administrator for Clarets Mad, ClaretTony, and several of its senior members and moderators, to leave the Footy Mad network and establish their own discussion forum, 'Up the Clarets'. This was a significant problem for the Footy Mad network as a whole, as the Burnley message board was one of the most active discussion groups they had under their remit and it generated income from the adverts that were placed there. Most of their forums contain a few hundred discussion threads and posts, whilst Clarets Mad is one of a small number of messages boards within the network with over 24,000 discussions threads and over 374,000 posts (only the Arsenal Mad and Cardiff City Mad message boards boast greater figures within the network). It was also a significant move for the site's administrator, too, as he was paid for his work by Footy Mad and had invested many years developing the content on the site, only to leave for an unpaid role and have to restart the content that was produced. Whilst Clarets Mad continued thereafter, its popularity has dwindled significantly. The traffic has reduced to approximately 7% of its former levels, compared to when I began studying the forum, and contributions to discussion threads have also reduced considerably.²² Even the most popular ritualistic discussion, the match-day thread, struggles to inspire a large number of contributions. This is especially true when compared to its status before the January 2016 move and, more crucially, to the newly established forum.

The final findings chapter of the thesis will analyse this unexpected development and the causal factors that resulted in the change of forum location will be documented. More importantly, analysing the development more closely reveals significant two findings in relation to the conceptualisation of online community advanced within the second chapter. Firstly, it allows us to further our understanding of the newly formed identities that result from CMC; between community members, as well as to online places they frequent. Secondly,

²² Based on my observation of 'logged in user' and 'visitor' stats which the forum provides.

analysing the decision of those community members at the forefront of the change of location, and reactions from the community's membership at large to their decision, provided the research project with a significant body of data regarding power and status inequities between group members.

"The Forum is Dead; Long Live the Forum!"

In truth, although it was not inevitable, the move to Up the Clarets had been a long time in the making. A small group of Clarets Mad posters, the main administrator and several moderators among them, had set up an alternative message board and had begun testing it in late 2015. This was largely due to increasing tensions between the forum's owners (Footy Mad, that is) and its users, on Clarets Mad, for a couple of years preceding this. Frustrations were frequently expressed on Clarets Mad about the sites speed and efficiency, with users reporting lengthy loading times, particularly at peak times (match-days were notoriously bad, especially for post-match discussions), page loading failures and lost contributions (posts made by user that never appeared). Rather randomly, the 'search' function of the forum disappeared for many months and, during the Christmas period of 2014, the site was completely inaccessible for almost two weeks.

From a research perspective, this was a worrying period during my observation. The months leading up to the formation of a new message board, and those in the immediate aftermath of Up the Clarets being created, were fraught with anxiety about the feasibility of the study. It was clear that technological issues were discouraging contributors and impacting on the interactions within the community, but the idea of abandoning the Clarets Mad domain caused me a great deal of concern; that website facilitated communication between the community members I was observing and I couldn't help but be concerned that leaving it jeopardised the future of such interactions and thus the research project as a whole.

It was the opinion of many users that the forum structure and software was outdated and needed simplifying or replacing, in order for the site to run as efficiently as it had in the past. In 2015, problems with the website were

becoming more common and wide-ranging in nature; particularly troublesome was the inability of users to login, or that the site did not recognise their username and/or accounts, so new accounts had to be created if members wished to contribute. Many of these problems were raised in a thread on the new forum, to welcome users to Up the Clarets;

"Had been using CM for years but after I had 2 accounts mysteriously vanish with no support, I was relegated to spectator in proceedings."
(Dante.El.Chunk, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 33, 21/01/16)

"For the past few months I have been unable access the old site on my computer at home for more than a few seconds, before it went 'Clarets Mad is not responding'. I am planning to retire at the end of this year and I was worried I was going to lose touch with you all. No such problems with this site. So, thank you Tony, John and everyone else responsible for setting up Uptheclarets."
(lakedistrictclaret, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 63, 21/01/16)

"I had stopped using CM some time ago because it became so annoying to use. Well done to those who have set this up. It was much needed. UTC!"
(SleepingCat, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 107, 21/01/16)

In many ways, Clarets Mad was a victim of its own success. As the message board was so popular, it became littered with advertisements of all kinds by the parent network with the intention of maximising the revenues they could attain. Returning to the forum as I write this section, to see if things have improved, it would seem that the number of advertisements has reduced slightly but that they are still highly intrusive and dominate both the appearance and functionality of the message board. The screenshot below, whilst illustrating the kind of advertisements being placed and the sheer space they occupy on the forum's opening page, is limited by the fact that it cannot convey the extent to which those adverts intrude on the user's experience; from the flashing and moving images and pop-up windows that many of the advertisements adopt in particular. Such is the importance of advertising to the network at large that, even in the discussion threads, adverts of a substantial size are placed between member contributions, which break up the flow of the discussion for the reader.

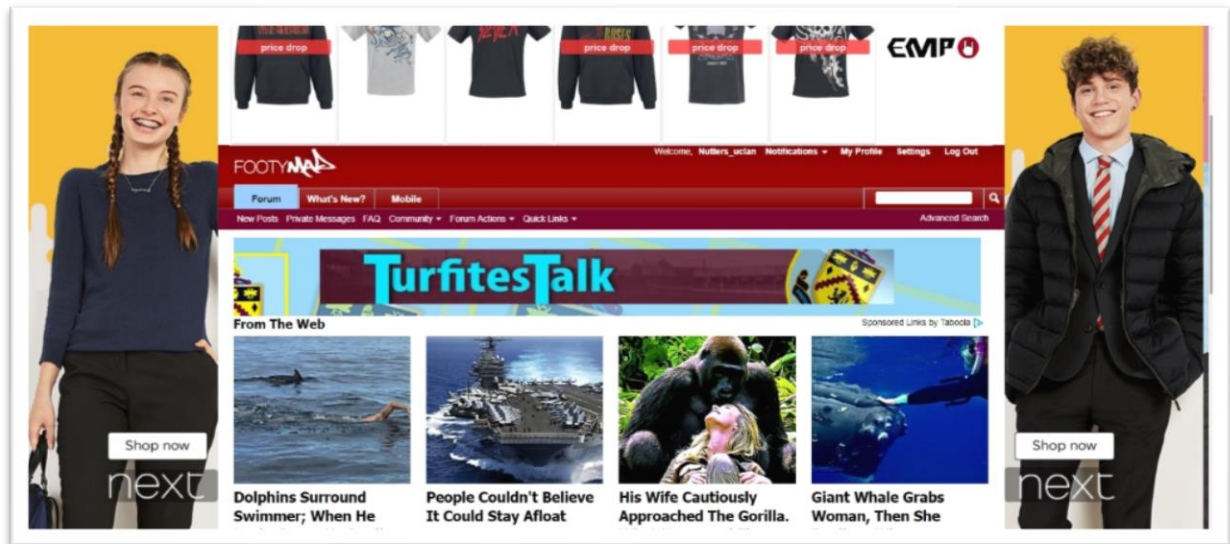


Figure Twelve: Clarets Mad Forum Adverts, 21/08/18

Before the move to Up the Clarets, many fans began to question if these advertisements were at the root of the forum's deteriorating performance in recent years. It was certainly at the forefront of the decision to move, as explained in the opening post of the new forum;

"Si tu id aeficas, ei venient...'Build it and they will come'... Burnley fans have been calling out for someone to 'bite the bullet' and build a platform, which can recreate that virtual pub...discussing, deliberating and debating all things Claret and Blue. We've done it before and now that jumping adverts are no-more, hopefully we can get back to what we used to do best.

