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The changing faces of fandom? Exploring emerging 'online' and 'offline' fandom spaces in the English Premier League

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how spaces of fandom in the English Premier League (EPL) have developed over the last decade in light of globalization processes and technological advancements. This conceptual paper thus utilizes the existing literature and frames these insights to outline emerging 'offline' and 'online' spaces of fandom in the English football's top-tier. It is argued that these under-explored spaces have been enacted by broader, powerful processes and the two spaces – the fan zone ('offline' space) and the independent Fan TV ('online') do now comprise two important spaces that add vibrancy, meaning and socio-cultural elements to the practice of 'being' a fan. Crucially, the article ties into and extend current debates around the technology-fandom pair. It sustains that, in order to understand contemporary fan culture in the EPL, these spaces must, increasingly, be considered as sites for collective and individual identification, the performance of fandom and social interaction.

KEYWORDS

English Premier League; consumption; globalization; spaces; technologies

Introduction

It has been frequently argued that 'globalization', 'digitalization' and 'commercialization' processes have had profound impacts on the English Premier League (EPL) as a whole (Turner 2017; Millward 2011; Giulianotti 2011). Indeed, 'all "-ization" verbal nouns imply change' (Albrow 1999, 85). Such is also the case in the sporting world. The aforementioned processes have transformed the ways in which sport is consumed (Numerato and Giulianotti 2018). Working out from this notion, this article examines these inter-linked processes' impact on *fandom* and fandom *spaces* in the EPL. Fundamentally, 'football has a wide range of spaces to meet and interact. From pubs, supporters' clubs and stadiums, fans regularly meet to share the emotional experience of the game' (Cleland et al. 2018, 34). Given the present, hyper-digitalized era (Lawrence and Crawford 2018), spaces hereinafter refer to 'offline' and 'online' spaces that both remain vital for fans and, subsequently, for understanding fan cultures (Millward 2011; Pearson 2012; Petersen-Wagner 2017a, 2017b,

Rookwood and Millward 2011; Brooks 2019). In the EPL, intensifying globalization and commercialization processes may be observed from the 1990s and onwards (King 2002; Millward 2011; Rookwood and Chan 2011). Collectively, these processes, with the rise of the Internet, have facilitated for a 'digital turn' in the EPL, which again has assisted the intensification of the mentioned globalizing and commercial forces. Meanwhile, the 'digital turn' has impacted the ways through which the league is consumed, followed and watched, as well as the ways fans engage with each other and their teams.

The aims driving this article are related to examining the 'new' and/or 'emerging' spaces in which EPL fans interact, congregate, and consume *within*. In terms of its purchase and originality, the article thus ties into and extends current debates on fandom, technologies and space. It also adds to arguments on the importance of social researchers keeping up with the new modes of fandom (Kunert 2021; Millward 2008, 2016; Gibbons and Dixon 2010; Cleland et al. 2018). The article argues that while 'traditional' spaces of fandom indeed persist (i.e. the stadium), together with what may now be considered 'well-established' spaces (i.e. e-zines, message boards, podcasts, see Millward 2008), there are some emerging spaces – both 'offline' and 'online' – that are becoming increasingly crucial to analyse in order to understand the perpetual evolution of EPL fandom in the 2020s.

That includes, *inter alia*, fan zones (Richards and Parry 2020) and online independent Fan TV channels (Rivers and Ross 2019), both of which add new presumption-oriented and vibrant elements to the match-day experience and influence collective and individual fan identifications. These spaces are also highly interconnected to technological and digital advancements that analytically could be approached under the umbrella of 'globalization'. This article is of a conceptual nature and utilizes insights from the existing literatures. The trends it seeks to analyse have paralleled with the development from the early 1990s when the EPL was formed (in 1992) (Parnell et al. 2018). Ultimately, the shifts to consumption practices and technologies occur continually. For example, in the 2019/20 season, EPL games were for the first time broadcasted via the online streaming service 'Amazon Prime' and the EPL has further tentative plans to launch a dedicated streaming platform for overseas territories from the 22/23 season with the platform being dubbed 'Premflix' (Ingle 2020). Meanwhile, the transformations of fandom in the EPL are well-documented (Millward 2011; King 2002; Giulianotti 2002). Notwithstanding, less is known about the 'new' (evolving) *spaces* wherein fans operate that are massively influenced or enacted by broader processes. By examining EPL fan zones and the rise of Fan TV, this article makes a scholarly contribution to the existing theoretical debates revolving around *why* these spaces have become sociologically important fandom spaces and how they can be approached empirically moving forward.

