



Top-down and bottom-up authenticity: The desires and exploitations of authentic consumption in English football

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Abstract

The need and desire for authenticity has become a central feature of modern life as people and cultures look to access ‘realness’ across a world in which much has become increasingly commodified, virtual and/or un-real. The field of professional sport is indicative of this trend. Specifically, the marketization of the English Premier League (EPL) and adjunct fan culture edifies both the use and exploitation of authenticity in the pursuit of financial gain for its most powerful stakeholders. This article unravels this case and depicts how the battle for authenticity is played out in contemporary football consumption in the UK and internationally. From the top-down and bottom-up authenticity is displayed, contested and reappropriated across the game. This is shown by examining how and why authenticity is exploited in the interests of capital and why its potent weaponisation endures in this case and, perhaps, cultures surrounding professional sport internationally. We address important gaps in our understanding and key debates around the search for truth and reality, along with connections to the self, our communities, and our past.

Keywords

authenticity, consumption, fandom, football, fan cultures

Introduction

In modern consumer societies, the importance and role of ‘authenticity’ has been subjected to significant sociological debate (Grauel, 2016; Thurnell-Read, 2019; Zukin,

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2008). Whilst scholars contend that '[t]he nature of authenticity in consumption is contested' (Beverland and Farrelly, 2010: 838), one common thread within this scholarship is that the *longing* for authenticity can be understood as a symptom of dissatisfaction with modernity and its reconfiguration of social life (Thurnell-Read, 2019) including the erosion of categories such as tradition and self-identity (Beck et al., 1994) and patterns of standardization and rationalization. In this context emerges a 'desire to locate the true or "real" expression of something' (Thurnell-Read, 2019: 1449). Yet, while pinning down what exactly 'authenticity' is, constitutes a challenging task (Thurnell-Read et al., 2022), it has been argued that research is needed which clarifies:

how modes of authenticity and enrichment processes are shaped and reshaped as they move across national borders and into contexts more or less marked by the long-term processes that are said to have given rise to such desires to produce and consume authenticity (Thurnell-Read, 2019: 1466).

This article seeks to reflect this call. It contributes to the debates on the authenticity-consumption nexus, by employing the empirical and culturally important context of English football fandom. As a nationally, transnationally and politically significant group, the sociological importance of football supporters is well-established. The social study of football fandom has, in recent years, increasingly recognized supporters' complex consumer and citizen identities (Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018), thus, capturing football supporters' political engagement and critical stance towards what they see as 'modern football' (Numerato, 2018). However, as a direct consequence of football's political economic changes after the formation of the Premier League in 1992, including powerful globalizing and commercial forces, the relationship between supporters and 'their' clubs has been transformed (Millward, 2011). Against the backdrop of football's new consumption, supporters' behaviours and identities have become increasingly complex and heterogeneous. Fans, above all, constitute a diverse social group as affirmed by extant typologies that conceptually divide supporters into a variety of categories (Davis, 2015; Giulianotti, 2002).

Crucially, one concept that repeatedly emerges in discussions of football fandom and cultures is '*authenticity*'. Accordingly, so-called 'inauthentic' supporters are commonly viewed as consumers with an emotional detachment to their team. Conversely, 'authentic supporters' are 'described as those with strong emotional connections that are rooted together in-group loyalties' (Dixon, 2014: 426), who are always present in the stadium and opposed to the game's commercialization which is seen to threaten 'the lives of "authentic fans" who experience games containing *razzamatazz* as culturally alienating' (Hognestad, 2015: 150). Hence, as in other consumer contexts – music, fashion or tourism – the question of authenticity in football fandom – that is, who is a 'real', 'genuine' or 'true' fan (Hognestad, 2015) remains highly contentious; not at least because the 'authentic fan' is traditionally seen as white, heterosexual working-class males (Magrath, 2021).

Yet, if this quest for authenticity occurs against the canvas of modernity and its (un)intended side-effects, including weakened ties of traditions (Beck et al., 1994; Thurnell-Read, 2019), it is unsurprising that authenticity holds a central position in the consumption (and production) of (modern) football in an age where the product (football) is firmly

embedded in the entertainment and experience industry and debates among football fans about what football should be *vis-à-vis* tradition and locality have followed (Numerato, 2018). Meanwhile, football clubs' marketing campaigns increasingly seek to commodify authenticity and 'foster a deep and authentic sense of belonging' (Henderson and Oates, 2023: 1013) As Gilmore and Pine (2007: 1) write, '[i]n any industry where experiences come to the fore, issues of authenticity follow closely behind'. We are therefore left with a situation where, as *The Guardian's* Jonathan Liew (2024) writes, 'English football has more words to describe ersatz fans than real ones: "plastics" and "casuals", "fakes" and "frauds", "tourists" and "day-trippers", "trolls" and "haters", "fair-weather fans" and "glory-hunters"'.