I remain absolutely convinced, that a well-run, almost ad-free messageboard, more than still has a place with most Burnley supporting internet users. Whilst social media has grown at a great pace over the last ten years or so, forums such as these enable fans to interact in depth. I've found such forums invaluable."
(jdrobbo, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 1, 27/12/15 – 95 likes)

Many users were frustrated with the 'jumping' adverts, to which jdrobbo refers to in his post, which (towards the end of 2015) occurred every time the forum's main page was loaded and led to accidental advert clicks. Pages on the forum would only partially load at first, but would give just enough time for a user to read over the page which included the titles of each discussion. By the time the user would move their cursor to click on a topic of interest, the page would

'jump' as a result of loading a second set of images or adverts. Users were then viewing a topic that they had not initially chosen to view, or were faced with a succession of pop-up adverts as they had accidentally clicked on a link they did not intend to view. Notoriously, there were also reports that a few of the pop-up advertisements were pornographic in nature. After the new forum was established, several discussion threads on Clarets Mad were initiated by forum members providing links to the new site, saying their goodbyes to anyone opting not to join Up the Clarets, or explaining their reasons for leaving (or staying). The most consistent factor driving fans towards the new forum that was cited in such posts was the adverse impact of the advertisements on the forum's performance;

"People (including myself) are leaving in droves because of the ad saturation. As a lurker, I too enjoy reading the banter, news and all topics BFC related. However, I'm sick and tired of waiting for the pages to settle down because of the ridiculous amount of ads they feel we need to see.

The banter (and other topics) on the new site has already started with many of the older posters contributing. It is refreshing, entertaining and more importantly much more enjoyable to read than the 'I lost 32 stones in 10 mins'"

(CeeCideClaret, 'Wait! Before you all leave...', post 6, 22/11/16)

"To be fair the warning signs had been there, I stopped coming on here around 2 years ago because of the ever increasing ads (and porn ads!) I can count 13 ads on this page alone, that's more ads than posts. If they had listened to its customers when concerns were raised a while back this site would still be the best fansite going. Unfortunately profit came before people."

(BurnleyLiam, 'Wait! Before you all leave...', post 7, 22/11/16)

"its a little late to be making changes now, we wanted changes when the forum was changed from a great place to chat and have banter into a profit led, ad filled monstrosity".

(Rick_Muller, 'Wait! Before you all leave...', post 9, 22/11/16)

"At least on the new site you can click on a topic and read it. On here you try and it jumps of the page and you end up on the wrong thread. The new site is soooo much faster, I know which one I'll be using."

(Firthy, 'Wait! Before you all leave...', post 23, 22/11/16)

In terms of our understanding of the community being observed, there are a few interesting discussion points raised here. Firstly, there is the question as to why it took so long for the forum's members to leave a platform that was, for two to

three years, clearly unsuitable for the main purpose of their engagement with it – access to information about the football club they support and an opportunity to discuss it with likeminded individuals. Addressing this allows us to explore the importance of place to online communities and how new identities are formed as a result of the CMC between fans. Secondly, although some members decided to join Up the Clarets and continue to frequent Clarets Mad at the same time, the vast majority of users abandoned the latter in favour of the new forum location. It is interesting to analyse the explanations of both types of fans in this regard and explore their reasons for leaving, or staying, with Clarets Mad, as it reveals a great deal about the divide between community members and users, the significance of the forum to the lives of those who engage with it, and more about the norms and values which have emerged from the community members that reside there.

Identity Crisis? Personal and spatial identities in online communities

Criticism of the performance of Clarets Mad was becoming increasingly common in 2015 after a lengthy period which had been characterised by the issues outlined above. There had been a few previous attempts by fans to create alternative forums, including The Longside Lounge, which continues to this day but has a very small membership. However, most of them fizzled out within a couple of months as they were unable to capture a significant proportion of the Clarets Mad community, or other online Burnley fans, in order to create a sustainable message board membership or community in their own right.

The reluctance of Clarets Mad members to leave the forum owed much to the longevity of the message board itself and a strong identity many members had developed over the years to the virtual space that their discussions were contained within. That is not to say that place became the central unifying force on which the community was based, as many early sociological explanations of community purported (Bell & Newby, 1971; Stacey, 1969). Rather, it is an acknowledgement that the place (Clarets Mad) became a part of the identity of many community members who interacted there (Rheingold, 1993), and a significant marker of insider and outsider status (Cohen, 1985) which developed over the lengthy period of time that community members occupied this virtual

space. This is in line with the argument put forward by Wellman and Gulia (1999) that online communities are not only created by a shared sense of identity, but they also, in turn, *provide* social identity for members. As a result, the upheaval of the move to Up the Clarets, away from the familiar online space they were accustomed to, was difficult to accept for some at first;

"I just feel that, as a user of the site, the branding and look of the site just has that historical "feel good" factor to it; we all know it, it's ingrained in us (to an extent) and I just feel it's a shame for it just have the rug pulled from underneath it so quickly."
(BereavementDividend, 'Thoughts on the rebirth of Claretsmad', post 6, 22/11/16)

"CM really has been a part of my life for so long. Is there really any way back? I hope so!"

I love the banter, the dog's abuse and the forum and opinion. Just sad to see CM fall apart so rapidly. The new site is fantastic for communication purposes with fellow Clarets but the demise of CM feels like losing an old friend!"
(The Beddlington Terrier, 'Sadness Beyond Words', posts 1 & 21, 24/11/16)

"As a claretsmadder for many a year...I think why not give both sites your membership, it doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. I'll continue to support CM as it has provided me with so much over the years."
(KritiChris, 'Why not both sites?', post 1, 26/01/17)

To the community that resided there, Clarets Mad has become a significant aspect of their lives; the regularity of their visits and interactions with other community members had become important to them and any potentially permanent disruption to that was not to be taken lightly. Although many of the relationships formed between community members via Clarets Mad have developed and subsequently existed beyond the confines of the forum itself, there were still significant ties members had to one another which were reliant on the forum. A move away from Clarets Mad could jeopardise some of the relationships they had established.

It could also undermine the status of regular contributors among fellow community members. Even the loss of simple features, such as the display of how many posts each member had made, how long they had been a member

and the 'top post count', which highlighted who were the top twenty contributors, overall, were considered significant. These created public displays of the commitment and contribution each member had made to the forum's vibrancy and success; a form of intramural social capital which contributed to the status each member had within the community (Wellman et al, 2001).

"Do you know how long it took me to rack up 1000 posts on the "other site" , now I have to start again from scratch. Its a bit like first day at school all over again, excited but nervous all at the same time."

(KarateKid, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 129, 21/01/16)

"I have many happy memories as LincolnClaret (2,685 network posts to be precise), but it's time for a new name for a new beginning!"

Well done to all those who have been involved in building this new forum. To say Clarets Mad was getting tedious is an understatement. Dare I say this could be a Premier League forum for a Premier League team ha ha!!"