The context: globalization, consumption, and the Premier League

This section zooms in on the links between 'globalization', 'consumption' and 'technology' concerning EPL fans and the spaces they interact within. Theorizations and conceptualizations of 'globalization' have come to occupy a dominant position in the mainstream social science since the early 1990s (Hognestad 2009). It has also been a prominent theme within public debates over the last decades. Ultimately, the concept 'resonates well with a widespread paradoxical feeling of an expanding world that becomes smaller' (ibid.). However, providing one clear-cut definition or theorization of 'globalization' is no easy task given the term's contested nature.

Indeed, Robertson (1992) recognizes it as a process characterized by increased formation of transnational interconnections and awareness of the world as one singular place. In part, this is enhanced by technological developments. Further, globalization is a long-term process that can be traced to the fifteenth century. Essentially, 'globalization' also refers to trends and transformations in political, social, cultural and economic domains and almost regardless of how one decides to conceptualize or theorize 'globalization', it is clear that sports have not been isolated from it.

The sociology of sport has produced several robust analyses focused on how 'globalization' has impacted sports, and most central here, football. Giulianotti and Robertson (2004) highlight and document how football can work as a site of analysis for the theorization and empirical exploration of 'global' and 'glocal' processes. Hence, football represents an *entrée* for sociological analyses and observation of broader global tendencies, transformations and forces (Duke 2002; Millward 2011; Hognestad 2009). Arguably, the pre-existing scholarship examining this multifaceted nexus, between the global forces and football, mirrors and validates the influential claim made by Giulianotti and Robertson (2004, 545) submitting that '[s]port, in particular football, constitutes one of the most dynamic, sociologically illuminating domains of globalization'.

With specific reference to the EPL, the league has been referred to as a 'global football league' (Millward 2011). Accordingly, the EPL encapsulates globalization's key features with the global mobilities of capital, images and people. Ultimately, the EPL, characterized by worldwide in-and-out movements of players, managers and supporters, is also subject to high commercial attractiveness from international investors and sponsors (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, more than half of the teams' owners come from overseas (May 2018), whereas the EPL's images, subject to competitive bidding for broadcasting rights by broadcasters, are broadcasted to audiences located in 212 territories and an estimated 4.7 billion viewers (Cleland 2017, 70). Recently, streaming giants, including Netflix and Amazon have also started to display an interest in the league's broadcasting rights.

The transnational *in-and-out* flows have altered the ways in which the EPL is consumed. Whilst EPL clubs are rooted locally, the clubs, comprising 'English football's leisure class are today situated upon an altogether more global landscape' (Webber 2018, 4). Webber argues that this has 'created a series of tensions between those traditional caucuses of support upon which these clubs historically relied, and the newer, altogether more global orientation of these clubs' (*ibid.*). Whereas globalization's direct and indirect ramifications have supplemented the EPL in economic, political and cultural terms, the league-supporter relationship remains a 'contested terrain' (Turner 2017, 128).

Cleland (2015, 103) writes that 'football's unprecedented levels of growth, investment and exposure since the 1980s have had a dramatic impact upon fan identity, "community", consumption and inclusion and have subsequently made definitions of contemporary fandom more complex'. Indeed, the processes described already have also altered the *spaces* in which the EPL is consumed. For instance, the global and commercial forces – combined with the introduction of the all-seater stadium and other security-related policies have been seen as impacting the stadiums' match-day atmospheres (Giulianotti 2011). Atmospheres are often considered crucial for match-day experiences, and sociologically, atmospheres can be considered impactful forces that tie consumption contexts to each other and influence bodies and behaviors (Hill 2016). Notwithstanding, 'atmospheres' also constitute an inherently slippery concept that may be haunted by nostalgic biases. Thus,

there must be some caution around claims of atmospheres being qualitatively ‘bettered’ or ‘worsened’.

However, supporters and coaches will commonly express discontent over match-days atmospheres (Millward 2011). This is also an issue that clubs and television broadcasters are aware of (Edensor 2015). Giulianotti (2011) highlights the manifested unease over English football apparently becoming less of a public spectacle and a social experience, where corporate powers create what he calls a problematic, atmosphere-free football spectacle (ibid., 3305). Other commercial initiatives knitted to aims of maximizing revenues have also been resisted. For example, campaigns and/or protests have been mobilized against both ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ club owners (Millward 2011) and the (consistently) increasing ticket prices (Giulianotti 2011). The ‘Game 39, proposal – whereby teams would play an extra fixture of the EPL in various international cities – was also contested in fan cultures (Rookwood and Chan 2011). The globalization processes that have influenced the EPL and its commercial attractiveness have therefore made clubs less commercially reliant on ‘localized’ fandom, impacted the match-day atmospheres and spaces and places of the EPL. That includes stadiums, both architecturally and in terms of the available consumption opportunities. Arguably, modern stadiums are no longer ‘only’ stadiums, but have integrated connectivity for smartphone users (Fletcher and Stoney 2020), shopping malls, apartments, hotels, cinemas and offices (Kennedy and Kennedy 2017).

