Sports Fans and Fan Culture: A Critical Reflection on Fandom as Communicative Leisure in a Commodified World

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Abstract

This critical reflection tries to understand sports fandom and sports fan culture by framing it in wider forms of fandom: music fandom and SF fandom. The reflection involves a review of key literature on sports fandom and wider fan cultures, but the main methodological focus is a critical reflection on the author's own fandoms. Specifically, the reflection returns to a PhD on rugby league and rugby union in the north of England, the first major ethnographic study undertaken by the author, before re-engaging with other forms of fandom in his personal life and his published research. New research is undertaken for this project in the form of personal reflections on fandom in the author's own autobiography. The author argues that fandoms are important leisure spaces shaped by commodification, but which are still spaces where identity and community can be constructed by individual agency.

Keywords Belonging · Community · Fandom · Leisure · Music · Sport

1 Introduction

In April 2021 a number of the biggest, richest professional association football clubs in Europe announced they were splitting away from their domestic leagues and the official governing-body's Champions League to form the European Super League. Within hours, fans in the United Kingdom (UK) had organised demonstrations and were lobbying their local Members of Parliament to stop it happening. Social media was for once united as Remainers and Brexiters forgot the fight over the European Union to condemn this betrayal of football. Very soon. members of the British ruling classes all the way up to the Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson intervened by denouncing the club and the American bankers behind the plan. Johnson

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admitted that football was not his sport, as a rugby-union playing pupil from Eton he has always attended games at Twickenham[1] – but now, as a populist pitching for the votes of the white working-class of 'left-behind' England (Sobolewska & Ford, 2020), he had no choice but to side with football fans rather than bankers. He did not bluff too much by performing the role of a football fan (unlike other Conservative Prime Ministers) but he saw he had to align with the communities and the identity-making work that make the football industry create billions of pounds. At a Press Conference, as reported in the *Metro* on 20 April, he said[2]:

> On the football, all I would say is our first step is clearly to back the footballing authorities in this country and the steps they're taking to counteract this initiative. Be in no doubt that we don't support the creation of this European Super League. It is not in the interests of fans, not in the interests of football. How can it be right to have a situation in which you create a kind of cartel that stops clubs competing against each other, playing against each other properly with all the hope and excitement that gives to fans up and down the country? I think it offends against the basic principles of competition and if necessary in order to protect that principle of competition we will seek, as I said to those bodies earlier on, a legislative solution but we hope they can find a way forwards themselves

In a paper called 'Imagined communities of fandom: sport, spectatorship, meaning and alienation in late capitalism', North American scholar Nathan Kalman-Lamb (2020: 1) argues that:

> fans are drawn to spectator sport because of a desire for connection that is difficult to satisfy in the context of capitalist social relations. This desire for connection leads to the formation of imagined communities of fandom through spectatorial affiliations with athletic teams. What is novel about this approach is that it highlights how the emotional gratification fans receive from spectatorship of capitalist sport is a) predicated above all upon their relations to other fans, rather than the athletes they support (although the labour and, indeed, sacrifice of athletes is a condition of these relations); and b) a function of the broader structural conditions that organize their lives, namely the relentless alienation of capitalism itself. This intervention is necessary, then, not just because it advances the literature on fan investment in sport, but, more significantly, because it highlights critical dimensions of the experience of capitalist life more broadly… I contend that while sport is too often dismissed as a trifling object for scholarly inquiry, it is in fact one of the most significant sites in capitalist cultures today precisely because of the ways in which spectatorial participation allows fans to navigate the complexities of late capitalism.

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[1] The home of the Rugby Football Union, English rugby union's governing body, in the commuter belt of London.

[2] https://metro.co.uk/2021/04/20/boris-johnson-slams-premier-league-clubs-for-creating-esl-cartel-14443382/, published 20 April 2021.