(Jlup1980, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 147, 21/01/16)

"it's nice you've all turned up, started posting and that but spare a thought for those of us who made 27631 posts last week only to have the counter reset this morning."

I'll never be top of the league again."

(DrPepper, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 150, 21/01/16)

Although a similar feature exists on Up the Clarets, a move to the new forum meant 'resetting' that data and building that public display of commitment from the beginning. Alongside an identity to the virtual space itself, the community members who resided there also had their own identities and online personas placed under threat by any potential move.

Identity to an online place, established relationships and online personas (which were tied to specific virtual spaces), were just some of the anchors which had discouraged the forum members of Clarets Mad from abandoning ship, despite the problems the message board was presenting them with. Again, the longevity of Clarets Mad also meant that the virtual space the members were so familiar with also contained the *community assets* they had collectively created. The rich virtual culture that had been established through ritualistic threads, such as the

Tinned Food Count and the Redbeard Generation Quiz; the fundraising initiatives, such as Dyche Night and the Clarets Mad Youth Foundation; the wealth of information built up through discussion threads; the sum total of each member's contributions to the success of the board; an era of Burnley Football Club's history and that of the online community itself – all of these were assets important to the community, but contained within the crumbling space of Clarets Mad.

Although some members of the forum became less active, inactive, or left altogether as a result of the site's instability, the majority of the core community members that resided there remained. However, a significant number of posters had decided to contribute less during the site's period of instability;

"Hello hello hello... Can honestly say that not posted on CMAD for easily well over 12months... Have kept a passing interest but that is all. Fingers crossed that this new one reignites not just mine, but many others lost love for a proper Clarets message board... UTC."
(monkeythief, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 267, 21/01/16)

"Well done to all concerned. I've been on CM since the early days (different username) but posted less and less until it just became reading the posts and I've even been doing that less and less too due to how unusable it became. What a pleasant experience it is reading this message board."
(twistedbyknives, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 276, 21/01/16)

"I used to post regularly (far, far too regularly...) on Clarets Mad, but the deluge of ads and general slowness/oldness was wearing thin. Great to see someone has finally gone for it with this."
(jedi_master, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 212, 21/01/16)

This reveals to us another facet of online communities hitherto unexplored in this thesis; the interactions between community members are tied to the technology itself. As a result, therefore, the subsequent features of a genuine online community that emerge from such interaction (as outlined in the conclusion of chapter two) are also dependent on the technology. The technology needs to adequately facilitate communication between members in order to create the conditions from which features of an online community can emerge. If that technology fails and interaction between community members

suffers as a result, the behaviours which typify an online community cannot be sustained. Once again, contributions to the thread that welcomed fans to the new forum were revealing in this regard;

"Many thanks to all concerned (In establishing Up the Clarets). Not much gets me excited these days but this is like a late Christmas present. Always enjoyed the flippant debates and the more profound topics in equal measure but so many interesting posters had disappeared or backed down, leaving juvenile arguments."
(Arnold Benson, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 258, 21/01/16)

"It was grim logging on and seeing fewer and fewer CM stalwarts. That's NOT meant to be offensive to new Clarets reading and/or registering on this forum. On the contrary, the more the merrier. But it's great to hear from Clarets who'd been put off by the policy of FM."
(ecc, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 272, 21/01/16)

"I feel the slow decline of CM wasn't just down to the state of the site. Too often over the past 18 months it has become a platform for a small number of posters to trade insults, childish jibes and foster personal duels and I for one found it had become boring beyond belief. I hope this marks a return to healthy debate aligned with honest opinions about a multiplicity of subjects, something we all enjoyed I'm sure."
(johnmac, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 186, 21/01/16)

As the first contributor, *Arnold Benson*, highlights, the declining number of contributions from community members led to a break down in the self-policing of over-zealous, personal and unacceptable comments. The norms and values of the Clarets Mad community were starting to break down, to some extent, as regular posters, whose contributions helped to establish these, were posting less frequently.

As others also remarked, like *jdrobbo's* comment that opened the welcoming post to Up the Clarets, the changing nature of online interactions and the growth in popularity of social media has also had an impact on online communities like the one in question. He pinpointed the growth of social media as being a significant development since Clarets Mad had begun; a challenge to such forums, but one that could not compete with the interactive possibilities that message board communities offer. Others too noted the emergence of social

media platforms and how football fans had taken to them in increasing number, whilst reflecting on the impact this has had on Clarets Mad;

"I'm not sure "the glory days" of CM can ever be recreated owing to the shift to social media, but like Robbo, I also feel that a functioning message board very much has its place."

(DavePTClaret, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 109, 21/01/16)

With that development in mind, it cannot be said that the strength of community ties and the relationships that are formed there are everlasting for all members concerned. In close-knit communities of any kind, new members are acquired, and established members leave - there is nothing unique with the community in question in this regard. What is interesting with online communities, however, is that the technology that facilitates the interaction between members is integral to the decision as to whether to join, persist with, or leave online communities.

People are increasingly accessing the internet via mobile devices rather than personal computers, particularly for personal and social activity. Mobile devices are now the most popular means of accessing the internet with 77% of all adults in the UK, and 97% of adults aged 25-34, accessing the internet 'on the go' (ONS, 2018). The availability and convenience of bespoke apps for social media platforms and the way in which users can seamlessly integrate their interests/hobbies into their everyday social interactions, via platforms such as Facebook and Twitter especially, are drawing potential and existing members away from message boards such as Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets. When community ties weaken for some members, or the underlying purpose for the interaction between fans is superseded by a more convenient or effective platform, they may choose to interact less frequently with the community at large or even altogether.

As a result of the difficulties Clarets Mad was experiencing in 2014 and 2015, community ties had weakened for some members, as interaction between them became so much more difficult or cumbersome. As mentioned, some established community members were lost along the way or they began to contribute less frequently. Gradually the conditions were being created that meant that, when a significant group of the community members (rather than just users) of the site

decided to establish a new home for the community, the failings of the Clarets Mad forum and its underlying technology outweighed the strength of identity most members had to that virtual space. It left many members willing to leave behind a place of importance and risk losing the community assets and personal status they had built, in order to ensure the community itself survived long term. Such was the importance of those community assets, however, that many of the early contributions to Up the Clarets were based on concerns about them;

"What is going to happen to the CM Youth Foundation Fund? Will this transfer to the new Forum?"

(The Enclosure, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 20, 21/01/16)

"Will threads from CM move across or will new ones need creating?"

(Macca, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 8, 21/01/16)

"Great work everyone. It's about time we were freed from the shackles of FootyMad, and I'm glad the thing that makes CM so good (users and content) have all migrated (or in the process of being)."

(ClaretGeoff, 'A Warm Welcome to the Bee Hole End - a new online home for Burnley fans!', post 43, 21/01/16)

To summarise this section, the findings of this thesis have revealed how the combined significance of; 1, community assets; 2, respected community members; 3, the development of strong identities to virtual places; and 4, the deteriorating technology on which the message board was based, resulted in so many Clarets Mad members leaving to join Up the Clarets at this particular point in time. There had been several previous opportunities to do so, when The Longside, No Nay Never and other discussion forums for Burnley fans were established and, as the evidence above has shown, discontent with the forum's underlying systems had been apparent for some time. However, without the prospect of interaction with established and respected community members, or a wealth of community assets to take with them, the identity fans had to the message board and community residing there was able to override technological obstacles for the majority. When so many of the community's key members were behind the establishment of an alternative forum and the prospect of most of the community's assets following them was apparent, these developments,

together with the failings of the technology, outweighed the strength of people's identity to that virtual place.