The role of technology

Cleland et al. (2018, 68) argue that ‘[s]pace and place are intrinsically important in the consumption of sport’ and relational practices. And, as Petersen-Wagner (2017a, 2017b) points out, EPL supporters interact in different spaces. That includes traditional (‘offline’) spaces such as the stadium and pubs. Yet, it also increasingly involves ‘online’ social media spaces and group chats in which fans may try to learn what it means to be a fan, interact, and attach meaning to the particular fandom. Processes attributed to ‘globalization’ have dramatically impacted the ways in which fans interact, socialize and create (or develop) fan identities. Especially the context of technological advancements such as the Internet and new forms of digital media. Technological advancements have contributed to the rapid spread of information, material and images across the globe (Millward 2011). According to Pearson (2012), the internet had, by the early 2000s, started to play a significant role for supporters. In his ethnography of ‘carnival fans’, Pearson (2012, 183) writes that ‘[m]obile phones and the internet, and the powerful combination of both, provided a new way for carnival fans groups to communicate, congregate and express themselves’.

Thus, the spaces fans interact in are both ‘offline’ and ‘online’. This shift led Gibbons and Dixon (2010) to call for researchers to take online discourses of English football fans more seriously. Millward (2008) also noted how fan e-zines became increasingly crucial for fan cultures and served as a platform for the construction of collective and individual identities, as well as information age sport fan democracy. Though, as Millward (2016, 189) later noted, even still, ‘relatively little is understood about the impact of the Internet and new/ social media on sports and its culture’.

Hence, it is clear that new forms of digital media and online spaces such as YouTube, e-zines and social media platforms have altered the ways in which fans talk about football’s cultural politics. The rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp

has added to this (Petersen-Wagner 2017a, Cleland et al. 2018; Weimann-Saks, Ariel, and Elishar-Malka 2020). It is useful that these digital spaces are captured in the social study of football fandom (Millward 2011) given the vital role technology plays in contemporary football fandom. It can also be observed that even ‘traditional’ spaces such as stadiums have gained digital layers, such as the availability of Wi-Fi capabilities and integrated ‘smart stadiums’ (for a general discussion, see Yang and Cole 2020). Whilst introduced to enhance the matchday experiences, some of these developments have been contested, however. For example, some clubs have banned tablets and selfie-sticks inside stadiums following negative feedback from fans (BBC. 2015). Beyond English football, the introduction of Wi-Fi in PSV Eindhoven’s home stadium was also resisted by fans, who protested against this (The Guardian 2014). The impact of technology is thus visible both in ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ fandom spaces.

Whereas Gibbons and Dixon (2010) presented their important call predominantly based on ‘online’ spaces, this article argues that both ‘online’ and ‘offline’ spaces in which fans, increasingly, interact and consume sports within must be sufficiently and reflexively appreciated in the EPL’s ‘globalized age’. One of the questions Gibbons and Dixon asked in order to arrive at their argument was ‘what is an English soccer fan in 2008’ (603). Perhaps, it is necessary and possible to draw inspiration from this and question what exactly an EPL fan in 2020 *is*, and in which emerging ‘offline’ and ‘online’ spaces this fan operates, consumes, and supports their club in. Those questions consequently impact this article’s central argument and two forthcoming sections. By drawing upon existing insights and conceptual frameworks from existing literature and secondary sources, we outline two emerging spaces that have, increasingly, become important to a vast number of EPL fans. Simultaneously, both the spaces remain somewhat under-researched given their relatively recent emergence or new-found popularity as fandom spaces.¹

Facilitating inclusivity: the fan zone

Traditionally, the stadium has been *the* place for football. Historically, in English football, stadiums have also played social roles, as community focal points and as sites for rituals, spectacles, entertainment, and culture. Hence, the stadium possesses high volumes of meaning for fans, as social spaces that are key determiners in supporters’ individual and collective club identification (Church and Penny 2013). However, over recent years, it is observable that another space has emerged in the EPL which, fundamentally, can offer fans inclusivity and which possess social meanings. As Richards and Parry (2020, 1) highlight, changes related to commercialization and professionalization in sport have assisted the emergence of ‘new spaces’ for highly marketable ‘fan experiences’. In the EPL, they observe, one of these spaces is the fan zone.