Whilst such labels, perhaps like football more broadly, might appear 'banal' or 'apolitical' (Turner and Millward, 2024), we argue that, beyond representing a question merely relevant to football fandom *per se*, the above continuum in fact guides us towards important sociological questions speaking to consumption in modern societies, nostalgia, community and identity construction processes (see Blasing, 2024). Moreover, these questions are significant for the study of consumer cultures, because they relate to debates surrounding consumer agency and resistance. and the question of how, precisely, consumers consume (Holt, 1995; Ulver-Sneistrup et al., 2011). Football fandom, we argue, tells us something important about the aforementioned desire to find a true or real expression of something in face of modernity's forces (cf. Thurnell-Read, 2019: 1449); just as scholars of authenticity in other consumer contexts have highlighted, *inter alia*, hipsters (Gerosa, 2024), craftwork (Thurnell-Read, 2019), tourism (Taylor, 2001), hip hop cultures (Arthur, 2006).

Framed as 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' authenticity this article contributes to theory on authenticity and its antecedent research. It does so by highlighting how authenticity is simultaneously co-produced from the bottom up, manufactured and co-opted from the top down and operationalised in programs of resistance. In this professional football in England is a potent site of exploration. It allows us to see the tussle between the actualisation of the authentic self in late-modern capitalism and the hegemony of massified consumer culture - which sits in waiting, ready to devour and reproduce bottom-up authenticity and display it under the lights.

This article adopts a conceptual approach, drawing upon frames from existing conceptualizations of authenticity in the study of consumer culture, football fandom and consumption. These insights are drawn together for the purpose of advancing an organizing heuristic that views 'authenticity' - here, in the empirical setting of football fandom - as a series of relationally connected top-down/bottom-up processes. Insights from the extant literature are supplemented by other secondary sources. First, in form of media and web sources where the topic of fans' authenticity appeared to be publicly discussed by supporter groups, club representatives or other stakeholders. Second, they are also informed by themes appearing in our earlier (Author B) or on-going (Author A) and more empirically-oriented sociological research in the study of football supporters that informs our thinking. Concerning case selection, the EPL was selected as it represents the domestic football league that has undergone the most intense globalisation and commercialisation processes, with its images being broadcast in 212 territories (Millward, 2011). Accordingly, EPL fandom's social significance is characterized by a local-global

tension that has created consumption related puzzles speaking to co-existing ‘authentic’ fandom. Acknowledging the limitations of our single case study approach, this also means that further, comparative research is still encouraged that can capture notions of ‘authentic’ fandom other football leagues, both in Europe and beyond.

Hence, we critically interrogate ‘authenticity’s’ meanings and productions in English football’s empirical context, as the home to the world’s most globalized and commercialized league (the EPL) and enormous local and global fan communities (Millward, 2011; Petersen-Wagner, 2017a, 2017b). We address the following three research questions:

- (i) What does ‘authenticity’ mean in the current, neoliberal age of football?
- (ii) How is ‘authenticity’ utilized in the marketization of EPL?
- (iii) How does fans’ quest for, and meanings of ‘authenticity’ differ from this

Theorizing and unpacking ‘authenticity’

Elsewhere, scholars have indicated a somewhat paradoxical relevance of authenticity contemporarily (Erickson, 1991) and its link to the pace of change in our material and social worlds (Virilio, 2005). For example, the ubiquity of social media usage is perhaps the most striking change to everyday culture and systems of communication of our time. Social media sites and apps are vital to ‘platform capitalism’ – wherein tech corporations employ algorithmic strategy, personal data, and network expansion to sell products and services (Srnicek, 2017). The impact is so profound that many said companies are more powerful than nation-states, as we live our lives increasingly online, staying in touch but never touching.

In the physical world, the advancements in technology and the onset of hyper-globalisation mean more people have greater exposure to sameness, a ‘globalisation of nothing’ in which nations, corporations and organisations work to purvey their likeness and facilitate global desire for it (Ritzer 2003: 190). This likeness and predictability are also demonstrated by syntenic materials that fuel a global fast-fashion industry with intercontinental branding; meanwhile, our food is genetically modified/preserved and sold via franchise purveyors with the same menu across continents. The result is alienation - a loss of self and sense of connection to unique individual and cultural identity (of ourselves and others) that is well documented (see MacCannell 1976; Øversveen, 2022). However, the widespread usage and integration of smartphones into daily life also means more access for multi-national firms/brands to our psyche, honing and cajoling needs and desires to (con)form our habits and possessions. In this context, ‘[t]he aesthetic regime of consumption influences the formation and operation of the regime of accumulation and conversely, the regime of accumulation influences the aesthetics and taste’ (Gerosa, 2024: 20). This cyclone of marketing, socialization and consumption is akin to a whirlpool that pulls emergent tastes and trends into market currents, energised by pervasive neoliberal values.