“It's like being in an argument, but only one voice is heard”: Questioning the Representativeness of Content, Power Equity and the Administration Of Message Boards.

One of the interesting insights provided by the interaction of fans over the collapse of Clarets Mad regards the power and status held by different community members and users. Theoretically, internet forums have democratised football fandom; they provide a voice to a significant proportion of football fans and allow many to have their say on matters which would otherwise be constrained (Nash, 2000; Millward, 2008b). This is not a new or revolutionary development, but one that has gradually evolved in the second half of the twentieth century. Since the introduction of Fanzines, in particular, before the possibilities of the internet were available and then realised, there was a flourishing representation of fan experiences and opinions from the 1980s. This allowed fans to vociferate their opposition to the way they were being treated and to some political and commercial developments within the game. It has been argued that football fan message boards are a direct successor to that fanzine era, as the increasing availability of the internet and ease of access to it led, in turn, to the migration of the traditional fanzine and its content into the digital world (Duke, 1991; Jary, Horne & Bucke, 1991; Haynes, 1995; Millward, 2008b).

However, as Haynes (1995) and Millward (2008b) suggest, there are distinct political leanings and values which underpin the fanzine movement as a whole and the content of such works, therefore, reflect the left-wing and liberal ethos of many of their producers. Jary, Horne and Bucke (1991) and Millward (2008b) also refer to research which suggests the content producers themselves are by no means representative of football fans as a whole. We must, therefore, be cautious when drawing conclusions from material that is, overwhelmingly, the creation of a white, male, middle class and often educated strand of football fans. Even if message boards further democratise football by facilitating the expression of a multitude of fan opinions and practises, which had been

previously restricted to a few middle-class writers in the fanzine era, we must still remain cautious about the content within them and analyse the power differences between content producers in order to ascertain how representative they are.

This is a challenging aspect of community relations and interaction to research. It is difficult to compile relevant data and to ensure that what is captured accounts for the entire spectrum of community users and members. Clearly, the content of a longstanding community forum, like that which now resides at Up the Clarets, is affected by the relationships and culture that have been formed by its members. It is, therefore, difficult to be precise about the impact that these can have on forum members and users alike and, thus, the missing voices and the *potential content* that has been subsumed by the community that has developed there.

Although there were a few instances of observable criticism of the message board's administrator and his moderation team, over the course of my observations, it was not until the switch to Up the Clarets occurred that the size of the 'missing voice' was revealed and the significance of some of my interviewee's testimony become clear. Upon leaving Clarets Mad, the Footy Mad network decided to ban ClaretTony, as well as other posters who provided links to the newly formed forum and encouraged Clarets Mad members to join. At the same time, they also reversed the existing bans that were in place, irrespective of their length or the purpose for their existence. Clarets Mad was suddenly awash with an outpouring of criticism aimed at the previous leadership, and ClaretTony in particular. When responding to a specific thread, which discussed whether members should leave Clarets Mad and join Up the Clarets, ChineseCasualClaret made his feelings clear as to why the existing forum was experiencing issues;

"Why bother (leaving)? Now Tony and his gang have gone all the cool people will be returning.

I, like yourself, am rejoicing, we can say Brian Laws is crap again without getting banned for being negative!!!²³

²³ Brian Laws was manager of Burnley FC from January 2010 to December of the same year. Although a popular player for Burnley FC in the 1980s, his appointment as manager was not well received by many fans.

Pre-Tony this site was much better, since he arrived he steadily banned everyone who disagreed with him and worse, filled the whole forum with adverts...the leaving of one massively unpopular editor won't make much of a difference, it is after all, about football. I notice it failed to make the national news..."
(ChineseCasualClaret, 'Wait! Before you all leave...', 22/11/16)

Others continued to refer to the previous leadership with sarcastic and pejorative remarks in a number of threads regarding the recent upheaval;

"Quite true and I'm sure a lot of the posters on Cartel Toeknees Splinter group site will read and post on both sites and quite right to do so too, as we are all Clarets fans, I don't see a problem with that."
(chipmunkclaret, 'Why not both sites?', 27/11/16)

"This site feels much better already now CT and his clique have gone. I'm sure whoever comes in next will do a much better job and get this site back to how it was in the glory days of The Prof (RIP)."
(OldBurnleyGal, 'Thoughts on the rebirth of Claretsmad', 22/11/16)

Upon reflection, there is a limitation to the data that was gathered and the research process. Whilst the distinction between outsiders and insiders was a consideration I outlined in the conceptualisation of an online community, throughout chapter two, the importance and extent of banned members was not considered until the shift away from Clarets Mad had occurred and, therefore, the opportunity to conduct meaningful interviews with fans who had been ostracised by the moderation team was lost. It would have been fruitful to interview such fans to gain an insight from the perspective of community outsiders, but it was not apparent to me how many there were and for what reasons they were banned until this significant event happened. However, returning to my fields notes and interview transcripts again did allow me to explore this issue further. Although not ideal, in terms of research design, doing so allowed me to gain an understanding regarding the power dynamics within the community and the influence these have on both the message board's content as well as the community's membership. One of my interviewees was

Subsequent relegation, from the club's first season in the Premier League, and a poor start to the 2010/11 season failed to improve this and ultimately led to his dismissal.

particularly revealing, as he discussed at lengths the nature of forum moderation and the impact this has had on him personally;

"We know this very well from Tony and his heavy handedness, with a couple of the other mods. I went through a period of heavy censorship from him, or from his course, to the point where...I stopped feeling the benefit of participation and walked away from it. For me, in my measure, and I think this is one of the issues that prevails (with the message board), is that Tony owns it, in inverted commas. I don't know how it precisely works but I assume he picks up a salary or a commission. The problem with that is that the censorship of the moderation of the board is dictated by an individual who sets the tone, as opposed to a higher level of governance which a forum of this size possibly needs.

We all know and we all accept the style of moderation, if we want to participate. So, in my case, when I didn't accept that style of moderation, because I felt that it went beyond moderation into being something personal, I went away and went to the other forums. No Nay Never, for example.. [but I] wasn't getting my fix of the, err, virtual social group.