Fan zones are used in contemporary sporting contexts to extend a shared viewing experience (Evans 2017). Fan zones are, usually, ‘fixed and temporary open-air spaces surrounded by fences that screen live games and offer their visitors a range of consumption opportunities (alcohol, food, merchandise) and entertainment’ (Lee Ludvigsen 2021, 235). These have been particularly popular since the early 2000s, with introduction of fan zones and ‘fan fests’ at international mega-events like the FIFA World Cup and UEFA Euro’s (Klauser 2011) and in North American sports including the National Basketball Association (Evans 2017). Commonly, fan zones have been marked by a significant visitor attractiveness

and have emerged as key destinations in the broader sporting event landscapes of the 2000s and 2010s. Whilst a number of studies have examined fan zones empirically at past sport mega events (Klauser 2011, 2017; Hagemann 2010; Lauss and Szigetvari 2010; Kolyperas and Sparks 2018) there has been less research focused on fan zones in domestic leagues like the EPL (for important exceptions, see Richards and Parry 2020; Pearson 2012). Regardless, Kolyperas and Sparks (2018, 73) highlight that a number of aspects of fan zones require further research, including the 'operational and the consumer practices of a variety of Fan Fests'.

Arguably, the fan zone *per se*, due to the range of individuals and activities inside it, may be considered by its attendees as an 'event within the event' and it can serve as a platform for carnivalesque experiences and socio-cultural interactions that mark a shift from the routinized 'everyday' (Lee Ludvigsen 2021). To be sure, the EPL fan zones differ in certain significant ways from those erected in mega-event host cities. Both in terms of their visitor attractiveness and fixedness, as ultimately, the EPL's family fan zones are 'usually located directly outside stadiums on match day' (Richards 2015, 396). Furthermore, it is noted that EPL fan zones 'have not received much academic attention' (ibid.). Essentially, as Richards argues, fan zones now play an important role in many fans' match-day experience as well as in the feminization and gentrification of football culture.

In recent years, clubs such as Burnley, Crystal Palace, Manchester City, Liverpool, and Everton have opened fan zones that are open to the public on match-days. In these zones, a variety of consumption opportunities, activities and entertainment are available for supporters to engage with before they enter the stadium for the 'main event'; the football match. As such, EPL fan zones involve the coalescence of temporality, branding and commodification processes, which Richards and Parry's (2020, 10) description of the Goodison Park fan zone illuminates:

The Everton fan zone on match day is a small, partitioned-off space inside Goodison's car park. During the week this space functions purely as a car park, but on match day it is transformed into a location where fans can engage in a variety of activities and games and purchase official Everton products from merchandise vans. Framing the fan zone are food stalls, from which fast food offerings similar to that inside the stadium such as burgers, and fish and chips are available prior to the match.

The common location of fan zones, often immediately outside the stadiums' turnstiles, means that match-goers – in order to enter the stadium – often have to pass through the fan zones, which seek to offer distinctive pre-match atmospheres. However, the atmosphere created by the fan zone is 'not built on history, memory or tradition, but rather developed from fans engaging with prearranged activities and entertainment, commercial products, and technology-based artefacts and practices' (ibid.). For example, by using hashtags (i.e. #EFCfanzone) in photos that may be showed on the stadiums' big screens (ibid.). Thus, whilst the fan zone space in itself is 'offline' the activities encouraged and facilitated for within it, in fact, blend 'online' activity with a physical fan interaction.

In terms of visitors, the typical EPL fan zone attendee is also likely to be going to the match and typically possesses a match ticket, unlike international mega-events where fan zones also attract large numbers of ticketless supporters and tourists, who watch live-games on large screens. Hence, in the EPL the fan zone, as a pre-match destination, serves as an alternative to other, more 'traditional' pre-match venues. That includes the public houses

where fans congregate to consume alcohol, socially interact, and chant before games' kick off (see Pearson 2012). However, the fan zone alternative is undeniably more formalized since they (often) are on the clubs' own premises and packed with official merchandize, club partners and club mascots. Subsequently, the implementation of EPL fan zones must also be interpreted as a commercial and opportunistic move by the clubs, tightly connected to the desire of maximising economic profits on match-days.

Pearson (2012) outlines the stereotypes of 'carnival fans' and 'the tourist' fan. In terms of pre-match behaviour, he notes that 'carnival fans' behaviour would involve going to the pub or off-licence to purchase drink and chant, whereas for 'the tourist' pre-match activities included 'visiting the official United "Fan Zone" and entering the ground well before kick-off' (77). Richards and Parry (2020) observe the spatial and gendered differences between the pub and the fan zone in the context of Everton fans. Crucially, they argue that the fan zone represents an 'alternative match day atmosphere and experience that remains centred on a family-friendly or at least family-inclusive culture' (12) which 'celebrates new types of fan engagement, and commercial artefacts' (13). Richards and Parry (2020) also argue that fan zones are primarily designed for families and children, and that the fan zone acted as a bridge for fans between the traditional and family- or community-oriented cultures.