Kalman-Lamb has a fair point to make about the construction of imagined communities, and he draws extensively on the theoretical work by Benedict Anderson (1991) and Eric Hobsbawm (1990). For Anderson, following Hobsbawm, modern nation-states are essentially constructions built on shared symbols and shared myths and histories. Hobsbawm showed that these states invented traditions they used to attempt to impose their hegemony other expanding populations at the time of the industrial revolution and the clash of European empires. When I read Kalman-Lamb's paper I was excited because I have been making the same use of Anderson and Hobsbawm to understand sports fandom and other forms of fandom ever since I started my PhD in 1993 (Spracklen, 1995, 1996, 2007, 2011a, 2016, 2017; Spracklen and Spracklen 2008; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2021; Spracklen et al., 2014; Spracklen et al., 2010). But I was disappointed that Kalman-Lamb did not cite any of that work. Nor did he say anything about imaginary community, which I have argued is different – but related – to the imagined (Spracklen, 1995, 1996). Imagined community is based on a real space and is constructed historically: it is the community of the modern nation-state built on shared myths and symbols such as flags, and it appears everywhere where belonging id shaped or contested. Imaginary community as I define it can transcend space and is constructed anthropologically in and about the present: in my work on rugby league, I refer to the imaginary community as 'the game' that crosses borders and includes in it all fans who feel attachment to rugby league in some way. Nonetheless, Kalman-Lamb's claim about the salience of the imagined community is important—and lead me to the aim of this paper.

This critical reflection tries to understand sports fandom and sports fan culture by framing it in wider forms of fandom: music fandom and SF fandom. I have written about heavy metal and alternative culture extensively, including one book (Spracklen, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2019, 2020a; Spracklen et al., 2014). I have also written a number of papers and a book on goths and the genesis and evolution of goth culture (Spracklen and Spracklen 2012; 2014; 2018). Finally, I have written about Star Wars fans arguing online over who is the authentic voice of such fandom when reflecting on the new films (Spracklen, 2020b). The reflection begins then with a history of sports fandom and a review of key literature on sports fandom and wider fan cultures, but the main methodological focus is a critical reflection on the author's own fandoms. Specifically, the reflection returns to my PhD on rugby league and rugby union in the north of England, the first major ethnographic study I undertook, before re-engaging with other forms of fandom in his personal life and his published research. New research is undertaken for this project in the form of personal reflections on fandom in my own autobiography. After these reflections I discuss how fandom can be understood sociologically, before returning to Boris Johnson and drawing some concluding remarks on the meaning and purpose of fandom at this point in human society. This is a moment when traditional sources of identity such as work have shrunk with the blurring of work and leisure, the rise of the gig economy and virtuality – that is, we live in an age of liquid modernity that creates liquid work and liquid leisure (Bauman, 2000; Blackshaw, 2010).

2 History of Fandom and Review of Literature

We know that sports fandom has a long history. Before the invention of modern sport in late modernity in the nineteenth century, sports and games and other entertainments had captured the attention of humans in many pre-modern and early modern cultures (Spracklen, 2011b). Famously, we know of the importance of sports participation as a form of elite Greek male identity, as this has come down to us in our own history making and culture, from Athens and Rome all the way to Boris Johnson and the still-predominant Western hegemony that helped create modern sport anyway. We know that the Greeks built enormous places where athletes could be watched by fans (Golden, 1998). We know Greeks spoke to each other about the relative strengths of individuals and cities at various sacred games. There were even Greeks who complained that sports had become too common, participated in by professionals and watched by people with no sense of culture. The Romans took up games and sports along with their own gladiatorial combats, and allowed all classes to attend these (Dunkle, 2013). They gambled, bought wine, cheered and booed. Roman satirist Juvenal even criticised the Roman elites for putting on circuses and offering bread to the masses as a way of keeping the masses in the metaphorical chains of their hegemony (Spracklen, 2011b). But his critique is not simply condemning the elites for keeping the masses enchained through sports fandom. He is critical of the people who love the sports, and the elites for being so scared of the sports fans that they feel they have to give them blood rather than something educational. Later, when Christianity had transformed the West, and the Roman Empire migrated to Constantinople, organised fan-clubs in the hippodrome called the Blues and Greens continued to shape fashion, politics, even religion, and when they did not fight each other like gangsters, or football hooligans, they rose up in city-wide riots (Cameron, 1976). People have always had the capacity to get enthusiastic about things in their free time, and rulers have always tried to control those leisure spaces.

