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**Sectarianism in Football's Digital Age:
Digital Discourse, Player Identity, and
Monarchical Symbolism in Scotland's 'Old
Firm' Rivalry**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that sectarianism expressed through the rivalry between Glasgow football clubs Celtic and Rangers has been reconstituted through digital fan forums, where online interactions among supporters reproduce and extend traditional sectarian identities and antagonisms into new virtual spaces. The research examines two online fan forums called Celtic's Kerrydale Street and Rangers' Follow Follow. These communities are observed as virtual arenas where sectarian discourse is expressed. The study uses an online ethnography approach and combines qualitative observation with constructivism across forum discussions. The method allowed close examination of fan generated content across two football-related incidents (James McLean, Kyle Lafferty and Celtic vs Rangers) and one socio-cultural event (The Death of Queen Elizabeth II). Findings show that sectarian identities and antagonisms remain active in online spaces.

The research found that both Celtic and Rangers forums act as virtual terraces where loyalty to the in-group and hostility toward the out-group is reinforced. Online fans use historical references through humour and coded language to strength boundaries and avoids moderation. This creates echo chambers where sectarian discourse becomes part of the routine of fan culture. The thesis examines how contemporary digital environments extend sectarian behaviour beyond match day and into social spaces. The thesis does this by making three contributions. First, it argues that sectarianism remains a living cultural phenomenon reworked through online spaces. Second, it advances the research of football fandom by critiquing how digital spaces express identity through imagined communities. Third, it provides analysis that can inform action to tackle discrimination and conflict online. Overall, the study helps develop an understanding of sectarian behaviour amongst football fans in the digital age.

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My thesis is dedicated to the Irish communities across the world. The resilience of Irish migrants and their cultural expression inspired this work. I am a Brummie now based in Manchester. I often walk (and now work) along Oxford Road, Manchester where 'Little Ireland' once stood. On those walks I feel close to the past and to the present struggles of Irish migrant communities who were often discriminated against and treated as second class citizens. Their story is one of hardship and of building cities and institutions in places that did not always welcome them.

The Birmingham Irish shaped the city that raised me. My family would say '*The Irish built Birmingham*' and I carry that line with pride. Sport also sits inside that story. Football, Irish Dancing and G.A.A gave the Irish a community and a voice.

I am grateful to my supervisors. Professor Peter Millward. Dr Jan Ludvigsen. Dr Jack Sugden. Thank you for patience guidance and belief in this project. Your wisdom shaped the direction of this thesis. It also shaped how I now understand the world as a researcher. I thank my partner Lauren Bibby for love courage and care. This work would not exist without you.

Today, new arrivals into the United Kingdom face suspicion and hate. Their journeys echo the paths of the 'forgotten' Irish. We must remember their labour, their grief and their quiet joy. We must not forget the past or those who were pushed to its edges. I offer this work in solidarity with them.

'I started school when I had shoes, and I left school when I grew out of them' - Margaret Scanlon

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Overview

This thesis argues that sectarianism expressed through the rivalry between Glasgow football clubs Celtic and Rangers has been reconstituted through digital fan forums, where online interactions among supporters reproduce and extend traditional sectarian identities and antagonisms into new virtual spaces. The research will concentrate on the online communities of Celtic and Rangers football club whose rivalry has been intertwined with religious and political divisions (McBride, 2017; Bradley, 2015). The study will observe comments and threads made on Celtics Kerrydale Street and Rangers' Follow Follow forum. This thesis sets out to explore digital fandom and argues literature around sectarianism which has traditionally focused on offline discourse.

The literature on sectarianism in Scotland has been a contested dichotomy. Bruce et al., (2005) argue that sectarianism is a myth as the public perception far exceeds actual personal experience of it. Others like Kelly (2011) suggest that sectarianism continues to affect communities and that society has buried the 'myth' that anti-Catholic bigotry no longer exists. Kelly (2011) also highlights how claims of anti-Protestant discrimination are raised in public discourse which frames sectarianism as a challenging phenomenon. What is clear is that sectarian behaviour has long been associated with Scottish football culture and various measures have been taken to counter the problem (Bradley, 2017; Law, 2015; May, 2015). Debates continue over how prevalent and serious sectarianism remains. This contradiction forms an important backdrop for this study.

The rise of online communication has created a new space for football fans to exchange views daily (Ludvigsen, 2023; Millward, 2016; Gibbons and Nuttall, 2012). Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) note that these online communities act as virtual terraces and extend the area of rivalry beyond the stadium and into cyberspace. As such, the interaction of sectarianism and digital fan culture opens a research gap with

little academic attention around this area since 2005 (McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan, 2005). This gap is significant given the fast technological advancements that have transformed how fan communities interact and express identity online. That means there is a clear need for updated scholarship examining how sectarian attitudes are expressed and contested in digital fan spaces. Therefore, the thesis is guided by one primary question, with several sub-questions that investigate the relationship between sectarianism and digital football fandom. It will argue a new dynamic and offer fresh perspectives and inform efforts to tackle hate speech in the digital age. These questions are stated below:

Research Question: Has digital culture added a new dimension to sectarian discourse in Scotland?

Sub Question 1: How do we understand sectarianism in the context of digital football fandom in Scotland?

Sub Question 2: In what ways do online football fan groups construct sectarian narratives, and what are they trying to convey?

Sub Question 3: How does online football fan discourse compare to dominant representations of sectarianism in contemporary society?

By answering these questions, this thesis contributes in three ways to literature on sectarianism, football fandom, and digital cultures. First, it will provide new evidence of how sectarian identities and antagonisms are seen in online contexts. By observing fan interactions, it offers insight to whether sectarianism is a 'thing of the past' (Bruce et al., 2005) or rooted in contemporary forums of communication within the digital era. It aims to improve the understanding that sectarianism is a living social phenomenon that has adapted to new forms of communication channels.

Second, the thesis contributes to football fandom studies especially around the emerging field of digital football cultures. Scholars have explored how digitalisation is reshaping fan identities (Millward, 2008; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Doidge, 2015) and this thesis applies these insights to the context of Celtic and Rangers fans. It

illustrates how digitalisation is played out in practice by exploring online communication, cyber tribalism and football forums as an important site of collective identity. The thesis findings therefore extend academic argument on fan behaviour in virtual spaces and the role of sectarian dialogue within fan performance and boundary making.

Third, the thesis demonstrates the importance of framing online comments to understand sectarian terminology. It shows how commentaries made on online platforms can be treated as valuable data sets and virtual ethnographies of fan culture. The analysis will set the stage for further investigation on newer platforms as well as contemporary issues in sport and society. To guide the reader through this project, the thesis is structured as follows.

1.2 Thesis Structure

The thesis is split into eight chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 provides the historical and theoretical unpacking on sectarianism in Scotland. Here, I argue how sectarianism has been defined and debated in academia and link the Celtic and Rangers football rivalry with the broader sectarian description. This chapter also establishes what sectarianism means in modern Scotland and highlights important arguments and theories. Chapter 3 shifts focus to the area of football fandom and digital communities. It examines relevant literature on fan culture, identity formation, and online behaviour by outlining the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis. Key theories around fandom and identity are argued. Chapter 4 details the methodology of the research and unpacks the use of online ethnography and qualitative analysis by including the steps of data collection from the Celtic and Rangers forums. The findings of the thesis are presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 which focus on the different topics selected for analysis:

Chapter 5: Fan Discourse on Football Players. This chapter examines two case studies in which sectarian tensions have surfaced around football players. The first case observes reactions to James McClean's refusal to wear a poppy on his football shirt in the lead-up to Remembrance Day in November 2022. The second case observes reactions to ex Rangers player Kyle Lafferty who was given a 10-game ban

because of a sectarian comment made in public. Chapter 5 demonstrates how Celtic and Rangers fans use players as proxies to voice ethnic and political grievances. Discussions on the online forums frame McClean and Lafferty as symbols of an 'us' versus 'them' narrative by showing the interplay between football and group loyalty in digital conversations.

Chapter 6: The 'New Firm?' - Celtic vs. Rangers. This chapter analyses fan commentary surrounding the 2023 Viaplay Cup final between Celtic and Rangers. The chapter investigates both Celtic and Rangers forums during the buildup to the final, during the game and the aftermath. Chapter 6 finds that underlying sectarian behaviours are evident across both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums. The research also argues that online spaces mirror the traditional matchday atmosphere as it extends as a creative form of sectarian expression.

Chapter 7: The Death of Queen Elizabeth II. This chapter examines matters outside of football by exploring how Celtic and Rangers fans shape their allegiances to wider public life. It focuses on the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the way this moment was seen on both forums. The analysis shows how cultural and political symbols such as the monarchy become entwined with the Celtic and Rangers divide. It also demonstrates how the moment was diverted through the sectarian identities of these online fan communities. Finally, Chapter 8 draws together the findings from the overall chapters and addresses the research questions in a full manner. The chapter corresponds with the sub questions and argues whether online culture has introduced a new dimension to sectarian discourse.

Overall, this thesis will address an understudied subject about digital culture and sectarian discourse in Scotland. It will ensure that the study is well anchored in academic work surrounding sectarianism, football fandom, digital communities and theoretical perspectives. The aim is to put forward a new perspective to help modernise the understanding of sectarian behaviour in contemporary society. The next chapter will outline the historical and theoretical background of sectarianism in Scotland and situate the Celtic and Rangers rivalry with broader definitions and debate. This foundation will contextualise the study and show key literature that inform the analysis to come.

CHAPTER 2: UNPACKING SECTARIANISM IN SCOTLAND

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the development of the word 'sectarianism' to provide a greater understanding of how the meaning has changed over time. The definition and practice of sectarianism are problematic and contested; this is due, in part, to the fact that the word is often used as a catch-all to describe many social problems. This chapter begins with an overview of Sectarianism in Britain, its multiple definitions, and criticisms. I also consider the debate of sectarianism as a cultural phenomenon and its extended provision within football in Scotland. The chapter will end with an examination of the legislative measures designed to tackle sectarianism in Scotland and consider the use of online technology as a new method to further hate speech.

2.2 The Emergence of Sectarianism in Britain

The word 'sectarianism' has traditionally been used to describe the religious composition of Christianity and the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Britain (Rosie, 2001). The term can be traced back to the Religious Reform period, where Protestantism split from Rome and the Established Catholic Church (Pincus, 2009). Emphasis on sectarianism marginalises that the Protestant Reformation radically modified the practice of Catholic hegemony across the British Isles and the Irish Isles. Catholicism was therefore seen as a sinful movement of which many were afraid. This trend of political and cultural reform of social control suppressed the linguistic practices of Catholicism until the late nineteenth century. At that time, the Protestant church was based on a demographic standard that was influenced by labour and capital. Protestantism commanded moral rules born from merchant capitalism, production factors for investment and innovation, and represented economic unification for the empire-building of Great Britain (Jackson, 2017). Such cues create an ethos that is fundamental to British identity.

The key issue in religious opposition was mass migration from Ireland during the emergence of the Industrial Revolution. The rationale behind Irish migration to England, Scotland, and Wales was the failure of the potato crop, also known as the Irish Diaspora or An Gorta Mór (Murphy, 2010). Famine turned out to be the beginning

of the religious divide in Scotland that created a substantial Irish presence (McLean, 2004). Civil freedom from past political discrimination (for example, the Penal Laws) was also a prospect for Catholics to reimagine themselves as equal citizens under the alliance of Great Britain and Ireland in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Immigration caused significant changes to the demographic and cultural landscape of the UK. Many Irish saw Scotland as a cheap, financially viable sanctuary to settle, work, and escape poverty. Devine and Rosie (2020) add that mass immigration transformed Scottish Catholicism from a small to a sizable community. As a result, Catholic neighbourhoods were found in the industrial belt of Scotland during a period of expansive industrialisation.

Kinealy (2006) highlights that divided structures in society arose and manifested themselves in several ways. A popular narrative was that Scottish natives who were Presbyterian were paranoid of the influx of people who adhered to an immigrant religion (Devine, 2012). The culture of Protestantism and Britishness, and the willingness to defend it, positioned Catholicism as the enemy within. The Irish were metaphorically and physically subalterns which meant they lacked agency and were subject to prejudice. Hardship, which often led to crime, violence, and drunkenness, was also attributed to the Irish, and they were often confined to the most deprived areas and working-class occupations. Many Catholics who arrived in Scotland were generally of lower income, unskilled, and extremely poor. Vaughan (2005) further notes that the Irish were often used as scapegoats for social and economic problems in Scotland during this period. Under these circumstances, the Irish were marked as cheap and exploitable labour and were often met with hostility and resentment from the Scottish working class.

Wolffe (2019) notes that Catholics found it relatively easy to find physical work in construction, domestic labour, and the service sector. However, a shortage of skills and low education restricted Irish involvement in paid skilled roles and influence. Weak economic and political control thus indicated that Protestants could put prejudice into practice. McCarthy (2017) points out that inequality in employment, ill-health, and political disorder became problematic for Irish Catholics to integrate equally into the mainstream of Scottish society. Sectarian motives towards the mass migratory flow from Ireland implied that Catholic settlers felt unfriendliness, hostility, and

discrimination, causing rejection and exclusion from the wider community (Renshaw, 2025). Across Scotland, poverty and lower levels of education among the Irish were often perceived by native Scots Protestants as evidence of the social harms attributed to Catholicism (Bruce, 1988). At the same time, the culture of Irishness was approached with mistrust and seen as exotic and disloyal to Scottish values. The Presbyterian campaign against Catholic Irish immigration later became known as 'The Kirk's Disgrace', where hatred was mobilised and utilised as a political tool to legitimise power (Rosie, 2004).

Even though a minority of Irish immigrants from Ulster to Scotland were Protestant, Catholicism became the primary layer of the identity of Irish migrants highlighted by nationalism and political allegiances (Walker, 2016). Therefore, the social position of religion embedded a sectarian way of thinking and acting in Scotland where economic, social, and political divisions were evident in everyday life. A collective belief shared by most of the Scottish population meant that the Irish Protestants shared a similar essence that limited sectarian dominance and segregation into Scottish life (Tierney, 2017). Interestingly, Patteson and Iannelli (2006) challenge the discussion of anti-Catholic sectarianism in Scotland by exploring social mobility, origin, and class using biographical data. Through analysis of significant data sources, Patterson and Iannelli claim that religion did not provide a marker in the labour market. Instead, it was an outcome of Irish immigrants from rural backgrounds who lacked skills in revolutionary industrial employment that compelled such inequality. Whilst acknowledging that there were comparative advantages for those from Protestant origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the evidence does not support a general argument of sectarianism as a barrier to employment and social mobility. Yet, the study broadens the discussion that skills, occupation, and social class were more decisive in explaining sectarianism than religion itself.

Whilst being less skilled may be an underlying factor for past discriminatory practices, others argue that class structures and historical occasions reinforced sectarianism in employment, housing, and land (Bryan, 2000). The relationship between religion, politics, and the colonial relationship between Britain and Ireland defies the symmetrical divisions between Catholics and Protestants. This complexity reflects how religious identities and social positions were shaped by political power, economic

interests, and historical experiences under British rule. Diplomacies became a broader sectarian culture in the West of Scotland given the liberal interest in both Ireland and more general socio-economic concerns (Gallagher, 1985). As Ó Corráin, (2018) suggests that Southern Ireland was loyal and habitual to an ultramontanist model. During the first half of the twentieth century, the process of its identity formation became predominantly pro-independence and in favour of a united Ireland (Powell, 2008). Partisan tensions thus arose because Protestants stood for the Union of Northern Ireland and Britain. As Morrow (2017) puts it, sectarian attitudes and behaviour spread due to the political turbulence of the British and Irish governments. The dynamics of Orangeism, an ethno-religious organisation that supports Protestant dominance, provide an essential illustration of the religious and ethnic dispute rooted in the rise of political nationalism (Bradley, 2004). Today, Orangeism and the Orange Order remain part of communities across contemporary Scotland and include anti-Catholic tendencies. This means that sectarian identities continue to be expressed through social and cultural representations that influence communities and public life.

One of the earliest academic studies that shows the intra-Christian version of sectarianism in Scotland was 'No Pope of Rome' in 1986 by Steve Bruce. Bruce's work draws historical significance towards the rise and fall of anti-Catholicism in Scotland and covers militant Protestantism and its development during twentieth-century Scotland. Tom Gallagher's *Glasgow: the Uneasy Peace* in 1987 followed Bruce's publication. This book analyses the low social class position of Irish Catholics in Glasgow during 1819-1914 and uncovers the details of the hostility faced by the Irish in the early period of their settlement. Both Bruce and Gallagher draw attention to expansive industrialisation, large-scale Irish immigration, and the Ulster conflict as the salience of religious-ethnic conflict. In their sense, the term 'sectarianism' shows ethnic animosities and layers of cultural expression-related bigotry issues that fuelled religious enmity. Both manuscripts complement each other because they provide the first social and political commentary on Scotland's divided story that centres around the Irish experience.

Mac an Ghail (2000) suggests that the Irish in Great Britain have been constructed as an invisible ethnic minority and have resisted detailed examination in academia. He notes that the Irish assimilated better than other ethnic groups which meant that their

struggles with discrimination, poverty, and social marginalisation went unnoticed; hence his description of them as an 'invisible ethnic minority'. It is possible that, despite substantial migration from Ireland for over 200 years, gaps in our understanding of colonial relations and identity markers with the Irish are limited. Of particular concern is the lack of in-depth research into tensions based on ethno-religious identities between the Catholic and Protestant communities (Cairns and Darby, 1998). Similarly, Walker (2016) also emphasises a lack of foundation for understanding Irish migration. He suggests that past sectarian narratives represent a context that lacks analysis and precision and argues that religious sectarianism should have been addressed long before the 21st century. The shortage of hard evidence is also exemplified in the work of John Kelly. Kelly (2013) claims that Catholics and Protestants and their associated identities, meanings, and links have been misconstrued in the work on discrimination. The main criticism is that a lack of past literature draws attention to the socio-political paradigm of sectarianism and the hierarchies of identity among native Scots and the Irish. Accordingly, the deficit of academic work opens a narrow description of sectarianism and has been challenging to describe. Finn (1994) implies that hidden prejudice, marked by civil unrest, permits sectarianism and its definitional framework to be more complicated than perception indicates. From this standpoint, concepts of Irish identity are not approached in earlier academic practice and have influenced outcomes and conclusions of its definition (Bradley, 1995).

2.3 Defining Sectarianism in Scotland

It is notable that there are long-standing debates about sectarianism in contemporary Scottish society, and the task of defining sectarianism in modern terms is complex. For example, 'sectarian' and 'sectarianism' are often treated identically in text, indicating a system based on sect-based allegiance and identities (Atkinson et al., 2021). Many suggest that its study contains multiple meanings constructed by cultural and scholastic sources (Bruce, Glendinning, Paterson, and Rosie, 2005; McKerrell, 2012; Walls and Williams, 2005). In today's usage, a lack of theorisation tangles its understanding (Gilligan, 2017). Although many tend to see sectarianism as a cultural form of religious oppression, discussions have shifted towards hostile social attitudes adding to its contestation (Boyle, 2017). Others, such as Nazir et al., (2021) add that

sectarianism is acting outdated attitudes that affect everyone in Glasgow like a thick fog. It is difficult to see what is happening and what is being said.

Finn et al., (2009) indicate that sectarianism has a varied meaning that does not easily fit into a single category which has led to increased social stigmatisation and suspicion. Bradley (2017) places the blame for this directly at the media, as they have played a role in fuelling sectarianism and continuing to perpetuate it. To some, the term refers to specific historical circumstances exclusive to Scotland and Ireland. Others believe that it is a structural form of discrimination that exists beyond certain religious denominations and targets people for their background or presumed beliefs (Finn et al., 2009). A thorough analysis of the vocabulary is also seen in Flint and Kelly (2013). They offer a descent into the language of sectarianism and demonstrate how it has been employed to signify very different things. Their study on bigotry, football, and Scotland notes that the inaccuracy of the term makes it difficult to define. Instead, they avoid using the term as they believe that it manifests in a way that is confusing and complex to public knowledge.

As a starting point, the increase in contemporary literature on sectarianism in Scotland begins with James MacMillan. The composer became caught in controversy after implying that Scotland was a *'land of sleep-walking bigotry'* and spoke about anti-Catholicism as a cross-cultural phenomenon, institutionalised across Scotland's politics, media, football, employment, and education (cited in Devine et al., 2000, p. 15). MacMillan further said that Scotland had forgotten social change and its past discriminatory social and cultural structures. Flint (2008) argues that it is difficult to determine the validity of MacMillan's speech and the poor social relations between Catholics and Protestants in present-day Scotland. However, the call for change raises the question of where sectarianism exists. Tom Devine describes MacMillan's appeal as a *'Pandora box opening in a spectacular fashion'* (Devine 2000, p 8). This is because research in the domain of 'sectarianism' and Scotland drew intense attention from that point. A spectrum ranging from many scholars, multiple commentaries, empirical work, and historical studies became evident around that time (Devine et al., 2000). A review by Lindroes (2019) also demonstrates that robust academic work on race, religion, and hatred in Scotland became more popular in the twentieth century. It seems appropriate to suggest that Macmillan's rhetoric was the

catalyst for the re-emergence of academic inquiry on sectarianism in Scotland due to the media attention it gained.

Waiton (2018) notes that there were almost three hundred different mainstream publications on sectarianism, bigotry, and football rivalry in Scotland across various academic disciplines by the turn of the millennium. By then, much attention had focused on religion which encouraged a flow of controversy and criticism. The first to research the academic nature of sectarianism in modern Scotland was Tom Devine in 2000. Devine's (2000) study examines sectarianism and its social, political, economic, and ecological analogy through a collection of monographs titled *'Scotland's Shame? Bigotry and Sectarianism in Modern Scotland'*. The examination presents the many manifestations of sectarianism across all areas of modern-day Scotland bringing awareness against discriminated social groups. Devine's (2000) work offers the initial move for scholars to discuss their societal views on sectarianism. Later, however, a significant amount of academic criticism followed in terms of definition. For example, Goodall (2015, p 2) claims that *'the problem with the concept of sectarianism is that it has been used to describe so many different things'*.

Sectarianism, for some, is characterised by an us and them dichotomy in which one group perceives itself to be superior to another and attempts to dominate, suppress, or eliminate the other (Bruce, 2019). This manifests in discrimination on the grounds of religious beliefs, but also on political opinions, ethnicities, nationalities, and so forth. Many studies claim a lack of academic clarity on the term sectarianism due to the different views. This is very much stated in the work of Devine (2000). For instance, Rosie (2015) argues that Devine's work is factually inaccurate in many places and brings a profound interpretation influenced by past experiences. Patrick Reilly also highlights this point. Reilly writes, *'To ask if there is anti-Catholicism in Scotland is like asking if there are Frenchmen in Paris'* (Devine, 2000, p 29). He further notes that *'the existence of sectarianism is a self-evident truth that does not need to be laboured'* (Devine, 2000, p 29).

A critical concern is that there is little consensus about sectarianism and its fundamental characteristics. Bradley (2008) suggests that the interplay of identity with other social and situational features demonstrates that its contemporary interpretation

is subject to scholarly disagreement. There is no denying that its conflicted definition has led to many different themes and narratives. However, its contested meaning continues to trouble definitive claims about its presence in Scotland. As discussed, a traditional strand of understanding the perspectives of sectarianism is through religious conflict. The inference here is that sectarianism occurs when members of different faiths display bigotry and prejudice towards each other. Accordingly, to be 'sectarian' in Scotland means discriminating outside of socially and culturally accepted boundaries against Catholics or Protestants. Rosie (2004) and Bruce et al., (2004) report that sectarianism is generally understood in a critical sense where hostility is based on faith. In Scotland's social structure, these authors agree that religion is a contributing factor when seeking sectarianism. In this way, the interfaith hostility between Catholics and Protestants is solely concentrated through the lens of religious identity and discrimination. Thus, Rosie defined sectarianism as:

..... behaviour, policies and types of treatment that are informed by religious differences and are recognisable social patterns of inequality, some of which are predicated on discrimination. Sectarianism describes a set of social relations that are codified into a stratification system that religion causes or comes to represent (Rosie, 2004, p 24).

What stands out here is the central role of religion in sectarianism. Rosie (2004) defines religion as a system of beliefs, practices, and identities tied to a particular faith. Yet, sectarianism operates through prejudice or discrimination directed at individuals based on their religious affiliation. Bruce (2000) argues that societal changes and the influence of religion require careful analysis in modern-day society. Bruce believes that the significance of religion has eroded in contemporary society into a process known as secularisation. McKinney (2015) also agrees with this point, suggesting that religion should not be considered the primary foundation when theorising sectarianism due to the secularisation in postmodern culture. McKinney also argues that sectarianism should be reconceptualised as a more comprehensive social process that extends beyond religious factors where multiple dimensions of inequality are produced.

A critical problem when defining sectarianism is understanding whether religion still matters in contemporary Scotland. This point raises uncertainty as to whether the impact of religious practice is the primary constituent of discrimination, prejudice, and hatred in Scotland. Consequently, *sectarianism in Scotland*, written by Steve Bruce and colleagues, was published to counter the perception of an endemic anti-Catholicism (Bruce et al., 2004). They argue that identities based on religious preference are less relevant to people's lives in the 21st century because intermarriage between Catholics and Protestants is high. Bruce claims that there is no present systemic or structural disadvantage in Scotland based on religion, no difference in socio-economic status between young Catholics and non-Catholics, and no disapproval of anti-Catholicism in Scotland. This rhetoric of religion appears ambiguous about how actual sectarianism is in the contemporary world. On this basis, increased modern-day secularisation demonstrates a lack of sectarianism and is a significant opposition to the idea that sectarianism is alive in Scotland.

The work of Bruce et al., (2004) assumes that sectarianism and religion are synonymous in their definition. The influence of the census data in their study was extensive as it set the tone for modern-day perceptions. Bruce (2019) later points out that sectarian identities are exaggerated in social locations and creates disorder rather than a narrow notion of actual disadvantage in society. Flint (2012) condemns football matches and Orange and Republican marches (such as St. Patrick's Day and the Twelfth of July), where identity drawn from historical events is a visual medium. Labels such as the *'90-minute bigot'* further imply the influence on the pantomime environment of football fandom and social groups (Deuchar and Holligan, 2010). Bruce et al., (2005) add that the football context is a space where fans do not mean to cause harm, and when offensive language is often used, it is not used in everyday life. However, Hamilton-Smith et al., (2021) contend that any sectarian overtones vent social anxiety and the moral panic over sectarianism due to the fear of disorder and crime by pointing out that the term has become overused and misunderstood.