Fan zones will typically screen the club's own TV channel with images of historical games and moments, offer live entertainment and activities designed for families and children including *ad hoc* five-a-side and 'keepie uppie' challenges. Thus, although some of the products and activities offered by a fan zone in the EPL are similar – to an extent – with those of the pub – including interaction, food, alcohol and pre-match discussions (Edensor 2015), there are some fundamental distinctions. Moreover, fan zones are also more spacious whilst regulated and surveilled since club match-day stewards and occasionally, police officers, will be apparent or patrolling the area around the stadiums and because fans engage in 'self-policing'.

Although not all EPL clubs may currently offer fan zones, and even though fan zones are not the preferred pre-match destinations for *all* fans, there are still reasons to argue that the fan zone represents a vital space for supporters in the EPL in the 2020s, that comes in addition to more traditional 'offline' spaces associated with fandom (i.e. stadium, pub). Essentially, fan zones provide opportunities for supporter interaction, consumption rituals and entertainment. These, again, are all key elements and drivers for collective and individual fan identities (King 2002; Brooks 2019; Petersen-Wagner 2017a, 2017b, Nash 2000) and they can also be more inclusive and family friendly spaces (Richards and Parry 2020). Whilst the fan zone represents a relatively new 'physical' space; the next section illuminates another emerging 'virtual' fandom space.

A 'YouTube revolution'? The rise of a fan TV culture

This section outlines another space of fandom that has emerged in accordance with the EPL's globalization and, more broadly, technological advancements. That is the online independent 'Fan TV' channels that are primarily broadcasted via YouTube and subsequently shared via other social media channels. Increasingly, fans have hosted fan channels on YouTube and 'framed them as contemporary products of the participatory new media era' (Rivers and Ross 2019, 14). These are typically produced, edited, and published with the necessary technical knowledge (Lawrence and Crawford 2018). Fan TV channels, of course, represent an emerging *online* space and in terms of content, videos and 'vlogs' consist of

audio-visuals (i.e. interviews with match-goers, special guests, match reactions) as well as the possibility to share, comment or react (i.e. by clicking 'like'). As such, the channels serve as spaces in which fans congregate, debate, and organise virtually, simultaneously reflecting the democratisation of the media.

The rise of the 'Fan TV' culture must be seen in relation to the 'fandom-technology' duology, as fans are now free to broadcast fan channels and provide real-time match day services to fellow fans (Lawrence and Crawford 2018). As mentioned, scholars have documented the impact of technology on fandom practices and consumption practices. Pearson (2012, 170) noted that the emergence of the internet and mobile phones had altered fandom 'considerably' and 'probably forever'. Meanwhile, Petersen-Wagner's (2017a, 2017b) 'online' and 'offline' ethnographies of Liverpool fans highlight how web-based spaces are now crucial for fan communication, performing fandom and learning how to become a fan and what this 'means'. This occurs through social media including Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr (Kunert 2021), and also, online message boards (Millward 2008). Secondly, the popularity of certain 'Fan TV' channels can be seen in context of the phenomenon of the 'YouTube celebrity', which has become increasingly central in popular culture (Lovelock 2017). Indeed, Olsson and Martinez (2019) argue that 'YouTubers' can be understood as 'micro-celebrities' that not uncommonly are 'ordinary people' with a substantial number of social media followers and/or subscribers. As such, operating a 'successful' and widely followed 'Fan TV' channel can provide social status and, in some cases, financial revenue (Rivers and Ross 2019).

As argued here, Fan TV channels add new dimensions to the fan culture in the EPL. In discussing YouTube 'Fan TV' channels, it is appropriate to connect the forthcoming argument to the existing research on e-zines (Millward 2008). E-zines are online fanzines with interactive message boards for fans. E-zines, Millward (2008, 299) writes, 'offer (usually) unofficial channels in which supporters can air their views and publicly debate subjectively important issues'. Millward highlights the shift from fan zines (emerging in the 1970s and 1980s) towards e-zines towards the end of the twentieth century. Consequently, studies have demonstrated the role of independent fan outlets and podcasts as means for fans to express their interpretations of the cultural politics influencing their club and football more holistically (Rookwood and Millward 2011). Essentially, the YouTube 'Fan TV' channels symbolize an extension to the e-zines and podcasts and symbolize another *marquee* 'space' on the 'fandom-space' timeline. Concurrently, it is important to emphasize that this does not imply a decline of e-zines, message boards or podcasts, which are still actively used or recorded by fan groups. The YouTube 'Fan TV' channels do, however, encapsulate one of the most recent trends and the continuation of a global and digital forces impacting contemporary fandom in the EPL.