That said, fandom as we understand it today is a product of modernity and in this century of what we might call the turn to postmodernity: post-industrialization; globalization; the rise of the information society; what Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity and Blackshaw (2010) liquid leisure. The first academic debates about sports fandom revolved around figurational sociology and the civilizing process as described by Elias (1978, 1982). Elias and Dunning (1986) wanted to understand how football fandom served as a place for working-class men to feel belonging and be violent, at a time when the civilizing process had led modern society to be free of any other space where these men could be violent. Others such as Redhead (2002) tried to show that football fandom was a legitimate form of residual working-class culture, at a time when football was unpopular among the ruling classes. But sports fandom was also dismissed by many mainstream theorists as being a form of the modern culture industry. Adorno (1991), for example, famously saw sports as a form of unfreedom. This dismissal of fandom as being the product of low, base cultural forms fed to the masses can be found in Gramsci (1971) as well, who argued that sports and popular music on the radio

were a way of keeping the Italians under the fascists from even being aware that they were being in chains. Only towards the end of the previous century did popular music fandom become something more than just a form for hegemonic control, though even Hebdige (1979) is suspicious of how much resistance can be found in sub-genres such as punk (Duffett, 2013). Fandom more generally was theorised as a place of agency and identity-making by Jenkins (2012). Using fans of Doctor Who, he showed that they were able to find belonging by choosing to be part of this fan community, but that does not mean they simply buy all the products and the ideology. They were playful, critical, self-supporting and creative. They were, to co-opt Habermas, using communicative rationality in a public sphere of their own shaping to find meaning and purpose. This view of SF fandom is pretty much accepted in the literature (Ferreday, 2015; Leonard, 2005; Shefrin, 2004). Music fandom is more problematic, as some see popular music as a place of instrumental rationality (Bennett, 2012; Brett, 2015; Hill, 2016; Hoad, 2017; Rossolatos, 2015). Music fandom and sports fandom have been critically compared by Schimmel et al. (2007). Sports fandom is seen more positively as a space for challenging norms of gender, or allowing sports fans to be playful, or to use their agency to feel belonging: but the limits of that agency, and who is allowed to belong, and why they belong, is something that is still strongly debated (Archer & Matheson, 2019; Dixon, 2013; Hughson & Free, 2006; Melnick & Wann, 2011; Redhead, 2002; Serazio & Thorson, 2020). Now, I turn to my own fandom to shed some light on what being a fan means.

3 My Own Fandoms

Where do my own fan identities and communities come from? My first music memory is listening to the song 'Dreamer' by British progressive rock band Supertramp, and 'Come Up and See Me' by Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel. I remember hearing them being played on the radio as a toddler. My parents listened to the radio and their own records. My dad was a big fan of Elvis, my mum played a lot of Ella Fitzgerald. I remember the woman next door – a huge Elvis fan – crying for weeks when he died, and the shrine she kept for him. Music, then, has always been a part of life, my community, my family and my social identity. Listening to Supertramp with my mum and dad made me feel happy because the music made me feel I belonged in the home. When I was at primary school I embraced the peer pressure around me and found myself becoming a follower of Adam and the Ants. Being a fan of Adam and the Ants ensured I was one of the gang in the playground, and also made sure the girls talked to me. Then my brother became a skinhead and got into Madness, so for a few years I went around in a Harrington jacket sporting a crew-cut and listening to ska. As I became a tweenie I started to read the New Musical Express (NME), listen to John Peel and develop a taste for alternative, punk, post-punk and goth. But I also got into Iron Maiden and heavy metal after seeing the video for 'Number of the Beast' with my neighbour up the road. Metal was mocked by the NME and the rest of the music media. I loved its power, but I knew even as a thirteen-year old that I had to be careful to whom I confessed my metalhead fandom. Metal was uncool,