Research has been significant to the myth debate as seen in Bruce's work. However, Kelly (2011) suggests that anti-Catholic/Irish prejudices are central to understand economic, social, and cultural margins of inequality in Scotland. In his argument, Kelly argues that the consensus used in Bruce et al., (2004) study does not allow us to

examine the attitudes of Irish ethnicity, and the importance of identity; and there is no mention of gender, age, social inequality, etc. Kelly also recognises that the experience of sectarianism goes beyond statistical data and thus should be considered a universal human experience. Walls and Williams (2005) also criticise Bruce and the limitations in his methodology. Ethnographic research on discriminatory employment practices argues that the unequal representation of Catholics is prevalent for those living within lower socio-economic means and recognises economic disadvantage for Irish Catholics and descendants in Scotland due to factors such as name, address, and schools attended. In addition, the research addresses sectarianism within a qualitative sense that emphasises structural disadvantage in social mobility and the undervaluation of identity in responding to the experiences of discrimination overall.

Law (2018) suggests that sectarianism has been expanded, repeatedly and episodically due to ideological construction by the media and government. It is the negative forms of such prejudice that garner attention. Law (2018) adds that sectarianism's social and political function has become glorified amongst politicians in Scotland, while it is becoming less relevant in broader society. The intensity of sectarian attachment and belonging is prominent in popular masculine cultures. However, Clayton (2005) submits that a more extensive analysis of sectarianism is needed, one that re-conceptualises the 'oppression and exclusion' of the community experience. Recognising public concern comprises the hybrid of historical and existing social problems that shape a current view of sectarianism. One view is that religiously motivated friction was never the whole narrative and so a reductive analysis that sees only this element is seemingly invalid. Virdee (2014) argues that the anti-Catholic framing was a racial discourse that portrayed the Irish as biologically inferior. Therefore, Clayton (2005) explains that the co-existence of a sectarian culture in Scotland is better defined through religious and geographical identities within the framework of racism.

Victimisation and ostracism towards the Irish have thus created a paradox among academics regarding a structural and systemic approach versus a contextual and cultural framework. This may reflect that little attention has been paid to the lack of academic visibility of the Irish experience in Britain in general (Hickman and Ryan,

2020). Van Dijk (1992) notes that classic forms of racial discrimination, or 'biological racism' have been replaced by a socio-cultural form of racism in everyday conversations, press reports, and parliamentary debates. However, deconstructing whiteness shows the under-researched area of the Irish experience. These ideas demonstrate that ethnicity and structural overlaps of 'sect' and 'race' are the same social phenomena (Brewer, 1992). The social relations between the Irish and Scottish can be viewed as an imbalance of power due to ethnicity. Brewer (1992) points out that, like racism, sectarianism operates at three interrelated levels. They are individual behaviour, the domain of ideas, and when its values emerge in society's social structure. He further argues the term through the 'equivalence frame'. This implies that sectarianism in Scotland is about allegiance to Britain and Britishness and the other to Ireland and Irishness. This fits with the perception that having either identity is sometimes considered problematic because they are often portrayed in opposition to one another (Kelly, 2011).

2.4 The debate on anti-Irish Racism

MacPherson (1999) defines racism as attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (MacPherson 1999, p34). Here, racism is about prejudice against people of skin colour or ethnic background. Therefore, in this context, negativity towards people of Irish origin in Scotland collectively brings the interplay between identity, religion, and national identity into the field of ethnic and racial studies. Mac an Ghail (2001) indicates that race-relations theorists created distinct racialised accounts of ethnic minorities in Britain. He believes that overt Irish bigotry fits into the broader process of racialisation due to the historical system of Protestant power and domination. Research is needed to show why the Irish and colour are neglected as the markers of difference compared to other strands (Mac an Ghail, 2001). A suggestion as to why so few articles have researched Irish identity may relate to the nature of the experience compared to others.

McVeigh and Rolston (2014) acknowledge that labelling sectarianism as racism is a product of British imperialism that is rooted in the beliefs surrounding the Irish conflict. Both authors suggest that this is a way of naturalising and 'othering' Irish culture which

then becomes seen as barbaric, irrational, and in need of containment. This is significant because it reflects how power is used to delegitimise and silence people's experiences. However, McVeigh and Rolston (2014) admit that the conflict between white groups is rooted in religious affiliations rather than somewhere else. In this way, race is used as a signifier for something more complex and is a way of displacing class-based relations of power. Cultural differentiation is crucial when recognising and understanding racial discourse in Scotland. It helps to interpret the contextual elements of sectarianism between different groups. While this may be less exceptional than other racial discourses, for example, Islamophobia, sectarianism as a form of racism challenges the mainstream perception of the Irish experience and colonial exploitation.

McBride (2022) suggests that the Irish diaspora has been conceptually overlooked because it is placed in the category of 'whiteness' when examining racism, ethnic disadvantage, and discrimination. This marginalisation is further complicated by class-based prejudices (such as anti-Scouse sentiment) which target Irish and working-class identities in ways that intersect with, but are distinct from, racialised discrimination (Free, 2011). Both Mac an Ghail and McBride (2001; 2022) draw attention to the black and white dualistic model of racial discrimination, and more visible ethnic minorities face institutional and cultural racism. This suggests that Irish bigotry is a cultural narrative that is less likely to receive similar adverse treatment to colour racism in the contemporary period. This essential and complex distinction argues that must place racism within a wider framework. It is worth noting that 'Irish' is often used as a euphemism for Catholics, even though Protestant Irish and non-Irish Catholics were also part of the mass migration. Consequently, Bradley (1996) points out that 'Irishness' is interchangeable with 'Catholicism', forming a key difference marker.

For McBride (2022), anti-Irish racism is more relevant than religious discrimination, as it is a problem that remains an ontological condition in contemporary Scotland. This conceptualises sectarianism as a form of racism that targets people for their Irish identity. However, it would be incorrect to say that anti-Irish racism is ubiquitous in modern Scotland. Bruce (2013) indicates that the Scottish people with an Irish Catholic heritage are systemically embedded within Scottish society. While this portrayal is overly positive, some limitations arise from the complex process of inclusion and

exclusion. Indeed, prejudicial practices are challenging to locate in 21st-century Scotland (Kelly and Bradley, 2019). Doeblner, McAreavey and Shortall (2018) reiterate that the colonialism of British history is still entrenched on both sides of the Protestant British vs Irish Catholic divide, particularly in Northern Ireland. Protestant identity in Scotland has strong cultural overtures and characteristics. It is in argument here that this identity is somewhat defined by its relationship to Catholics (Bradley, 1999).

For this reason, researchers have more shown an interest in sectarianism and racial ideology due to the past power structure linked to British imperialism in Ireland (McVeigh and Rolston, 2014). Bradley (1999) notes that Protestantism has a high 'cultural' and 'social' content and its cultural content appears to include a key characteristic of Scots/British nationalism. Therefore, sectarianism and the anti-Irish racism perspective challenge us to recalibrate their meaning and the more general understanding of race and ethnic phenomena in the present. Citing 'racism' may be seen as an extension of sectarianism because the process of racialisation might impact Irish identity. Other scholars argue that it is insufficient to treat sectarianism and racism as the same phenomenon. For example, Gillian (2012) suggests that different outlooks on racial discrimination add to the 'crisis of anti-racism' because Scots and Irish are not races. Bruce and Glendinning (2017) and Rosie (2015) argue that adverse treatment towards Catholics cannot be termed 'racist' because structural inequalities have declined.

The modern debate surrounding sectarian behaviour has become and a key challenge for Scotland's legislative and policy communities where both manifest in the monitoring and prevention of public order offences linked to sectarianism (Scottish Government, 2013). The Scottish Government responded by publishing the National Action Plan to Tackle Sectarianism in Scotland in 2013. The National Action Plan aims to challenge sectarian behaviour by working with key stakeholders, including football clubs, supporters' groups, local authorities, police forces, and third-sector organisations (Scottish Government, 2013). Scholars such as McBride (2018) and Kelly (2010) have also shown an increased interest in the Catholic minority when it comes to reporting and responding to sectarianism because of their past socio-economic position. Consequently, they recognise that religion in Scotland was a unique marker of difference whereas skin colour was elsewhere. This was manifested through social

segregation and employment discrimination that aligned along Catholic-Protestant identity. As mentioned, reform has eliminated much of this structural bigotry. This point establishes a narrative that most Catholics from Irish backgrounds living in Scotland consider themselves Scottish (Devine, 2008). A study by Gallagher et al., (2011) found that 53% of the Catholic community would identify as Scottish first, and only 9% would see themselves as Irish. In this way, the Catholic community has become more settled in Scotland, while some argue that they are less marginalised.

Today, people living in Scotland's most deprived communities are likely to believe that harassment of both Protestants and Catholics is a possible occurrence in their neighbourhood (Scottish Government, 2015). This finding suggests that sectarian tensions are intensified by urban poverty and working-class Protestant/Scottish communities also feel vulnerable under such conditions. Moreover, poverty-driven hostility can also extend beyond traditional sectarian lines. For example, Shuttleworth's (2018) thesis suggests that working class frustrations amongst both Catholic and Protestant communities can lead to a wave of racist attacks against refugees. This was noticed when asylum seekers were resettled in some of Glasgow's poorest housing estates; illustrating how economic hardship can fuel prejudice away from religious perspectives, as poorer communities sometimes scapegoat 'outsiders' in times of social stress.

Furthermore, recent contributions have generated increasing recognition that discrimination along sectarian lines exists in the contemporary period. Whigham et al., (2020) argue that sectarianism based on race and religion has been overtaken by more relevant factors, particularly within areas of politics and national identity. For example, debates over Scottish independence and the alignment of communities with either pro or anti-independence positions have shaped social divisions more than traditional religious loyalties (Whigham et al., 2020). Their work demonstrates how ethnonational and political representations during the referendum on Scottish Independence influenced public perception, with constitutional allegiance spilling over into football fandom (see Appendix image 1). Such understanding links 'identity' and 'belonging' as a cause of discrimination, isolation, differentiation, and inequality (Ormston et al., 2017). Flint and Kelly (2011) suggest that two interpretations underlie the existence of sectarianism. The first recognises the construction of identities within

it, being that identity is based on the expression of religious, national, and cultural beliefs. These identities belong to groups of people who define themselves through the prism of ethno-religious and ethnic-nationalist origins embedded in the cultural fabric in which they exist (Hoey, 2019).

The expression of Protestant, Loyalist, British, Catholic, Republican, and Irish identities is thus socially and culturally driven and recognised in societal environments (May, 2015). Football stadiums and Protestant and Republican (Catholic) parades/marches are examples of sect-specific rituals that permit the expression of these identities. The strong perception of sectarianism in Scotland and the impact of public processions on communities has emphasised the varying degrees of opinion on sectarian behaviour. Bradley (2021) notes that it highlights how Scotland represents, remembers, and neglects its imperial past and present. In a more positive sense, others argue that football and parades are a way of bringing communities together to celebrate heritage (Cronin, 2007).

Morrow (2017) highlights an example of sectarianism by demonstrating how it remains ingrained and continues to manifest itself across Scottish society, with the symbolism of colour and football allegiance playing a significant role. Similar evidence has been reported in the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2014) on public attitudes towards sectarianism in Scotland. The survey found that most people in Scotland view football as a contributor to sectarianism. 88% of respondents said football contributes to sectarianism to some extent, and 55% identified it as the main factor, far more than any other listed cause. Other events such as loyalist (including Orange Order) marches (79% mentioned them) and Irish Republican marches (70%) were also frequently cited, but with far fewer people naming them as the primary cause. The study also found that few Catholics support Rangers, while few Protestants support Celtic which brings relevancy to this study. Interestingly, the results also show a widespread perception that religious prejudice exists against both Catholics and Protestants in Scotland, though more people believe that Catholics are the subject of at least some prejudice. Those who live in the west of Scotland were more likely to see sectarianism as a problem across the whole of Scotland and over half believed that sectarianism will always exist.

2.5 Sectarianism and the Law in Scotland

A Critical review of academic literature so far suggests sectarianism is associated with negative attitudes or hostile environments based on ethnic, cultural, and political identities. Here, the social process of inclusion and exclusion between groups is reproduced intergenerationally through conflict and hostility. Religious identities play a part in Scotland's historical legacy. However, ethnicity, political nationalism, and sporting allegiances are now a core element of sectarianism and thus are a product of the personal and social consequences that materialise divisions.

From the early 2000s onwards, the Scottish Government has made several bold policy statements and initiatives about sectarianism and effective ways to tackle it (Crawford, 2013; Bruce et al., 2005). Between 2005 and 2015, the introduction of grants to educate in schools and prisons has led to anti-sectarian projects that promote community psychosocial health (Boyd-MacMillan et al., 2016). 'Nil by Mouth', Scotland's leading anti-sectarian charity, also established protocols for cultural and social change from government safeguarding practices. It is worth noting that devolution also intensified a political focus to tackle the contested nature of sectarianism within the Scottish criminal justice system (Hamilton-Smith and McArdle, 2015). Walker (2012) notes that new powers for the Scottish Parliament in 1997 were the spur to confront the sectarian enigma. For the first time, Scotland held devolved powers that reunited its Parliament, and the 'sectarian problem' became an essential topic of political debate.

The need for theorising sectarianism has received governmental attention from the Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland (AGTS), established in 2012. The definition was designed to be inclusive and to encourage a clear description of sectarianism. Therefore, it is worth stressing that terminology matters when attempting to understand sectarianism. Having multiple meanings is an inevitable consequence of using a clear-cut definition to cover such a diverse and complex phenomenon. What this definition offers, however, is a clear scope of sectarianism as it now exists today, rather than one that can be contested and open to many interpretations. The discursive dominance of sectarianism endows it as a root cause of hate crime in Scotland. Consequently, the AGTS defines sectarianism in modern Scotland as:

...a complex of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, actions and structures, at personal and communal levels, which originate in religious difference and can involve discriminatory mixing of religion with politics, sporting allegiance and national identifications (Scottish Government, 2013, p.5)

The definition shows that sectarianism is more than just an act. The law includes feelings, emotions, thoughts, and preferences based on perceived background, national origins, and identity. Rosie (2015) points out that the Action Group on Tackling Sectarianism (AGTS) addresses essential gaps in existing awareness towards tackling sectarianism in Scotland. However, Rosie further disputes that there exists widespread anxiety in the public because few people personally experience it. Indeed, sectarianism today reflects an ideological hegemony influenced by the historical and hierarchical aspects of religious, political, and ethnic identities (McKinney, Francis, and McKenna, 2021). However, it is viewed as a problem that occurs elsewhere in Scotland (Hinchliffe et al., 2015). Likewise, Kelly and Bradley (2019) suggest that structural prejudices that are sufficient to be viewed as 'sectarianism' have largely eased, have become diluted, and are difficult to pinpoint. The critical debate is that sectarian attitudes can appear complex in different segments of Scotland and can also vary depending on the occasion and situation in which they are experienced (Goodall et al., 2015).

The application of legalisation and hate crime categorisation demonstrates the complex phenomenon as over-complicated or convoluted. Between 1985 and 2000, UK laws began treating football-related behaviour as a separate category, acknowledging the higher risk of violence and disorder at matches (Pearson and Stott, 2022). This means that football is recognised as a social space where tensions could be intensified and require legal and policing responses. In this context, Hamilton-Smith et al. (2015) argue that football fans often deny any sectarian intent, even though their actions are perceived as predictable and socially accepted within these environments. Consequently, parades and football matches have become commonplace and potentially problematic sites for sectarian prejudice under the definition. For these reasons, despite the conceptual dispute over the Action Group on Tackling Sectarianism, the decision was made to use this definition of Sectarianism throughout

this thesis, focusing on the mixing of religion, politics, sporting allegiances, and national identifications. The Action Group on Tackling Sectarianism definition offers a clear scope of Sectarianism as it now exists, rather than one that is contested and capable of so many interpretations. The discursive dominance of Sectarianism endows it as a root cause of sectarian crime in Scotland.

Scotland has been hesitant in adopting Football Banning Orders (FBOS), even if they might work well as a tool in combating football-related disorder and sectarianism. This reluctance persists, even though these issues have been prominent on the Scottish political agenda, in the media, and digital outlets, and among consumers since 2011 (McBride, 2022). Although imposed by police on those suspected of engaging in an offence, research by Hamilton Smith et al., (2011) suggests that political procrastination relating to FBOS adoption was at play; a consistent lack of resources as well as unwillingness are identified as factors associated with this inaction. The UK's policies towards football-related offences have seen varied levels of effectiveness, with notable successes in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. However, Scotland has been slow to criminalise fans for sectarian issues due to a lack of consensus on whether these are problems that belong within the sporting sphere or wider society (Hamilton-Smith et al., 2011; Waiton, 2014). This prompts inquiries about current attitudes towards intolerance, namely, whether it is defined by how severely its citizens are penalised for misbehaviour.

McBride (2017) and Bradley (2015) raise important questions about the legal framework governing sectarian behaviour in football stadiums. Central to this discussion is how cultural norms can be used as a tool for hegemonic authority while simultaneously neglecting a deeper analysis into why such practices occur, particularly among Old Firm clubs, where song, chant, and identity play important roles in emphasising fan support. Around that time, McBride (2017) further wrote that the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act in 2012 was a way for the Scottish government to gain support from those who opposed Unionist views. This implied that the Act was focused on a rigid form of British identity that somewhat targeted Celtic fans. Hamilton-Smith et al., (2015) also brought to light the negative impact that sectarian law was having on football. Their research shared the problems between police and supporters, with a culture of distrust becoming

apparent between law enforcement agencies. Under Section 1, behaviour '*in relation to a regulated football match*' could be prosecuted if it was to provoke public disorder and was considered offensive by a reasonable person. This included chants, songs and gestures perceived to express hatred against defined groups. Section 6 dealt more with threatening material that could stir up religious hatred. Convictions carried sentences of up to five years imprisonment for the most serious offences (Hamilton-Smith et al., 2015).

The legislation was controversial from the start, and the Scottish government cited ineffectiveness as the main reason for the act's repeal in 2018, stating that it did not tackle the fundamental issues of sectarianism. Charities such as Nil by Mouth also argue that existing laws were sufficient for dealing with hate crime in Scotland (Burns, 2023). Today, there is apprehension that the repeal of the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act may result in an upsurge in sectarianism, as there would be no legal deterrent against such behaviour. As stressed throughout this chapter, tackling sectarianism requires addressing various complicated and multifaceted issues. However, it remains imperative for stakeholders to take proactive measures towards mitigating the problem of sectarianism in Scotland, if people believe that it stills exists as a problematic in contemporary society.

There is an apparent need to examine how sectarianism shapes distinctive cultural patterns and the practices of community life. Furthermore, there is a fundamentally problematic issue of 'discourse' displayed through social subsystems. The next section will discuss how social realities are articulated and shaped by the interpersonal roles of identities in Scotland through a cultural, social, and political phenomenon. It will now go on to introduce the idea that sectarianism is an inheritance of culture, reproduced in different social spheres and contexts.

2.6 Sectarianism as a Cultural Phenomenon

Sectarianism in Scotland reveals an obvious connection to football fandom. It is a microcosm that reflects societal dynamics and provides a valuable lens for understanding identities, nationalism, social class, and political behaviours (McBride,

2020). Various signs and symbols, such as club scarves, colours, and flags, communicate values that contribute to political, religious, and ethnic dimensions (Bradley, 1997). Davis, Flint and Kelly (2013) argue that football sectarianism is primarily rooted in the prevailing culture of fandom rather than a broader manifestation of sectarianism in society. Davis emphasises the unique role of fan culture, which sheds light on specific dynamics within football that contribute to sectarian issues in Scotland.

Murray (1984) serves as one of the first to explore the Celtic and Rangers rivalry. His work provides an important insight into understanding the intersections of sectarian behaviour in football. Murray's work explores domestic club football in Scotland. Murray's book is important, as its originality explores the correlation with sectarian behaviour, public disorder, and violence in the Scottish game. Murray later wrote '*The Old Firm in the New Age: Celtic and Rangers Since the 'Souness Revolution'*' in 1988. This book held more religious connotations, with a focus on the religious intricacies linked with nationalism and identity. Both books examine the memoir of society in the West of Scotland in general and the reality of anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant prejudice. Murray explores fandom and tribalism as social and cultural symbols rooted in earlier history throughout such discussions, setting up the basis to explore sectarian behaviour in modern times.

One of the essential means through which sectarianism can be studied is the foundation of the Glasgow Celtic Football Club. Celtic FC represents Irish migration in the West of Scotland, a symbol of heritage and tradition, essential to the expression and maintenance of Irishness (Clancy, 2010). It appears that Celtic as an institution never held an exclusionary Catholic-Irish system. However, others suggest that the holding of Catholic identity and ethnic culture marked Celtic as an 'Irish' football club against oppressive ideologies. Without Catholicism or the Catholic Church in Scotland, there would be no Glasgow Celtic. Beyond matters of faith, Celtic are the most publicly influential cultural symbolic champions of the Irish Catholic diasporic community in Scotland. Murray (1986) convincingly argues that it is likely that Celtic's overt Irish symbolism and success provoked a response from the indigenous population in Glasgow.

Bradley (2019) also adds that Celtic's distinctive identity contrasts sharply with predominant forms of Scottish and British identities. Finn (1991) suggests that the Rangers Football Club held an ideological construction of Protestantism, Loyalism, and Unionism (sometimes interwoven), which predated the formation of Celtic. The wave of popular Protestantism could evidence this claim. Conversely, it is understood that the origin of Rangers did not hold a religious ethos but instead grew as a social defence mechanism against the rise of Celtic and Catholicism (Giulianotti and Gerrard, 2001). Bradley (1995) further suggests that the roots of the Rangers Football Club were typical in the sense that most clubs in Scotland were Protestant and embraced the host culture of Britain.

Indeed, football can be a relevant sphere that displays hate and hysteria towards a particular allegiance. However, some aspects of Murray's (1984; 1988) books are open to academic scrutiny. For example, Finn and Giulianotti (1999) argue that Murray accuses Irish Catholic migrants of introducing sectarianism in Scottish football and exposing the confusion of Irishness. Murray also blamed Celtic and Hibernian football clubs for introducing 'sectarianism' to Scottish football. This is important as it illustrates how such academic forms accuse minority groups of sectarianism without recognising the broader cultural and structural influences. It further supports the point that Murray overlooks the contours of Scottish life and the systemic prejudice towards the large-scale migration of Catholic migrants. This perspective is noted in other scholarly practices that assert sectarianism as a convenient mask for anti-Irish racism (Finn, 1991; Bradley, 1995). There are two points to address here. Firstly, both Finn (1991) and Bradley (1993) focus on sectarianism as the perpetuation of prejudice and the Irish's social, cultural, and political exclusion. Secondly, Finn (1991) indicates that oppression and injustice were common towards the Irish Catholic population. Catholics were treated like second-class citizens. Being 'Irish' and 'Catholic' were interchangeable; they conflate to create a new constitutive 'other' by being a national and religious minority (Kelly and Bradley, 2019). This was a problem because it increased discrimination and social exclusion that stereotyped individuals based on both their ethnicity and religion.

What can be taken from the work of Murray is that prejudice towards Catholics was rooted throughout British history. Scholars such as Kelly (2011) explore this and point

to anti-Catholic prejudice and bigotry as a critical component of national identity. Furthermore, Bradley (2019) considers more historical ideologies that contribute to the construction of anti-Catholic bigotry. For instance, Guy Fawkes night in November, a celebration of the burning of a 'Catholic' betrayer who attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605. Specifically, Guy Fawkes night in November can be seen as an early visible factor that suggests those who challenge or dispute the widely held narratives of colonialism, or dominant forms of Britishness, are justified as suspect to prejudice. Guy Fawkes night continues to reinforce historical associations with Catholic identity in Scotland; it keeps past prejudices visible in ways that are often overlooked elsewhere in England. When relating this to sport, it can be seen how football clubs in Scotland can produce a shared anti-Catholic sentiment and subsequent communities. An example of this is the non-Catholic signing policy at Rangers Football Club, which existed for players and other staff for much of the twentieth century (Bradley, 1996). This pattern is not confined to football either as similar power dynamics can be seen in other sport such as basketball in parts of Europe. Stajić and Gačanović (2019) highlight that the rivalry between KK Partizan and KK Crvena Zvezda have historically shaped fan allegiances and intensified socio-political divisions within and beyond the sporting arena.

Murray (2000) notes that the concept of rivalry in Glasgow is characterised by a paradox informed by a political, cultural, and religious past. Indeed, this is evident from some of the points mentioned in the previous section. However, Lawrence (2016) argues that rivalry at local, regional, and national levels aligns with a heterogeneous society's working-class culture and geographical territory division. The 'acting out and display of fandom' sees fans become involved in symbolic singing and chanting. This reaffirms their belonging and serves as a marker of in-group loyalty and attachment. Finn (1991, 1994) further stresses this point, noting that football fandom sometimes spills over into an impetus for aggressive masculinity and male tribalism and is somewhat used as a symbol to express cultural and social identity.

Sub-sections of supporters, such as 'Ultra' fans, also coordinate the atmosphere inside stadiums through songs, displays, and chants (Doidge, 2020). These groups represent one form of organised fandom that sit alongside a broader spectrum that includes casual supporters, traditional match-going fans, and affiliated online

communities (Giulianotti, 2002). Bell and Bell (2021) highlight that groups such as the 'Green Brigade' (Celtic Ultra Fan Group) often advertise collective singing and political displays that challenge the commodification of 'modern football' through their intense emotional attachment to their group. This means that their practices can be about resisting commercialised forms of football and asserting alternative identities rooted in community and collective belonging. Bell and Bell (2021) further suggest that this is an example of how supporter groups can offer a more emotional, less rational connection to their team. In this way, fan groups can be seen as a product of, and reaction to, the modern game and its commercialisation (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2014). However, despite attempts to criminalise through the introduction of legislation banning offensive 'singing', Celtic's ultra-group would categorise themselves as 'anti-fascist' and 'anti-sectarian', meaning that they would actively challenge any form of discrimination. Nevertheless, this self-identification is contested as some of their displays and chants can still reproduce divisive narratives that highlight tensions over what constitutes acceptable expression within fan culture (Bradley, 2025). This provides an alternative narrative to the mainstream media's portrayal of supporters as aggressive 'hooligans' and contests political and moral viewpoints that suggest all collective displays and forms of support are linked to violence or hatred towards others. In turn, this challenges the dominant ideologies peddled by sections of society and the media who seek to demonise football fans and their practices.