Although it has been touched upon already, this calls for questioning what exactly a fan channel *is* and what it offers EPL fan groups. In 2016, the *Telegraph* could report on 'football's YouTube revolution' which demonstrated a 'natural progression from the radio phone-in, the fanzine 20 years ago or blog 10 years ago' (Telegraph 2016). Ultimately, Fan TV channels represent a way for supporters to create and upload audio-visual content on video-sharing platforms like YouTube. Typically, the Fan TV host(s) will interview, engage with or converse with other (both fellow and rival) fans on the streets, outside the stadiums, in public houses or in studios.

Furthermore, the nature of fan TV encourages debate and discussion that can be directly engaged in the online 'spaces': be it on YouTube's own comment section or on other social

media where the videos may be embedded into, shared or converted into internet memes² or 'gifs'. As such, Rivers and Ross (2019) argue that Fan TV channels' discourses are tightly knitted to the ideas of 'banter' and 'mock impoliteness'. They provide insight into the sheer scale of independent Fan TV channels associated with EPL teams, and Rivers and Ross (2019) observe that most EPL teams have unofficial fan representations on YouTube. That includes, *inter alia*, 'FullTimeDEVILS' (Manchester United, 563k subscribers), 'The Redmen TV' (Liverpool, 431k subscribers) and the one subject to examination in Rivers and Ross's study; 'AFTV' (Arsenal, 1.25 million subscribers and more than 13,000 videos uploaded at the time of writing).

Similar to the EPL fan zones, the Fan TV channels are also yet to be sufficiently examined by social scientists. Yet, it is clear that the development is highly significant, and Fan TV may be interpreted as one way of facilitating football fans to voice their perceptions on club matters, transfer speculations, and the game-play and moreover provide tactical analyses with pre- and post-game reactions. As such, there are distinct similarities with fan zines, e-zines and message boards. As the Redmen TV YouTube page summarizes, the channel offers 'Stats, Sketches, Analysis, Features, Interviews and Real Fan Opinions broadcasting after every Liverpool game'.³ Like fan zones, football clubs are seeking to capitalise further, Liverpool Football Club (2020) recently launched an optional premium subscription to their YouTube Channel offering access to an exclusive members' area on the platform for example.

Interestingly, the core principles of Fan TV channels connect to some of Noam Chomsky's remarks on the sports fan (however broadly defined). For Chomsky (2004, 99) sports represent one of the domains in the society where ordinary individuals – or the fans – are 'not at all in awe of the experts' which Chomsky admittedly highlights 'is a little unusual'. With specific mention to radio call-ins by fans, Chomsky in fact sees that the 'pundit' or 'expert' often are critically questioned by the sports fan. In some ways, the independent fan channels demonstrate Chomsky's observations. However, this can be extended further, because fans take on the role as the host *and* the expert, and interview others who voice *their* expert opinions and reactions on what went 'wrong' or why the opponent was tactically defeated. Notwithstanding, this also illuminates the potential of Fan TV channels to serve as important sites of sports fan democratization where, concurrently, the general, perceived over-commercialization of sports (see, for example, Rookwood and Chan 2011) broadcasting can be opposed or resisted through the creation of unique content.

In one of the few studies on Fan TV channels, Rivers and Ross (2019) argue that YouTube 'facilitates discursive interactions between individuals who might otherwise have remained isolated from one another' (3). Furthermore, they suggest that fan channels – when uploaded on YouTube – display the potential for fans to engage in meaningful debate, but simultaneously, with wide exposure and (potential) popularity, channels may also be a potential site for revenue. The authors write that:

These channels offer viewers access to a range of club related features including pre- and post-match reaction interviews, player ratings, performance appraisals and other topical discussions. Furthermore, many such football fan channels now cross-collaborate with each other in order to maximize viewing figures and potential YouTube revenue (*ibid.*).

The authors thus question if fan channels should be viewed as sources of financial income for their respective operators, entertainment for rival fans or as genuine interest for fellow fans. As Rivers and Ross draw attention to, YouTube videos may generate revenue based

upon number of uploads and views. Thus, they argue one caution is that ‘fans channels such as AFTV should primarily be framed as a source of financial income for the operators and the associated’ (ibid., 15). Arguably, there are some dimensions to this claim. For example, fan channels are not necessarily launched initially to generate financial income, however, this may arrive with certain channels’ popularity and ability to engage with fans and ultimately ‘go viral’. In this sense, it may also be prudent to borrow Ritzer and Jurgenson’s (2010) ideas on ‘prosumer capitalism’. Essentially, ‘prosumption’ involves inter-related production and consumption processes (Ritzer 2014) and have intensified in line with the rise of Web 2.0 technologies.