sexist, conservative, at least to the alternative radical indie folk who dictated what was cool in high school. I did get into goth in a big way at this time as well, because I was from Leeds and The Sisters of Mercy were from Leeds – and their music was as dark and powerful in my mind as the blackest of metal. When metal adopted punk and goth's black clothing it made it easier for me to maintain a look that has served me well in goth spaces and metal ones. As I entered my twenties I also started to consider myself a fan of world and folk music: again, having a big beard makes me fit in to folk gigs as well as metal ones, and with folk metal there is even a whole cross over sub-genre to get excited about.

At school I was out-and-proud as fan of alternative music. I was much quieter about my obsession with fantasy and SF. I had fallen in love with Star Wars when it first appeared on the screens here, then with Star Trek on television.[3] I read my way through the SF canon then got hooked on Tolkien. Then at high school, along with metal and comics, I started to play role-playing games, something I only abandoned when I got to university and I could re-invent myself. This was all done with shame by me, because being a nerd was uncool and put people like me at risk of being attacked by the headcases. But I did not get attacked at school because my brother played rugby league with them, and I was sporty enough to pass. Every Saturday we would be out with my dad watching association football – what we called football – at non-league grounds within a radius defined by the local buses and trains. Then every Sunday we would be out following rugby league – what we called rugby – and our club: Hunslet. I was a sports fan who could play rugby reasonably well at school, and I could talk excitedly about rugby and football.

Here is one of my first sports memories, from my PhD (Spracklen, 1996: 12–13):

> In the dim light of the inferior arc lamps around the pitch I could just make out, through the mist, dark and ferocious giants running and grunting and passing between them a grey ball. My hands, warmed by a portion of chips, were still too cold to clap, so I cheered with every cheer that went up. I knew who I was supporting: it was my dad's team, our team, the one whose scarf and bobble hat adorned my body. But the game itself was out of the understanding of a five year old. We were playing our rivals from the other side of town, the team my dad cursed and swore at whenever they were mentioned in the paper. So I, naturally, felt the same way about them. Yet I cheered with every cheer, unaware that most of the cheers were for the other team, until my older brother punched me.
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> Then, from out of the mist, a player leaner and smaller than the others appeared, running right past where I stood with the ball in his hands. I looked at him and recognised him as one of my players. He had a number five on his back, and his jersey was clean enough to be distinguishable from the others, but it was his face I knew. He was my hero, he stood out from the rest of the players, who were all granite faced and sideburned. He was a player even a five year old with limited attention spans could recognise.

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[3] It may have been the other way round.

He was black, but at the time I didn't understand what that meant. All I knew was he scored tries, and I always wanted to be him whenever we played. I remember seeing the sweat on his face, the spittle at the edges of his mouth, and the draught of Wintergreen and damp grass as he went by. I remember the cry that went up from my dad and brother as he touched down, unopposed, though I was too small to see. I couldn't understand the jubilation on the faces of the adults who were stood around me, but I cheered and shouted his name anyway. Then my team's name was being chanted, and I imagined that I was my hero, waving at my fans, and I felt I belonged there. When the hooter went my dad told me we had won - and what's more, we had beaten *them*.