I felt I had no choice to reluctantly go back to Clarets Mad and accept the limitations, no the imposition of the governance – no, not governance, it's actually the exact opposite of governance as it's an autocracy. I tend not to throw opinions out there anymore, so in terms of my own actions and participation, interviewee A (refers to current username) is less controversial than I may have been previously. Where my controversy would have come from would be knowledge based intellectual argument, which would get censored by the moderators from their intellectual perspective. It's like being in an argument, but only one voice is heard."
(Interviewee A, from 2014)

The suggestion here is that the moderation team and process is driven by the message board's figurehead and, more pertinently, his own bias. The moderators themselves are selected by an individual, rather than by the community at large. The content they choose to moderate, or members they tend to sanction, is underpinned by a commercial motive as the forum's success leads to direct financial benefits for the Footy mad network and, in turn, the forum administrator. Crucially, the contributions many community members make (or choose to omit) are made in the knowledge of what is deemed acceptable or otherwise to a small group of powerful members. This last point was something two of my other interviewees also alluded to;

"I've fallen out with him (ClaretTony) – well, I've said something and he's fallen out with me, on that basis! He don't change, does he? He just bangs his answer out and that's the end of it. You just have to shrug your shoulders and say 'tomorrow's another day'...You'd just say something and he'd take exception to it, you come back and justify it and he chops it off – or chops you off, whatever, suspends you for a day. I got suspended for a day once; I can't remember what it was about but we were having a disagreement and he decided I needed a rest! [laughs]. It's wasn't something dramatic, just a straightforward disagreement, but you have to accept it."

(Interviewee E, from 2014)

"I am opinionated, so if something's going on I would reply. You always get people who take the opposite point of view – nobody violently the other way though. I get the impression ClaretTony doesn't like me. There's a lot of things I put on and he has a little dig back at me on there. He disagrees with me on quite a few things. It's not that I say black and he says white, it'll just be a little thing about Burnley (the football club). I'll say something and then the next reply will be him coming across me. I don't take it to heart; he doesn't really know me so it's not personal. That is what a forum is for, different opinions".

(Interviewee B, from 2014)

In both instances, the interviewees demonstrate their acceptance of the forum's moderation process, the power and influence of its administrator and the inevitability of opposing opinion which characterises CMC on a message board for football fans. However, this reveals a great deal about the influence a message board's moderation team has on the content and membership which, in turn, determine the character and culture of an online community.

Until this point, the thesis has distinguished between online community users and members but, conceptually, has understood those two positions as being self-defining. A football fan either chooses to interact with other forum members, or simply consume the content that those members produce passively. A fan chooses to contribute to a community of likeminded people, or take from that community without reciprocating their efforts. However, it is clear that the status a fan has, as either a message board member and user, is not always under their direct control. For many, the willingness to contribute to the community and interact with fellow fans has been present, but what they contribute and the nature of their interaction with other community members has gone against the opinions, values and expectations of a small group of

powerful members and their status has thus been defined for them. What is left behind, as a result, is a message board membership whose personalities are able to adhere to expectations of that minority and the potential sanctions and 'heavy handedness' should they cross the line; as interviewee E suggested "you shrug your shoulders and tomorrow's another day" or, as interviewee A explained more directly, "we all know and we all accept the style of moderation, if we want to participate". As such, the content produced by the membership of Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets and the community that has developed cannot be said to be representative of Burnley supporters at large.

Whether or not a commercial motive behind the moderation process is genuine or not is difficult to substantiate, but it is significant to the *perception* many forum members have about the decisions made by ClaretTony and his team. Whether commercial or otherwise, there is the feeling among many forum members that a distinct agenda exists and that certain types of forum posts are much more likely to receive censorship than others. In particular, use of foul language (and attempts to bypass the forum's language filter) and posts about the club and team which are deemed overly negative are less accepted. The latter of these points was alluded to by ChineseCasualClaret, above, when discussing his new found freedom to express discontent with Brian Laws being manager of Burnley without being perceived as being overly negative. The former point was documented in a couple of the interviews I conducted;

"One or two have been banned. There was chriscantforgive. He's not been on for a long time because he was banned. He was a bloody good laugh and I got on really well with him. He swears a lot and he doesn't take any shit off anybody, either! He tells people straight and the editor, perhaps, doesn't like the way he conducts himself on there, you know, so he's banned him a few times and now he has a permanent one

I can understand why he got banned; he used to give a lot of stick to, err, opposition fans who came on there, but it was the swearing more than anything [laughs]. He swears all the time. I know him personally, and that's how he speaks! [laughs]. He's really funny, hilarious, a good laugh. I sometimes see him outside the match, the ground".

Grannyjo is another. She's banned, but we see her outside the ground before matches"

(Interviewee C, from 2014)

"We went through a spell where he just seemed arsey about everything I wrote, all because I dared to have a pop at the club, the board, about the transfer window. I just try and stay out of his way now. I'd write something and he'd be there - to correct me - even if it was nothing to do with transfer, or money, you know? It's like he enjoyed correcting me, and others too, just because we didn't think the club was getting it, absolutely everything, right."

(Interviewee D, from 2014)

The interview testimony above, coupled with data from the forums, suggest that there are distinct limits to the notion of free speech and democratic ideals flourishing within football fan discussion forums. In the case study in question, the basis of restrictions are, at times, rather arbitrary in nature, as a small group of moderators and a distinct leader determine the basis of what is, and what is not, acceptable within discussion threads. Forum contributors who post on a regular basis and become active community members are those who have identified the abrasive personality of the forum's editor and have subsequently taken steps to limit their interaction with him to avoid conflict, have recognised and come to terms with the authoritarian nature of the forum's leadership, and have accepted the likelihood of sanctions or derision that follow a clash of opinion with that person and his moderation team. As Millward remarked;

'As a group outsider, the offensive comments do not seem as controversial as some seemingly inoffensive statements given by popular posters...Therefore, although e-zines are democratic insofar as all fans are entitled to their own opinions, not all supporter voices have equal power when "threads" are constructed' (Millward, 2008b: 304).

As the findings of this chapter have shown, we can add to Millward's statement by pointing to evidence which shows that fans alter the content of their posts and constrain their opinions when it is understood that it might contravene the opinions of those in power. Furthermore, the opinions of many dissenting voices, whilst seemingly inoffensive but going against those who moderate the forum, are silenced by temporary or even permanent bans which are handed out by a small group of community members granted the authority to do so. Crucially, the evidence also shows that the inequity of power, to which Millward (2008b) refers, imposes significant restraints on the status a forum member can acquire. Their position as a community member or user, irrespective of their intent or desire, is largely shaped by forces outside of their control.

The points raised by my observations and interviewees were all areas I would have loved to have explored more directly, with the administrator in question. Although I, personally, had not experienced negative interactions with ClaretTony and found him very supportive of this research project at the outset, I decided not to request an interview with him. Based on the occasions that we did speak to one another, together with his online demeanour towards others, I felt that an interview which touched upon the subject matter discussed above had the potential to cause offence or elicit a negative reaction. Intuitively, I decided against jeopardising the future of the research project as a result of upsetting him by raising the idea of heavy-handed moderation, control and authority, or personal gains he made from running the forum. Likewise, if pseudonyms could have been effective in this instance and it were at all possible to have protected the identity of the administrator in question, I would have done so. Unfortunately, their prominence on the forum meant that any outsider to the community in question would have been able to identify the person in question online with only a cursory attempt at doing so. The subject matter covered here was also too critical to an understanding of the community in question to be omitted, but it has not been easy to include and has presented me with some rather uncomfortable dilemmas as a researcher.

Conclusion

The final findings chapter of the thesis has explored two key themes which became apparent to the researcher as a result of a largely unexpected, but very significant development for the group being studied. The community left their long-standing home, Clarets Mad, in the early weeks of 2016 and reconvened at a new location, Up the Clarets. Such a move was difficult for some to accept, especially at first, given the length of time they had been frequenting that site and the potential disruption a move may have caused to the strong ties they had formed with the community there and its members.