A result of this vortex is a quest for authenticity that undergirds a multitude of goods/lifestyle experiences and patterns of consumption, edified by an array of signs that light the way to the possibility of the authentic. ‘Real’, ‘organic’, ‘traditional’, ‘local’, ‘genuine’ -

are all common markers gilding our consumption (Groszlik, 2017), while trends in the digital world encourage you to engage with and produce #unfltered content with the lauded goal of ‘being your authentic self’. Yet the paradox here is that in seeking out the experience or feeling of authenticity within the prism of late modern capitalism, one is participating in the marketisation and commercialisation of authenticity, which is itself inauthentic. So, within this malaise and against such forces, what then can we understand as authenticity? What is it to be authentic?

There are no easy answers here, given the multifaceted attachments and interconnected meanings that have surrounded authenticity. Yet some of the work has already been done above in defining authenticity against what it is not – the globalisation of sameness and the triumph of virtual over the real. We can also look for definitions of authenticity in cultural resistance to industrialisation (Hall, 2020) and/or the evolution of craft economies as opposed to Fordist mass production (Luckman and Thomas, 2023). Herein the earliest definition of authenticity emerges - the assignation of the original versus the copy. In modernity, a metamorphosis of the term has taken place ‘from authenticity as the original in opposition to copies, to authenticity as the “true self” in opposition to the alienated self’ (Gerosa, 2024: 21). The spectre of Marx looms large here, given the centrality of alienation – from both production and products – in this analysis. Herein, the tendrils of commercialisation weave their way into the realms of culture and its practices, influencing both consumption and understandings of the self as connected to consumptive practice (Langman and Kalekin-Fishman, 2005).

The push towards authenticity is, then, a response to the forces that seek to constrain it. It is both ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’. To practice and connect with our authentic selves and to do so unmolested by greater societal machinery or markets (see also Freire 1970). Our aforementioned consumption practices and growth of the craft economy are indicative of this desire to enact personal or natural realness, and the market/industry has reacted accordingly (Beverland and Farrelly 2010). With this understanding, we can arrive at a definition termed succinctly by Gerosa (2024: 33) who holds ‘authenticity as the ability of autonomous self-determination of existence, as opposed to the conformity of the massification of the self’.

The market responses have co-opted these desires within the craft revolution to marshal our consumption via the ‘cold logics of the market economy’ (Thurnell-Read, 2019: 1451). The battle continues and is indeed played out in theatres of art, music (Arthur, 2006), tourism fields (Taylor, 2001) and, as we discuss, sport, in this case football stadia and adjunct fan culture. Consequently, as important sociological questions concerning ‘authenticity’ in modern consumer societies have been tackled, it can be contended that football spaces and cultures compose an intriguing site for how authentic consumption is both longed for, contested and created, as set against patterns of standardisation and homogenization.

The quest for authenticity against the backdrop of ‘modern football’

In March 2024, Tottenham Hotspur’s Australian manager, Ange Postecoglou, was asked during a press conference if EPL clubs were leaving behind local fans and subsequently

intensifying their efforts trying to attract ‘tourist’ supporters, supposedly, willing to pay higher prices for match-day tickets. In response, Postecoglou remarked:

See that’s really harsh [...] because I’m probably ‘plastic’ and ‘tourist’, because I was coming from the other side of the world, really passionate about football, and if I could get access to see a Premier League game, that was the world to me (quoted in [The Guardian, 2024](#)).

The then Tottenham manager’s defence of the ‘plastic’ fan touches the surface of a much wider conundrum: who may be considered a real football fan?

In existing fandom studies, it appears that the question of *how* individuals support their clubs has assumed an equal importance to *who* they support ([Gibbons and Nuttall, 2016](#)). Notwithstanding, this search for authenticity and ‘authentic’ fandom cannot be understood without unpacking first the transformation of football because the searching process occurs against the backdrop of what is described often as ‘modern football’. Whilst ‘modern football’ constitutes a slippery concept, it refers broadly to ideas of football as a largely commodified, mediatized and securitized product that is characterized by higher ticket prices, club owners/directors’ financial mismanagement, unsuitable kick-off times (determined by powerful broadcasters), declining and sanitized stadium atmospheres and, finally, heavy-handed policing approaches ([Numerato, 2018](#)).

Following Hognestad (2015: 141), this has consequently led to supporter protests from a movement that – albeit incoherent – are united by being ‘Against Modern Football’. This movement nostalgically emphasizes football’s ‘glorious past’ and draws attention to how ‘modern football’ has marginalized ‘real fans’. These claims, made by supporters opposing ‘modern football’ hence collectively express ‘their own set of self-interests and a broader concern for the future of the game’ ([Webber, 2017](#): 876) and stand against clubs and leagues’ profitable aspirations.

In English football, neoliberal policies, the formation of the EPL in 1992 and the introduction of all-seater stadiums led a ‘new middle-class habitus’ inside stadiums ([Dubal, 2010](#)). This followed a shift whereby the football authorities, leagues and its clubs attempted to appeal to a more middle-class audience ([Webber, 2017](#)). Given the general importance of lively atmospheres for the consumption of sport ([Davis and Gibbons, 2023](#)), this meant that many supporters of the older generations and working-class felt increasingly alienated and that match-day atmospheres had become sanitized and that clubs, increasingly, were oriented towards ‘attracting a new class of fans’, more likely to purchase official merchandise and consume the club’s *brand* ([Dubal, 2010](#): 135).