The Kick Off is another YouTube channel, with 276k subscribers, which creates a unique space for football fans online. Unlike club-specific fan channels, The Kick Off adopts a traditional panel style format, in which prominent football YouTubers watch, commentate, debate and analyse the game providing match build up and post-game analysis as well as in-game discourse, providing free, accessible content for fans as well as a space to interact and comment on the games themselves in real-time by using the chat feature. The Kick Off has also been sponsored by betting company Ladbrokes, which exemplifies the lucrative power of new forms of digital media.

Evidently, independent Fan TV channels can provide a voice to fans and allow active participation. As Millward (2008, 308) argued ‘[e]-zines, much like their fanzine forerunner movement, provide evidence of vibrant fan cultures’. In the case of Fan TV, this may be echoed. These channels add further vibrancy and meaning to fan cultures – with fans in the roles as TV hosts, experts, consumers, and producers – in both domestic and transnational contexts. Fan TV channels thus add another layer to the EPL’s digital spaces that are already composed by social media, podcasts, blogs, e-zines, and online forums. As recently argued, studies examining fans use of social media are increasingly popular in the sociology of sports (Moreau et al. 2021). For the continuation of the social study of football fandom, consumption, and identities it is therefore completely necessary to ‘keep up’ with emerging spaces on social media wherein fans interact, which are becoming increasingly defining for fan cultures locally and transnationally. Subsequently, as next section discusses and reflects on, keeping up with the times, undeniably, remains a key task for understanding the meanings of ‘being a fan’ in the 2020s.

Capturing the trends

In the EPL’s globalized epoch, this paper illuminates selected significant trends in the realm of fan cultures. This section expands on *how* the outlined spaces may be used in empirical works on fandom and consumption. It also argues for the importance of continually adapting to trends in fan culture. With technological advancements and the rise of ‘new’ forms of media, it is crucial that researchers adopt to the pristine spaces in which fandom is practiced and its signs are interpreted within. When fan cultures develop, keeping pace with the times is vital (see, for example, Millward 2008, 2016; Gibbons and Dixon 2010). The two outlined spaces of this paper allow for researchers interested in fan cultures and consumption to study fan cultures from both ‘within’ and the ‘outside’.

Regarding fan zones, these are a relatively recent development. Research on EPL fan zones, thus, is limited, although some extremely important work exists (see Richards 2015;

Richards and Parry 2020). The gendered boundaries of fan zones found in this research remain central and there are also questions around how ethnicity and disability affect fan zone attendance or experiences. Additionally, there are some important questions to be asked around how the fan zone, as highly commercialized spheres that enlarge (and physically extend) clubs' capacity for maximising match-day revenue, impacts (or *if* it impacts) the ritualistic endeavour of 'going to the match' (Edensor and Millington 2010) in the clubs offering fan zones. And then, how technology and social media play into this, with the mentioned encouragement of hashtag use, geotags and photo sharing competitions. Meanwhile, not all fans are interested in fan zones and may see them as an extension of football's commercialization. Approaching these questions facilitates for methodological flexibility, however, they could undoubtedly be pursued by the deployment of field questionnaires and qualitative methodologies including field interviews, visual and observational components.

Analysing fans' social media practices can yield an insight into fans' consumption habits and patterns. For the study of Fan TV culture, this is an important argument. Scholars have increasingly recognized fan channels, for example, in relation to 'banter' and 'mocking' in the fan comments (Rivers and Ross 2019). To build on this, we argue that there are two other fan channel elements that are sociologically intriguing. First, this relates to content. What exactly is being discussed? Are some matters more frequently discussed than others? Indeed, topics are likely to vary; from match reports, player ratings, Video Assistant Referee (VAR) to ticket prices. Examining the content would allow the development of an understanding of which (over-arching) processes that fans embrace, resist or contest, and how they are responded to (be it decision-aid technology, commercialization, policing, on-pitch performances). Methodologically, content, discourse and frame analysis techniques can be useful here. We do, however, suspect – as Millward (2016) suggested – that rather it being a case of social scientists not taking online fan discourses seriously, perhaps it is instead a case of social scientists not being aware of 'how to gather and/or take most seriously the use of social media in the analysis of football' (197). In light of the digital turn in social sciences (Petersen-Wagner 2018; Marres 2017), social media analytics and big data tools like the 'YouTube Data Tools' (see Rieder, Matamoros-Fernández, and Coromina 2018) and 'Chorus Twitter Analytics' (see Brooker, Barnett, and Cribbin 2016) can be employed to scrape and analyse data from YouTube and Twitter and this can facilitate a greater understanding of Fan TV channels and, subsequently, fandom on social media.