As the previous chapters had shown, particularly in the analysis of ritualistic discussion threads, the members of Clarets Mad had developed a rich and innovative digital fan culture there. As a result, a number of community members had developed strong identities to the virtual space of Clarets Mad itself; the URL was home to a wealth of cultural assets they had produced,

characters and personalities they had created (each with their own unique and acknowledged status), and a lengthy history which defined a distinct era of their support for Burnley FC at large.

Whilst Clarets Mad continues to exist and a smaller group of fans utilise the forum to interact, the vast majority of community members being studied no longer contribute to discussions at that internet locale. The technological failings of that virtual space had, for a couple of years prior to the move, started to undermine the CMC between community members and weaken the ties some of them had to the community at large. In the conceptualisation of online communities offered in chapter two, I argued that the *emergence* of key community elements results from interactions, via CMC, between those who have a shared interest, identity or something in common. As this chapter has subsequently shown, that interaction is also crucial to the *maintenance* of such online communities and we are, therefore, able to further our conceptual understanding of how the online community operates in this specific context. Where technological issues undermine the interaction between members, the bonds between them can subsequently weaken too. Fortunately, for the community in question, a decision to leave the Footy Mad network was not left too late; the intrusive advertisements and poor performance of Clarets Mad had eroded the identity to that virtual place for many and weakened it sufficiently for others. Sufficiently, that is, to facilitate migration to a new platform and location, where the established community members were moving to and as much of the rich digital culture and its community assets that they created could be taken with them.

As unexpected as the move to Up the Clarets was, what that move revealed in terms of the authoritarian leadership of the forum and the extent of the power inequities between forum members was even more surprising. Although message boards have been seen as an extension of the democratisation of football fandom, the findings of this thesis add weight to the argument that researchers need to use the data they gather with caution and thoroughly scrutinise the perspective such data represents. In this instance, had the change of forum location not occurred, the hidden voices of a number of ostracised fans would not have been picked up by the ethnographic observation on which the research for this thesis was based.

However, the discontent expressed by Burnley fans who had been censored by the editor of Clarets Mad and his moderation team, as well as suggestions about the basis of that censorship, led to some revealing insights as a result of triangulating this data with the interviews I had previously conducted. This analysis revealed the extent of the power held by a small group of members over the community at large and significantly shaped the content of the contributions that community members made, the discussion topics they initiated and the discussion threads they were likely to take part in. Not only that, but it suggests that this represents the 'tip of the iceberg' when it comes to 'potential content' that has been lost over the years and that which has not been encapsulated by this research project and its design. I will now attend to this issue and other avenues for further research within the conclusion of the thesis.

CONCLUSION

The thesis has furthered our understanding of the role that the internet plays in modern football fandom and, more specifically, the way that fans communicate with one another on the internet. Allied to this, it has also assessed whether or not genuine communities of fans are established online as a result of the interaction between fans via CMC.

This has helped to answer recent calls for more academic attention to the online activities of football fans (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010; Gibbons & Nuttall, 2014) and has added to the growing number of studies that have utilised online interactions between sport fans as a source of data for their studies (Mitrano, 1999; End, 1999; McMenemy et al., 2005; Ruddock, 2005; Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Millward, 2008a & 2008b; Poulton & Durell, 2016). However, none of the cited studies have focused on the CMC between fans as the actual subject of enquiry in itself, and have, instead, used those interactions as a means to develop an understanding of wider issues relating to sport. This thesis has helped to fill that gap by engaging in a prolonged ethnographic study of a single group of fans, whose predominant form of interaction is via CMC.

The thesis has provided further originality by identifying the key elements of social interaction which constitute an online community and has used these to analyse the content produced by a specific group of fans. In order to do so, the thesis has offered an explicitly outlined model of what is meant by 'online community' and has avoided the imprecise, vague and rhetoric use of the term community which is commonplace within the study of football fan culture. After reviewing the work of a number of key contributors to the sociological understanding of communities and, subsequently, online communities, this thesis has proposed a distinct set of criteria that demonstrate the existence of an online community. This enables the term 'online community' to retain conceptual and analytical value by, first, identifying the 'online' attribute without resorting to dichotomous distinctions with face-to-face communities and, secondly, by rescuing the term community from its conflation with other collective nouns within the academic study of football fans.

Research for the thesis began with a conceptualisation of the online community as a sequential process, which is initiated by CMC between a group of people

who were brought together by a shared interest, identity or something in common. Resulting from this CMC and interaction between the members of a group, there are distinct norms, values, meaningful relationships and insider/outsider statuses that emerge. Many of the interactions between members are characterised by reciprocal behaviours and, alongside this, an identity to an online space and fellow community members also develops. Whilst community members may interact in a variety of ways, CMC remains important to their engagements with one another once the community has formed.

This concept was then applied to the fans that interacted on the Clarets Mad and, latterly, Up the Clarets message boards. Almost six complete football seasons of observation and eight interviews later, the findings of this thesis have shown that the fundamental components of genuine online communities can be detected in modern football fandom. Despite the concerns about internet use and virtual communications within the study of football fans, and fears over the declining significance of community in wider sociological literature, the core elements of an online community that formed the conceptual basis of the thesis have been conveyed in abundance throughout the findings chapters. As I assess these, in turn, the questions initially proposed by the thesis are addressed; why do football fans choose to interact online and what is the nature of CMC between them? And, what norms and behaviours can be observed within such communities?

The significance of the relationships formed between community members was a reoccurring feature of chapters three to seven. The first of these, focusing on the ritualistic threads that permeate discussion topics on the message board, highlighted the strong familiarity that has developed between members as a result of their regular and, in some instances, structured opportunities to interact with one another. Significant friendships have emerged, and community members have become intimately aware of several facets of one another's personal lives and circumstances. They have shown concern and empathy for one another when personal problems or health issues arise, a sense of loss when key members pass away, and great endeavour to ensure that such members are respected and remembered for their contributions to the online community. Many have arranged to meet in person, at matches, message board community

events and, with one significant community member in particular, even whilst holidaying on the island of Mauritius.

These meaningful relationships are characterised by the trust and rapport that has developed between members over time. Such factors are key to the reciprocal behaviours that characterise many of the contributions made by community members to the message board. With regards to football itself, chapter four analysed the selfless way that community members have relayed verbatim coverage of radio commentary (and/or their observations from watching the match on television) for the benefit of others. They are willing to sacrifice aspects of their own consumption of the match in order to share their experience of being a Burnley fan with others, whilst ensuring those who are unable to access the match have enough information to follow the fortunes of their beloved team.

More importantly, these reciprocal behaviours, like many of the discussion threads on the message board, extend beyond the confines of football. Many community members willingly offer and give their help and advice to fellow Burnley supporters. Typically, this is about the minutia of daily life - product recommendations, IT queries, buildings services and maintenance, and so on. Despite the plethora of information available on the internet to address almost all of the enquiries that are made, members of the online community in question turn to one another, contributors of a forum for football fans, in order to seek the answers they need. They do so in order to receive reliable information; they trust the opinion and advice of people they have a shared identity with and they place significant value on the advice of specific members whose contributions and status they have come to know and associate with authenticity. As the thesis has shown, in chapter six, this also facilitates the sharing of deeply personal and sometimes traumatic circumstances that have occurred in the lives of several community members.