Against these social, cultural and economic changes to English football, the authenticity of football and its fandom has gained a big importance. We may see how scholars have explored the meanings of authentic fandom but also problematized the concept ([Crawford, 2004](#); [Davis, 2015](#); [Millward, 2011](#); [Petersen-Wagner, 2017b](#)). In English football’s context, authentic fans most commonly are seen as white, working-class male supporters who are local to the club they support and also express masculine features, and regularly attend fixtures ([Petersen-Wagner, 2017b](#)). Locality and geographical proximity, thus, have often stood out as core variables and markers upon supporters’ distinction of whom that are more authentic or genuine than others. Authenticity, we argue, remains a problematic concept because ideas of ‘authentic fandom’ differ according

to the lines of gender, race, disabilities and sexuality (Magrath, 2021; Richard and Parry, 2020) and has commonly been determined by an ‘either-or’ perspective assuming that nation-state borders (i.e., physical proximity to a club) recreate (in)authenticity (Petersen-Wagner, 2017a; 2017b). As Crawford (2004) writes, it therefore remains crucial in scholarly analyses to not ‘celebrate’ certain supporter practices or communities whilst ‘ignoring’ or ‘downgrading’ others. The notions of ‘real’, ‘true’ and ‘authentic’ fans are marked by inherent subjectivities and do not exist in a ‘fixed objective form’ (Thurnell-Read, 2019).

Notwithstanding, the longing for experiences of authentic fandom remains a culturally and socially illuminating aspect of fan cultures. For instance, as Nash (2000) observed, many Scandinavian Liverpool FC supporters travelling to the city of Liverpool would embark upon an authenticity journey: being able to create and demonstrate *authenticity* became a key concern for many of these fans. Thus, these fans would attempt to re-create what they perceived to be local (thus, ‘authentic’) fandom practices. By avoiding tourist hotspots and official stadium lounges and, instead, visiting more ‘traditional’ public houses that enabled them to ‘engage with key symbolic practices deemed genuine by dominant local tradition’ (Nash, 2000: 14). As Nash notes, ‘[t]he more experienced ‘genuine’ regular travellers were openly hostile to the ‘tourists’, [and] refused to drink in the same pubs as them’ (p. 15). As opposed to the authentic (or traditional) supporter, we may *prima facie* identify the ‘tourist’ (Pearson, 2012), ‘transnational’ fan (Millward, 2011) or what Giulianotti (2002), drawing upon Benjamin’s Parisian urban dweller, called the *flâneur*, who is not considered to be authentic or true fans given their more consumer-related relationship to their team.

Yet, the equation of authentic support with locality (and weekly stadium presence) is problematic. Petersen-Wagner’s (2017a, 2017b) work on Brazilian and Swiss fan communities demonstrates that authentic fandom should not primarily be defined in terms of locality, because technological advancements have altered the ways in which football is being consumed and organized – *inter alia* global broadcasting, online forums and social media, and country-specific supporters’ clubs. This has reconfigured fandom practices and meanings related to authenticity. This work shows that locality need not be a prerequisite for authentic fandom. Instead, so-called transnational fans can well consider themselves as real or authentic, given that they create alternatives to a weekly stadium presence through cosmopolitan networks of solidarity, online interactions with other fans and by watching live games together in pubs. Petersen-Wagner (2017a: 965) reminds us, therefore, in an era of globalization, ‘supporting a football club comes in different forms and, despite these differences, men and women, who are not defined by ethnicity, social class or nation-state, all engage in shared emotions – joy in victory, sadness in defeat’.

Whilst this rightly problematizes and expands upon earlier conceptions of what constitutes an authentic football fan, authenticity remains a pressing topic. It is also, occasionally, contradictory. Whilst inauthentic support, often, is conflated with the role of the consumer and some supporters thus try to distance themselves from the consumer-role, some supporters have also attempted to frame themselves as consumers because this may enhance their voice in their campaigns against ‘modern football’. As Numerato and Giulianotti (2018: 346) write, ‘this improved [consumer] status not only serves to strengthen the articulation of football fan consumer rights but also allows supporters to

articulate their concerns related to decision-making processes and commercial, media, policing and wider security issues'. It therefore remains crucial, as Fitzpatrick (2025: 198) writes, that despite many supporters' uneasiness with the commodification of top-level English football, 'most fans can be characterised as "market realists": there is a pragmatic, if at times reluctant, acceptance of the commercial reality underpinning the neoliberal logic of contemporary football'. The desire to consume football 'authentically' is marked simultaneously by compliance and resistance towards the free-market hegemony of English football (Turner and Millward, 2024).