While football is emblematic of mainstream culture in Scotland, it is essential to note that it reflects contemporary sectarianism as an increased public issue (Waiton, 2018). May (2015) draws attention to the paradox surrounding football by suggesting that it is not the sole cause of tension among different groups in Scotland. Furthermore, May (2015) states that faith groups, academics, cultural figures, and members of the public, in general, all report the existence of an inter-communal tension in Scotland. It can therefore be assumed that sectarianism is considered a more cultural phenomenon. This is significant because it moves us away from the notion that football is the root cause of all sectarianism in Scotland. From this perspective, Goodall et al., (2015, p.16) describes sectarianism as '*experienced in profoundly cultural ways that demand detailed cultural analysis, which helps inform the public debate so that it better represents the everyday experience of Scots*'. This challenges the dominant narrative that football and football fans are to blame for sectarianism, even though many fans

do not identify with these issues. In turn, it challenges the negative stereotypes and assumptions often made about football fans in Scotland.

Another symbolic practice where social rituals are expressed is the Loyalist and Republican Parades. Hamilton-Smith et al., (2015) suggest that this also brings out a cultural perspective exhibited in the West of Scotland. Ritualistic marches and parades in Scotland articulate culture and traditional heritage that represent ethno-religious belonging. There has been little systematic sociological effort to document what crowds sing during parades. Yet, we know that such events represent cultural rituals that are made noticeable in public spaces on the days of significant events. St Patrick's Day or the Twelfth of July parades have been a feature of life in Scotland since at least the nineteenth century. However, Goodall et al., (2015) argue that they hold certain cultural practices that have sectarian agendas that impact public perception. This is because flags and colours are identified in the parades due to the celebration's perceived nature, which impacts the tensions between communities (Morrow, 2017). The use of music and singing at such events also has a bearing on the way that sectarianism is enacted and displayed.

Songs and music with sectarian connotations are contested at marches and parades as a source of codified sectarianism that constructs strong socio-political messages (Millar, 2016; 2020). A similar argument is often made between Celtic and Rangers supporters and the performance of sectarian songs as an articulation of their culture (Flint and Powell, 2013). A large and growing body of literature has also investigated the application of anti-Catholic music and Irish rebel songs as a unique power to create sectarian meaning (For example, Millar, 2016; McKerrell, 2015). Together, these studies outline that music can construct sectarianism due to its context, wording, and meaning. One study by McKerrell (2012) examined the mediatization of music regarding a case study of The Famine Song (a song sung by some Ulster loyalists in Scotland, directed at Catholics) at football matches. McKerrell (2012) also mentions that hearing sectarianism as a song is a notable cultural enigma that relies on assumptions and essentialised identities. In a simple sense, rebel or anti-Irish songs are an integral part of cultural reproduction that locates cultural identity.

Bradley (2015) highlights that these songs often manifest among football fans and the media, which narrate a perceived 'sectarian' issue. This narrative also includes chanting or displaying football banners deemed to incite racial, national, or religious hate. Kelly (2011) notes that tensions during 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland also exacerbate an ideological construction of political identity that is omnipresent at football matches and parades. Indeed, these events are characterised by emblems shaped by the political conflict between Irish Nationalists and Ulster Loyalists. While this is problematic for some people, Walker (2012) highlights that others see these events as a necessary outlet for political identities (fashioned by historical events) as a sense of tribal belonging. Hamilton-Smith (2013) further demonstrates that those who express British or Irish political identities in social spaces reject their desire to be sectarian. Yet, their research raises questions about how these events typify social anxiety over sectarianism and public fear of disorder and crime.

Bairner (1994, p 11) further highlights that social spaces are where 'modern men proclaim their loyalties' and therefore share cultural divergence. Sectarianism's public perceptions and experiences in Scotland are linked to white men, layered with masculine identities located in working-class communities (Deuchar and Holligan, 2009). Research on Sectarianism has long been regarded as a male domain, with females playing a subordinate role. So far, however, there have been few gendered manifestations of Sectarianism in Scotland. Recent studies have focused on hegemonic discourse, focusing on male-dominated public spaces (Bruce, 2019; Carr, et al., 2021; Pope, Williams and Cleland, 2022). This work indicate that the position and experience of women are markedly underrepresented within academic literature on Sectarianism beyond football. Therefore, it can be argued that Sectarianism's public manifestations have been constructed as a gendered phenomenon entwined with masculinity (Lindores and Emejulu, 2019).

Given the practical challenges, Goodall and Malloch (2013) suggest that when women are discussed in the context of sectarianism, it often concerns their evasive approach to avoid conflict to protect their family or domestic sphere. Goodall and Malloch further mention that women are not affiliated with aggressive forms of sectarianism but are vulnerable to sectarian bigotry and violence within their communities. Lindores and Emejulu (2018) also argue that policy and practice must take feminised sectarianism

seriously, which takes place in micro-communities of the home and semi-private spaces. They suggest that a gendered analysis of sectarianism is required to recognise women's agency in the construction and experience of sectarian behaviours.

Bradley (2024) notes that cultural symbols such as flags, songs, and football colours reveal an ideological product of the historical Irish British colonial conflict. As a result of its associations and identities, Bradley (1995) argues that sectarian antagonisms in football institutions are a microcosm of broader society. Some writers (e.g., Kelly, 2010) suggest that being either a Rangers or Celtic fan is sufficient to be considered sectarian because it represents a political signifier. However, this interpretation can depend on the mode of engagement as more casual supporters may not express or recognise these identities in the same way as engaged or organised fan groups. Kelly (2010) further implies that Celtic and Rangers provide Scotland with a convenient smokescreen that retains the tale that sectarianism is an Old Firm, West of Scotland, and working-class phenomenon. This view is similarly supported by Kelly and Bairner (2018) who note that having an ethnoreligious identity in Scotland evokes media and political interest when it is displayed in public.

Other studies have considered sectarianism to be linked with constitutional debate on Scottish independence (Walker, 2012). This is closely tied to processes of identity construction and the negotiation of social difference, which often leads to boundary-making practices. There is a clear challenge to combat prejudice, online hate crime, and sectarianism in sport, with a focus narrowed on football. Simultaneously, football remains an increasingly contested cultural and social space where aspects of working-class culture are seen as highlighted as problematic by authorities in modern Scotland (May 2015).

2.7 Summary

This research has considered the challenges of defining the historical contexts of sectarianism and some of the conflicts and issues concerning the topic in Scotland. It has identified some of the critical issues and disagreements among scholars that

should be considered when addressing research in this area. It has been apparent that sectarianism in Scotland is multi-faceted with a collection of themes playing out in various ways. Yet, its understanding is rooted in the foundations of identity, religion, and culture. This chapter also strives to explore new ways in which sectarianism is constructed. Some of the issues identified have provided an overview for further discussion and the different sociological and cultural understandings of the term (Finn, 2003).

The understanding of sectarianism in Scotland has developed through research that examines how it is reproduced across different cultural settings. What is known is that the study of sectarianism has shifted away from religious discrimination to cultural practices, with insufficient attention paid to the legacy of historic unequal power relations (McBride, 2018). Many more recent studies have focused on making sense of sectarianism through conceptualising identities within football supporters, parades, music, and community groups in Scotland (Kelly, 2011; Bradley, 2022; Millar, 2016). Others such as Waiton (2018) argue that these approaches have been somewhat controversial as they seem to target selected groups rather than a societal issue. While some suggest that sectarianism in Scotland has been exaggerated and is a 'myth' whilst others suggest that expressions of British Unionism and Loyalism, Orangeism, and Irish Republicanism are portrayed as sectarian. This debate is reflective of the contested and unclear definitions of sectarianism, as well as a lack of theoretical and empirical clarity.

It has been acknowledged that most of the work on sectarianism has focused on its reproduction within various frameworks. Consequently, it is essential to address the subsections of cultural studies around football fandom that have governed work up to this point. This can support perspectives, such as those held by Kelly (2010), who specify that the roots of sectarianism run deep in both Scottish football and society. Some limitations and deficiencies are associated with developing a new underpinning and definition due to the complex, multi-faceted, and contested nature of the term. Surrounding this is the widespread acknowledgement that sectarianism is difficult to define and understand.

It is essential to dissect sectarianism further, as it allows researchers to establish the need to focus on new methods of communication in the modern day. As McMenemy and Poulter (2005) mention, online represents an environment where participants may express opinions and behaviours that may not emerge in traditional settings. Further work by Cleland (2014) and Kilvington and Price (2021) develop this argument by highlighting how digital platforms have created new forms of interaction that raises the visibility and intensity of expression. When this is linked with the growth of the internet from a cultural phenomenon to a critical site of cultural production, there is a requirement to develop work in this area. This point also emphasises the significance of the internet's role in contemporary communication and examines its importance when investigating football fandom. The internet has allowed for the construction and consumption of fan culture to develop in new ways. Football forums are principal ways fans can congregate and converse across various communities. This sets up subsequent opportunities to warrant further specific analysis on Sectarianism, identity, discourse, and fan communities virtually.

CHAPTER 3: CONCEPTUALISING FOOTBALL FANDOM AND ONLINE COMMUNITIES

3.1 Introduction

Football fandom has become an important field of academic investigation in recent years. Researchers have been examining questions of identity (Gibbons, 2016), community (Millward, 2012), discrimination (Cleland and Cashmore, 2016), and conflict (Dunning, 2000). The nature of sports allegiances can also link to personal and collective identities and has led to clashes where historic rivalries are played out among fan groups (Dixon, 2013). As such, researchers express in their work that most football fans engage in communities and rituals by finding meaning and solidarity in their club affiliations.

It has been known that football fan cultures have historically been understood as masculine and sometimes exclusionary (Cleland et al., 2018). Porat (2010) and Giulianotti and Robertson (2004) reinforce this point by noting that fandom can reinforce dominant identities. Power et al., (2020, p1) also argue that football provides *'a unique space for the public performance of identity, both for hegemonic groups attempting to demarcate normative cultural values, and alternative and diasporic groups who use football to critique the status quo and celebrate their alterity'*. In other words, supporting a team becomes a stage on which identities are celebrated. Rituals such as songs and gatherings are as essential to fandom as the action on the field, as they serve a collective memory and identity that upholds representation of the group (Serazio, 2013). Singing the club anthem, standing in unison, and orchestrated tifos in the stands are symbolic acts through which fans produce and reinforce their imagined community.

More recently, the rise of the internet and social media has given birth to new online fan communities that transcend geographical boundaries (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2012; Guschwan, 2016). This suggests that online fan communities can extend their geographies of inclusion that connect supporters across cities, regions, and countries. Fans can now congregate in virtual spaces to debate matches, share memes, compile statistics, and celebrate (or commiserate) in real time (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). However, digital media has allowed a participatory and exclusive culture (subscriptions, memberships, passwords) to grow, where fans move from passive consumers to active co-creators of content. A social media post can have as much

cultural impact and clubs themselves carefully monitor the user-generated content and sentiment originating from their fan base (Petersen-Wagner and Ludvigsen, 2023). However, it is important to remember that these same online spaces have a dual character because they can be hotbeds of toxicity (Kilvington and Price, 2018). The democratisation of voice in fan communities brings new forms of exclusion and conflict. Likewise, Cleland (2014) suggests that social media has provided a new dimension to racist discourse in football as anonymous fans may feel encouraged to post prejudice online in ways they would not in person.

The chapter ahead will explore this transformation in depth, balancing an awareness of the new democratic and creative possibilities for football fans against a critical awareness of the new tensions and toxicities that have emerged. The goal is to grasp how football fandom operates as a microcosm of society due to the ongoing argument whether sectarianism exists in contemporary society. Indeed, the mix of identity, ritual, symbolic community, and digital mediation, football fandom offers a lens to examine wider societal phenomena (Numerato, 2018; Benkwitz and Molnar, 2012). It will explore the need for belonging and the performance of collective meaning, the negotiation of power and difference, and the impact of technology on communities in the modern world.

3.2 Defining Football Fandom

Modern football fandom emerged alongside the rise of football as a mass spectator sport in the late 19th and 20th centuries (Crawford, 2004; Dixon, 2016). Early football supporters were often fixed in local working-class communities, forming passionate followings around neighbourhood clubs. However, academic attention to football fandom did not gain momentum until the late 1960s, when researchers such as Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988), Redhead (2002) and Boyle and Hayes (2004) began to examine fan cultures. Radmann and Hedenborg (2018) note that this interest was sparked by the changing nature of football in Britain and strengthening the relationship with the mass media and business. In other words, as football became more commercialised and televised, fan practices and identities started to change in ways that attracted research. Early studies often focused on the collective aspects of fandom but also on the problems of crowd violence and hooliganism that made football

crowds a topic of public concern (Dunning, 2000; Spaaij, 2006; Rookwood and Pearson, 2012). Notably, much of this work reflected the cultural role in society in Western Europe and described fandom through a male working-class lens.

One longstanding approach has been to classify the types of football fans and their varying levels of commitment. Giulianotti's (2002) seminal typology, for example, distinguishes between supporters, followers, fans, and flaneurs, based on dimensions of traditional loyalty versus cosmopolitan consumerism. He records that supporters are the 'classic die-hards'; locally rooted, emotional intensity, and invested in the club through regular match attendance and lifelong allegiance (Giulianotti, 2002). At the opposite end, flaneurs are more detached consumers of the sport as they sample football as an entertainment option among many and may even shift allegiances, embodying the postmodern globalised spectators (Giulianotti, 2002). Between these poles lie followers who track a team's fortunes but with less intense devotion and fans who engage passionately but primarily as consumers of branded club products.

Giulianotti's (2002) taxonomy and similar dichotomies (e.g. real supporters versus armchair fans) raise the issue of authenticity in fandom. Indeed, debates over authenticity have long filled football fan culture and scholarship. Fans may see the season-ticket holder as the authentic fan, in contrast to the casual spectator or overseas TV viewer (Dixon, 2016). Yet Gibbons et al., (2016) questions this by arguing that authenticity is a complex concept that cannot be reduced to simple markers such as geography and match attendance. As Davis (2015) observes, the very notion of one fan being more authentic than another is problematic in a modern context of fluid identities and consumer culture. Davis (2015) also introduced terms like 'post-fandom' and 'post-authentic fandom' to describe the current era in which traditional benchmarks of fandom are less defining than before.

It can be argued that football support has become just one form of consumption and self-expression, and people negotiate what authenticity means in practice (Best, 2013). For instance, some fans have responded to commercialisation by forming breakaway clubs such as FC United of Manchester (Millward and Poulton, 2014). These post-consumer fans seek to reclaim an 'authentic' community ethos outside the mainstream commercial game. The diversity of fan types from ultras to casual fans,

local die-hards to global digital followers demonstrates that football fandom cannot be summarised by any single point. Typologies are useful for this diversity, but others like Weber et al., (2022) emphasises that they are ideal types where real fans often blur categories and shift positions over time. As such, the literature highlights a critical stance toward any rigid fan hierarchy, recognising that all forms of fandom are contextually authentic.

Another area of fandom research has focused on football hooliganism (Williams et al., 2014). Work from Spaaij (2006), Dunning (2000) and Rookwood and Pearson (2012) often embodied the hooligan as a young, working-class male, part of a rough urban subculture that found in football terraces an outlet for aggression and identity assertion. Dunning (2000) also noted that as traditional working-class communities eroded in the UK and modern life imposed tighter social controls, young men wanted 'quests for excitement' through the adrenaline of football rivalries and fights. In this view, hooligan gangs known as firms provide an alternative peer group and status system for excluded youth, where toughness was valued (Redhead, 2020). Others, such as Pearson (2015) and Rookwood and Pearson (2012) have noted that the focus on hooligans has overshadowed the broader spectrum of fan experience by merging fandom with its extreme manifestation. Additionally, poor crowd management, inadequate stadium infrastructure, and unsafe conditions at matches (Hillsborough, Ibrox disaster etc.) highlight the risks faced by ordinary fans and have been overlooked in discussions that focus on hooliganism.

By the 1990s, with improved policing, CCTV surveillance, and stricter stadium regulations, overt violence in many countries had declined (Giulianotti and Klauser, 2011). Research began to shift beyond hooliganism and more towards the legacy of hooligan culture in more refined forms, such as hooligan firms rebranding as ultra groups and fan antagonism manifesting through chants and online abuse (Hodges 2016). It is known that some clubs still celebrate fan identity as an indication of the working-class, male-dominated fan tradition, which is seen as a marker of authenticity (Pope, 2011). This led Doidge et al., (2020) to suggest that football fandom is characterised by internal paradoxes; it permits community and loyalty, but can also harbour exclusion, aggression, and hyper-masculinity. Unlike disorder, deviance in fandom encompasses behaviours that violate social norms and ethical expectations.

Research on deviance in fandom has expanded to include issues like racism and homophobia. Recognising these as performances tarnish the inclusive ideals of football (Cleland, 2014; Cleland and Magrath, 2019). Today, the digital age has created new arenas for fan deviance where online trolling and abuse toward players can be seen as a virtual continuation of the antagonism that once played out in the terraces.

3.3 Digital Fandom and Football Culture

The rise of the internet has indeed changed how fans engage with their teams and each other (Millward, 2016; Pegoraro, 2013). A new digital football studies paradigm has been identified, noting that football fandom has entered a hyper digital moment in which online communication is central to fan culture (Lawrence and Crawford, 2022). In contrast to the traditional model of fandom, which was bound by geography and stadium attendance, fans can follow and influence the club from anywhere in the world, 24/7. Football fans now consume football through a constant flow of digital content, such as watch-along, podcasts, and fantasy leagues (Crawford et al., 2022). In Jenkins's (2019) terms, it has increasingly included participatory culture as seen in the creation of fan-run YouTube channels, fan podcasts, and social media fan pages. Many supporters are now producers by creating content and expressions of support. Spracklen (2022) notes that this has democratised some aspects of fan culture as it has given ordinary fans a public voice that can rival official club media.

Such practice reflects what Crawford et al., (2022) describe as the rise of themed digital participatory experiences around football. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when stadiums were closed and live attendance was impossible, these trends intensified (Bond et al., 2022). Fans, clubs, and broadcasters innovated new digital fan experiences to fill the void. Lawrence and Crawford (2022) argue that the pandemic revealed how modern fandom is increasingly focused on the consumption of football-themed digital participatory experiences as fans wanted to reclaim the feeling of communal participation through technology. Yet, some traditionalists still view digital fans and overseas e-fans with suspicion, perceiving them as flaneurs who lack genuine commitment (Giulianotti, 2018). For example, Tinson et al., (2023) indicate that digital fandom involves forms of knowledge, labour, and emotional

investment. Fans of this kind must work harder to prove their legitimacy by displaying in-depth club knowledge; thereby developing a post-authentic fandom where passion is proven on online forums rather than on the terraces (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). This can create a powerful sense of online community but also opens fandom to toxic behaviours.

Miranda et al., (2024) further highlight how social media fandom is a double-edged sword; meaning it can be inclusive and productive, but it is also socially regressive, and sexist and replicates abuse in online interactions. Consequently, theories of fandom have been updated to understand networks and online identity performance by including the application of frameworks to understand how emotions circulate in cyberspace (Kilvington and Price, 2021; Fletcher et al., 2024). Likewise, Sandvoss (2004) suggests that football fandom is becoming a mirror of consumption reflecting broader postmodern cultural trends. This insight is more relevant as contemporary fandom is a personalised media experience, and a key part of many fans' work identities. Woods and Ludvigsen (2022) note that the intense bond between supporters and clubs is intertwined with media and globalisation. The study of football fandom must therefore bridge physical and virtual realms by recognising that the virtual terraces of social media and forums are as integral to fan culture as the stadium terraces were in the past.

Further research by Doidge, Kossakowski, and Mintert (2020) shows that emotional responses to matches directly influence the tone of fans that sustains the expressive engagement with their club. Interestingly, this study explored political mobilisation amongst fans and how political solidarity motivates collective behaviour. A large-scale analysis by Hill (2025) of millions of Reddit posts demonstrated that real-world game outcomes trigger sentiment shifts across sport fan communities. Their study found that sport defeats often produce spikes in negative sentiment and correlates with problematic or abusive language in posts (Hill, 2025). In other words, anger and disappointment can spill over into hateful comments. The study also found that these sentiment waves can spread contagiously into unrelated online communities as well. This also relates to the work of Kampe and Paulsson (2024) who argue that digital fan spaces function as interconnected emotional ecosystems where passions (and hostilities) are intensified and easily transmitted.

Reports of discriminatory abuse in football doubled between the 2021-22 and 2023-24 football seasons (Kick It Out, 2025). Abuse aimed at individual players also rose by 43% on social media platforms (Kick It Out, 2025). The study by Kick it Out also shows that the anonymity of online platforms appears to encourage a minority of users to participate in harassment that would be less common face-to-face (Armstrong and Telzer, 2021; Graham, 2019). Football rivalries can also escalate into hate speech in online spaces and can be coordinated by extremist groups or wider social prejudices (Seijbel, Sterkenburg, and Oonk, 2022). Seijbel, Sterkenburg, and Oonk's (2022) study on Ajax and their rival Feyenoord shows that tweets targeted to the other can contribute to an exclusionary discourse online. Fenton et al., (2024) also report that female fans and journalists receive frequent misogynistic abuse when they comment on football. This reflects a toxic masculinity in certain corners of online fan culture that tends to be ignored as enforcing civility in decentralised fan spaces remains difficult (Hill, Canniford, and Millward, 2018) In the meantime, many fan communities have taken it upon themselves to moderate and establish codes of conduct where dedicated fans work to keep their spaces positive and inclusive.

3.4 Commodification of Fandom and Consumer Culture

Fans today have more ways than ever before to spend money on their team. This includes official jerseys and memorabilia, subscription channels, stadium tours etc (Brandt, 2024). Sandvoss (2004) suggests that football fandom has become a consumer culture as it reflects a broader shift to neoliberal and market-driven social relations. However, this commodification has motivated resistance and anxiety among many supporters. Goldblatt (2014) suggests that football's traditional ethos of local loyalty, collective identity and even 'soul' is threatened by commercialism and globalisation. The failed experiment of the European Super League (ESL) in 2021 demonstrates this threat alongside other footballing protests (BBC, 2023).

Millward (2011) and Numerato (2018) suggest that many forms of fan mobilisation exist in football such the establishment of supporter trusts and fan-owned clubs. These groups are in place to organise boycotts and social media campaigns and aim to reassert supporter influence in an era of corporate ownership. Millward's (2013) study

of English club supporters also highlights that under foreign ownership and globalisation, fans often unite around ideas of community and authenticity. Case studies of Liverpool, Manchester United, and other clubs show fans using social movement tactics to protest high ticket prices, unwanted takeovers and identity changes such as relocations and colour changes. These movements show strong marks to challenge the consumerist paradigm and remind stakeholders that a football club's cultural value exceeds its commercial value.

The debate on commodification also questions how football fandom is marketed to audiences across the globe. Williams and Caulfield (2020) suggest that commodification risks producing more isolated fans as well as those who feel their loyalty is exploited because of business. It has been known that fans often feel reduced to revenue streams and lack a voice in decision-making (Cleland, 2010). This has been explored through the lens of moral economy as fans make judgments about what is fair in their club's commercialisation and when those moral expectations are breached. However, others argue that commodification has brought benefits to football such as improved stadium facilities (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007; Kennedy and Kennedy, 2012). This is seen through 'glocalisation' where fan practices adapt and survive within global commercial frameworks. For example, supporter groups may maintain grassroots traditions by singing and tifo displays in hyper-modern stadiums. Weed's (2013) research on pubs as 'virtual venues' also shows how international fan clubs recreate match day atmospheres in sports bars worldwide.

Today, fans negotiate their role as consumers and as cultural co-owners of the game. The literature calls attention to this negotiation by emphasising that fandom involves consumption of products, media, experiences and production of meanings, social bonds, and resistance (Millward, 2011). As Dixon (2014) notes, fans are the 'liquid consumers' of late modern football still seeking an authentic connection amongst the flood of commercialisation.

3.5 Gendered Dimensions of Football Fandom

While early studies of football fandom often treated the fan base as a homogenous mass, more recent research has foregrounded the gendered nature of fandom and

the long-neglected experiences of women supporters. Historically, football terraces in many countries were male-dominated spaces, and women who participated as fans were often stereotyped (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012). This gender bias is evident in the work of Lawrence and Davis (2019), who suggest that what came before in football fan research 'has often focused predominantly on white male fans and their experiences of the game'. In recent years, however, a growing body of work has been required to correct this imbalance by examining how gender identity shapes and is shaped by football fandom. Pope (2016), Cleland and Cashmore (2018), and Doehler (2024) all reveal that women football fans encounter questioning sexist language and even harassment both in stadiums and online.

Doehler's 2024 study of 1,624 women supporters in the UK found that social media, while offering a platform for women to engage in football debates, also exposes them to significant gender-based abuse and stereotype policing (Doehler 2024). Female fans reported being told their opinions are worthless due to their gender, encapsulated in comments like '*Your analysis is as useless as your ovaries*' which inspired the title of Doehler's article (Doehler, 2024, p12). The study applied and expanded Pope et al., (2022) model of masculine performance in sports spaces, demonstrating that the football discourse on Twitter (X) is often governed by male norms that women must contend with. In Scotland, Lindores and Emejulu (2019) challenge the hegemonic masculinity of dominant football discourses by exploring women's everyday experiences of sectarianism. The findings demonstrate that sectarianism extends beyond white, male-only, working-class contexts, emphasising the need to examine different gendered manifestations of sectarian bigotry, particularly about how ethno-religious identities are maintained through marriage, and the socialisation and upbringing of children.

Female fan presence at men's games has increased in many countries, and clubs have taken steps to present a more family and female friendly image (Pfister and Pope, 2018). Moreover, the spectacular growth of women's football and its fan base has challenged gender norms in surprising ways, including the fact that a significant portion of women's football fans are male, and their fandom often centres on a different set of values (e.g. seeing women's football as purer or more community-oriented) compared to some men's football fan cultures (Pope, 2016). This led Jones (2008)

and Pfister and Pope (2018) to examine how fandom in the women's game both overlaps with and diverges from traditional (men's) football fandom. For instance, some male fans of women's football claim to appreciate the atmosphere as more inclusive and less aggressive, pointing to a possible feminisation of fan culture in those settings, though others worry about preserving women's football from the hyper-commercialisation seen in the men's game. The intersection of gender with other identities is another emerging focus.