Second, there are questions to be asked about the networks *between* fan channel operators and their relationship(s) to their respective clubs. Typically, the Fan TV channels in focus here are promoted as independent channels. Yet, when (or *if*) the popularity increases, it serves as revealing how fan channels are perceived by producers themselves, and from club officials, marketing teams and, indeed, players. For example, Arsenal striker, Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang, was criticised for his close relationship with 'Arsenal Fan TV' (Eurosport 2019). Fan TV culture may therefore impact fan-player relations, too.

In summary, arguments holding that online fan interactions should be treated or taken seriously perpetuate and stands as strong as ever (Millward 2006, 2008, 2016; Gibbons and Dixon 2010). However, we *do not* argue that, over the last decade, they have been ignored. Our contention is simply that, as technologies utilized by fans in their everyday lives develop, so should the study of fandom (continue to) be reactive, responsive, open-minded, and versatile.

Concluding thoughts

With its discussion, this article makes a contribution to the existing academic debates around emerging fandom spaces in the EPL in the twenty-first century. Such contribution comes through the examination of these spaces' significance, and by providing potential explanations for why these spaces have emerged in line with broader processes that have been theorized in the sociology of sport and discussed above. We position these spaces' emergence in the context of globalization processes which have impacted the ways in which the EPL and the league's actions and experiences are consumed, organized, and followed. The article therefore discusses the significance of this, and adds to our understanding of fan zones and Fan TV in relation to fan cultures.

Up until this point '[f]ootball has often been investigated sociologically and anthropologically through research among its supporters' (Moreau et al. 2021, 3). In such scholarship, some common themes have been the 'identification with a club or a group of organized supporters [and the] politicization of supporters according to political and economic contexts (ibid.). In the context of English football, scholars have successfully produced empirical understandings of fan cultures. Both in the 'traditional' or 'established' spaces, like the stadium (Pearson 2012; Petersen-Wagner 2017a), the pub (Brooks 2019) and more recent 'online' spaces including e-zines, message boards and social/'new' media (Millward 2006, 2007, 2008; Lawrence and Crawford 2018).

Moving forward, it remains crucial to consider and focus upon these emerging spaces. That includes the two spaces that have been devoted discussion in this article. Both these spaces are visited, viewed, shared, and participated within or reacted to by millions of fans across every EPL season and both promise intriguing arenas for scholarly investigation. The fan zone predominantly represents an 'offline' space, that is a more family-inclusive pre-match arena for supporters, with hints of 'online' technological artefacts blended into them (Richards and Parry 2020). Then, the 'online' Fan TV channels allow fans a voice (in dual terms) and interaction with other fans through reactions, sharing and comments. At the turn of the new decade; the 2020s, understanding these spaces can enhance our understanding of fan cultures in what can be characterised as a globalised and digitalised era of the EPL.

With its analysis and argument, this article ties into and makes a timely contribution to the literature on 'fandom' within the sociology of sports. The article speaks to – and can extend – the existing debates in the field on fans' 'online' (Millward 2006, 2007, 2008; Kunert 2021; Gibbons and Dixon 2010; Cleland et al. 2018) and 'offline' spaces (Richards and Parry 2020) in the English football's top divisions. These debates again speak to broader academic debates around individual and collective fandom and the cultural politics of global consumption. We make no claim here that the fan zone and Fan TV channels represent the *only* emerging spaces in which fan interaction occurs within football. Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis we have seen some new developments in that regard. For example, as games took place behind closed doors, some clubs set up large screens featuring fans watching the game from home in real-time. The recent lockdowns thus open up some vital questions for future research in this area. Undeniably, however, this article covers some of the most important trends that can be witnessed over the EPL's last ten years. An understanding of these spaces – as this article contributes with – is therefore sociologically important and a turn toward digital sociology can offer tools to partly achieve this.

Notes

1. For exceptions, see Rivers and Ross (2019) and Richards and Parry (2020).
2. Memes, as used here, refer to ‘visual texts such as still images, videos, or animated GIFs that are intertextual. These texts are created and circulated by everyday citizens in order to construct and communicate understandings of the social world’ (Dickerson 2016, 304).
3. See: <https://www.youtube.com/user/WeAreTheRedmen/about>

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