Moreover, in recent years, football clubs themselves, particularly their marketing departments, have engaged in the commodification of authenticity. In the context of English football, authenticity is not only sought by supporters but also *produced* by clubs. As Henderson and Oates (2023: 1013) argue in the case of Everton and Liverpool FC, '[t]hrough marketing campaigns, the clubs attempt to convey the authenticity and specialness of the community they offer through a tactic we call "branded solidarity"'. Images and rhetoric emphasizing local traditions and stories are utilized by the clubs, they note, are utilized in order to 'develop a sense of authenticity around their brands' (p. 1026). Meanwhile, most EPL clubs offer stadium tours that promise 'visitors to go behind-the-scenes, feel the unique atmosphere of stadiums, walk in the footsteps of players and coaches, and have an authentic experience' (Tobar and Ramshaw, 2022: 437, emphasis added).

We therefore see how *authenticity* is ever-present yet bound to mean different meanings in 'modern football' in a neoliberal age. On the one hand, it is something that fans long for upon consuming football – a marker of distinction (cf. Bourdieu, 1984) – something that is real and unique, hence not mass produced and devoid of tradition (e.g., modern football). On the other, authenticity as can be seen is commodified and has become marketized by clubs that promise and sell authentic experiences.

Yet, given that football clubs and supporters are engaged in a symbolic, definitional struggle over 'what football should be and what it really is' (Numerato, 2018: 2), it is of course expected that there is a distance between what clubs and supporter feel authenticity should be and what authenticity really is. Whilst contestations and disagreements between clubs and fans have been examined in the context of club owners or takeovers (Millward, 2011), the European Super League (Turner and Millward, 2024), social control measures (Author B), the extant distance regarding authenticity has been given far less attention. Little research has addressed this authenticity paradox and by seeking to fill this gap, this article will now explore the making of authenticity from the top-down and bottom-up in order to understand (i) how authenticity is commodified in the EPL and (ii) how fans' meanings differ from this.

Top-down authenticity

The historical significance and community embeddedness of EPL clubs, along with the global and financial success of the league model, has meant that the clubs, as contended, fans themselves, are ideal vessels for the purveyance of authentic consumption. The deeply emblematic nature of sport is active in this case, with club badges as revered symbols among players, staff and supporters alike who wear them proudly on their shirts

and, in many cases, their skins. However, despite representing important cultural artefacts, many of these badges have undergone a modernisation, reflecting the wider market ideology characterising the game. Club crests are redeployed as ‘logos’ while the ‘graphic heritage’ is altered and cast aside in favour of more market and social media-friendly symbols of the club brand.

The finessing and modernization of such cultural artifacts occurs to keep in line with the demands of the market and to drive global consumption however, despite exceptions including Cardiff City owner Vincent Tan’s decision to change the club’s traditional crest, and colours from blue to red in 2012-13, most owners have on the surface, been careful not to stray too far from the original colours and emblems. There is a corporate logic to this insofar as the apparatus is attuned to the trends toward authenticity and, in being so, marshals nostalgia to ferment wider and deeper customer loyalty (Cho et al., 2019).

Regarding the team jersey, the replica shirt continues to be a staple money-maker for clubs. However, yet more ‘traditional’ fans tend to shun the latest offering in favour of retro designs that are still sold via the club shop or website yet offer the ‘premise of authenticity’ (Stride et al., 2017: 187) and allow a sense of distinction among supporters (Blasing, 2024). Moreover, the burgeoning market in match-worn shirts (often sold directly by clubs), complete with certificates of authenticity, is an indication of fans’ inner desire to go further in pursuit of a real cultural artefact connecting them to their club. In many ways this microcosm summaries the feud at the heart of the battle for authenticity, evident in fan culture, as the original versus the copy, whereby the ‘[c]heap knock offs sold at street stands are not acceptable’ (Blasing, 2024: 374).

The wearing of club colours and shirts are indicative of the wider group performance of fandom making them susceptible to mass production themselves. In this sense fans are marionettes in the packaging of the football product. TV promotions, highlights packages, YouTube videos, clips on TikTok, ‘X’, Bluesky and elsewhere are awash with fan imagery capitalised upon, and carefully edited, from the ‘top-down’ by broadcasters, leagues and clubs who use these to sell *images of authenticity*. As Giulianotti (2011: 3303) writes, through a host of apparatuses and techniques including club marketing campaigns, news reports and advertisements, we observe the promotion of a:

particular range of authorised, morally defensible “true fan” identities and practices, which emphasise the routine consumption of football related products, “inoffensive expressions” of team support and the willingness to produce “atmosphere” by responding to a top-down orchestration of singing and chanting.

The holding of banners, flags, scarves and singing chants - many of which date back to the 1800s (Schonderwood, 2011) - are authentic cultural practices stepped in history but packaged as a proud and unique accoutrement to elite football. In this, fans are not only made complicit in their consumption but are key players in a masquerade of authenticity. A draw for an increasingly global fan base searching for something real to which they can anchor their identity in a febrile sea of plasticity. This speaks Fraser’s (2022) definition of ‘cannibal capitalism’ wherein socio-cultural spaces, places and rituals are very much on the menu yet must pass through various phases and metamorphoses to become palatable

for the modern consumer. This speaks to directly to the inter-relation of top-down and bottom-up authenticity.