Millward's (2023) analysis of the Pride in Football network (an alliance of LGBT+ fan groups in the UK) shows how the visibility of LGBT fans has grown. This has led to organised efforts to combat homophobia and diversify the image of the football fan. Initiatives like Rainbow Laces and the rise of women's and LGBT supporter clubs reflect a slow but important cultural shift (Millward, 2023). However, Kossakowski, Antonowicz, and Jakubowska (2020) suggest that they caution that deep-rooted masculine norms in football are resistant to change. The performance of masculinity remains ingrained in many fan practices. This takes place during the expectation that real fans display toughness and dominance to the way football banter can devolve into homophobic jokes as a form of in-group bonding (Cleland, 2018). Thus, a critical gender lens reveals that fandom is not a neutral space as it is constructed through gendered expectations.

3.6 Fandom and Identity Construction

Dixon (2014) suggests that football fandom is understood today as a social construct, where fans' identities are produced through social interaction and cultural practice. Indeed, it can be suggested that fans learn what it means to be a supporter through shared rituals, symbols, and narratives. The social-constructionist view implies that fan identities can vary by context and time as they arise within the fan community and broader cultural narratives rather than existing independently. Porat (2010) and Brown, Crabbe and Mellor (2013) stress that fans perform their identities in relation to others. They argue that fans enact identity through repeated practices (chants, clothing, and behaviours) rather than possessing a single fixed fan nature. In the fan context, this means that being a fan is a role taken up about teammates, rivals, and cultural norms.

Fans perform identity through attending matches, singing anthems, or displaying banners, and in doing so they become supporters (Pearson, 2004). Poulton and Durell (2016) also compared fan experience to a language, noting that chants at matches form a symbolic practice which gives meaning or expression to the idea of belonging to a club and community. Fan identities emerge in performance as supporters assume the identity of fan by doing fanlike things, while shifting between overlapping roles (local supporter, national believer, member of a subculture, etc.) as contexts change. Because fans' identities are performed through communication, language, and discourse play key roles. For example, Poulton and Durell (2016) imply that discursive behaviour re-constructs cultural values and identities. In football crowds, chants, banners, and even online discussions allow fans to mark in-groups and out-groups. Simultaneously, however, it distinguishes fans from others; a process of constructing otherness that confronts one group's values against another's (Newson et al., 2023).

Football fan bases often operate in symmetry to Anderson's (1983) imagined communities as fans feel united by shared symbols and rituals. Kalman-Lamb (2021) further adds that modern sports spectatorial communities function as sites of meaning and community in a late-capitalist world. Fans invent these communities through ritualistic practices and media consumption. This imagined quality is evident in how fans worldwide align behind a club despite geographical distances (Spracklen, 2022). Furthermore, McDougall (2020) notes that fandoms are not monolithic. Clubs such as St. Pauli and Glasgow Celtic often take explicit political and social stances and attract fans who share those ideologies. Here, sub-communities form around values (anti-racism, anti-fascism, working-class solidarity) within the broader fanbase.

Garcia-Lopez's analysis (2024) shows that supporters of clubs like St. Pauli and Celtic use Twitter and Instagram to promote messages of diversity and inclusion. This activism is a form of power by publicly championing social values and pressure clubs and leagues to respond. In the UK and Europe, fans' agencies have been seen in boycotts (ticket price protests), in the formation of supporters' trusts, and campaigns against racism and sexism in the stands (Kossakowski and Ludvigsen, 2025). Fan organisations (e.g., the Football Supporters' Association in England) lobby for policy changes and greater supporter consultation. Such agency reflects the counter public

nature of fandom where fans carve out their own spaces and where they challenge the status quo and negotiate identity on their terms (Turner, 2017).

Another key debate is how identity politics (race, gender, class) plays out in football. It is known that clubs often promote a narrow model of the true fan (male, local, heterosexual) and can marginalise women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ supporters (Caudwell, 2011). Other studies also note that this exclusion highlights how football identity can be gatekept by norms. For example, Dubal (2010) points out that commercialisation tends to spread stereotypes and exclude those who do not fit the ideal of the true fan. In response to this, many fans contest these norms as ultras and supporters' groups across Europe pioneer inclusive chants and anti-discrimination banners e.g. anti-racist tifos and pro-refugee banners (Doidge, Kossakowski and Mintert, 2020). In this way, football fans negotiate belonging they draw on broader cultural and political identities by while dominant narratives that try to fix the meaning of supporter.

The rise of digital media has given fans unprecedented capacity to influence identity. Vale and Fernandes (2018) see that clubs and players use social networks to extend their brand, but these same platforms have become megaphones for supporters' voices and alternative interpretations. Importantly, digital spaces often increase dissenting voices. Fans who do not fit the traditional mould, whether older ultras critical of modern ownership, younger fans advocating for social justice, or diaspora supporters can now find like-minded communities online (Antonowicz, Dominik, Kossakowski, and Szlendak, 2016). These counter-publics challenge mainstream coverage. For example, fanzines and blogs emerged in the 2000s to critique club policy from a fan perspective (Millward, 2016). These digital practices show how fans reproduce and contest its meanings in contemporary football.

3.7 Theoretical Frameworks of Fandom and Identity

Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities offers a lens for understanding the collective identity of football fans in online spaces. Anderson originally described the nation as an imagined political community in which

'members... will never know most of their fellow-members... yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 1991, p 6). Supporters of a football club can imagine themselves as part of a global fan nation by feeling a bond with other supporters who they will never meet in person. Modern live broadcasts, fan forums and social media now enable supporters to imagine themselves as part of one unified fan community.

Anderson's framework helps explain fans' deep sense of belonging, but it also explains potential oppositions that arise from such group identifications. Kalman-Lamb (2020, p 932) argues that the imagined community of fandom can produce *'Manichean understandings of social relations'*, where one's own club is seen as good and righteous while rivals are cast as villains. This view is reinforced through fan discourse and media and may lead to the marginalisation of out-groups and even violence in extreme cases (McLean and Wainwright, 2009). In other words, the same sense of communion that brings fans together can also fuel intergroup conflict.

Sidnam's (2015) study of Arsenal FC's worldwide supporters also demonstrates how fans *'from Lagos to Los Angeles, and from Beijing to Bangalore'* (p. 135) identify with a club in a country many have never visited. Through digital platforms, the North London club became simultaneously embedded in English culture and accessible globally by giving fans a community that contributes to their sense of identity and ontological security (Sidnam, 2015). This illustrates how online football fandom functions as an imagined community that transcends borders. The shared rituals rehearse this imagined solidarity and help fans feel part of a larger supporter base.

Jenkins (2018) theory of 'participatory culture' builds on the ideas of community by showing the active role of fans in creating and sustaining their collective identity. Jenkins portrays fans as participants who engage and socialise in the context of fandom (Jenkins, 2018). His work shows that fan communities are *'among the most active, creative, critically engaged, and socially connected'* groups of media consumers (Jenkins, 2006, p. 60). They form a 'participatory culture' and a social environment with low barriers to expression; fans produce their own content, share knowledge, mentor new members, and feel their contributions matter to the group (Jenkins, 2018). In digital football fandom, this participatory ethos is evident across

forums, social networks, and messaging groups. Supporters debate tactics, co-create chants or slogans, exchange insider humour, and collective actions (such as coordinated tifo displays or online campaigns) (Cleland et al., 2018). Activities like this show what Jenkins describes as a 'new relationship' between audiences and culture as fans construct their own meanings and interpretations beyond the intentions of official producers.

Jenkins (2008) further adds that fandom becomes a subculture and space where personal identity and group membership intertwine. Being a 'true fan' is a badge of identity that members perform and negotiate through participation. However, Guschwan (2012) notes that participatory fan communities are not without internal tensions. Jenkins (2006) argues how inclusive these communities are. As such, Jenkins' framework helps researchers understand this narrative by showing how online fandom is co-produced; making digital fan spaces key sites where group identity, belonging, and cultural citizenship are performed. While most fans engage in participatory culture, identity fusion theory explains the end of fan identification. Developed by Swann et al., (2015), identity fusion describes a level of alignment between a person's self and a group. It is defined as a sense of 'oneness' that motivates pro-group behaviours (Swann et al., 2012). Fusion implies that an individual's identity is not submerged by the group but fused with it. This theory has been applied to understand the loyalty and sacrifice observed in certain fan subgroups mainly in football ultras and hooligan circles (Knijnik and Newson, 2021; Newson, 2019).

For some supporters, being a fan is part of who they are. Studies in the UK and Brazil, for example, have used identity fusion to explain passionate supporter groups despite different cultural contexts (Bortolini et al., 2018; Newson, 2019). Fused fans feel a bond with other supporters and a sense of personal agency on behalf of the group. This can produce solidarity and selflessness as such fans might travel far distances at personal expense to support the team and defend the club's honour in heated online battles and offline confrontations alike (Newson and Buhrmester, 2023). Unfortunately, the flip side is a tendency for conflict and risk-taking. Strongly fused fans are motivated to endorse extreme pro-group acts when they perceive the group to be threatened (Newton, 2017).

Identity fusion thus sheds light on phenomena like football violence and bridges the psychological gap between belonging and over-identification. This helps us understand how online fan passion can escalate into toxic and harmful behaviour (Newton, 2019). Of course, not all fans experience such fusion as it tends to characterise a minority of 'diehards', but its effects are outsized in shaping fan culture's extremes (Harasta, 2021). Recognising identity fusion in digital fandom shows why some supporters react with intense emotion and loyalty that is far beyond what casual fans experience, and it provides a link between the micro-level of individual awareness and the macro-level of group phenomena.

Finally, the concept of moral panic offers a perspective on how broader society and media sometimes respond to the passions and conflicts of online football fandom. Originally by Cohen in 1972 in the context of youth subcultures, a moral panic is a social episode in which a person or group is cast as a threat to societal values, and public discourse around them becomes exaggerated. Cohen (1972. p. 9) described how '*a condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests*' with the media presenting the group in a stylised and stereotypical fashion and moral guardians calling for swift action.

In the history of football fandom, there is evidence of clear parallels with moral panic. For example, British football hooligans in the 1970s and 1980s were often portrayed as folk devils and the press and politicians mobilised a narrative of crisis around fan violence (Ward, 2002; Poulton, 2006). Others, such as Rookwood and Pearson (2012), have since implied that this hooliganism crisis was a media construction rather than an objective nationwide scourge as it was intensified by mass media hysteria and a moral panic that exaggerated the threat fans posed. This insight is valuable when examining online fan discourse in the digital era. Today's football fans assemble on visible platforms (Twitter, Facebook, fan forums), which means moments of deviant fan behaviour are more exposed (Cable, Kilvington, and Mottershead, 2022). In Cohen's terms, the untypical is made typical by media increase (Cohen, 2011). A few extreme comments by fans might be presented as evidence of an entire fan base's depravity. Social media's speed and scale can intensify this dynamic.

Walsh (2000) suggests that virality itself acts as an accelerator for moral panic as outrage online can be misinterpreted as widespread consensus that a grave threat exists. Furthermore, social media often becomes the target of blame. As Mueller (2019) puts it, the newfound 'hyper transparency' of social media has fostered a moral panic about the internet where platforms are accused of all manner of evils. There is echoes of this panic in football contexts. For instance, calls to ban anonymous accounts often follow publicised cases of online fan abuse (Binns, 2017). The value of the moral panic framework lies in encouraging a critical balance as it urges scholars to distinguish between legitimate concern and collective overreaction. By applying this framework, researchers understand how online football fandom can become a battleground for cultural values.

3.8 Virtual Fandom and the Internet

Virtual fandom refers to fan cultures and communities that exist primarily online. Rheingold (2000) notes that online communities are social groups formed through sustained digital interaction. Today's fans inhabit a network society (Castells, 2011) in which information and communication technologies connect individuals into global webs of interaction (David, Kirton, and Millward, 2013). Rheingold (1993 p. 5) defines virtual communities as '*social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace*'. He underscored the idea that genuine interpersonal bonds and group identity could form through computer-mediated communication. The early internet's capacity to unite fans around common goals led scholars and enthusiasts to herald a 'global village' of online communities (Bergh and Ohlander, 2020).

As internet technologies advanced, online fan communities thrived from web forums and dedicated fan sites in the 2000s to contemporary social media groups, subreddits, and messaging apps (Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins, 2010). These developments paralleled the emergence of what Castells (2000) terms the network society, characterised by the primacy of information networks in social organisations. In the context of fandom, this means that supporters can use networked power to influence discourse and mobilise fellow fans without needing formal authority structures.

Research by David, Kirton, and Millward (2017) draws on Castells' framework to illustrate how groups of fans function as subnetworks within the larger network society and leverage connectivity to coordinate their social interactions and collective actions. For example, English Premier League communities, football supporter groups, and other fan networks use social media virality, hashtag campaigns, and online petitions to influence and build visibility for their causes.

Jenkins (2007) suggests that fans are not passive consumers but active participants who create content and form a frontline of new media relationships. In the Web 2.0 era, fan communities have become sources of user-generated content (Millward, 2016). Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture also emphasises how digital platforms lower barriers to expression and foster collaborative creation of meaning. Fans are among the most active, creative, critically engaged, and socially connected media consumers, and their investment and labour can drive the success of media franchises (Jenkins, 2006). Football clubs and leagues also recognise that fan engagement and content-sharing on digital platforms are crucial for sustaining fan interest and loyalty (Vale and Fernandes, 2018).

The development of online communities has positioned fans as co-creators of cultural value and narratives around their teams. The voluntary and open-ended nature of online affiliation means that online communities can be more fluid. People can join and leave with relative ease and identity play is common, with anonymity allowing multiple personas, and community boundaries are often unclear. As such, Hammond (2007) implies that the term 'online community' should be used with an understanding of its flexibility, sometimes preferring terms like 'network' and 'collective' depending on context. In this thesis, the term online community will be used in a broad sense to represent any sustained online gathering of fans with a shared interest and social connection. This reflects the innovation of digital sociality and the need for new conceptual frameworks to capture forms of belonging that are mediated by technology.

One major concern is the fragmentation of discourse which is often discussed in terms of cyberbalkanisation and echo chambers (Fenton Gillooly and Vasilica, 2023). Cyberbalkanisation refers to the Internet breaking into isolated communities of like-minded individuals (Fenton, 2018). This means that groups of fans may retreat into

their groups where everyone shares the same team loyalty or perspective with little exposure to outside viewpoints. As Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2023) suggest, cyberbalkanization is the process of online communities fragmenting into smaller, specialised groups that become isolated from each other and wider societal discourse. In fan terms, supporters of a club might interact only with fellow supporters of that club in a closed group and rarely engage with the broader football community of other teams. On one hand, this self-segregation can strengthen internal bonds; like-minded fans build strong supportive communities through shared experiences (Hedlund, 2017). On the other hand, it can produce echo chamber environments where members only encounter information and opinions that reinforce pre-existing points of view.

Furthermore, the rivalry dynamic in football can also deepen balkanization where fans cluster with their own but actively avoid rival groups (Hodges and Brentin, 2018). Over time, the lack of dialogue with others may polarise fan communities, making inter-group understanding more difficult for outsiders. It is worth noting that Bernard (2022) has challenged the myth of the online echo chamber, arguing that the internet also exposes people to more diverse voices than ever. A related challenge is the rise of online hate speech and toxic behaviour in virtual fandom spaces. Kearns et al., (2023) warn that online hate speech in sports is a growing concern, with fans, players, and officials all subjected to abuse ranging from racial slurs to misogynistic commentary.

Parsakia and Jafari (2023, p.8) note that *'toxic behaviours, identity safety concerns, and content disputes'* are commonly reported challenges within fandom communities. These can include personal attacks between members, dismissal of newbie fans or those deemed less authentic, and the spread of rumours that motivate conflict. Moderators and community managers often must intervene to enforce civility, ban abusive users, and delete hateful content (Alonso and O'Shea, 2012). Yet the scale and speed of virtual engagements make complete policing difficult. The presence of hate speech in some quarters of virtual fandom highlights the bigger social issue of digital hate, but it also highlights the responsibility of community members and platforms to cultivate better discursive norms.

In traditional fan culture authenticity has often been tied to physical presence and local loyalty; the true fan is the one who attends games regularly and is from the local

community (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2016). Weed (2010) and Bale (2002) suggest that fans no longer must attend their team's matches to be considered 'authentic', challenging older authenticity viewpoints. In other words, dedication can now be demonstrated through other means, such as knowledge of the club's history, online activity and support, financial investment in merchandise and streaming services, and participation in the fan community's daily life (Woods and Ludvigsen, 2022). Digital connectivity allows, for instance, an international fan to watch every match online, interact with fellow fans constantly, and perhaps even contribute to fan projects (like fanzines or podcasts), thereby building a case for being just as much a 'real fan' as any season ticket holder.

Authenticity becomes a site of internal contestation among fans, driven by codes of expected conduct and peer surveillance of one another's fan credentials (Dixon, 2014). This means that fans 'judge' and are 'judged' by their peers; measured by rituals and behaviours valued within the fan community. Dixon (2014) introduced the concept of lateral surveillance in fandom, where fans monitor and judge each other's behaviours and knowledge to assess authenticity. In online settings, this might manifest as long-time members scrutinising a new user's posts for signs of true commitment, or fans quizzing each other on obscure facts to establish hierarchy. Codes of conduct are often enforced through subtle peer pressure. Those who violate unwritten rules may be labelled 'plastics' (Baker, 2019). Authenticity is negotiated collectively with fans themselves establishing the boundaries of what behaviours and attitudes signify a legitimate supporter. For example, a fan who criticises the team might be accused by others of disloyalty (and hence inauthentic), whereas one who defends the team staunchly against outsiders could earn respect as a true fan. These judgments are made and communicated publicly in forums and comment threads, illustrating Dixon's (2014) point that fans engage in continuous mutual surveillance to monitor authenticity at a cultural level.

In addition, belonging is a central appeal of online fan communities. The internet allows fans to find a tribe of like-minded peers, often described through concepts like imagined community (Anderson, 1983). Belongingness comes from sharing insider language and collective rituals, and the knowledge that others in the group share one's emotional highs and lows regarding their team. However, belonging in online fandom

is not automatically granted to all; it must be earned and negotiated, which introduces aspects of hierarchy. Even in open internet forums, social hierarchies among fans tend to emerge based on various forms of capital. Concepts like 'fan cultural capital' (or subcultural capital) have been adapted to virtual contexts (Richardson and Turley, 2008). Fans gain status by demonstrating knowledge, dedication, and skills valued in the community.

In Chin's (2018) work on online fandom, it was observed that fans leverage Bourdieu's notions of economic, social, and cultural capital to build fan subcultural capital that structures their networks. In a simple sense, fans convert resources like time, money, knowledge and social connections into recognition and influence within the community. Those at the top of the hierarchy are admired and their voices carry more weight. These ideas set the stage for a focused exploration of online football forums as key sites of fan discourse and identity construction. Football forums show many of the themes discussed. They are self-contained virtual communities with their own histories and norms; they host passionate discourse that can both solidify group identity and exclude or attack; they are arenas where fans perform authenticity and jockey for status; and they can both cultivate a sense of belonging and inadvertently foster division.

3.9 Football Forums as Symbolic Communities

Football forums are symbolic communities in Cohen's (1985) sense, where membership is defined by shared symbols and rituals rather than physical proximity. Cohen's classic formulation of a community as a '*social milieu of belonging encompassed by a common symbolic boundary*' (Cohen 1985, p 15). This maps well onto online fan forums. Supporters across the globe co-construct a strong sense of 'we' through common language (club slogans, chants, memes), team colours and logos as identity markers, and collective memories of matches (Lee et al., 2013). In this way, a football forum functions like an imagined tribe of fans; its participants conform around values and symbols that outsiders do not share. Anderson's (1983) notion of an imagined community similarly applies as fans feel a bond of unity despite never meeting in person, a connection 'constructed through mutual experiences, symbols, and narratives.

Within these symbolic communities, identity is negotiated and performed. Jenkins's (2014) theory of social identity highlights that fandom involves both internal self-identification and external categorisation. On the internal side, forum users assert who they are. For example, declaring '*I'm a lifelong fan*' or '*We never lose hope!*' thus actively constructing their in-group identity (Johansson, Gillin, and Norberg, 2023). Externally, they are also labelled by others (rival supporters, media, even their club), who may tag them as glory-hunter, hooligans, or plastic fans depending on their perceived behaviour. Other groups such as female fans may also face additional gatekeeping. This highlights how fan typologies are often shaped by social expectations and masculine stereotypes (Pearson, 2015). Jenkins (2014) notes that internal identification is an individual or collective process, whereas external identification is the labelling of 'us by them, and of them by us'. Football forums reflect this interaction; fans self-categorise through the language they choose and through the cultural codes they use, while opponents apply stereotypes and jargon that mark in-group versus out-group status.

Drawing on Goffman (1959), fans can be seen as enacting front-stage personas in the forum. Users adopt screen names, avatars, and stylised language to present themselves as a particular kind of fan. Butler's theory of performativity (though not always cited in sports studies) also resonates. Fan identity is done repeatedly through chants, taunts, and posts. Indeed, online anonymity often emboldens performance. As Kilvington (2020) observes, the online milieu's anonymity and invisibility encourage disinhibition, so that comments once reserved for backstage spaces (private conversations) are projected frontstage for all to see. In other words, norms that might govern polite conversation on the terrace give way online, and Goffman's frontstage presentation includes prejudices that appear in public forum threads. Osborne and Coombs (2013) likewise emphasise that sports fandom is a role one performs, not just an identity one possesses. Forum discourse like the banter, boasting, and creative parodies, thus becomes the site where fan identities are enacted, tested, and monitored.

Language is the primary resource for constructing these identities. Football fans' posts are loaded with language ideologies (McGlashan, 2021) and the belief systems about what counts as authentic fan speech, which in turn index social meaning. A distinctive

jargon (nicknames, hashtags, local dialect features) and tone (humour, sarcasm, swearwords) signal membership and conversation with others. This aligns with Papadima and Photiadis (2019) on linguistic cues of group membership as in forums, speech about the in-group (one's team) tends to be more abstract while speech about the out-group (rival teams) often uses more negative descriptors, reflecting the linguistic intergroup bias. Others have shown how online fan language can both mirror and shape social biases. For example, Cleland (2011) and Cleland and Dixon (2015) document how forums become spaces for racial and homophobic discourse; these patterns are part of the symbolic practice of fandom as they reproduce wider ideologies by in-group reinforcement. Other studies, such as Cable et al., (2022) and Kilvington et al., (2022) similarly find that social media intensifies racist expressions among fans.

Within the forum community, the interaction of language and identity can also challenge outsiders. New or female fans may face gatekeeping. Hynes and Cook (2013) found that women on football boards often negotiate norms about true supporters. The very act of speaking a certain way (e.g., using sexist jokes) can mark someone as an insider or not. At the same time, forums can foster solidarity. Fans use inclusive first-person plurals and collective pronouns to reinforce collective identity. These practices of who is allowed to speak, in what way, and who is labelled deviant, are exactly what Jenkins' model helps analyse. Other theorists provide additional lenses. Bourdieu's (1984) ideas of habitus and cultural capital suggest that fans' tastes (which club to support, which chants to use) align with social class and background, making fandom more welcoming to middle-class fans and others to working-class fans (Nash, 2001; Millward, 2011). Linden and Linden (2017) reminds us that modern fans relate to players as celebrities, which is evident in how discussion quickly shifts from tactical analysis to personal gossip, blurring the private and public self. Studies of globalisation (Finn and Giulianotti, 2013) emphasise how fandom identity may be local or global, and forums themselves reflect that mix of identifications.

Football forums sustain symbolic boundaries (Cohen 1985) by privileging shared rituals and slang. They enact social identity processes (Jenkins 2008) through ongoing acts of self-definition and labelling, and they channel symbolic practice by embedding cultural meanings in everyday conversation (Herd, 2017). Overall, the fusion of these

perspectives indicates that online fan forums are not just casual chat spaces but complex performative arenas. They are where community is constructed and contested through symbols where individual and collective identities are dynamically formed, and where language both reflects and reproduces social ideologies. As such, they offer a valuable site for analysing how football fans use talk to make and mark identity in today's digital media environment.

3.10 Studies on Sectarianism and Online Forums

In what appears to be the first concerted examination of online sectarianism, McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan (2005) investigated two popular unofficial message boards associated with Celtic and Rangers. Their analysis targeted on evaluating the level of sectarian content on these forums, given that many studies have been undertaken into the nature of sectarianism in Scotland, but none had yet addressed sectarianism on the Internet. The analysis identified a phenomenon of interlopers with rival fans infiltrating the other team's forum and deliberately posting provocative sectarian taunts. In the Rangers board, especially, a big part of sectarian content was attributed to Celtic-supporting interlopers, illustrating how online anonymity enables cross-tribal flaming that might be unacceptable in person.

Forums dedicated to Celtic and Rangers form tight-knit virtual communities that mirror the camaraderie of traditional supporter clubs (though the sense of community and engagement can vary across different platforms and fan groups). Fans find a sense of belonging with like-minded others, but they also construct clear boundaries between us and them (McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan, 2005). Dedicated fan forums, some with tens of thousands of members, are often segregated by club affiliation. On such boards, open debate with rival supporters is rare; instead, the community polices itself to maintain an in-group space (Weber et al., 2022). An interesting finding by McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan (2005) comes from an analysis of Celtic's message board where half of all discussion threads over a sample period in 2004 contained accusations about Rangers supporters' bigotry. In other words, Celtic's online community are packed with accusations of Rangers' bigotry, making the rival's perceived sectarianism a regular reference point in intra-Celtic discussions. Today,

shared social media platforms and football forums continue to provide spaces where these narratives can be reinforced and contested across a wider fan base.

In the two decades since, academic attention to Scottish sectarianism on fan forums has been limited as no major academic study has revisited online communication to update or expand upon McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan (2005) findings. In other words, Scottish sectarian fan discourse online remains unstudied since 2005. This gap is interesting, especially given that the period after 2005 witnessed substantial progress of online hate speech on newer platforms, several high-profile sectarian incidents involving Old Firm fans, and even legislative efforts like Scotland's short-lived Offensive Behaviour at Football Act (2012), which aimed to limit football-related hate speech (Cleland, 2012; Bradley, 2024; McBride, 2022). While policymakers and media grew concerned with sectarianism in both stadiums and cyberspace, it is evident that academia has not produced a body of literature on how these hostilities were playing out in digital fan forums. This means that there is little systematic knowledge of whether forum discourse around Celtic and Rangers fans have changed in tone or how it compares to sectarian expression based on other arenas.