The strength of the relationships that are formed and the frequency of interaction between community members has led to the formation of insider conventions, knowledge and a distinct digital culture. Although not deliberate in an attempt to exclude fans from membership of the online community, the unique aspects of the digital fan culture that has been created by ritualistic

discussion threads, such as match-day discussions and the Tinned Food Count, the characters and mascots that are invented, such as Madge, and the traditions or conventions that become the norm, such as use of the term puffs, are only fully understood in terms of their meaning by those who have engaged with the message board extensively and for a prolonged period of time. As such, although not intentionally exclusive in nature, they are frequently referred to by community members as a way of demonstrating the insider knowledge they have as well as their *belonging* to the online community that has created them.

As with all communities, whether online or otherwise, Clarets Mad and Up the Clarets attracted fans from differing backgrounds and circumstances, resulting in a broad range of opinions and experiences to share within the discussion threads. Inevitably, this resulted in numerous instances of debate and even conflict. It has been through an analysis of these debates and conflicts that this thesis has been able to further our understanding of the norms and values of this specific community of football fans. It has also demonstrated how these norms and values are renegotiated over time, through debate and conflict which has been informed by wider discourses and issues (in both football and society at large).

Chapter five, in particular, focused on the way the community engaged with increasing concerns about the extent and severity of homophobia in football. Numerous bespoke discussion threads were created to address the topic directly, and such was the pervasiveness of the issue that it arose in the discussion of many (seemingly) unrelated topics. Several community members and users expressed strong opinions on the matter, with some vehement defences of the anti-homophobia movement being advanced, as well as equally vociferous arguments about the way that the issue is being overstated or, worse, part of a more disturbing agenda. Collectively, these threads demonstrated that community members were able to debate subjects that were controversial in nature, despite some rather polarised differences of opinion, because the understood norms and values of the community had a significant influence on the way they interacted with one another. There were obvious signs of passionate opinion about the topic from several community members, but each contribution they made was given with an awareness of the impact it may have on the status, reputation and social capital they had within the community. As

such, personal attacks, abusive behaviours and language, and the use of offensive terms to describe homosexuals were omitted from such debates, as they had the potential to undermine the point being made and, more importantly, the reputation of the contributor within the community.

Engagement with the issue of homophobia also resulted in a change to a fan practise that had become a tradition arising from the earliest match-day discussion threads on Clarets Mad. Since its introduction by holycustard, the use of the term 'puffs' to describe opposition players and teams was a commonplace moniker, used regular by community members as a pejorative term but not in relation to sexuality. However, debates over the issue of homophobia in football promoted some community members and users alike to question the continued use of the term. This opened up insightful discussions about the potential ways the term could be read and misread and that, given the attempts to eradicate the abuse of homosexuals within football, it would be better to desist using it. Despite the very occasional use of 'puffs' within subsequent match-day threads, since September 2013 this particular tradition has given way to a community consensus that the use of pejorative terms regarding homosexuality are not acceptable. Even if its use was not intentionally directed at homosexuals, community members accepted that it could be construed as homophobic and offend people, which goes against the norms and values of the online community at large.

However, contrary to much of the literature concerning the extent of homophobia within football (Anderson, 2009; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2013; Macgrath & Anderson, 2017) and an argument that modern football fandom is characterised by the development of inclusive masculinities within society at large (Anderson, 2007; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; McGrath and Anderson, 201) the findings of this thesis are that the norms and values regarding sexuality, within the online community that has formed the case study here, demonstrate the continued existence and dominance of traditional masculinity and heteronormativity, as well as the persistent subordination of homosexuals and trivialisation of their experiences. Added to this, despite the potential to offend a section of fans or society at large, the issue of homophobia was a secondary concern when placed alongside the prosperity of Burnley FC and its team (Ruddock, 2005; Millward, 2008a). Although it was not the

intention of this thesis to explore the issue of homophobia at the outset, nor is there scope to fully explore the ramifications of my findings in relation to that issue here, by exploring the norms and values of a specific online community of football fans this thesis has provided rich qualitative data to suggest that homophobic discourses and heteronormativity are ubiquitous features of modern football fandom. Whilst it is encouraging to note that communal norms and values can curtail the use of abusive terms and are able to reshape fan practises which contribute to this, further research into specific fan communities and their values regarding sexuality would enlighten us further regarding the extent and severity of the issue.

Finally, the conceptualisation of online communities offered in chapter two centred on the emergence of new identities – to the community itself and the virtual space they occupy. As our final findings chapter revealed, the deterioration of the virtual space that was Clarets Mad, due to technological problems, was a concern to community members. So too was the eventual decision to rehome the community at a new location, in early 2016, at the Up the Clarets message board. Although the extent of the technological issues meant that the vast majority understood that the move was a necessity, in order for the community to continue to thrive, it was not without an outpouring of sentiment and attachment to the space they had frequented for so long. Tied to that place was a degree of security for the status and reputation of members; the importance of which has been highlighted numerous times throughout the findings of this research. That space was also the depository for a wealth of community assets and a history that were significant features of the digital fan culture they had been collectively created. More important, however, was an identity to the community itself and its members. The intrusive nature of advertisements and the poor performance of the Footy Mad platform had been endured for a number of years before it was deemed necessary to seek a new virtual home; one that could facilitate effective CMC and interaction between community members.

Limitations and Future Research

In line with an interpretivist approach, this thesis has analysed the findings of its underpinning research in an inductive manner, which has allowed for reflexive

forms of theorising and has, in turn, led to refinements and alterations to the initial conceptualisation of online communities that was offered. In light of the findings outlined in chapter seven, in particular, I would argue that the original criteria regarding the emergence of insider and outsider status from CMC, as discussed in chapter two, was too simplistic in nature and predicated on an assumption that a person's involvement and status within an online community was self-defining.

As the study has shown, there are differing levels of membership within the community that are based on the degree of power and influence a particular member has. In this case, a small group of community members have the ability to moderate, censor and ban the participation of others. They are not elected, but are granted such status by the site's editor and the trusted circle of moderators he has formed around him. As such, there is a small 'inner circle' of community members who have almost all of the power within this community; they make all of the significant decisions, sanction or censor the activity of others and, as was unwittingly revealed by the move a new message board, have the power to determine whether or not someone can be a member at all. The extent of this power imbalance and the impact it had on the status of so many contributors was not apparent until much of the research for this thesis had been completed. Future research would benefit from understanding the community insider to outsider axis as a continuum, rather than two diametrically opposed positions. This would allow for a more fruitful analysis of community members and users that understood the varying status such fans had, rather than seeing them as an homogenous group.

Whilst assessing the findings of this thesis relating to power differences and the moderation of fan contributions to the message boards in question, future researchers into online fan communities may benefit from targeting specific message boards which have a more democratically chosen and representative hierarchy of members. Where explicit and publicly stated guidelines are in place, rather than the arbitrary, hidden and personal judgements of a self-selecting minority, it would be interesting to see how the norms and values of such communities differ from those that have developed within the online community in question. Doing so would allow us to analyse the breadth of opinion and debate canvassed by a message board that has an alternative form of

governance, how conflict between members is managed, and how the content of the message board and the values of the community reflect a larger proportion of its members. Further research relating to these areas would further the findings of this thesis and our understanding of CMC, online fan relations and digital fan culture.