This is my earliest memory of supporting Hunslet – watching Rudy Francis score a try in the dim light of evening match. But that was clearly not the first time I had gone to a game with my dad and my brother. The reflection continues (Spracklen, 1996: 13–14):

I was back from university for Christmas. Instead of driving home my brother took me straight to a cup tie we were playing, with all my bags on the backseat. I was tired after the long journey and the long night before, but we knew there were more important things than driving safely and relaxing at home. We were in the 3rd round of the Regal Trophy! With minutes to go we paid our way in, grabbed a quick pint, then rushed out to watch the match. We collapsed into our seats in the stand, exhausted, then the ref blew his whistle and the adrenaline rushed back. Familiar faces were all around me, people who I'd grown up with for eighty minutes each Sunday. The same voices began to moan as we went behind. Our tactics were the same, our defence as weak as ever, and their fans were loud and aggressive. A small section called our winger names whenever he touched the ball, simply because he was black. In response some of our lads called them sheep-shaggers and radioactive mutants (it was a Cumbrian team). We were losing by a wide margin, and I was gutted. I hated their fans for their jeers and racist taunts - I knew they were all the same, backwoods Cumbrians, and our lads were right. They were all inbred and mutated by pollution from Sellafield: especially the players, who were all dirty and thick and over rated.

When we finally scored, thanks to the efforts of a youngster born and bred in our district, I knew he was doing this to tell those Cumbrians where to go. We all cheered, and chanted his name and the name of our team. We knew we were losing, but we were better men. In front of me an old man who looked like an ex-player, and who whined at the top of his voice at every refereeing decision that went against us, shouted towards the dug out: "Get more of our own on!". He turned to his companion, and I heard him say: "It teks pride to play eighty minutes, only a local feller knows what it means to play fer us."

At the time, I knew exactly what he meant. It made perfect sense to me. I had watched our team through thin and thinner - we never seemed to have any thick - and I had never really paused to accept that people could have any other sort of loyalty during a match. Of course, away from the game I was as fair minded as the next person, but during the game itself, when we were inevita-

bly losing to some smug team full of ex-Internationals and Australians, I never paused to explore the paradoxes and tacit meanings of my support. So I could empathise with the old man's comments, even though I couldn't sympathise with or justify them.

I was a fan of Hunslet RLFC since they played at Parkside, their original ground abandoned and sold in the early 1970s. That sale led to the club being re-formed as New Hunslet, and they played at the old Greyhound Stadium on Elland Road, across from the football ground. New Hunslet changed their name back to Hunslet, and moved to Batley, two bus-rides away for me, my older brother and my dad. We followed them anyway because that it was what we did. When my mum was at home cooking Sunday tea we were trailing up to Batley's ground (Mount Pleasant), surrounded by terraces of smoke-grimed brick, empty mills and abandoned factories. We learned very quickly what this was: a tough sport for working-class men, a sport for northerners. We called our sport rugby but it was the proper rugby. Rugby league was the game that was invented when clubs in Yorkshire and Lancashire split from the RFU and Twickenham in 1895. The northerners wanted to take control of their own destiny and to pay their players. They made the sport tougher and more entertaining. We knew rugby union tried to stop rugby league, banning its players and fighting to keep rugby league from developing and becoming legitimised (Spracklen & Spracklen, 2021). Rugby union got the Vichy Government and the Nazis to ban rugby league. Even in the nineties, rugby league struggled to get official recognition in the British military. Being a rugby league fan meant identifying with the underdogs struggling to get rugby league alive in different countries around the world. It meant supporting expansionists in Wales and the south of England (Spracklen, 2007). It meant being proud that rugby league was the number one sport in Papua New Guinea, and was one of the strongest professional team sports in Australia with the NSWRL (which became the NRL via the ARL). We knew as well that although most of the people who played and supported rugby league were white, the game had had a long and noble history of black British players, Maoris and other Polynesians joining teams in the north of England (Spracklen, 2016; Spracklen & Spracklen, 2021; Spracklen et al., 2010). We knew rugby league had been a home from home for dozens of black Welsh rugby union players.