It is important to note that beyond sectarianism, football message boards across various countries have been studied as sources of racialised discourse. In England, Cleland (2014) conducted a discourse analysis of two prominent football forums to assess fans' views on racism in the game. Analysing over 500 posts from late 2011 to early 2012, Cleland found that social media sites such as fan message boards have allowed racist thoughts to flourish online, often taking the form of outright hostility toward ethnic and religious others (Cleland, 2014). A common theme was the rejection of multiculturalism as many online fans expressed anger at the perceived erosion of a white national football identity. This suggests that fan forums can act as echo chambers for broader socio-political resentments, in this case conflating football with narratives of national belonging and anti-immigrant sentiment.

More recent research has taken a broader survey of how fans discuss racism and Islamophobia online. Kilvington et al., (2022) critically examined over 1,000 posts across multiple football forums to understand contemporary attitudes towards racism in the sport. Their analysis identified different viewpoints as some fans insisted that

racism has decreased and is a past issue while others argued that racism has increased in subtle forms. Notably, slurs and Islamophobic comments were rare in the sample. Yet, Kilvington et al., (2022) warn that this surface improvement is undermined by pervasive denial and minimisation. Many forum participants were observed 'denying and downplaying racism and Islamophobia' adopting a narrow view that only the most severe abuse counts as racism (Kilvington et al., 2022, p 854).

Doidge (2015) provides further examples on discrimination in his analysis of Italian fan forums' reaction to Mario Balotelli, a high-profile Black Italian footballer. Doidge shows how comments posted on internet forums were full of abuse towards Balotelli, whose presence had become symbolic of Italy's emerging multicultural reality (Doidge, 2015). As a Black player for teams like Inter Milan and AC Milan, Balotelli was targeted not just because of skin colour but also because opposing fans saw him as an embodiment of an outsider threatening their club's identity. One comment '*If you jump up and down, Balotelli dies*' encouraged racist chanting to taunt and kill the player's spirit (Doidge, 2015, p 257). Doidge's work concluded that inter-club animosity was actively fuelling racist expressions. Supporters leveraged racial hatred as just another weapon to insult rival teams' players. This finding echoes the Scottish sectarian context, in that ingrained social hostilities get mapped onto football allegiances and then amplified in the free-for-all of online forums.

The popularity of message boards is partly due to the richness of interaction users provide. They remain popular among dedicated fans for detailed discussions and niche debates. Fans on forums are typically pseudonymous rather than fully anonymous, building reputations over the years under stable nicknames. This creates an internal social order and a feeling of authenticity where many trust forum discussions to hear the real talk from fellow fans in contrast to official club communications (Atkinson, 2022). This longevity and depth make forums a valuable archive of attitudes on controversial topics. As Newton (2017) notes, fan message boards provide a relatively unfiltered access to fan attitudes on identity, politics, and hostility in football. On these boards, supporters openly debate issues like nationalism, religion, race, and gender in direct connection to their football loyalties. The result is a collection of qualitative data, from jokes and songs being shared in text to debates

about racist incidents; all posts made in the heat of the moment by everyday fans rather than polished statements.

The lack of academic scrutiny on Scottish fan forums in recent years is a significant blind spot. While other researchers have begun to tackle online hate speech in sport in general, there remains incomplete coverage of the more contained but influential realm of club-specific forums. As noted, no study since the mid-2000s has analysed sectarian discourse in the online fan forum setting and even though offline sectarian incidents have continued to draw public concern. This gap in the literature means that we do not yet know how the nature of sectarian banter and bigotry among Scottish fans has evolved with the advent of new media and changing social norms. This thesis, therefore, situates itself at the intersection of those gaps by using fan forums as a source to explore how old narratives (Catholic vs Protestant, Irish vs British identities) are articulated in new digital forms.

3.11 Summary

This chapter has unpacked the debates around football fandom and identified where further inquiry is needed. It underlines that football fandom is a multi-faceted social phenomenon characterised by attachment, collective identity, cultural rituals and marked by masculine culture and instances of hate (Millward, 2023; Giulianotti, 2004; Porat, 2010; Kilvington and Price, 2021). It has also shown that fan identity can be both inclusive and exclusionary by bringing supporters together in shared devotion from the taxonomy of supporters, followers, fans, and flaneurs (Giulianotti, 2002). The research from the literature makes it clear that any study of contemporary football fan culture must account for this mix of old traditions and new media, of community passions and social divisions and of cultural continuity and change.

Football fan communities define who is an 'authentic supporter' by distinguishing themselves from rival fanbases and against the perceived interlopers (Benkowitz and Molnar, 2012). This reflects the creation of symbolic boundaries that outline an in-group and an out-group. These markers help distinguish real fans by reinforcing internal hierarchies even within a unified fan base (Brandt, 2024). At the same time, fans often unite in opposition to other fans or outsider groups by strengthening internal

cohesion by contrast with a rival. Here, online spaces become a venue for us versus them conversations. As Kelly (2011) observes in an analysis of Scottish media, public narratives construct a unified non-sectarian core identity of true Scots defined against a sectarian other. Such framing shows how notions of authentic community are often built by stigmatising those labelled as deviant and outside the norm. In the fan context, this can translate to chants, slogans, and online comments that police the boundaries of who counts as a 'legitimate member' of the club's community and who does not (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018).

A critical observation from the literature is the gap regarding sectarian discourse and modern online fan platforms. Apart from McMenemy, O'Loan, and Poulter's study (2005), there has been little follow-up research examining how sectarian narratives persist, evolve, or are challenged in the age of social media and active message boards. In other words, academic understanding of Scottish football sectarianism online has not kept pace with the changing digital environment. The chapter emphasised this gap as an important oversight. While I have rich analyses of other aspects of digital fandom there is a lack of updated insight into how football related sectarianism play out. This gap provides a strong justification for the present thesis. Having consolidated the knowledge from existing literature, the thesis now turns to this point. The next chapter will detail the methodology developed to examine fan discourse in online forums. It will outline the research design, data collection, and analytical approach and demonstrate how the current study builds on the reviewed literature.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 and 4 have revealed a lack of research in the field of sectarianism and football fandom and the need for further study. They also show that there is a need to

explore further research into online football fan communities, particularly to thoroughly understand the position of sectarianism within contemporary society. It was discovered that out of all the computer-mediated communication explored throughout the previous theory, one that is particularly underrepresented is football fan groups, especially on online message boards/forums. In addition, the numerous opportunities created by new technology to conduct research online encompass a wealth of user-generated data, as opposed to other research representations (Costello, McDermott, and Wallace, 2017). It is crucial to evaluate the function of computer-mediated communication regarding sectarian behaviour, as it is a relatively new phenomenon.

There are many reasons why research on online football fan communities is necessary and timely. First, there has been a shortage of online research across the political, economic, and social domains, although investigations in this area are steadily increasing over the last decade (Cleland and Cashmore, 2016; Numerato, 2015; Hynes and Cook, 2013). Ortiz (2020) underscores the significance of research on discourse and how it is experienced online and across social domains, which is a significant contribution to the social sciences. However, as illustrated previously, the majority of hate crime research within football fandom has been conducted on racial and ethnic discrimination that people of colour typically experience (Kilvington and Price, 2017). This theorisation is therefore problematic because the examination of sectarianism and anti-Irish racism has been somewhat marginalised from the 'ethnic hate' debate. McBride (2017) argues that victimisation based on ethnic origin or cultural differences tends to be overlooked within the complexity of racism by academic scholars. This perception influences the racial hierarchy framework built around skin colour, positioning black, Islamic, and Jewish communities as the exclusive object of racial, structural, and discriminatory academic inquiry. Limited inquiry supports the suggestion that research on sectarianism and anti-Irish racism is non-normative, dominated by research on other strands, and taken less seriously in the online context.

To expand knowledge on sectarianism in a new area, academic exploration is warranted to understand the cultural and ideological frames of online football fandom. More attention is needed to map the online world and how fans facilitate online interaction across digital platforms. As fandom is being increasingly practiced on

public sites through technology, smartphones, internet-enabled devices, and social media, our process of communication and content has increased a significant amount of data on a variety of subjects (Cleland et al., 2019; Kilvington and Price, 2021). This is relevant in how these platforms shape interaction and the expression of fan behaviour in real time. Online forums also offer a place for interaction and sharing information, and opinions (Kunert, 2021). While this is a practical yet enriching way to conduct research on relevant disciplines within the study of sport and sociology, its ever-evolving nature can negatively expose different types of racial discriminatory experiences (McGovern, 2017). Therefore, I propose that online spaces provide a new way to make sense of the sectarian discourse within football fandoms in Scotland. There is very little research on the phenomenon of football fandom and sectarian behaviour in the online field, highlighting the necessity to study it more extensively in its own right.

In this chapter, I build on research on digital technology and communication within sports studies by presenting a methodological framework. Therefore, this study uses an online ethnography approach to explore three sections across two message boards relating to Celtic and Rangers. The methodological framework is beneficial as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the fan cultures surrounding these two teams and conduct a comprehensive examination of how digital technology and communication are used by supporters in this context. This chapter begins with a consideration of the key research questions, elaboration of the research design and techniques used, and the epistemological reasons for choosing them. It then discusses the methods of data collection, analysis, and summarisation.

4.2 Research Aims and Design

The research aims to answer the question: Has digital culture added a new dimension to sectarian discourse in Scotland? The following research questions are also highlighted:

1. **Sub Question 1:** How do we understand Sectarianism in the context of digital football fandom in Scotland?
2. **Sub Question 2:** In what ways do online football fan groups construct sectarian narratives, and what are they trying to convey?
3. **Sub Question 3:** How does online football fan discourse compare to dominant representations of Sectarianism in contemporary society?

As my research aims to understand sectarianism in the context of online football fandom, an online ethnography presents the research design and methodology. The lack of strong theoretical frameworks has led researchers to rely on online observation by using fan message boards as part of digital ethnographic studies. As such, the aim is to research online platforms as tools for conducting qualitative research. Due to the wealth of online information, online ethnography gives a complete and integrated exploration to address the research objectives in an appropriate and principled manner. It enables the research questions to be answered with sufficient depth and breadth, where the collection of data is either visual or textual (Saville, 2012). While not all research on football fandom is qualitative, a considerable number of qualitative studies on digital culture, fan discourse, and practice manifest through online surveys and observations (Millward, 2008; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Doidge, 2015). Therefore, previous scholarship establishes a benchmark for conducting a qualitative research project on digital fan communities, allowing for a thorough analysis of how thoughts and behaviours transpired in online spaces.

4.3 Online Ethnography

The study employs an online ethnographic approach using a qualitative method to construct data through online observations of message boards. The practice of ethnography is rooted in anthropological traditions based on the direct observation of cultural features (Molnar and Purdy, 2016). Paoli and D'Auria (2021) suggest that ethnography is an approach that allows researchers to gain a good understanding of

human behaviour and culture, dissecting the way people act and think. Online ethnography is a branch of ethnography that specifically examines human behaviour and interaction in digital spaces. It is a relatively new method that has emerged with the growth of the internet. A traditional aspect of ethnography is that researchers produce meaning by physically immersing themselves for some time while conducting participant observation (Hine, 2008). However, with the rise of the internet, a new form of ethnographic research has emerged. Online ethnography is a type of research that uses online platforms to observe and analyse human behaviour. As such, online ethnographers use various tools to research the behaviours of users online. Some highlight that the physical presence of a researcher in a particular bounded location is a hallmark of ethnographic fieldwork. It is important to note that with the emergence of contemporary digital communications, the nature of 'immersion' in physical worlds cannot be conducted in the same manner. Additionally, the researcher is no longer bound by geographical location and can conduct research across different cultures without the need to physically travel there. Given this understanding, researchers have reframed 'ethnography' ethically and socially to engage with online culture and life in the digital era. Scholars have researched social media platforms, gaming communities, and even virtual worlds.

Netnography (Kozinets, 2012) or online/virtual/digital ethnography (Hine 2017) operate as a relatively new methodology that reconceptualises the traditional concept of ethnography. Both are cultural research driven toward human understanding, which can be collected from online communities and interactions. Ethnography is a field of research originally derived from anthropology, sociology, and related fields. In the study of human culture, academics such as Hine (2011), Boellstorff (2020), and Horst and Miller (2012) offer a range of theoretical overviews, advice, and examples of studying the cultures and communities that emerge through computer-mediated communications. For example, Horst and Miller (2012) emphasise the role of materiality in digital anthropology by suggesting that studying human interaction also means that virtual studies of human socialisation can be done. Others, such as Kozinets (2012), imply that technology is a physical manifestation because online communication has become commonplace in society. In this case, Kozinets compares online ethnography to traditional ethnography, noting that it is the pursuit of a rich reality on blogs, social networking sites, podcasts, and mobile online/offline

communities, which often can be in person. interaction in online spaces is often asynchronous, with time-stamped contributions that engagement between participants. Such emphasis is deemed 'human research' based on participant observation, despite being definitionally and methodologically embedded in the digital environment.

Online ethnography also constitutes new social forms and cultural artifacts that are open to interpretation and analysis (Bundon, 2016). Researchers spend a substantial amount of time observing online sites in which they familiarise themselves with their users and discourses (Bundon, 2017). However, it is essential to note that researchers should consider different conditions when researching the digital world. First, some scholars have employed a blended approach of ethnographies by exploring the relationship between online and offline practices. According to Przybylski (2020), this hybrid enables the creation of 'rich' ethnography that helps better understand the egalitarian nature of expressive culture. Other studies in the field also emphasize the distinction between concepts from the virtual world online and the 'real' world offline. This occurs through either participation or observation in online forums/message boards and offline practices that use other method interfaces. For example, Numerato (2016) underscores that offline behaviours/actions/events complement the role played in the digital sphere and therefore hold a valuable experiential position. In turn, this can create opportunities to engage with members of the public who like the same things and explore how they interact to understand their society. Woods and Ludvigsen (2021) highlight that 'offline' and 'online' spaces remain essential for comprehending fan culture in the hyper-digitalised era. Rather than focusing on the internet as a separate entity from the physical world, the complementation of both 'online' and 'offline' spheres helps to negate the purpose and meaning of human action and experience research.

Another consideration when researching digital platforms is to focus solely on online communication, avoiding the dichotomy of researching both the virtual and real worlds. In this instance, the researcher operates only in online spaces where user-generated textual, graphic, audio-visual, and photographic products are collectively incorporated into the research. Kozinets (2012) defines this immersion as netnography, where the researcher exclusively concentrates on online interaction through computer-mediated

communications. Such a methodological design follows the concept of online ethnography or virtual ethnography as a method for studying online cultures and communities. Kozinets (2015, p.266) labelled this '*virtual verisimilitude*', where observation, through the data shared freely on the Internet, helps explore the worlds of living beings. By whatever name, the point is that the researcher studies mediated interactions in online communities and the culture shared within them (Kozinets, 2017). This is done through digital methods, the most common being content analysis of digital artifacts such as websites, videos, and social media platforms, qualitative interviews and group discussions (both online and offline), and participant observation. The advantages of using digital methods for research are that they are relatively easy and inexpensive to use; data can be gathered from many people in a short amount of time, and they allow for increased access to 'hard-to-reach' populations. Additionally, digital methods can help create more accurate representations of reality as they reduce the hierarchical structures between the researcher and participants.

Hine (2017) highlight that there exist two polar positions when researching online cultures and communities. Depending on the position of the researcher, data collection using an online ethnography can range from participatory (active) to non-participatory (passive) that is less visible and anonymous than in face-to-face settings. The latter approach is closely linked to an observational approach in which the researcher is seen as a specific type of lurker (Kozinets, 2012). There are examples of many research designs that adopt a non-participatory stance, which tends to observe and maintain low engagement with online users. For example, in their study of online fan responses to the Rooney Rule in English Football, Kilvington (2022) describe their methodological technique as asynchronous 'lurking' by reading message posts as a guest on Twitter. Millward (2008) also employs a 'lurker' approach to online cultures and communities by exploring racism and anti-Muslim discourse on e-zine message boards. Millward's study passively observes the multimedia composites of events, identities, and inscriptions on websites related to fans of Middlesbrough FC and Newcastle FC, where in-group culture could be monitored.

Both Kilvington and Millward complement the work of Hine (2000) as their research does not infringe on or affect the personal lives of those who are being researched. In other words, digital research 'lurking' provides insight that is non-intrusive and

objective. While digital stalking can give lots of details about an individual, it cannot generate primary data as the researcher is not interacting with the subject. To achieve this, online ethnography requires active participation from the researcher. This can be in the form of digital observation where the researcher becomes a member of an online community to gain insider knowledge (Hopkins, 2013). This type of participant observation was used by Hopkins (2013) in his study of how television viewers interact with one another in digital fan forums related to Australian Rules Football. They found that digital fan forums are '*richer sites of television fandom*' (2008, p.504) as they provide a space for users to generate and circulate their content.

Fenton, Keegan and Parry (2023) emphasise a more participatory approach to online ethnography. This means the researcher partakes in the online community through interviews and conversations. Costello et al., (2017) argue that using unobtrusive measures can often ignore opportunities to create knowledge in online communities and social media spaces. Hence, active participation in the community permits the researcher to ascribe full membership that is closer to traditional ethnography. Koziens (2012) also adds that trustworthiness increases when researchers maintain a deep immersion and prolonged engagement on online platforms. This process suggests that the researcher may reveal their identity, which is visible to see by other community members. Koziens (2012) further notes that scholars should avoid being dominant when representing themselves within online discussion forums, etc., as it may result in them expressing self-emotion or becoming native in the community. Online communication on the internet facilitates patterns of expression of emotion, and thus developing neutral social ties between users is important. Emotional reactions and over-involvement in the community should also be carefully monitored as they may lead to the researcher losing objectivity. This can include strong personal attachments to participants, adopting the viewpoints of the group, or being invested in discussions.

Cleland and Cashmore's (2012) study on racism is viewed as participating in the online research process as they engage football fans on message boards and forums. Both actively contribute to the online community by posting e-surveys to football fans to gain their views on racism in British football. By letting members be aware of their research position, their identities were revealed, the purpose of the project was

explained, and anonymity was guaranteed. A consideration when using online platforms as a research tool is treating them as a cultural location where lived cultures and artefacts make meaning. This means treating the integration of culture and technology as simultaneous to make meaning of lived behaviour and experiences (Hine, 2015). Gibbons (2015) employs this strategy, investigating the reception of an event that occurs outside of the internet (Alumina Case Study), observing online activity related to the debate and conducting discourse analysis of the findings. Digital stalking or digital research 'lurking' is the process of observing people's behaviour online without them being aware. This can be done through reading blog posts, tweets, Facebook comments or in this case, comments made on football forums.

This study treats the internet as a cultural site by exploring sectarianism through a passive 'online ethnography'. Due to the nature of the project, this methodology provides a clear advantage in using unobtrusive measures. By exploring digital fan spaces on online message boards concerning both Celtic FC and Rangers FC, the growth of public online conversation provides a wealth of qualitative information where cultural activity is found (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, an inactive approach enables performance and discourse to be observed freely on related sites that provide a storehouse of available information. The examination of achieved exchanges are tools employed to explore the constitutive process of fan identity to understand and interpret social worlds on message boards. The research adopts a passive stance as a 'lurker' by focusing on the examination of sectarianism, identity, and fandom across three areas. They are comments made about football players, football rivalry, and politics. Costello et al., (2017) highlight that *'lurking is a digital form of gathering information and observing others'* (p. 371). Furthermore, online ethnography has the potential to *'decentre the researcher in the research process'* (Hine, 2015, p. 67) by investigating online communities and fan behaviour independently from an active role.

Digital research methods, such as online ethnography, allow for the study of football fandom to be conducted remotely and without disturbing or interrupting fan behaviour (Kozinets, 2010). Therefore, an inactive approach enables performance and discourse to be observed freely on related sites that provide a storehouse of available information. The examination of achieved exchanges are tools employed to explore the constitutive process of fan identity. Passive participation within an online

community can also be suitable when researching sensitive or complex matters. In such cases, digital research methods provide opportunities to access and study people and behaviours that may be difficult to reach using traditional methods (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). The online environment affords a certain level of anonymity that can encourage people to reveal information about themselves that they may not do face-to-face (Kozinets, 2010). This is especially pertinent when researching sensitive topics. In addition, the online environment gives a feeling of safety as users can easily log off or exit a website if they feel uncomfortable (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Thus, due to the complex nature of the sectarian behaviour, a non-intrusive role in the research situation helps support the collection of naturalistic data and aid understanding of sectarian discourse in online spaces.

4.4 Ontological and Epistemological leaning

This research adopts a constructivist paradigm at the ontological and epistemological levels. Social constructivism posits that multiple realities exist as each social context generates its version of reality (Vygotsky, 1978). Epistemologically, knowledge is seen as contextual and co-created between people (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In the context of digital football fan forums, this means that concepts like team identity, rivalry and fan behaviour is viewed as joint constructions of supporters rather than objective facts. Examples of this can be seen papers that research community norms, discrimination, and racism, (Millward, 2008; Gibbons, 2011; Giulianotti, 2002).

In a constructivist paradigm, both ontology and epistemology are grounded in the social reality constructed by people rather than being objectively given. Ontologically, constructivism matches with a relativist position as it rejects the idea of a single, independent reality, arguing instead that reality is plural and emergent from social interaction (Lincoln et al., 2011). Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) suggest that a constructivist epistemology rejects the idea that objective truth exists and is waiting to be discovered. They insist that truth arises in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world. In other words, there is no pre-existing social world independent of human activity and language. What researchers take as reality is produced through human interpretation and communication (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 28). This contrasts with a realist ontology (typical of positivism), which assumes a single reality

can be known. Constructivism also holds that knowledge is subjective and intersubjective. Rather than the researcher striving for objectivity, constructivists see the researcher and participants as co-creators of meaning (Burns et al., 2022). These philosophical commitments lay the foundation for the design and conduct of research in this thesis.

4.5 Key Theorists and Concepts in Social Constructivism

Berger and Luckmann (1966) are foundation of constructivism with their seminal book 'The Social Construction of Reality'. This book outlines how everyday life is produced and institutionalised through social processes. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that individuals and groups actively create social realities which then come to be experienced as objective truths. They describe a dialectical process suggesting that people express ideas into the social world. These ideas become objectified by taking on a life of their own in culture, and subsequently, individuals adopt these socially created facts as real. Therefore, even phenomena like institutions, identities are human products that attain an appearance of objectivity over time. As Burr (1998) explains in her introduction to social constructionism, Berger and Luckmann's account shows how the world can be socially constructed by the practices of people yet experienced by them as if its nature is pre-given and fixed. In the context of football fandom, for example, the traditions and rivalries of a club (songs and nicknames) are created by supporters over history, but contemporary fans may take them for granted as inherent truths of how things are in supporting that club.

Galbin (2014) further notes that language is more than just a way of connecting people as people 'exist' in language. This means that our sense of self and world is shaped by the concepts and categories that our language provides. Rather than focusing on the individual mind in isolation, Gergen et al., (1973) focus on social relationships and dialogues as the sites where meaning is made. For instance, what it means to be a fan, a rival, or even what counts as offensive in a forum all emerge from ongoing conversations among people. Berger and Luckmann (1966) also noted that people socially construct reality by their use of agreed-upon and shared meanings communicated through language. A comment on social media has no fixed meaning

as it depends on the shared understandings and context that the online community constructs around it.

Burr (2003) has also been pivotal in researching the assumptions of social constructionism. Burr (2003) outlines that social constructionism takes a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge. This means that our perceptions of the world are heavily influenced by historical and cultural context rather than being reflections of an objective reality. She notes that the constructionist approach '*emphasises the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation*' (Burr, 1998, p.12). This collaborative creation of reality means that identity and social phenomena are ever in a state of flux and are negotiated and re-negotiated through discourse. Burr (1995) also stresses that there is no single perspective or universal truth in social life as our understandings are subject to the particular social and linguistic processes at play.

A key concept emerging from these theorists is the 'social construction of reality' and the idea that what is treated as reality is built up from social agreements and routines. The core idea is that identity is socially constructed and negotiated, rather than being a fixed essence and identity is viewed as an ongoing project formed through interaction (Giddens and Pierson, 1998). As Somers (1994) argues, individuals develop a sense of self through their relationships and dialogues with others. For example, identity is seen as a narrative as 'we' come to know who 'we' are by the stories told in our social environment. Anderson and Goolishian (1992), working in a constructivist tradition, put it that '*we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self-descriptions*' (p.380). Only through ongoing social conversation does a person develop a coherent sense of identity. In an online football community, a supporter's identity (for instance, as a die-hard Ultras fan or as a rational analyst fan) emerges from interactions on the forum through storytelling, banter, and shared references rather than existing a priori (Doidge, 2015). Identity is, therefore co-produced by community members.

One common cited concern is that social constructivism can lean towards relativism and the idea that if all realities are constructed (Hammersley, 2013). Worries are raised

that this could lead to an ‘anything goes’ stance where all beliefs are seen as equally valid. Indeed, constructivists do reject the notion of an absolute truth as they ‘*do not claim to provide the truth in singular terms*’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 86). Gergen (1985) acknowledges this critique but clarifies that this does not mean that anything goes. In constructivist thought, not all interpretations are equal in practice because knowledge is bounded by community consensus and norms. Constructivists respond to the relativist position by pointing out that communities historically and culturally situate knowledge and impose disciplines on what is useful to believe. For example, a fan community may socially construct what counts as racism and might argue over it, but this discourse occurs within broader societal norms that may heavily stigmatise overt racial slurs (Doidge, 2015; Back and Solomos, 2013). This means that not every viewpoint (e.g., openly racist ones) is treated as equally valid by the majority.

Another critique is that early social constructionist work was sometimes accused of giving insufficient attention to power and material conditions. Critics from feminist, critical race, and Marxist perspectives argue that constructivism must consider that not all constructions are created equal as some are imposed by more powerful actors and some serve to reinforce inequities (Flick, 2014; Hartsock, 1998; Crenshaw, 2013). For instance, in online spaces, the platform design and moderation policies (often controlled by administrators) shape what kinds of user constructions can thrive. As such, interpretive constructivist approaches might overlook these structural power dynamics. Kincheloe and McLaren (2011) combine social constructivism with critical theory to interrogate the role of ideology, domination, and material power in knowledge production. In the territory of football fandom, a constructivist analysis might be improved by examining which fan narratives dominate and how institutional power intersects with fan-generated meanings (Doidge, 2015; Cleland, 2014).