Indeed, EPL clubs are increasingly turning their attention towards their global fans base and the ‘tourist fan’ willing to pay higher ticket prices, spend more on club merchandise (Rudkin and Sharma, 2020), and in what Miles (2010) calls ‘themed spaces’, including corporate fan zones (Richards and Parry, 2020) and hospitality lounges. Hence, not only the stadium, but surrounding spaces, and even local communities themselves are coopted in the to-and-fro of authenticity. For example, it is common for clubs to leverage their working-class ‘heritage’ to sell merchandise, tickets and experiences beyond the means of legacy fans from the communities that have contributed to it. Yet, Everton FC is known as ‘The Peoples Club’ embossed on club scarves, marketing banners and the tickets themselves, while Liverpool FCs anthem reassures fans they will “Never Walk Alone” (Henderson and Oats, 2023). Meanwhile, West Ham FC is “Founded on Iron” – a nod to the club’s working-class origins in East London’s iron works (Belton, 2003). However, fans from each of these teams participate regularly in activism and blatant collective action, challenging essentially how English football has become ‘unaffordable to large swathes of the traditional fanbase’ (FSA, 2024). Yet even in these performances resistant to commercial forces in the game, fans are somewhat displaying their authentic connection to their clubs and surroundings – a key aspect of their appearance to a more general consumer culture.

However, perhaps mindful of the need to ‘balance tension between commercial and community objectives’ (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013: 272), all EPL clubs and many further down the pyramid, also have their own foundations. With names generally varying between ‘The Club Foundation’ or ‘Club in the Community’, these entities are separate to the clubs yet retain the image rights to leverage the power of the badge in fundraising and advocacy for community welfare advocacy. While diverse in scope, foundations’ aims are similar across the EPL as typified by the mission statement of Manchester City in the Community who ‘support people across greater Manchester by empowering healthier lives...creating healthy futures and healthy communities’ (CITC, 2025). On the one hand, this aligns with wider patterns of corporate social responsibility, thus an opportunity for EPL monoliths to give back and, in doing so, seek redress for their corporate largess (Hamil and Morrow, 2011). On the other, it is also a notable example of positive value congruence with fans, which leads to greater trust, loyalty and ultimately higher/sustained spending among consumers (see Ziniel and Gransden, 2023). As we argue, therefore, it is possible to see a top-down negotiation and reconfiguration of authenticity at the hands of club hierarchies (along with broadcasters and sponsors) who seek to use and purvey their closeness to the locales that birthed them and situate this within the circuit of consumption that favours the ‘authentic’.

Bottom-up authenticity

This section turns to how authenticity is, in parallel, negotiated and (re)made from the ‘bottom-up’. Already in the 1970s, British football fanzines emerged as ‘authentic’ publications, produced and consumed as an alternative to media texts produced by journalists and club employees in newspapers and official match-day programmes.

Fanzines became a counter-hegemonic movement contrasting football's commercialism; as Rookwood and Hoey (2024: 89) write, '[s]haped by their proximity to fans and perceived authenticity, fanzines in the analogue age provided a small scale yet important challenge to the hegemony of the gatekeepers in print and broadcast media'.

Often characterized by a DIY-style, produced with photocopiers or at small presses, fanzines quickly became an important site for the critique of 'mainstream football' (Numerato, 2018) that was incompatible with 'authentic football'. English clubs would have several fanzines that, commonly, would contain longer and shorter articles and commentaries on sporting and social issues often written in a humorous way (Millward, 2011). Crucially, the fanzines' authenticity is expressed by its position, parallel to, but outside, the top-down efforts to re-create authenticity from tabloids, clubs' match-day programmes and professional football magazines.

In some cases, this meant fanzine writers would discuss how modernization processes would impact the fan experience and power relationships. Dixon (2014), for example, find that some Newcastle fan writers discussed that embracing the role of a 'consumer' could help them gain more power faced with the club directors. Other writers drew attention to how modernization processes altered traditional kick-off times, ticket prices or even outright eroded authentic stadium atmospheres so highly sought after (Millward, 2008; 2011).

If, on a basic level, the search for authenticity reveals a dissatisfaction with modernity (Thurnell-Read, 2019), it may be argued that within the bottom-up making of authenticity, the creation of fanzines enabled this dissatisfaction to be expressed, whilst constituting an important starting point for supporters' production of *alternative* and perceivably more authentic arenas of fandom (Millward, 2008).