We followed Hunslet from South Leeds because my dad followed them, though we actually lived in Bramley in West Leeds. My dad actually grew up in Burmantofts in East Leeds, but there was at the time a thriving rugby-league community in that area who transmitted Hunslet fandom to its sons. We grew up as fans of Hunslet, once-cup winning side reduced to being watched by hundreds of fans. These fans yearned for the good old days to come back. They dreamed of returning to Hunslet, and for the club to become as big as Leeds, who were the old rivals across the river and who had become too big. We grew up hating Leeds RLFC more than rugby union, because Leeds had money and signed all the best local players in Hunslet, and they attracted all the rugby fans in Leeds who wanted to see first division rugby. We thought Hunslet was more authentically working-class, and lots of the fans were in working-class jobs and from working-class communities. But not everybody was. We lived on an estate in Bramley, in a council house, but my mum and dad were

no longer working-class by occupation. My mum worked as a nurse at a sixth-form college and my dad worked in local government as a careers-guidance officer. For my dad, and for me and our kid (as we always described ourselves), this was about remembering or commemorating a working-class community that no longer existed. When Hunslet reached Wembley in 1965, the district was filled with mills and factories, in turn surrounded by back-to-back terraced housing and pubs. Hunslet was world-famous for its railway works that made steam engines. From the end of the sixties, Hunslet started to suffer from motorway schemes and the replacement of terraces with shopping centres and council flats. The railway works closed. The rest of the industry collapsed. And the white, working-class families that had supported Hunslet were moved out, or chose to move, to the huge estates of Middleton and Belle Isle, or further afield to Castleford or Morley. So the fans of Hunslet who were around when I did my PhD did not live in Hunslet, but they went back every other week to watch Hunslet play, even if the team itself did not get a new home in the district until 1994. Wherever Hunslet played in exile (the Greyhound stadium, Batley, Elland Road, Bramley) was Hunslet.

4 Discussion

In my PhD, I theorised that rugby league fandom was constructed from two intersectional symbolic communities. Rugby league in the north of England had its own imagined community, a white, working-class north of mill towns and mining villages. This was a community imagined exactly like the national communities first shown by Anderson (1990): the people in this imagined community used historical myths and Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) invented traditions to justify their place in the topography of the north. These were the 'proper' inhabitants of the black-soot terraces in the shadow of the sandstone moors because they were the people who believed themselves to be. In their invented traditions, rugby league's split from rugby union proved the character and the community of this northern white working-class men, and the fans and players of the 1990s (when I was doing my PhD) were the inheritors of this imagined community. But rugby league was more something imagined and invented using myths. It was itself defined in the present by symbolic boundaries at different levels of belonging (Cohen, 1985) and crossed the world to Australia and New Zealand. It was what I called an imaginary community (Cohen, 1985), in which men shaped their hegemonic masculinity, and in which fans relished the idea that 'the game' (as described the imaginary) was hard, distinctive, anti-Establishment yet a place that was welcoming as long as one knew the meaning of the symbols, the myths and the invented traditions. Being an authentic fan of 'the game' meant knowing that rugby league was better than rugby union, that rugby union still tried to ban rugby league, and that rugby union was able to use its hegemony in the press to keep league in its place. Being a fan in the imaginary community was to have the critical thinking of a sociology graduate, keenly aware of the way 'the game', like the imagined community of the north of England, was kept absolutely marginal to the sports and culture and power of Britain's rulers.

I contend that in music fandom, the same elective, symbolic communities can be seen to be at work. For many years, heavy metal has been dismissed by taste-makers and elites as being marginal, working-class, white male music. Yet heavy metal has continued to be made and consumed by fans around the world. 'Heavy metal' is an imaginary community constructed from an imagined community of working-class, masculine rebellion and transgression. Its symbolic boundaries are constructed by a belief that we are all individuals, that metal is more authentic than pop. Just as rugby league fans wear Les Catalans jerseys and polo-shirts to demonstrate they are authentic fans who understand the importance of southern France in our history (Spracklen & Spracklen, 2008), metal fans prove their level of belonging in the imaginary community by wearing obscure band t-shirts.[4] If one wears something associated with black metal, one indicates one is so committed to being an individual and being out of the mainstream that anything might be possible. Metal is obviously one part of the culture industry, one part of popular music, but at the same time its fans perform their instrumentality as an act of symbolic and actual resistance to capitalism. SF fandoms also have their own imagined and imaginary communities, where we try to show we are not simple consumers of mainstream entertainment, while accepting that our tastes are mediated through popular culture. Being a nerd has become fashionable, and the industries around SF have become highly profitable. Yet SF fans can and do resist the commodification of their leisure. Just because I love Star Wars, Star Trek and the book The Lord of the Rings (best not ask me about the films), does not make me a consumer of all things related to them. And it does not make me a consumer or fan of things constructed to grab my attention and my money.