A constructivist paradigm thus supports research into these complex phenomena by providing a framework to capture nuance and context (Lincoln, Lynham and Guba, 2011). It allows the researcher to document the process by which hate, or bigotry, is given meaning by supporters and, likewise, how these are delegitimised by other supporters. This is important for creating interventions for instance, if one finds that fans themselves often counter racist posts by appealing to a shared club value, stakeholders could build on that internal norm to combat racism (Cleland and

Cashmore, 2016). In addition, if one finds that racist or sectarian narratives are going unchecked, it may indicate a need for external moderation and education (Doidge, 2015; Garland and Rowe, 2001). Such conclusions are only visible when one looks at the qualitative interactions rather than just the quantitative prevalence of slurs. In contrast, had I used a positivist approach, I might know how many offensive posts occurred but not much about how or why they occur and what they mean to participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013). A critical realist might point to socio-economic drivers of sectarianism, useful at a macro level, but still might not capture the micro-level meaning-making where individuals either challenge these attitudes in their daily online engagements.

4.6 Non-Participatory Observation Approach

I adopted a non-participatory observation approach to monitor both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums. In ethnographic terms, this is an off-site nonparticipant observation as the researcher observes the online community without any active involvement (Kozinets, 2010). This strategy was chosen to preserve the natural behaviour of participants, and by not commenting or influencing the conversation, I could witness how fans authentically interact, contest, and perform their identities in situ. The observation period spanned several months (a multi-month period) to capture both routine daily interactions and responses to key events. Specifically, the fieldwork covered approximately 12 months of forum monitoring, which is comparable to other digital ethnographies that dedicate months of immersion as lurking observers (Markham, 2013; Hine, 2015). During this time, I regularly logged on to observe threads across all major categories, ensuring a full picture of the community's discourse. In particular, the observation encompassed threads spanning a broad range of fan activities.

Online fan message boards offer a lifelike arena for studying fandom (Fenton, 2018; Cleland and Cashmore, 2016; Millward, 2016). Football forums are key gathering places where supporters meet to share opinions, passion, and insider knowledge away from official club narratives. They also capture fan interactions in real time by providing an unfiltered view of how meaning is made within the community. In this case, Follow Follow (the largest Rangers FC forum) and Kerrydale Street (the main

Celtic FC forum) are chosen as field sites because of their prominence and rich activity. Both forums provide a space where Scottish football is expressed through discussion of matches, players, rivalries, and shared experiences. Studying both forums allows a comparative lens on how two fan communities construct meaning around shared football events. In the context of these forums, every post, reply, joke and argument is part of a continuous process of reality-building within the fan community. Members explicitly and implicitly co-construct the narrative of their fandom.

As Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) observed in fan cultures, fans are active participants within fandom as a social, cultural, and interpretive institution. Adopting this lens, the research approaches forum posts as expressions of fans' active sense-making as each contributor is simultaneously shaping and reflecting the group's understanding of what it means to be part of Rangers or the Celtic family. This conceptualisation informs both how the data were observed (with attention to fans' subjective frames of reference) and how they are analysed (seeking insight into the participants' categories of meaning rather than imposing external definitions). Drawing on the notion of interaction rituals (Collins 2004; Goffman 1967), the study also consider how fans' repeated communicative practices generate solidarity and group identity. Even in text-based online settings, fans engage in recognisable rituals that mark them as insiders and reinforce emotional bonds. For example, in match-day threads, one can observe waves of collective effervescence as dozens of users might simultaneously post when a goal is scored, mirroring a stadium-like cheer in virtual form. These shared emotional rhythms serve to bind the community together around moments of pride or, conversely, frustration. Likewise, rituals of greeting and status may occur as newcomers may be politely educated by veteran members on the forum protocol; famous regulars receive acknowledgment and reactions that maintain a hierarchy of reputation.

All sub-forums were monitored regularly, and whenever a thread emerged that sparks intensive interaction, for example, a controversial match incident generating hundreds of replies that led to debates, that thread is assigned for preservation. This process ensured coverage of each major thread type (matches, transfers, player news, general news) while focusing on information-rich cases of fan discourse. As Hine (2000, p 21)

notes in her discussion of virtual ethnography, selective snapshot approaches in online research can be valuable as it enables in-depth tracing of a topic without being overwhelmed by the immense '*sheer mass of words*' in forums. Following this logic, the process of archiving a quantity of threads that together reflect the breadth of fan engagements are used throughout the research period. Each selected thread was saved in its entirety by manual copying of the content onto Microsoft Word to preserve the original posts, timestamps, and sequence of interaction.

4.7 Sampling

1: Observing threads and comments on football players with a PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) or CNP (Catholic Nationalist Republican) identity.

There are several ways in which sectarianism in online spaces is investigated in this thesis. The first investigation examines comments and posts directed towards football players with a PUL (Protestant Unionist Loyalist) or CNP (Catholic Nationalist Republican) identity focusing on James McClean and Kyle Lafferty. It is essential to note that football players who publicly express their sense of identity are often seen to be victims of cultural prejudice and insulting discourse (Millward, 2008). For this reason, professional sports stars may receive abuse based on national stereotypes or racial connotations.

In England, a study found that abuse on social media towards football players was most prevalent during local derbies and games involving historically rival teams (Magrath, 2018). Other research shows that abuse is directed towards players of all races but was especially aimed at black and mixed-race footballers (Kilvington and Price, 2018). There has been some progress in tackling the abuse of football players online. However, there are limitations on religious stereotyping and perceived links between violence and Irishness directed towards footballers in the UK. These abuse cases have been widely publicised and have resulted in several high-profile players coming out to condemn the abuse they have received.

Doidge (2015) reminds us that sports stars have become one cultural marker for fan identity but also hold conflict with supporters with opposing ideological identities.

Therefore, using a series of keywords and phrases of James McClean and Kyle Lafferty, threads, and comments are observed and coded. This is done by collecting a sample of comments from both general and specific message boards related to those posts from Celtic and Rangers message boards.

2: Observing Threads and comments during the ‘Old Firm’ fixture between Celtic and Rangers Football Club

The second part of the study observed comments on both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow during the 2022 Viaplay League Cup final. Both Celtic and Rangers play each other in this fixture, with plenty of opportunity to observe comments made by online fans leading up, during and after the fixture.

More importantly, the aim was to focus on threads or comments that hold connotations of sectarian attitudes and beliefs. The aim is to explain online fan behaviour across the message boards to examine how football fan groups construct sectarian narratives. By tracking recent trends, topical threads, and keywords, a dataset of the threads relating to the research question(s) are collected for analysis. As there are thousands of comments and threads on forum platforms, the data collected is filtered to ensure only relevant conversations are included. A narrative is presented in the results section.

3: Analysing Threads and Reactions to the Queen Elizabeth’s Death

The final section of the data collection observed comments made about reactions to the death of Elizabeth II. Due to the religious and cultural heritage of both Celtic and Rangers football clubs, there is a strong connection between the political framework shaped by the UK monarchy. This is evident in the fact that both clubs and their fans position themselves within their respective cultural hegemonies and political origins. In this phase, I used both Celtic and Rangers to explore the situational implications of football fandom by observing how supporters of each team discuss and engage with this political phenomenon. By doing this, I hope to provide further insight into how

cultural identity and political consciousness are constructed online through the reinforcement of identities. Like the above sections, threads and keywords are observed and put into data sets to support the collection of analysis.

Overall, the three cases provide a framework for understanding modern sectarianism. The analyses of James McClean and Kyle Lafferty, the Celtic vs Rangers fixture, and the reactions to the death of the Queen, offers a well-rounded perspective on how sectarianism manifests in digital spaces. They are captured to the full spectrum of online sectarian expression; from the personal and individual, to the collective and historical and to the sporting rivalries that shape fan identity in Scotland. Overall, they are suited for examining the diverse ways in which modern online sectarianism is constructed and performed.

4.8 Ethics

One central question was whether observing posts on football forums requires informed consent from users or forum administrators. In non-participant observational research of publicly accessible online forums, obtaining individual consent is often impractical and not legally required so long as the data are truly public (Cleland, Dixon, and Kilvington, 2019). The forums in this study (Follow Follow and Kerrydale Street) are publicly readable discussion boards, and their content is available without a password or registration. This public status suggests that posts can be treated as published texts, and indeed, users are explicitly warned by the forum that they should not post anything they consider private. At the same time, the researcher must remain sensitive to participants' expectations of privacy. Studies have shown that what is public in a technical sense may still be perceived as a private or intimate community by its members. For example, Markham and Buchanan (2012) argue that the simple public/private dichotomy is insufficient as online contexts are complex, and ethical decisions should consider how participants themselves view the space and content. A large open-access forum thread may be reasonably treated as published public discourse, whereas a small, closed-group chat might be considered private (Nuttall, 2018).

Non-intervention (covert observation) was judged the most ethical and methodologically sound approach for this project. Looking for consent from forum members or administrators would have required the researcher to identify themselves and announce the study to the community. As Kozinets (2002) noted, full disclosure of researcher presence is generally ideal in ethnography to respect community autonomy. In practice, however, such disclosure in a contentious setting could bias the data and disrupt the natural environment (Kozinets, 2002). Both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums under study often discuss sensitive, volatile topics (sectarian rivalries); revealing the research could lead members to self-censor or alter their behaviour, undermining the validity of the observations. Moreover, obtaining meaningful consent from all contributors was logistically impracticable as not every user is active or reachable at a given time, and some posts of interest were made by users who have since left the forum. Given these challenges, numerous peer studies like Xavier (2019) and Cleland (2016) have taken a similar non-intrusive approach when researching public forums, treating them as texts for analysis while refraining from interventions that could affect the environment.

4.9 Anonymity and Confidentiality

Ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of individuals behind the posts are important. Even though forum contributors use pseudonyms or handles (and often do not reveal their real names), the ethical principle of no harm requires me to protect their identities in any publications further. This means that pseudonyms are assigned in research notes and writing, and the real usernames are not disclosed. As Gibbons and Nuttall's (2012) digital case study shows, removing a username is not always sufficient; online content is searchable, and verbatim quotes can be traced back to their source. To mitigate this risk, the research edits sensitive posts so that they convey the meaning without being exact, short fragments that are less likely to be.

Researching sectarian expression means the content under observation can be sensitive, offensive, or harmful. As such, the research balances the imperative to document such discourse with the responsibility not to normalise hate speech. One consideration is the psychological impact of the research and others who may be exposed to the data (supervisors). Strategies have been put in place to manage this

and remains mindful of the possible emotional strain of reading hostile or bigoted comments and have access to supervisory support to discuss any distressing material encountered. All notes and publications are contextualising sectarian remarks critically, rather than reproducing them without comment. When presenting examples of forum content, the thesis uses content warnings if necessary and ensure that analysis is foregrounded over hateful language.

Since this study is observational, the researcher does not intervene in the forum discussions (for the reasons discussed above). This non-intervention includes not attempting to counter-argue or call out sectarian posts in real time, as doing so would compromise my role and could provoke conflict. Ethically, witnessing harmful speech can be uncomfortable. Therefore, the chosen approach is to address this responsibly at the level of analysis and reporting, rather than in the field. My ethical responsibility is fulfilled by carefully documenting the occurrence of such speech, analysing its context, and using the research to inform understanding and possible interventions outside the forum (for example, in recommendations or discussions with stakeholders after the study). In essence, both forums' own moderation systems and community norms are allowed to operate without my interference during data collection, and part of the research interest lies in observing how users and moderators themselves respond to bigoted content. Both Follow Follow and Kerrydale Street forums are moderated spaces, and users often self-police or challenge extreme comments. By not intervening, the research studies these organic dynamics. This provides insight into how sectarianism is policed by the fan communities, a facet that would be lost if I became an active participant. Non-intervention is thus justified to respect the community's agency in managing its content. The researcher remains prepared, however, to act if truly necessary.

The aim is to remain aware of my role; as a social science student documenting a social phenomenon, and as a human being with moral reactions to that phenomenon. This reflexivity involved regularly questioning whether the act of reporting on hateful speech could inadvertently contribute to its spread. The researcher addresses this by adopting a critically analytical tone in all writings and calling out the unacceptability of sectarianism as part of the analysis, rather than presenting such content in a biased manner. The aim is that the thesis informs readers (including community stakeholders

or policymakers) about the dynamics of sectarian discourse in the hope that this knowledge can be used to combat such prejudice. This represents the social benefit justification for the research by explaining how sectarianism operates in online fan communities; the study can help in developing interventions or counter-speech strategies. Nonetheless, the research is careful not to become a mere conduit for hate. Every decision is filtered through the question of *‘does this keep ethical principles and do justice to the topic?’* This includes the responsibility to the academic community at Liverpool John Moores University and a responsibility to the forums and their users.

4.10 Analysis

Framing theory is used in this study to analyse how participants frame their behaviours and comments during the data collection process. This qualitative research method helps to understand how football fans make sense of their online experiences and the environment of online message boards. In framing analysis, meaning arises through a process of interpretation and contextualization. In framing analysis, observation enables scholars to understand how participants interpret and give meaning to issues, events, or situations. Framing analysis has been used extensively in the social sciences, particularly in sociology, anthropology, and political science. It has helped these fields to explore underlying textual meaning (Goffman, 1974). Goffman's work is key in this field as it provides a foundational understanding of how people use frames to interact and make sense of their experiences, which informs this study's methodology for examining online interactions among football fans. He argues that researchers use frames to structure their understanding of the world around them. As such, the purpose of using frame analysis is to understand how football fans make sense of their online experiences. The research aims to investigate how online message boards of two forums develop new meanings related to sectarian discourse and how collective identities are shaped by specific actors, issues, and events.

De Vreese (2005) offers a typology of frames by labelling two different types. The first type is the 'issue-specific frame', which refers to the way an issue is presented in the media. This links to a particular event or interpretation that highlights specific aspects of a particular issue or conflict, making them more relevant to that specific situation. The second type is the 'generic-related frame', which refers to a broad, flexible

thematic structure that can be applied to a wide range of topics or events. De Vreese argues that an issue-specific approach allows for a thoughtful level of specificity and details relevant to the event or issue under investigation (2005, p. 55). A generic related approach, however, provides a more general orientation for investigating a particular phenomenon across issues, frames, and topics. In this study, issue-specific framing is employed. The usefulness of this structure can be utilised to capture the range of potential interpretations that relate to specific topics. In this case, footballing and political events are structured in the way themes, arguments, and assertions are analysed across the selected message boards. Such a position perceives reality as directed by events, and it is believed that the events act as a frame for our interpretation.

Positive and negative frames in sport can indicate how certain events or issues are presented in the digital space. For example, a positive frame may be used to suggest that football fans are generally well-behaved, while a negative frame may focus on the problems associated with discrimination, online hate, or hooliganism (Spaaij and Testa, 2016). This type of framing allows academics to understand how different interpretations of an event or issue shape our understanding and ultimately lead to decisions being made by those involved. In this case, frames around sectarian behaviour is analysed to determine how conceptions of 'good' and 'bad' are constructed in the online space. Contemporary issues around Irishness, cultural/religious identity, etc., is explored to establish how sectarian connotations are employed on the two selected message boards. The underlying aim of this study is to show how online football fans interact with each other about their shared experiences of footballing culture. By exploring this process, the target is to gain insight into how collective identities are shaped by different actors, issues, and events that influence the way sectarianism is potentially presented in the modern day.

A key aspect of this research is to recognise the various terminologies used to define sectarianism. As highlighted in Chapter 2, sectarianism has been difficult to define, and it has only recently been defined. The researcher therefore uses the Advisory Group on Tackling Sectarianism in Scotland (AGTS) definition of sectarianism, which states:

...a complex of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, actions and structures, at personal and communal levels, which originate in religious difference and can involve a negative mixing of religion with politics, sporting allegiance and national identifications (Scottish Government, 2013c, p.5)

Aligning this definition to the observation helps identify frames of analysis and how they are being formed in the online environment. Observing the comments employed by Celtic and Rangers users provides an understanding of how different actors view, interpret, and relate to each other when discussing the three topics highlighted. From a researcher's perspective, being aware of offensive words and language also helps to monitor conversations and better articulate the frames of reference. Knowledge of posts and threads from football fans enables an active understanding of material supporting the process to constructively understand the virtual community. Emojis and images also provide insight into how views and opinions are expressed in the message. Understanding the visual language used in this context helps uncover the messages being conveyed.

4.10 Position of Researcher

I approach this research as a football fan aware of the need to remain objective and impartial (Gibbons, 2017). Growing up in a family with a strong Irish heritage in Birmingham, I recognise that my heritage could influence personal bias. My Irish Catholic upbringing and involvement with the Celtic fan community has also given me insider insight into one side of the rivalry. I cannot and do not want to change this, so I took deliberate steps to engage in reflexivity (May, 1999). I made it a point to immerse myself in the Rangers FC fan community. I spent time with Rangers supporters in Manchester and watched matches alongside them in public spaces. This was outside my comfort zone, but I did find this helpful as it allowed me to rethink the issues surrounding truth, objectivity, and bias relating to research (May, 1999). These face-to-face interactions also helped draw parallels between the two fan bases in real life and provided a more balanced way to understand both online message board cultures.

My participation in online football forums has been another key part of my strategy to maintain objectivity. Away from this project, I tend to engage with Celtic fan message

boards by reading threads about players, managers, matches, and even community initiatives (Green Brigade, Celtic State of Mind etc). However, I made a consistent effort beforehand to engage with the Follow Follow by observing discussions and debates on the forum. I also created a username and followed numerous threads on the Rangers forum so get a feel of how users engage with the site. This reflexivity process helped me gain insight into the tone and humour of the community and improved my ability to recognise and set aside any partiality (Nixon, 1994).

Years of active participation in football fan communities has made me fluent in the language of Celtic and Rangers supporters. I understand the jokes, the slang, and the intense language that surfaces online. Being a Celtic fan also means that I am aware of the historical and cultural narratives that shape Celtic fandom. However, I also approach this knowledge critically. Throughout the analysis, I made effort to questioned whether my interpretation is influenced by my own perspective and I cross checked comments. This is the sort of epistemological position that helped me make sense of the concept of bias (May and Perry, 2014).

As a result, I tried to remain impartial and fair-minded by applying reflexive practices where I felt strong feelings to the Celtic side (Nixon, 1994). Embracing a reflexive stance also meant confronting uncomfortable truths about my own biases. For instance, I've caught myself using Derry instead of Derry Londonderry in the thesis which was also noted by my supervisor. Recognising this, I paused and re-read the comment in its own terms to ensure a neutral take. This openness to both sides confirms that my analysis remains balanced. It also reflects my commitment to overcome personal bias.

I believe that by addressing my own biases and involving both communities in my field of view, I provide a richer and more credible academic insight. My lived experience as a football fan becomes a strength rather than a weakness as it drives my curiosity. This stance honours the trust of both Celtic and Rangers online communities by treating their voices with equal care and awareness.

4.11 Summary

This thesis uses an online ethnographic approach to investigate how sectarianism is constructed in digital spaces. The approach is used through a clear gap in the literature on sectarianism and digital communication by observing Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums. Both message boards provide a rich site for user-generated dialogue due to the need for more research of sectarian expression in virtual fan communities (McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan, 2005). The study uses a constructivist research paradigm by treating the online space as a social construct and aware of fan interactions and language. An observational position justifies the use of qualitative online ethnography as it captures meaning and narratives of football fans.

The analysis observes both forums without participation and allows the nature flow of interaction to be captured without influence. This strategy supports the authenticity of data and enables the collection of comments to be straightforward. The methodology has outlined the use of framing theory to dissect how online users interpret and give meaning in these online spaces. By using a framing lens, the analysis shows how comments made around the three selected areas are aligned with the research questions. Strict ethical and reflexive practices are also be used. A non-intervention process avoids no disruption to the online communities and allows for a more authentic observation. My own positioning was also recognised, and reflexive measures were integrated to mitigate bias.

In summary, this chapter has recognised a comprehensive methodological framework that uses constructivist qualitative inquiry through a passive online ethnographic design. This is underpinned by framing analysis and ethical awareness. The research foundation makes it possible for the result chapters to present the research findings. It demonstrates how the methodology argues the ways in which sectarianism manifests in the online domains of Scottish football fandom.

CHAPTER 5: FAN DISCOURSE ON FOOTBALL PLAYERS

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue how sectarianism takes shape in the online world of football fandom by exploring James McClean and Kyle Lafferty. The chapter addresses the research questions by focusing on three angles; the nature of sectarian expression in online fan communities, two case studies that act as flashpoints for fan discourse, and how these digital narratives connect to wider Scottish society's perspective on sectarianism. The chapter uses the two profiles of James McClean and Kyle Lafferty as flashpoints in these online conversations. Both cause reactions from Celtic and

Rangers fans and reveal the position of collective identity, symbolism, and the us-versus-them dynamic online. They are also direct targets for elongated hatred that is prolonged. For context, McClean is an Irish Catholic player who refused to wear the poppy. He is greeted by many Celtic fans as a hero representing their heritage. On the other hand, Lafferty is a Northern Irish Protestant who was caught using a sectarian slur. He is demonised by Celtic fans as the bigotry they oppose while some Rangers fans downplay his actions out of loyalty.

5.2 James McClean and the Red Poppy Controversy

McClean has never played for Celtic, but as a Catholic Irishman from Derry Londonderry, he has been much admired by supporters. Celtic fans seemed to bring a feeling of belonging and solidarity to McLean, especially given the importance of the Irish cause to Celtic's foundations (Kelly and Bradley, 2019). Comments and threads on Kerry Dale Street became popular during the Remembrance Day period (November 11th, 2022) when McClean took not to wear a red poppy on his shirt. A red poppy on football shirts signifies support for the Royal British Legion's Poppy Appeal, a fundraising initiative to aid the Armed Forces community in the UK (Hally, 2022). It is worth noting that this controversy with McClean has persisted for many years in England and has been a popular talking point among many online communities and social media users (Kelly, 2023). Offline, McLean is sometimes booed at football games by opposition fans and has also been subject to anti-Irish chants and abuse (Sky Sports, 2024).

The poppy is very much a part of the culture of the UK; it is a symbol that has been passed down through generations as an inherent cultural and social symbol commemorating British military personnel (Iles, 2008). More recently, the poppy has taken on a more complex role as it is now associated with various political and social debates (Fitzpatrick, 2021). This is because the poppy has become a means of reviving a collective national identity in support of one of Britain's longstanding and prominent institutions - the British military. In this case, the red poppy in football can be interpreted by many Celtic fans as representing the historical British military's occupation of Ireland (Penn and Berridge, 2018). The first batch of comments below, taken from Kerrydale Street, highlights James McClean as a topic of discussion. Here,

I began to make sense of the general view of online users towards McClean and the so-called 'poppy controversy' in which he was involved in.

It's unacceptable the level abuse that McClean gets for not wearing a poppy. It's freedom of speech and his right as an Irish citizen not to wear one. He's still an absolute roaster though - Celtic Fan 1

I hope the spotlight will be shone on the inevitable anti-Irish racism that James McLean will face by opposing fans all because he sticks to his principles by using his freedom of choice by not wearing a poppy on his shirt. I won't hold my breath though - Celtic Fan 2

Not sure if this should be in the media thread but since it's poppy related, I'll put it here. Read an article about James McClean's refusal to wear a poppy by Irish journalist Tommy Conlon. It is an absolutely shocking piece. - Celtic Fan 3

It's like James McLean not wearing a poppy, it's a lonesome fight and he has been accused of being a bigot and an extremist, thus he's being attacked from all quarters. If we attack the SFA¹ or Deidco² on our own, we'd be open to the same PR/Media ridicule. BTW, James McLean gets my utmost respect for standing by his principles - Celtic Fan 1

The idiots booing McLean obviously have no idea why they're wearing a poppy. Imbeciles - Celtic Fan 3

Is McClean a different race or religion to the majority of the rest of the Irish squad? His principalled stance on poppies and outspoken political views other issues is why he gets targeted. - Celtic Fan 4

From the outset, I noted that the online community is built on mutual passions and the cultural ethos surrounding its Irish heritage. In Anderson's terms, the forum helps create an imagined community where members who will never meet in person still perceive themselves as part of one group (Anderson, 1983). The forum also carries key components of Irish culture that inform feelings of patriotism, nationalism, and cultural identity (Bradley, 2019). As such, Celtic's fandom provides a common reference points as heroes, rivalries, and symbols become sources of cultural memory and pride (Conner, 2014). By facilitating communication around the poppy, the forum establishes social relations and identities grounded in these shared cultural spaces

¹ SFA: The Scottish Football Association

² Deidco: A nickname associated with Rangers following its financial difficulties in 2012

(Giulianotti and Armstrong, 2002). In other words, the Kerrydale Street forum is not just talking about football; it is actively doing identity work blending in with the narratives of community.

It was evident that underlying the peace on Kerrydale Street were broader patterns of Irish nationalism and patriotism. Here, Billig's (1995) theory of Banal Nationalism is useful for understanding how national sentiment fills daily activity in such forums. Billig (1995) argues that established nations are continuously flagged in the background of ordinary conversation and media. In daily conversations, I noted that cues like the use of 'we' and 'us' are used to describe Celtic fans and McClean, which kept the national imagination of Irishness alive. Celtic fans routinely use collective pronouns and in-group rituals, effectively flagging the Irish cause in everyday conversation around Remembrance Day (Clancy, 2010). These habits are what Billig calls the unwavering flags of nationalism that are taken-for-granted signals of who 'we' are. Below is an example of this at work:

I like James McLean not wearing a poppy, it's a lonesome fight and he has been accused of being a bigot and an extremist, thus he's being attacked from all quarters. If we attack the SFA or Deidco on our own, we'd be open to the same PR/Media ridicule. BTW, James McLean get my upmost respect for standing by his principles". - Celtic Fan 5

I come from, on my mother's side, West Cork, which was heavily involved in both the War of Independence and Civil War and had some hard times at the hands of Colonel (later General) Percival and the Essex Regiment and also the RIC Auxiliaries³ who acted as hardline Black and Tans⁴. This was almost 100 years ago, but for many in the area it is not forgotten. Therefore, I do understand James McClean's anthem issue. - Celtic Fan 6

Billig (1985) also notes that sport coverage *'day after day, invites us, the readers, to support the national cause'* (Billig, 1985, p. 4). This translates to supporting a team in ways that intertwine with ethnic and national identity. Celtic, for instance, has historic ties to Glasgow's Irish community and on the forum, it was evident that everyday forms of Irish patriotism and cultural pride are interwoven with clubs fanbase (Kelly, 2011). Online fans may post messages imploring Ireland's history and display Irish flags and

³ Paramilitary unit of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) during the Irish War of Independence

⁴ The Black and Tans were a British auxiliary police force to suppress the Irish War of Independence

symbols in their user avatars and signatures. Such practices are commonplace acts of affinity and meaningful acknowledgments of a shared heritage. By indicating the Irish cause through words and symbols, the forum's dialogue reinforces a sense of national belonging as part of the Celtic identity and supporting James McClean's refusal to wear a poppy.