The final findings chapter also highlighted some problems with the research design of the thesis. In particular, it was not until the unforeseen move to a new message board occurred that certain issues came to light regarding the power inequities between community members, the authoritarian nature of moderation on the message board which was symptomatic of this, and also the extent of the lost voices who were silenced or controlled by that power inequity.

On reflection, this is a broader issue facing ethnographic research which is conducted online. Irrespective of the specific issues above, it must also be noted that the opinions and experiences of peripheral members of the forum (lurkers and sporadic contributors) are difficult to capture via the adopted research approach. An ethnographic study which is primarily based on CMC is almost entirely focused on text-based *contributions*, which makes the ethnographic enterprise focused on *active contributors* to the CMC itself. As a result, the study of online communities via ethnography faces the challenge of encompassing message board members who might well be community members, having formed meaningful relationships with the members that can be identified through regular interaction via CMC, but whose interaction with the board is inconsistent, has waned since those relationships were formed, or has subsequently chosen to maintain such relationships to the community via face-to-face, or offline, interaction. This is, perhaps, where a traditional face-to-face ethnographic study has the advantage of facilitating a researcher's observation of those who are on the periphery of the community much more easily, as well as physical cues and other evidence as to how distant they are from the community members and if there is any interaction with them at all.

Future research may benefit by adopting a user-centred observation which focuses specifically on sporadic message board contributors, lurkers or peripheral community members/users, rather than the core community members on which this study was based. This would enlighten us further as to

how a broader section of fans integrate CMC and digital culture into their fandom of the game; many of whom may seek the informed, trusted, and instant information about their club that message boards can provide, but do not rely on the interaction with fellow fans and an identity to an online community like those who have been studied within this thesis. There are also fans who might identify with the virtual space and for whom *Clarets Mad* and *Up the Clarets* have become significant to their identity as a Burnley fan, but choose not to interact on a regular basis and contribute to the discussions there.

Another limitation to the findings of the thesis emerged as the research on which it was based developed from its inception. One of the aims of the thesis was to provide an insight into the experiences and practises of football fans who do not follow one of the elite clubs that dominate so much of the existing literature on the subject. However, at the end of this project, Burnley FC are, perhaps, less typical than they were at the start of the enterprise. The club finished seventh in the Premier League at the end of the 2017/18 season and, as I write this conclusion, they have just played 44-time Greek Champions Olympiacos in the UEFA Europa League. This is, admittedly, a brief and rather unexpected era of success. That said, it must be acknowledged that playing in a European cup competition and competing in the top flight of English football for five of the last ten seasons is not an experience that is typical of the majority of small-town English football clubs.

Burnley are still, however, far from being an 'elite' club within the English game. The coveted top six, of Manchester United, Manchester City, Liverpool, Arsenal, Tottenham Hotspur and Chelsea, were comfortably ahead of Burnley in the final league standings and each of those clubs is on a different level when comparing their finances, number of supporters and sporting success to that of Burnley's. Within the context of European football as a whole, however, competing in the Premier League for three consecutive seasons has elevated Burnley above most other football clubs in terms of their income and expenditure on players' wages. In a commercial sense, at least, Burnley are one of Europe's leading football clubs at present – a status also earned by AFC Bournemouth, who are currently the 28th richest team on the continent, despite the fact that they have never won any major domestic honours (Deloitte, 2018). Although Burnley FC has probably gained additional fans (both domestically and internationally) as a result of their

recent success and the accompanying exposure it receives from being in the Premier League, the vast majority of their supporters are still from the town itself and surrounding area (either now, or originally). Although that is difficult to evidence, it is certainly true of the message board community analysed in this research and no substantial developments occurred in relation to the geographic basis of its members.

Although it was not the intention of this thesis to provide findings and conclusions upon which generalisations could be made, it did intend to provide an insight into the online practises of those fans who supported a club which was more *typical* of those in the English game than that which the existing literature focused upon. We should, therefore, be wary of making suggestions from the findings that are not applicable to the majority of English clubs; most of which have never played in the Premier League, never mind qualified for European competitions.

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APPENDIX

A - Participant Information and Consent Form (Interviews)



The Internet & Modern Football Fandom

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & CONSENT SHEET

The Research Project

I've been researching online football fandom for some time now, as part of my doctoral thesis on the same subject. I am focusing on one particular message board extensively, Clarets Mad.

This was the obvious choice, not just because I am already a member and an avid Burnley supporter, but because Eli's is a forum blessed with a number of great, regular posters, and a rich, wide-ranging array of discussion threads for me to explore.

My main aim is to further academic understanding of the role of the internet within modern football fandom and explore notions of community and whether or not they exist within internet message boards.

Your participation in the research is through an interview, which should last between 30 minutes and one hour, at a time convenient to you. The interview will focus on your involvement with Clarets Mad or, alternatively, the reasons why you choose not to use that site.

The research findings will be made available to all contributors when the final thesis has been written. It is also intended that research findings will be written up for publication in academic journals.

For further information please contact:

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Your Participation in the Research Project

1. You have been invited to participate in the project because of your use of Clarets Mad, or other forms of internet based communication between fans.
2. You can refuse to take part in the study at any time by contacting the researcher directly.
3. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
4. If you agree to participate I will seek your permission to record the interview so that I can transcribe it later for analytical purposes. During the interview, you may decline to answer any question, you may request that the tape recorder be turned off, or you may withdraw from the study without consequence.
5. Information provided will be treated as confidential and the recordings and transcripts will be stored securely within the University Department, with access restricted to the researcher only. Participants will be referred to anonymously in any written reports or articles unless they wish otherwise.

Participant Consent Form

Name (print): _____

Clarets Mad Username (if applicable): _____

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded.
4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet. Data Protection Act 1998: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

B – Initial Research Post (message board)

Dear Clarets-Mad users

Like many of you, I am an avid reader and occasional contributor to Eli's, and have become fascinated by the discussions within it. This has led to further fascination with the role of the internet and computer based communication within modern football fandom.

Also like myself, I'm sure a number of you have received the occasional derisory remark about contributing to online discussions of football!

As a result, I've been researching online football fandom for some time and have now decided to focus on one particular message board extensively. Clarets-Mad was the obvious choice, not just because I am already a member and an avid Burnley supporter, but because Eli's is a forum blessed with a number of great, regular posters, and a rich, wide-ranging array of discussion threads for me to explore.

My main aim is to further academic understanding of the role of the internet within modern football fandom and explore notions of community and whether or not they exist within internet message boards. As part of this research, I may also ask some of you for your thoughts on these (and other) matters at a later date.

At no point will I use any of your contributions to Eli's, or the main Clarets-Mad website, without first requesting permission from you directly. Even then, you will have the right to remain anonymous and may ask for specific material to be omitted if you do so desire. Rest assured that none of the information I am collecting is of a personal nature at all – I am interested in football fandom at large, not specific football fans.

If any of you have any questions, suggestions or reservations about my work, please feel free to contact me directly (dnuttall1@uclan.ac.uk) or leave a post within this thread. I'll get back to you as soon as possible.

Kind Regards

Danny Nuttall