Being a sports fan is to be a part of an elective community. You choose to be in it, and others judge your belonging by your actions. Being a sports fan is about choosing: this is an act of free will, or one we think is free. But often this choice is not ours to make. We are socialised or enculturated into our sports fandom as children. We are taken to sports events by our family as young children and become enraptured by the spectacle. Or we become persuaded or coerced into becoming a sports fan by our peers at school. Or we play the role of the sports fan that we learn from the media and capitalism at the point of late modernity: the consumer, the authentic fan versus the casual watching on television. Or our choices are forged by the populism and patriotism shaped in the media (Serazio & Thorson, 2020). In many parts of the world me and others like me become (or we became in the last century in many parts of the Global North) socialised through football fandom as unfashionable, alienated working-class, white men. Or as elite men or women, we become sports fans to prove we are cultural omnivores (Duffett, 2013) or to show as women that we are challenging the power of the Gender Order (Connell, 1987, 1995). We learn the fashion, the history and the language of specific sports so we can become true fans, passing and performing identity and community in this time of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) and liquid leisure (Blackshaw, 2010).

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[4] At the moment I am wearing Wytch Hazel, a Christian epic metal band from Preston in Lancashire.

5 Conclusion

Kalman-Lamb (2020) is correct, football fandom is definitely an imagined community. But it is also an imaginary community, or rather, football fandom is an intersecting network of imagined and imaginary communities, in which a range of actors try to impose their vision over their meaning and purposes of those communities. Sports fandom is like music fandom, or science-fiction fandom, or any other leisure-cultural form that brings people together who share a passion for something. The objects of that passion are inventions of capitalism and what Habermas (1984, 1987) and Adorno (1991) call the commodification of the everyday. They are products, instruments, constraints. But even fans who embrace the commodification feel belonging, and buying the latest jersey is still a way of defining who they are even if they have spent loads of money to be a walking advertisement for Manchester United and its sponsors. Buying the stuff gives a Manchester United fan a way in to the imagined and imaginary communities of football fandom. Some fans delve deeper through the symbolic boundaries of the imaginary community and realise there is more to football than the latest jersey, and these fans become actors resisting the commodification, helping to re-shape the symbolic boundaries that matter to the insiders.

To be a rugby league fan is to be marginal still in every country and society in the world apart from Papua New Guinea. To be a soccer fan in the United States is to be mocked as a weird foreigner, an outsider, a woman who votes Democrat as opposed to the good old boy who wears his Make America Great Again cap and watches the Super Bowl. Historically, British sports and physical education served to replicate Victorian myths of British identity: being fair, being a Muscular Christian subaltern fighting and dying for the race and the Empire. Through the twentieth century they continued to reproduce the habitus of the English middle and upper classes. Even now, the sports that are popular are not the sports that get coverage in the media or support from government. British sports fandom as an imagined and imaginary community—and a form of nation-building and taste-forming—still rotates around the tennis at Wimbledon and rugby union's Six Nations, although it has co-opted football because even Tory MPs and Prime Ministers like Boris Johnson have to show they like the game of the masses. Johnson's rejection of the European Super League may be a move as cynical as the ones offered by the Senators and Emperor's in Juvenal's poems, but it demonstrates the importance of these leisure spaces when so much else in society, especially work, has lost its role in identity-making.

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