Whereas fanzines' popularity was impacted by the emergence of forums and social media platforms, we can observe how the creation of spaces with claims of authenticity – that are less commercially orchestrated or choreographed from the top down – has continued. Perhaps representing a contrast to clubs' own 'official' fan zones (cf. Richards and Parry, 2020), one example of this in the case of Liverpool FC includes so-called *Boss Night* events. As Rookwood and Hoey (2024: 90) note, these warehouse fan events and gigs, often organized after fixtures, 'bring highly localised fan rituals like chants and banners' to the forefront. Interestingly, this consumption of 'localized' fan rituals is not solely sought within its immediate local context; but by transnational supporter bases with *Boss Night* events that have been staged in Scandinavia and North America. Whilst this suggests, as Nash (2000) found, that some transnational supporters are keen to adopt fandom practices validated by local tradition, it remains important here to not reduce transnational supporters to a coherent body of passive recipients of 'authenticity', but as actors that also resist and reinterpret 'authenticity' differently to 'local' supporters. Following Petersen-Wagner's (2017b: 137) lead, it remains crucial to depart from a perspective assuming that 'the political borders of the nation-state (re)create divisions for "authenticity" and "inauthenticity"'. Particularly so, as online spaces reconfigure the modes through which 'authentic' consumption may be pursued through online communities that may spill over into offline communities.

Indeed, the last decade has seen the rise of so-called YouTube 'Fan TV' channels (Rivers and Ross, 2021) that offer a different type of consumption; less authorized and

morally defensible than the one crafted from the top down. Despite lacking the broadcasting rights to show live games, independent channels like *Arsenal Fan TV* (known AFTV), *The United Stand* and *The Anfield Wrap* all boast thousands of subscribers and provide match analyses, commentary, watch-alongs and discussions on developments within football. In doing so, however, this also raises questions surrounding authenticity. Indeed, these may be seen as interventions that promote a democratized media, traditional and authentic fan symbols, signs and identities (Woods and Ludvigsen, 2022). Yet, such channels can, in some instances – even if it was not the original aim – end up becoming commercialized and financially lucrative if they increase in popularity (Rivers and Ross, 2021). Thus, such bottom-up initiatives, especially those deemed ‘successful’, run the risk of becoming co-opted *from the top*, including clubs, advertisers, or broadcasters, and hence part of, or even resembling the neoliberal structures and “‘corporate machine’ its creators originally set out to challenge’ (Lawrence and Crawford, 2022: 61). Notwithstanding, the fanzines, fan ‘events’ and channels all matter, as they essentially afford fans to produce their own versions of football’s transformation.

Concurrently, by engaging in their own independent media productions, fans are figuratively dipping their toes into the mainstream, and by virtue of their success and existence on commercial platforms, they become increasingly submerged, their authentic aura depleted. A search for profit for sustenance is then intoned that devours freedom from the massification they sought to oppose, feeding a persistent ouroboros and live-streamed before our very eyes.

As such, the unpacked examples highlight two central elements of English football’s authenticity discourse/quest. First, from the ‘bottom-up’, authenticity is viewed as essentially unique to the more ‘regular’, ‘authorized’, ‘sterile’ or ‘mainstream’ football choreographed from the ‘top-down’. Authenticity, in this context, cannot be disassociated from notions of the ‘organic’ or the ‘independent’. Second, authenticity, even when crafted from the ‘bottom-up’, as seen, is still largely anchored in practices and signs associated with ‘traditional’ fandom (e.g., locality).

Notwithstanding, the unique nature of fans as consumers, regarding their loyalty to the clubs and the surrounding areas, has spread outwards from the terraces and into important physical spaces and issues in their communities, away from the glow of the corporate branding. While many of these activities are in line with traditional fan practices, in many cases they are an attempt to regain control of authentic fan culture against the pull of its marketisation. A battle that lies at the heart of one’s desire to live a free and authentic life – fans relationship with their club and vis versa is at the heart of this desire, just as it remains core to their conception of self (Newson, 2019).

Such resistance is exemplified by the Fans Supporting Foodbanks network, which emerged over the past decade to leverage the significant power of British and Irish football fandom to address the real issue of food insecurity across diverse areas (Fitzpatrick and Hoey, 2022). Over 40 clubs now have independent and dedicated fan organisations that collect before and after games to fill the larders of local foodbanks to provide for their communities. Supporters even donate to each other’s collections at away days, a show of solidarity operating under the FSF slogan of ‘hunger doesn’t wear club colours’. In the Liverpool City Region, the combined efforts of Everton and Liverpool fans provide around 25% of all donations to emergency food services and they have also set up their

own fan-run community pantries that run 6 days a week feeding over 700 people (Sugden and Faulkner, 2023).

The movement was sparked by the same activists who spearheaded the ‘fans against modern football’ and connected anti-ticket price hike ‘Twenty is Plenty’ campaigns, and speaks to a desire for club fans to maintain a connection and a responsibility to their surroundings. This is in the face of the globalised game they support each weekend. The contradiction is not lost on the volunteers, as one commented: ‘There’s a massive disparity and the clubs may have thought they were doing enough through their own charities, but we’ve shown them fans collecting for other fans of the club who are starving’ (Sugden and Faulkner, 2023). Indeed, these fans, solemnly collecting food and donations outside of monolithic stadia, often adjacent to corporate fan zones, is itself an authentic performance that defines itself in opposition to the massification that surrounds it. Through collecting excess food, clothing or charitable donations from fans, often for fans, this movement contributes to a cyclical and sustainable economy that stands as an alternative to the over-consumptive zeitgeist which infuses contemporary Western culture.