As I continued to observe, I began noting some of the social norms and belief systems that shaped user interactions within the forum, with particular emphasis on the language used. As Glynn and Brown (2023) suggest, humour often plays a central part in shaping group identity and signalling in-group membership on online forums. In this case, certain use words and sectarian language started to reflect these dynamics. Anderson (2020) further notes that imagined communities may provide an expression of hate speech in online spaces and therefore need community policing to remove undesirable elements. Consequently, I did start to read comments where language was more coded and subtle. Sectarian words such as 'Hun' were used as a derogatory term for Rangers fans on the forum, as well as comments about the British Queen were also noted. For context, 'Hun' is noted as a sectarian word used as an insult to Protestants. For example:

James McClean hates the fucking Queen!!!! - Celtic Fan 7

If James McClean disnae have to wear a poppy ah'm no daein a huddle. - Celtic Fan 8

Souness is a eff cretin. No idea what he's up to with all his hun yesteryears and drool Britannia, but he's a total scunner. - Celtic Dan 9

You can tell Souness⁵ is a hun, he's thick as pig shampoo and a cretin to boot. As for the Protestant institution bit he was the guy that broke that but maybe it was more down to him (and Murray) trying to break Celtic than it was breaking sectarian barriers from a rancid bigoted club of carrot. - Celtic Fan 10

Anyone slating McClean an abhorrent wee arsekissing crawler. - Celtic Fan 11

⁵ Graham Souness - Ex Rangers Manager and TV Pundit

The comments on James McClean's exemplifies how a player can serve as a symbolic figure around which fan identities unite (Porat, 2010). Celtic fans who defend McClean may not particularly care about him as an individual and the finer points of his controversy; rather, what he represents triggers their involvement. In addition, McClean symbolises an Irish nationalist ethos and resistance to British and Protestant hegemony in football culture. Essentially, he stands for 'our side' of a longstanding sectarian divide on the Celtic forum. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) can help explain why fans mobilise so strongly in these instances. According to this theory, people derive pride and self-esteem from group affiliations, and they tend to elevate their in-group while disapproving an out-group to enhance collective identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Defending McClean becomes a proxy for defending the Celtic in-group (Irish/Catholic/Nationalist identity) against perceived outsiders. Further examples of this are shown below:

All jokes aside I was surprised by the amount of booing directed at McClean, the Fields of Athenry and our national anthem. To be fair, Scotland ... anything sectarian about it. That covers the national anthem only. Not James McClean, The Fields of Athenry or the huddle. It smacked of hunnery. - Celtic Fan 12

Shove yer new King up yer Plastic Paddy, Hun luvvin' Loyalist hole. Toast that with yer Billy Boy chums in yer cap doffing Masonic clubs in Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and the rest of Shortbread, Sevco⁶ land where many of you Scottish Tims drink...cos the pints are cheaper. The only country to vote against independence from it's English colonial masters. Wear that badge of shame William. Now sup yer well earned soup and continue worshipping at the statue of Lord Andy of Walker. - Celtic Fan 13

(Laughing Emoji) Now he's plays for the Boys in Green Now he sings Amhrán na bhFiann⁷ James McClean hates the fecking Queen - Celtic Fan 14

The abuse directed at McClean is the most extreme and widespread example of racism towards a player in the ... just a lot better at hiding it than their cousins up here. But let's be honest. James McClean loves the 'RA. - Celtic Fan 15

Calling rivals 'Huns' to mock supporters of the British monarchy demonstrates a constructed nationalist identity, one that illustrates Anderson's (1991) concept of the nation as an imagined community of shared symbols. These coded insults, along with

⁶ 'Sevco' refers to Sevco Scotland Limited - the company that acquired the assets of the Rangers FC

⁷ National Anthem of Ireland: Amhrán na bhFiann

communal chants and songs (for example, The Fields of Athenry), function as ritualised group practices that provide security for Celtic fans by linking users to a stable collective narrative of Irish history and struggle (McMenemy and Poulter, 2005). Such sectarian slogans enforce group norms as fans signal in-group membership by using terms that outsiders cannot decode, which also reinforces internal cohesion (Benkwitz and Molnar, 2012). Moreover, in line with Anderson's (2020) analysis of imagined communities, the Celtic community often polices its discourse, censoring hate speech and channelling hostility into culturally specific figures. This reinforces the in-group's boundaries and norms surrounding football fans (Newson, Buhrmester, and Whitehouse, 2023). By denigrating outsiders (e.g. Poppy supporters, Rangers, Souness) and rallying around shared comments and humour, Celtic fans show a clear us-versus-them boundary and strengthen group identity to support James McClean. Simultaneously, humour and cultural references in songs and slogans signal belonging for fans and serve as a form of resistance to external authority.

Goffman (1953) suggests that individuals emphasise and downplay certain aspects of themselves to project a desired image in line with audience expectations. This means that self-presentation manifests in a performative use of terminology as a means of impression management (Frederick and Clavio, 2015). Such performance overrides any concern for how outsiders might perceive them; what matters is the imagined audience of like-minded users (Litt, 2015). Within the forum's frontstage setting, Celtic fans act out their support for McClean by conforming to group expectations, feeling little need to censor sectarian expressions that the community treats as normal. In effect, sectarian language becomes a prop in the performance of identity used to craft an impression of group loyalty to McClean and his stance. Frequent use of sectarian slurs and political references sets a tone in which such language is expected as part of the community repertoire (Rowe, Ruddock, and Hutchins, 2010). This creates an echo chamber where users feel unconcerned about negative reactions to bigoted remarks. Indeed, Cleland and Cashmore (2016) find that anonymity and lack of face-to-face accountability online lead to a more unrestrained communication style. The result can be an increase in sectarian content, where provocation posts thrive within Kerrydale Street's culture because the community shares a collective understanding (Hayes, 2006). As such, overt sectarian expressions are normalised as part of football

banter; fans do not fear criticism from their peers for crossing a line. The extracted examples below show this:

Huns to believe a Cork Derry Sandwich⁸ is an IRA thing if we tell them James McClean was in one? - Celtic Fan 11

Reply: If James McClean did ever sign for Celtic there's a fair chance Neil Lennon would be allowed to live out his life in peace. - Celtic Fan 12

Bring James McClean home Brendan⁹ - Celtic Fan 13

Reply: I can just see it now: Scorer for Celtic: Vol James McClean. 1st batt. Derry (Bogside) IRA brigade¹⁰ - Celtic Fan 14

Points deducted for signing rebs etc. so we'd lose points if we signed James McClean? - Celtic Fan 13

Reply: PSML (*Piss myself Laughing*) Hahahaha - Celtic Fan 13

Up the FAKIN RAAA!¹¹ - Celtic Fan 14

Here, comments containing sectarian slogans take on meaning as tokens of camaraderie and defiance. Calling someone a 'Hun' and using political abbreviations around the 'IRA' is more of a social signal within the group's shared language. These words function as symbolic markers that distinguish the in-group ('us' the McClean/Irish-identifying side) from the out-group ('them' e.g. Poppy perceived British establishment). In Goffman's terms, the forum provides a stage where this symbolic language is part of the agreed-upon script. Celtic users uphold an agreement that sectarian terms are an acceptable part of interaction, therefore reinforcing the meaning of those terms as humorous. This illustrates how online community norms are both produced by and productive of language use (Kilvington and Price, 2021; Cleland, 2014). The more fans perform sectarian behaviour through these words, the more entrenched those norms become on the forum, further freeing individuals to use sectarian terminology without self-censorship.

⁸ Used to describe a situation where a football player is positioned between two attackers

⁹ Brendan Rogers - Celtic Manager

¹⁰ The Derry Brigade of the Provisional IRA was an IRA unit

¹¹ RAAA! Meaning the Irish Republican Army

It was clear that many Celtic fans initially united around a supportive narrative of McClean, guided by the patterns of interaction and status dynamics amongst those on the forum. However, there were some Celtic users who pushed back against the pro-McClean sentiment. This pushback challenges patterns of interactions and power status boundaries that usually govern mobilisation of support in online networks (Turner, 2022), indicating that agreement can be contested by dissenting voices. Indeed, digital spaces give ordinary fans the means to talk back to dominant opinions and authorities, interrupting narratives and power hierarchies (Jenkins, 2007). The result is a more conflictual but participatory space. The below thread demonstrates this in action:

Someone said James McClean was singled out because of his race and nationality and I said he was targeted because he's outspoken on poppies, republicanism etc. That doesn't make the abuse that he receives ok, it's merely a comment on why it happens. - Celtic Fan 15

Reply: Sorry to side track, but in another posted you mentioned Neil Lennon & Aiden McGeady along with McClean. What in your opinion was the reason they received abuse everywhere they played in Scotland? - Celtic Fan 16

Still no answer. Why was James McClean booed? It's disgraceful how this is ignored. Yet in 8 weeks time or what ever it is he's the bad guy. If it was any other race or religion it would be main stream news - Celtic fan 17

We'll never know. I don't recall Robbie Keane, Darren O'Dea or Liam Miller getting booed every touch they took or any of the Irish players that play for diddy clubs in Scotland. Maybe because they are quiet LOL. - Celtic Fan 18

Reply: McClean a different race or religion to the majority of the rest of the Irish squad? His principalled stance on poppies and outspoken political views other issues is why he gets targeted. He somewhat played up to it - Celtic Fan 19

For many in the Kerrydale Street community, the remembrance poppy is seen as a symbol of imperialist militarism, so McClean's defiance was celebrated as an act of integrity aligned with the Celtic fan identity and club values (Conner, 2014). However, it is important to note that this online space was not monolithic. Moments of conversational argument emerged when some fans challenged the dominant pro-McClean framing by viewing the poppy as an apolitical gesture of respect. Yet, such opposition was short-lived, and the need for a cohesive group identity and emotional solidarity soon reasserted itself; towards McClean quickly reappeared. In particular,

the underlying dispute over McLean's Irish identity and legitimacy as a victim was never truly settled, so support for him was quickly reactivated. More comments extracted from the thread show this:

That doesn't make the abuse that he receives ok it's a comment on why it happens - Celtic Fan 20

Sneering, condescending, arrogant and a poke at the 'Oirish'" for any Celtic fan to side against McClean have no truck with Celtic's Irish connection. Hun lite hypocrites - Celtic Fan 21

The founding fathers of our great club will be spinning in their graves - Celtic Fan 22

Irish people killed by British forces are among those allegedly commemorated by the poppy. He is a proud Irish Nationalist from Derry - Celtic Fan 23

James McClean is a beacon of honesty and integrity... and a lovely, decent fella - Celtic Fan 24

A critical point to raise at this point was that many Celtic fans who use sectarian language do so not out of deep personal conviction, but as a form of rhetorical communal performance. A similar point was made by Cleland (2014) in his work on racism, as some online posters he researched were often challenged as to whether they were being serious about the comments they were making. As such, it can be argued that sectarian comments made in defence of figures like James McClean often serve a strategic and symbolic purpose more than a literal one. I noted that McClean becomes a symbolic benchmark for the Kerrydale Street community. Supporting him allows online Celtic fans to voice historical and cultural grievances by proxy. This point captures how many fans have little investment in sectarian ideology, yet they use terms to express defiance and solidarity in that moment. Online language is, therefore, a performance of loyalty as mentioned in Lawrence and Crawford (2018) and Simsek and Ozturk (2024). By acting out chants about the 'IRA' and other sectarian terms, Celtic users perform an exaggerated loyalty to the Celtic/Irish cause, regardless of their actual political involvement in offline spaces.

The content of the belief is less significant than its expression as a symbol of identity, which aligns with the group's collective narrative. Celtic fans focus on expressing their Irish identity, as noted by Bradley (2008), rather than on any personal beliefs they may

hold. In other words, a sectarian rhetoric here operates as a scripted dramatisation of group identity, one that online users step into to play the role of staunch supporter (File and Worlledge, 2023). Goodall et al., (2015) observe that, even in private, fans do not hold extreme sectarian views, highlighting a contrast between public expression and private belief. Yet, it is evident on the forum's stage that they enact those views to meet fans' expectations and to reinforce the online collective identity narrative. I turned to the Rangers supporters' forum, Follow Follow, to see if a similar online culture different was at play. Every digital community tends to cultivate its emotional climate and norms (Fenton et al., 2023), and in this case, Follow Follow was likely to be more traditionalist and steeped in a Loyalist view towards James McClean. Such an emotional climate can be seen as a shared atmosphere of defiance and tribal solidarity, reflecting the Rangers fans deep roots in Protestant Loyalism (Giulianotti, 2007). In contrast to Kerrydale Street's ethos, the discourse on Follow Follow often reinforces a particular vision of group identity and outlines a clear other (in this case, Celtic and its links).

5.3 Unpacking James McClean's Red Poppy Controversy on Follow Follow Rangers Forum

It was evident from the outset that James McClean was an unwelcome person for many fans of clubs with strong British identities. The Glasgow Rangers fan base, with a traditionally Protestant, British unionist are very much aligned with remembrance culture (Whigham, Kelly, and Bairner, 2021) and saw McClean's poppy refusal as offensive. Year after year, McLean endures sectarian chants from the stands and an overwhelming amount of online harassment and even death threats and a level of hostility that he has described as more abuse than any other player has faced in England (The New York Times, 2024). As expected, the poppy controversy emerged as a central topic on Follow Follow. Below are some comments I first extracted from the forum:

McLean gets abuse because he supports the murder of innocent people. He's a backer of IRA scum and is the worst of the worst. Pure and simple. Anyone who likes James McLean is a monster and not someone you want to be around. Poison. - Rangers Fan 1

When you refuse to respect the fallen from our country and celebrate the IRA and post pictures with a balaclava on playing the terrorists to his children then he can't expect any other treatment. He is not the victim, the victims are the disappeared murdered by the IRA and the countless men, women and children who have been caught up in IRA bombings or murdered by IRA bullets. - Rangers Fan 2

McClellan does not seem to realise that booing or criticising a sympathiser of a sectarian terrorist organisation such as the IRA is not sectarianism within itself but a protest against the innocents they murdered. Many people have memories of these heinous IRA actions which occurred locally near Wigan and Birmingham. The real 'history lesson' McClellan speaks of is that many younger supporters who boo and criticise him are now aware of IRA bombings and killings of local people and that is why he is getting deserved criticism, booing etc. James McClellan is not a victim, the thousands that the IRA killed are the true victims. - Rangers Fan 3

The comments above show how fans are anchored in collective memory and identity politics. For many Rangers supporters (and like-minded fans in Britain), the poppy is a sacred symbol of remembrance for fallen soldiers and a token of loyalty to British heritage and the Crown (Penn and Berridge, 2018). McClellan's rejection of the poppy is therefore framed as a political provocation. For the Rangers community, he seems to dishonour the memory of British servicemen and the innocent victims of the IRA's paramilitary campaign, thereby violating a core belief of Rangers-fan cultural allegiance. The forum discourse invokes a narrative of victimhood as users remind each other of the atrocities committed by the IRA. This coincides with Fitzpatrick's (2023) work on football remembrance, which shows how collective memory is mobilised in football fandom alongside the remembrance of war dead. Here, the 'Troubles' in Ireland are interwoven with fan identity, and the forum has been transformed into a site of memory where military commemoration is performed as communal amongst the Rangers community.

As I continued to observe the forum, I noted that the discourse about McClellan was marked by an intense use of sectarian language and outright hate speech. Discussions quickly descend into strings of slurs. For example, users labelled McClellan 'an IRA-loving scumbag', a 'bigoted c**t', or a 'Provo¹² prick', and tell him to 'feck off' or 'go home'. Such rhetoric was sectarian, conflating McClellan's Irish nationalist identity with support for the IRA and consequently with terrorism. It was evident that hate speech in the Follow Follow forum serves as a mechanism of

¹² Provo is a shortened term for Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA).

othering, as McClean is cast out of the realm of acceptable society and that he is 'not one of us' but the ultimate outsider (Glynn and Brown, 2023). Through collective derogatory language, the online community draws a boundary between the in-group (loyal Rangers/British supporters, who revere the poppy and the Union) and the out-group (Irish republicans or those perceived as such). Sveinson and Hoeber (2023) call this a classic case of symbolic boundary-making where the derogatory descriptions and aggressive unanimity in the forum reinforce who 'we' are by vilifying what 'we' are not.

Drawing on Geertz's analysis of the Balinese cockfight, where betting reflects and reinforces social kinship, I noticed a similar dynamic in how Rangers fans commented about McClean. There was some form of obsession with McClean, who acted as a symbolic performance regarding a larger social conflict. Fans commented about a football player and his actions, and they worked through their own collective identity and historical experience. In Geertz's terms, the forum discourse on McClean is both '*a story they tell themselves about themselves*' and an act that helps create social solidarity among them (Geertz, 1972, p. 26). The Rangers fans, by persistently retelling the tale of McClean the traitor/villain and their victimhood and moral high ground, told stories about their community and about what it means to be a Rangers supporter. Below is an example of this at play:

Well James should you choose to disrespect British values within the UK with your Republican mindset then you sow what you reap, and then play the poor me sectarian card, but strangely none of your fellow countrymen (sic) get as much verbals as you do similar to Lennon at Celtic plenty of other N.I. players have been at Parkhead but none were abused as much as poor Neil because of HIS actions, strange that , do the maths and you will work it out.....eventually! - Rangers fan 4

What a repulsive piece of Irish shite he is. - Rangers fan 5

He's a scumbag, I'm pleased to see the English football fans recognise what he is and have let him know in such a public way. Keep up the good work I say. - Rangers fan 6

Playing the victim card when he brings it all on himself , utter vermin. - Rangers fan 7

Bigot accuses others of bigotry. It's tiring, the sheer hypocrisy - Rangers fan 8

He teaches his kids, proudly, about IRA terrorist murderers, the guy is a fucking scumbag and a vicTim to boot. - Rangers fan 9

A man who had shown contempt every single time a Royal or known British subject, casualty of war or victim (genuine not canvassing for gains) is to be honoured. The reason McLean is getting booed is because he is a complete fuckwit who plays the victim, supports terrorists, hates the UK, but is happy to be paid in British pounds - Rangers Fan 10

McClean is a rancid piece of shit and deserves everything he gets and everything that will eventually come to him. He will have a bank account filled with British Sterling and no doubt plenty of pictures of the queen in his pocket, An utter hypocrite. - Rangers Fan 11

I booed McClean because he's a bellend, that's it, there was nothing sinister or sectarian about it. - Rangers Fan 12

What's the odds on the Scum going for him in the next transfer window? He's a Lennon¹³ on IRA steroids. - Rangers Fan 13

The storytelling involved in the online thread above is not a passive reflection; it is an active reinforcement of cultural narratives (Robson, 2001). Geertz (1972) notes that cultural performances are models of reality and models for reality at the same time. As such, the online procedure of abusing James McClean serves as a model of Rangers fans' rooted sectarian worldview as it reflects the patterns of antagonism (Protestant vs. Catholic, British vs. Irish nationalist) that have long existed in Glasgow's sectarian divide (Bradley, 2017). At the same time, it actively strengthens the forum community by bringing online fans together in a common ritual of denunciation. McClean-bashing threads are performing group kinship and group boundaries in much the same way that betting on one's kin's cock in a Balinese village reaffirms kinship ties (Geertz, 1972). Each Rangers fan who joins the pile-on against McClean is, symbolically, placing their bet on the side of their cultural kin and against the outsider. The stakes are emotional and social rather than material, but they are felt.

McClean is further seen as the quintessential villain and a hate figure on Follow Follow where negative comments are directed at him. In Barthes's (1972) terms, McClean is like the bad wrestler in the ring, whose persona is portrayed most darkly so that the audience can unite in hatred against him. Barthes (1972) notes that the bad character

¹³ Neil Lennon: Former Celtic manager and player

in American wrestling often carried a quasi-political identity. For example, being portrayed as a Communist during the Cold War era (Barthes, 1972). In this case, McClean is associated with a political identity in the eyes of Rangers supporters. He is seen as an Irish republican extremist, effectively a stand-in for the IRA and the broader Irish nationalist cause. This politicisation of his villainy heightens the stakes of the drama on the forum. Just as the American wrestling crowd of the 1950s would boo the Commie heel (not just an individual but the symbol of a threatening ideology), so do Rangers fans by posting hateful comments about McClean as the embodiment of an existential other. The discourse takes on a mythic structure; McClean's every action is interpreted as part of a story in which the Rangers side (loyal British patriotism) is under attack by the Celtic side (Irish republicanism and perceived anti-British sentiment). Further comments below show this at play.

James McLean is an IRA loving c*nt who should have been wiped out the face of the earth many years ago along with his IRA pal Gerry Adams¹⁴. If hanging was still on the statute, I would have loved to have volunteered and pulled the lever and see these two Irish scum bastards drop to the end of the rope and dance - Rangers fan 14

Reply: Disappointed that it was only verbal abuse. Didn't watch the game but would have been delighted if this thread was about him being broken in half. - Rangers fan 15

Reply: McLean deserves every single bit of abuse he gets and more mate - Rangers fan 14

Reply: Go home then and leave your British money behind, cheerio lol. - Rangers fan 15

In effect, McClean serves as a scapegoat for the Follow Follow community's fears and resentments; a process for symbolic displacement of sectarian hate that might otherwise be drawn out. This reflects what Jenkins (2014) calls the construction of the Other as comments depend on dehumanisation and scapegoating for fandom purposes. By dehumanising McClean as a figure of a hated out-group, Rangers fans collectively channel historical grievances and insecurities into a single focal point. This process of scapegoating unifies the in-group, much as communal hatreds in ritual can solidify group identity (Durkheim, 1995). Posts that use sectarian terms also function as a cultural performance; a ritualised display through which Rangers fans perform

¹⁴ Gerry Adams is a retired Irish Republican politician who was the president of Sinn Fein

their group identity and solidarity. This is evident in the work of Cleland (2014), who notes that football forums are often spaces of exaggeration and role-play, unlike the stage where fans play the part of die-hard fans. Comments and inside jokes are part of an ongoing performance on Follow Follow. Fans use sectarian slurs, songs, and slogans as dramatic props to assert their membership in the in-group. Below is another example of this at work:

He's got a face like a map of Ireland. - Rangers Fan 16

Irelands shame, Britain's burden lol - Rangers Fan 17

MacLean is the type of guy who gets thrown out of a hundred pubs, but its always the barmen's fault. I don't know of Niall Quinn in the past or any other southern Irish footballers currently in England who receive this alleged anti-Irish racism.? I think that says it all - Rangers fan 18

The magnificent bastard appears to have ruffled a few mentally challenged feathers. gave up talking to or having any kind of interaction with these people they are not normal best ignoring McClean and his kind. - Rangers Fan 19

Reply: Don't give him the oxygen he needs. - Rangers fan 20

Reply: He reap what you sow you mhanky, filthy 19th Century Terrorist fuckpig! - Rangers Fan 18

Victim scum bastard - Rangers fan 21

The storytelling involved in the online ritual is not a passive reflection; it is an active reinforcement of cultural narratives (Robson, 2001). It reinforces a common ground amongst the community. As Barthes notes in his work on wrestling, *'the function of the wrestler is not to win, it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him'* (Barthes, 1972, p. 14). As such, users on the Follow Follow forum mirrors the historical patterns of antagonism (Protestant vs. Catholic, British vs. Irish nationalist) that have long existed in Glasgow's sectarian divide (Bradley, 2017), thereby reinforcing these divisions in the digital space. This cultural performance is inherently symbolic as the songs, chants, and catchphrases common in Rangers culture (e.g. 'We Are The People' or 'No Surrender') are repeated rituals (Giulianotti, 2007). This also functions as what Billig (1995) would call a banal nationalistic cue, where everyday symbols that flag the group's identity and cause are used without seeming political. Billig (1995) emphasises that established identity groups maintain themselves through daily

comments, and while the stakes in this ritual are emotional and social rather than material, they are felt, underscoring the powerful role of online cultural performances in reinforcing community bonds.

It was clear that sectarian expressions and in-group slogans serve a purpose; they are so routine that online fans hardly notice their nationalist or sectarian character, yet these rituals constantly reproduce the perception of a collective identity united by heritage and opposition to Celtic. In this way, sectarian discourse becomes a performance of group culture. As Giulianotti (2007) puts it, referring to British identity is like a collective tradition as it is part of the habitus of being a Rangers supporter. As such, the Follow Follow forum rewards those who can perform the most passionate displays of loyalism, much like a cultural script that members learn and enact to gain approval (what Bourdieu might term accumulating symbolic capital within the fan field). This aspect means that Rangers fans may engage in sectarian talk as a form of play-acting display, even when they are not hateful in private. This helps explain why sectarian comments often appear as performing to the audience of fans is part of the fun, whereas the same users might not voice such extreme sentiments in other contexts.

Another crucial layer across the forum was the role of emotional projection in fuelling sectarian discourse. The intensity of comments directed at McClean suggests that fans are projecting deeper feelings onto the target. Nagel, Kros and Davenport (2024) suggest that this can be seen as a classic scapegoating mechanism, in which underlying frustrations are displaced onto a convenient external enemy. By piling abuse on to McClean, online fans vent anger about broader issues that might otherwise be socially unacceptable to express offline. As such, I noted that the online environment encourages this emotional release. Research on racial hate crime in the wake of the Euro 2020 Final in London by Nagel, Kros and Davenport (2024) notes that extremists online attack their perceived enemies in language that depends on emotion for effect. As such, the threads about McClean and related sectarian topics are heavy with insults and swear words, rather than any reasoned discussion; a clear sign that the discourse is driven by gut feelings and symbolic offense rather than factual debate.