The paradox, once more, is stark. Fans embark on a well-organised, far-reaching and meaningful program of resistance to, in this case, food poverty. While, though their continued consumption, they remain complicit in the marketisation of the football product, itself a totem to a system of wider inequality they seek to resist. More broadly, the tension is that engaged fans, regardless of their position on the scale of ‘real’ - to ‘plastic’, are all embedded within the market realities of modern football, whether against it or otherwise (Webber 2017).

Conclusions

This article draws together two different research trajectories with high relevance for the study of consumer cultures. First, debates surrounding the importance of ‘authenticity’ in consumption have developed significantly. These debates highlight that, while ‘authenticity’ is hard to pin down, the longing for authenticity is connected to a broader dissatisfaction with pervasive modernity (Thurnell-Read, 2019; Thurnell-Read et al., 2022; Zukin, 2008). Second, scholars have established that football both shapes, and is shaped by, wider consumer trends (Numerato and Giulianotti, 2018; Webber, 2017). As Blasing (2024: 368) highlights ‘the practice of being a football fan makes them consumers’. The assignment of the role as a consumer, however, simultaneously creates a search for an authentic consumption of football which – as with authenticity more broadly – occurs alongside a disenchantment with processes of modernisation. This article has refined pre-existing models of ‘authenticity’, advancing further towards an understanding of bottom-up and top-down versions ‘authenticity’ as inter-related. Here, the top-down appropriations of what is viewed to be authentic means that consumers’ authenticity-seeking, as a means of resistance, may be largely controlled and is embedded within the EPL’s consumer culture. This paper maintains that the EPL poses a key window for analyses of authenticity in modern consumer cultures. However, beyond demonstrating this, based on existing insights, the paper’s wider theoretical implications for consumer culture theory relates to how it theorizes and understands authenticity as a

notion that is in flux and, finally, characterised by overlapping and relational market forces and consumer identities.

Numerato and Giulianotti (2018) previously conceptualized the citizen-consumer ('citimer') as created through complementary and interconnected 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processes. In analyses of the construction (or pursuit) of authenticity, scholars have approached this either from the bottom-up (Petersen-Wagner, 2017a) or top-down (Henderson and Oates, 2023) position. We advance this by analysing the search for authenticity from the top *and* the bottom, and by conceptually reframing 'authenticity' in the EPL as characterised by overlapping and sometimes blurry forces of the market, consumer agency and resistance.

We contribute towards an understanding of the dramas of authenticity that are played out in the EPL, including its fan cultures curated as products. Here, we have delineated an effective microcosm for understanding the tensions and resulting actions of the modern consumer in this context. The contemporary obsession with authenticity – often dichotomously categorized according to the organic/fabricated, original/copy, real/fake – is performed on the global, well-lit stage of the EPL. As argued, from the top-down, authenticity is crafted by clubs through the commodification or co-option of historic stadia, club insignia, replica/retro shirts, fan performances and atmospheres, and even clubs' very own communities. These become vessels of realism to entice the global, while maintaining loyalty to the local. However, the marketization of 'authentic' fandom has not been unanswered or uncontested. From the bottom up, we argue that fans have created independent physical and digital spaces that both celebrate their connection to the clubs, on their terms, and the commitment to the well-being of their communities. As McCarthy (2016: 242) writes, '[f]or it is to the voice within one's self and to the sentiments of one's being that the authentic person is attuned'.

Overall, this paper's analysis speaks not only to the contradictions and dilemmas of football fandom. In the broader study of consumer culture, we advance an understanding of the inner meanings of authenticity and conceptions of self in modernity. Yet, our empirical setting also reveals the tensions that emerge between consumer agency and resistance, and market co-option in the search for the 'authentic' consumer experience. Here, authenticity, rather than constituting something with a fixed or an 'objective existence' (Thurnell-Read, 2019: 1464) is characterised by a struggle for meaning. In many respects, fans' quest for meaning, we argue, shares similarities with that of other consumers, facing standardization and homogenization, in other contexts. Continued work, extending this top-down/bottom-up analysis, should therefore be encouraged in other important cultural fields, including *inter alia* music festivals, tourism, arts, and dining. In doing so, we might form a more global understanding of commercial consumer culture grounded in 'authentic' spaces to first, seek out ways to protect them and second, understand which (if any) have developed immunity to marketisation and how?

Here, football fans attachment to 'their' club is such that it forms part of their identity (Newson, 2019). Melding the identities and practices of the club to meet the cold market realities of neoliberalism, then, can be viewed as an assault on their freedom to live authentically. As key aspects of art, music, food and other deeply embedded cultural forms have been forced to kneel at these alters of capital, the consumption habits of football supporters also indicate this trend. While the media landscape has become fragmented,

each fragment acts as a tributary to the prevailing torrent of neoliberal dogma. Ultimately, the symbolic and historic nature of football clubs and their fans mean that it is an ideally authentic space, where fans' – both 'traditional' and 'transnational' – loyalty and desire for reality make them committed consumers and, at the same time, valued products.

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