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1979) suggests that people develop pride and self-esteem from their group memberships, and they often respond to perceived threats to the group by derogating the source of the danger. Porat (2010) has shown that the stronger one's identification is with a group, the more intensely one reacts when that identity is challenged. In the case of Rangers fans, many strongly identify with a Loyalist British heritage when McClean was a talking point. McClean's open Irish nationalism and refusal to honour British military tradition (e.g. the poppy) are interpreted as direct insults to that identity. This triggered an identity-threatening situation in which fans feel that their side is under attack, and they respond with heightened intensity. Maitner et al., (2017) explain that a person who identifies with a particular social group will react in direct proportion to their strength of feeling for that identity when it is insulted. Below is an example of this at play:

An absolute arse of a man. - Rangers Fan 11

Lowlife piece of scum teaching his kids with a balaclava on scumbag - Rangers Fan 12

It's almost as if openly glorifying the IRA in a country where they bombed and murdered innocent people, might make you unpopular. - Rangers fan 13

Like Anthony stokes before him this dunce will wind up in trouble when he's finished in football.They can't keep their gob shut and certainly can't read the room.. as it were. Nothing written or published about him is fake or made up it's all true.from stating his admiration for McGuinness¹⁵ to the balaclava and his love of Wolfe tones¹⁶ death songs all true.if I was ever at a game he was playing at he would be aware his guff is not welcome.horrible p o s - Rangers fan 14

When the c* nt stops boasting about supporting the IRA, then maybe people will begin to treat him as an entity somewhere above subhuman. - Rangers Fan 15

He can go and play in the League of Ireland or sign for Celtic. - Rangers Fan 16

References to the IRA and mocking Irish culture can therefore be seen as an emotional projection of the Rangers fans' fears and anger at seeing their valued identity disrespected. Importantly, this projection often involves dehumanising the target, a common psychological feature of hate speech (Fletcher et al., 2024). On the forum, McClean is rarely regarded as a complex individual; instead, he is reduced to

¹⁵ James McGuinness was an Irish republican politician

¹⁶ The Wolfe Tones are an Irish music band

a misrepresentation (Fenian rat and other slurs) that embodies everything the in-group hates. This is in line with the observation that sectarian dynamics rely on dehumanisation, and McClean is painted as evil, justifying extreme language. By denying his humanity, Rangers fans make their emotional attacks feel righteous and generate an emotional energy that bonds the Follow Follow members more tightly. As Newson, Buhrmester, and Whitehouse (2023) suggest, online fans bond in their anger and express that anger together, further solidifying their unity. This helps explain why sectarian terms can be enjoyable in a group context; it provides emotional arousal for Rangers fans and a sense of participating in something larger, all of which are psychologically rewarding.

At that point, I felt it was useful to consider if a similar dynamic might appear with a different figure. As such, Kyle Lafferty offered a useful point of comparison. Lafferty, by contrast to McClean, is a Northern Irish Protestant footballer who has openly voiced unionist sentiments, aligning him with a British loyalist identity. This contrast means that where McClean was seen as a villain on the Follow Follow fan forum, Lafferty would likely be welcomed as one of our own by the Rangers online community. Equally, on the Kerrydale Street forum, Lafferty would tend to occupy the adversarial role as a high-profile Rangers signing and vocal unionist; he symbolises the rival ethos. Celtic supporters are therefore likely to view him in much the same way that Rangers fans reacted to McClean, underscoring how each player's symbolic background flips the script in the opposing fan context. The next section of this chapter explores this in more detail.

5.4 Kyle Lafferty, Celtic Fans, and The Sectarian Ban

The 2022 incident involving Northern Irish footballer Kyle Lafferty provides a second player case study on how sectarianism is negotiated in online fan culture. Lafferty, who is associated with Rangers, was caught on video using a sectarian slur while interacting with fans. When a Celtic supporter posing for a photo shouted, 'Up the Celts' Lafferty responded by calling the fan a 'Fenian bastard' a derogatory term targeting the fan's Catholic Irish identity (Bradley, 2008). The SFA charged Lafferty under anti-sectarian rules and imposed a ten-match suspension (BBC, 2022). STV News (Coyle, 2022) and The Guardian (2022) also reported on Lafferty's ban and his

public apology, framing it as a clear-cut instance of sectarian misconduct addressed by strict disciplinary action. On Kerrydale Street, Celtic supporters engaged in discussions about the incident from the moment it broke. As such, I began by observing comments made on the forum. Below are extracted quotes taken from the first few comments.

Laugherty is an effing hun. if this finally means the last of him in Scottish football, I'm prepared to happily overlook what has never been a remotely funny prank. - Celtic Fan 1

Laugherty should get hammered for that video. Charged and also banned from football for a while. As someone said earlier in the thread, if you replace fenian with another word it would be national news. Tonev got a 7-match ban for something that was not proven so lets see what that muppet gets. Apart from lauded by too many people of course - Celtic Fan 2

My take on the Lafferty shambles is that isn't so much what he said (but given his background, would probably have been meant with more venom than your run-of-the-mill Scottish Hun), it's more the unnecessarily petulant and aggressive manner of his response. I mean, the guy only said "up the Celts" FFS. What would Lafferty have said/ done if the guy had gone "up the Ra¹⁷"?????? - Celtic Fan 3

Laugherty should have been run out of Scottish football after the Mulgrew incident, nothing but a lanky cheating hun scumbag bastard - Celtic Fan 4

So it wasn't a new, or original 'prank'. If I was Kyle Lafferty, I like to think I'd have been able to suppress my mild irritation, smile, say 'ha good one' and move on with my evening. Lafferty's reaction suggests that this was sitting very near to the top of his conscious waiting to be triggered. Nasty piece of work all round. - Celtic Fan 5

My initial thought was that Celtic fans immediately identified Lafferty by labels that mark him as belonging to the out-group. One common description was 'Hun' which is sectarian slang for a Protestants or Rangers supporter (Bell and Bell, 2021). Such language, though intended as an insult, served as a boundary-setting function as it forms a distinction of who does not belong to the Celtic us (Newson, Buhrmester, and Whitehouse, 2023). By branding Lafferty a 'Hun', Celtic fans symbolically exclude him from the Kerrydale Street community and develop their sense of belonging to a Catholic/nationalist in-group. This also reflects Hall's (1997) insight that cultural identity is a '*structured representation which only achieves its positivity through the narrow eye of the negative*' formed through difference and opposition (Hall, 1997, p.

¹⁷ 'Up the RA' refers to the IRA during the time of Irish Independence

21). It felt that the sectarian slurs aimed at Lafferty, therefore, are doing more than venting anger; they are what Jones (2008) calls performing identity work, showing a moral and cultural boundary between the Celtic community and those deemed outsiders.

Boundary-policing through language was often collective on the forum. When fans question Lafferty's behaviour through the threads, Celtic fans confirmed his Protestant/Rangers identity and contextualised it as negative. This indicated that sectarian labelling on the forum is a shared social code and by using the term hun fans reinforces a vision of two tribes (Catholic/Celtic and Protestant/Rangers) (Stern, 2016). In this context, every repetition of a sectarian comment is a performative act that re-inscribes the boundary between us and them. As such, the comments on the forum do not describe Lafferty as an outsider; they produce him as one in the discourse, and in so doing, Celtic fans reproduce their own group identity as its opposite (Porat, 2010). By doing sectarianism through posting comments, fans solidify the cultural script that defines a Celtic supporter in opposition to the Protestant/loyalist Other. Examples of this are shown below:

Lafferty is a dirty hun bastard. - Celtic Fan 6

Lafferty is a joke - Celtic 7

Up ye lafferty ya hun bastard - Celtic Fan 8

Forgot how much I despised Lafferty. Total scumbag of a player - Celtic Fan 9

Lafferty dirty orange bastard. Finish his career here today with a ban - Celtic Fan 10

My hatred for Lafferty hasn't diminished over the years I see. A long with Cromwell and Billy Orange¹⁸ - Celtic Fan 11

That lafferty is a scum bag carrot - Celtic Fan 12

As I continued, I noticed that the portrayal of Kyle Lafferty was elevated to the status of a folk devil as described by Cohen (1972). A folk devil is a figure to whom a community projects its fears and moral anger in the context of a moral panic (Cohen,

¹⁸ Oliver Cromwell and William of Orange are prominent figures in Irish history who represent the Protestant ascendancy

2011). As such, Lafferty's behaviour symbolises an intolerance that threatens the Kerrydale Street community's values. Online Celtic fans spoke of him using sectarian hatred, using his case to warn other fans as '*visible reminders of what we should not be*' (Cohen, 2011, p. 1126). This also corresponds with Cohen's observation that folk discourse constructs clear villains to channel societal anxieties. Cultural memory and historical grievance are also present in the Celtic community's collective recall of decades of anti-Irish Catholic discrimination, from the derogatory fenian chants aimed at them to real episodes of violence and intimidation. Below are extracted examples of this at play:

Laugherty should get hammered for that video. Charged and also banned from football for a while. As someone said earlier in the thread, if you replace fenian with another word it would be national news. Tonev¹⁹ got a 7 match ban for something that was not proven so lets see what that muppet gets. Apart from lauded by too many people of course. - Celtic fan 13

Reply: He got given a 10-game ban. He'll play the Minority Card I'm sure the impartial Scottish media will be all over that lafferty video and serious questions will be asked of him. - Celtic Fan 14

It's a fairly incredible situation that this is acceptable in this country by the clubs, the footballing authorities and the wider judiciary system. Put any other ethnic, racial or religious slur into that phrase in this situation and he is eff. Madness - Celtic Fan 13

Reply: If a player had been banned for 10 games for calling someone a p*ki or a n*gger, would it all be seen as one big laugh and him coming back to get 'revenge'? Would it eff. Horrible, orange, scum bastard - Celtic Fan 14

Wonder what his brother in law will make of that, although he probably calls him a freakish orange bastard as a cursory greeting. Probably won't even be deemed newsworthy. It's not a hun crying. He was on the punditry panel for the Scotland game. The huns always looks after their own. - Celtic fan 15

Within these narratives, it was clear that the emotional tone swings between humour and anxiety (Cohen, 2011). On one hand, fans use humour as a coping strategy, mocking the folk devil (Lafferty) to diminish his power. On the other hand, there is an undercurrent of moral urgency calling to stamp out sectarianism, and satisfaction that Lafferty received the maximum ban. This suggests that Celtic fans see his punishment as a broader victory against the threat he represents. They construct a morality tale

¹⁹ Aleksandar Tonev was a Celtic winger who was handed a seven-match ban after being found guilty of using racist insults

that the Kerrydale Street community must be vigilant against figures like Lafferty to prevent the recurrence of past horrors of discrimination (anti-Irish sentiment as mentioned in McBride, 2022). Consequently, Lafferty becomes a figure for the community's outrage and underlying fears. By attacking him online, Celtic supporters calm those anxieties and reaffirm the moral boundary lines of their virtual world. However, the need to do so in such fashion underlines how entwined sectarian histories are with contemporary group identities. Even as Celtic fans claim to reject sectarianism, they find themselves commenting on its language to define who they are and who they are not.

Like James McClean, Geertz's (1972) analysis provides a metaphor for interpreting the ritual dimension of Kyle Lafferty. Geertz (1972) argues that events create ritualised expressions of social tension, status rivalry, and cultural meanings within a community. This is a form of deep play wherein people symbolically endorse conflicts and hierarchies without changing their everyday social status (Geertz, 2001). By analogy, the Celtic/Catholic/Republican and Rangers/Protestant/Unionist rivalry can be seen as a grand cockfight of Scottish football. The Kerrydale Street forum serves as the ring in which symbolic battles are fought through chants, insults, memes, and debates. When online Celtic fans attack Kyle Lafferty and, by extension, what he represents, online fans engage in performative hatred that is ritualised (Reed, 2006). Lafferty is condemned in moral terms, jokes and derogatory nicknames are posted, and collective triumph is expressed at his punishment. For example:

Lad gets him in the photo and says 'up the celts.' It's done in a humorous way but our Kyle didn't see the funny side cos he's a dour hun wink. It was more him calling us a pack, as if we were animals, or that he never added unrepentant, that bothered me. Orange bastard. - Celtic Fan 16

If he were called a proddy bastard then it would need calling out as thats racist. Calling someone an orange whatever is not racist as the orange order is not a religion. So Kyle Lafferty is indeed a dirty orange bastard. - Celtic Fan 17

Lafferty literally lived in a house caked in dog Shampoo, he's pondlife. - Celtic Fan 18

Lafferty I'm sure he was one of the tramps to say no to newco. - Celtic Fan 19

Jaffa bastard. - Celtic Fan 20

One aspect I picked up on was how routine the comments of hatred become on the forum. Indeed, Geertz (1972, p 23) noted that despite the intensity of cockfights, '*no one's status really changes,*' and society continues afterward much as before. Likewise, after the outbreak of forum posts about Lafferty, daily life offline resumed; Celtic and Rangers fans still work together, live side by side in Glasgow, and the institutions of Scottish football roll on (Conner, 2011). This ritual of Kerrydale Street helps prevent constant violence by concentrating hostility into symbolic events (matches, incidents like this) with clear boundaries. In this sense, the sectarian discourse is ritualised hatred that both expresses and manages social conflict. It keeps the antagonism on a performative level, a key insight from Geertz's interpretive anthropology.

However, I did pick up on a contradiction. I noted that whilst Celtic fans can be seen as providing a safe outlet for old hatreds, they also continuously reinforce those very hatreds within the Kerrydale Street culture. Every time a Celtic fan commented with a derogatory response about Lafferty, they renewed the vocabulary and symbols of sectarian animosity for another cycle. This conflict is therefore ritualised but also perpetuated in collective memory and practice (Halbwachs, 2020). Geertz (2001) highlights how meaningful and culturally thick these rituals are, and they are models of society's values and models for how to behave against the other. As such, the Lafferty episode became a small morality play and a model for what Celtic fans should do when an opponent crosses the line. The ritual perspective helps explain why sectarian terms are common in the Kerrydale Street fan culture, as they have been ritualised over time into the very performances that give the rivalry its passionate flavour. The following thread demonstrates this point:

Can't believe what that Hun bastard Lafferty has gotten away with with those comments - Celtic Fan 21

Does Jenz have blood on the groin area of his shorts? eff scummy Hun bastard Lafferty, can't believe those shampoo bag commentators didn't call it. - Celtic Fan 22

Forgot how much I despised Lafferty. Total scumbag of a player - Celtic Fan 23

Lafferty dirty orange bastard. Finish his career here today - Celtic Fan 24

My hatred for Lafferty hasn't diminished over the years I see - Celtic Fan 25

That Lafferty is a scum bag carrot²⁰ - Celtic Fan 26

Beyond identity and ritual, I also observed that the Kerrydale Street forum is richly narrative and full of stories. Bairner (2014) notes that football fans are storytellers by nature, and they interpret events in terms of storylines, complete with heroes, villains, themes, and morals. As such, online fans make sense of the social world by fitting happenings into familiar social structures (Dixon, 2011). In football, this often means framing incidents as heroic tales of conflict where one's team/tribe is the protagonist, and the rival provides the antagonist. As Sanderson (2013) notes, sports fans love to root for a hero and against a villain, and having a compelling villain can magnify the emotional experience of the sport. The enjoyment of rivalry is tied to these character narratives; fans get pleasure seeing the bad guy get his punishment just as they celebrate their heroes triumphing.

Furthermore, sectarian outbursts cemented Lafferty's villain status in the eyes of Celtic supporters, uplifting him to a symbolic embodiment of evil within their virtual world. It was clear that Celtic supporters constructed a clear narrative as Lafferty is portrayed as a repeat offender and a bad character. This narrative ties into a broader morality tale of the Celtic and Rangers rivalry (Bradley, 2022; Flint and Kelly, 2013). In this case, Celtic fans often see themselves (and their club) as champions of diversity and victims of historic prejudice, while certain figures on the Rangers side become images of anti-Catholic or anti-Irish sentiment (the bad guys). Lafferty's use of the word Fenian instantly fits him into the moral imagination of the evil oppressor. Celtic fans repeatedly referenced how this incident was no surprise given Lafferty's background, narrating a continuity in his character arc. In doing so, Celtic supporters constructed a moral story that bigotry is a defining trait of the other side's characters, and when it surfaces, justice must be served:

Kyle Lafferty being Kyle Lafferty - Celtic Fan 27

Just a total dck, you never wish a gambling addiction on anyone - Celtic Fan 28

It was more him calling us a pack, as if we were animals, or that he never added unrepentant, that bothered me. Orange bastard. - Celtic Fan 29

²⁰ 'Carrot' referring to the colour Orange which links to the Orange Order

Expected nothing less from Lafferty. Big effing idiot of a guy. A bigot, a thug and an bum. - Celtic Fan 30

What a feckin bellend. No doubt will ignored by the papers. - Celtic Fan 31

Laugherty trying to stay relevant - it's all he has. - Celtic Fan 32

Lafferty being a rancid carrot - Celtic Fan 33

Parry's (2021) work on sport, hero formation and national identity informs us that villains in stories serve as foils to heroes as they embody what the community defines as wrong, thereby showing what it considers right. By casting Lafferty as a villain, Celtic fans positioned themselves as the heroes of the Lafferty incident and the 10-game ban. This moral dichotomy was evident in much of the Kerrydale forum, as I observed throughout. Such a point is satisfying to Celtic fans because it validates their identity and history regarding Ireland and Catholicism (Clancy, 2010). The key factor is that framing Lafferty as a symbolic enemy taps into larger narratives of Irish Catholic struggle versus Protestant prejudice (Finn, 1991). Parry (2021) would suggest that plot devices were at play on the forum, where the villain's fall (Lafferty's humiliation) and his punishment serve as the story's moral resolution.

The case of Kyle Lafferty on Kerrydale Street shows both the progress and the pitfalls. On one hand, the condemnation of his slur indicates a contemporary norm against sectarian hate; on the other hand, the performative way that condemnation was carried out shows how sectarian conflict itself has become gamified. This section thus highlights a paradox; Celtic fans, in ritualising their fight against sectarianism, risk keeping it alive. Sectarian language is re-authored in the story's fans tell and re-enacted in the identity drama of the forum. The next section turns my attention to Follow Follow forum to see if a similar dynamic was at play amongst Rangers fans.

5.5 Analysing Follow Follow Users to Kyle Lafferty's Sectarian Ban

Straightaway, the Lafferty affair became a collective representation of group identity and grievances amongst the Follow Follow community (King, 2000). Durkheim's (1982) theory of collective representations suggests that certain symbols and actions

stand for a community's shared ideas and values. In the eyes of many Rangers supporters, Kyle Lafferty, a Protestant from Northern Ireland and a two-time Rangers player, embodies core components of the club's cultural identity. His background in a Unionist community and open affinity for Rangers mean Lafferty is not just a football player but a symbolic figure (Herd, 2017). When he was caught on video, it was interpreted by the Rangers fan base in a representative way. Below are the initial comments on this incident at play:

At some point someone needs to take a stand hopefully it's Lafferty and he doesn't back down. He comes out and doubles down with a rendition of sweet Caroline. The double standards of the Daily Record. The same Rhag that had no issue with the Green Brigade declaring themselves as F****ns went on the attack with Kyle Lafferty with the same term. Thats what you're up against here on Scotland. We must support Laf. - Rangers fan 1

He's an Ulster Protestant who played for and supports Rangers and played for NI. That's enough for them to be getting on with as fair game in their eyes. The abuse about his sister passing away being the lowest they've stooped to in his case. Support for Laf - Rangers fan 2

Lafferty grew up in a unionist village in Fermanagh but outside of those unionist enclaves wearing a rangers jersey marked you out as a Brit/black/orange/planter bastard,take your pick from each insult.shouldnt be but it'll be water of a ducks back. It's never been a level playing field and it's getting worse - Rangers fan 3

Reply: Ethnic cleansing, Ethnic cleansing of the Catholic Faith... Free speech... Great work Laf - Rangers Fan 4

It was evident that Rangers fans immediately supported Lafferty as one of their own. Many perceived the punishment of a 10-game ban as not a balanced response to bigotry, but as an attack on their community's values by outside authorities. In other words, Lafferty's difficulty became a proxy through which Rangers supporters expressed long-standing grievances. It felt like Lafferty voiced what the Rangers community knows about Celtic fans and punishing him was like punishing the truth itself. The free speech referenced in the above thread hints at a belief that mainstream society is censoring the Rangers/Protestant voice and a sentiment that points to broader cultural resentment. This encapsulates how fan culture interprets the ban as an illegitimate imposition, almost a disrespect against the forum's representation. Linking to Durkheim's (1982) collective conscience, the SFA's disciplinary action

outraged what Rangers fans considered the right to express their collective identity, even in offensive ways.

Further comments on the forum highlighted that Lafferty grew up in the Protestant/Unionist tradition of Northern Ireland, which contrasts with the Catholic/Nationalist identity associated with Celtic supporters (Rosie, 2004). This emphasis shows how the incident taps into ethno-religious identities. It was as if Lafferty's behaviour was contextualised (or excused) by Rangers fans as a product of who he is and where he comes from, interpreting him as a symbol of Rangers culture fighting back against Celtic. As I observed the comments more, Lafferty's Protestant upbringing and support for Rangers stressed how the core aspects of identity shape fans' perceptions and defence of their heroes. This showed that many fans saw Lafferty as a representative of their imagined community (Anderson, 2006), caught in a wider battle of values. Below is an extracted thread that shows this:

Kyle should just say he is a catholic and he was just street talking to his fellow travellers. In a world where men become women etc who is going to question him. Banned for saying the truth. Bastards. it is not an offence to call someone a 19th Century Terrorist but if you add bast*rd on then it is an offence! Still baffled by SFA involvement - Rangers fan 5

Fking ridiculous. Only in Scotland would you get a ten game ban for speaking the truth. Yon Slavia player got less punishment for real racism. Meanwhile on the other side.. you can be caught spewing the greatest hits of terrorist anthems and any kind of sectarian bile that your heart desires, that gets you a new program on the BBC - Rangers Fan 6

Im absolutely raging at this. So we can see a club disgrace the county by disgusting chanting after the queens death and face no punishment. Kyle gets wound up by idiots on a night out, makes a stupid comment and is fined and a ten match ban. An fkn joke. His only crime was honesty Yep but if he said dirty orange bastard then nobody does a thing. - Rangers Fan 7

Fifty years of abuse of children and covered up by a rancid organisation from the east of Glasgow. Nothing has been done where have the SFA been on this crime against children who just wanted to play football - Rangers Fan 8

By positioning Lafferty as a target, Rangers fans argue that he was a victim of anti-Protestant agendas, and his sectarian slip is forgiven as a reaction within a broader struggle between two communities; punishing Lafferty becomes symbolic of a victim

on the Follow Follow forum community (Newson, 2023). The depth of emotion in these comments demonstrates Durkheim's notion that a collective representation (here, Lafferty as an emblem of the cause) can mobilise communal passions. It also fits with Benedict Anderson's observation that a nation (or any community) is imagined into being by shared sentiments and stories. In rallying to Lafferty's side, Rangers fans imagined themselves as part of a companionship standing up for one of their own against hostile external forces. Some Rangers fans even argue that sectarianism only works one way in Scotland, expressing resentment that anti-Protestant slurs are often ignored while anti-Catholic slurs draw punishment. The incident, therefore, becomes a benchmark for Rangers fans to discuss fairness and bias and a standard against which they measure other cases. In this way, it serves as a symbolic reference point in debates about what counts as sectarianism and who gets to police it (Law, 2018; Flint, 2008). Further to this aspect is the selective outrage, as forum users seemed to let off Lafferty for his behaviour. Discourse and power are intertwined here as the Follow Follow community asserts power to decide which narratives are amplified (e.g. the media is biased against us) and which are not. Below are a few comments taken from this at work:

Lafferty would be best advised to say nothing at all here, people will move on to the next thing they are "offended" about and pile on to someone else soon enough - Rangers Fan 9

We've all been brought up to always tell the truth, Kyle's clearly no different - Rangers Fan 10

No surrender Kyle Lafferty! - Rangers Fan 11

That . . . and the St. Boo-supporting actor using a sectarian slur to describe Protestants. - Rangers Fan 12

Well said Kyle!!! - Rangers Fan 13

No Surrender Kyle Lafferty - Rangers Fan 14

Durkheim's (1982) concept of collective effervescence describes the buzz that arises when groups gather and share intense emotions. Traditionally applied to religious rituals and cheering crowds, this idea can illuminate online fan forums during moments of outrage. As such, I noticed that the Follow Follow forum became a virtual gathering

where fans fed off each other's anger in real time. Posts appeared in succession, each reaffirming the outrage of the last. This resulted in a surge of shared emotional intensity that unified online fans in their passionate defence of Lafferty and the club. This mirrors what Durkheim observed in physical crowds that individuals feel swept up in electric emotions and a sense of unity with the group. The outrage became ritualised, reinforcing group cohesion as fans came together to condemn perceived injustices. Such a function as deep play, where the drama carries symbolic weight and reaffirms communal meanings about who the Rangers community is and what it stands for (Geertz, 1972). The collective rush of posting together therefore solidifies the sense of us (the Rangers family) against them (Celtic, the media, or authorities), demonstrating Durkheim's insight that communal emotion strengthens the social bonds and shared beliefs of a group.

It was also evident that Rangers fans often used coded language and euphemisms to express sectarian insults without breaking rules on the site. For example, the term '19th Century Terrorist' was used as a euphemism for 'fenian' essentially a code for an Irish Catholic or Celtic fan, so that a hateful message can be conveyed without using a banned slur. Such euphemistic hate speech is a known phenomenon online as communities develop benign-sounding code words to get a message across while evading detection from authorities (Barman et al., 2014). Users also obscure banned words by altering spelling or adding punctuation. McMenemy and Poulter (2005) study found similar findings where users would write 'h.un' in place of 'hun' or 'f.en1ain' for 'fenian' to slip past automated censorships. These linguistic tactics enabled fans to voice sectarian sentiments while technically adhering to forum rules and avoiding keywords that might trigger legal liability (Goodall, 2013). The result is an insider language of sectarianism that is recognisable to in-group members but less obvious to outsiders. Below is an example of this at play:

Lafferty grew up in a unionist village in Fermanagh but outside of those unionist enclaves wearing a rangers jersey marked you out as a Brit/black/orange/planter bastard,take your pick from each insult.shouldnt be but it'll be water of a ducks back. It's never been a level playing field and it's getting worse. 19th Century Terrorist bastards - Rangers Fan 15

Fifty years of Fenian abuse of children and covered up by a rancid organisation from the east of Glasgow. Nothing has been done where have the SFA been on this crime against children who just wanted to play football - Rangers Fan 16

Im absolutely raging at this. So we can see a club disgrace the county by disgusting chanting after the queens death and face no punishment. Kyle gets wound up by idiots on a night out, makes a stupid comment and is fined and a ten match ban. An fkn joke - Rangers Fan 17

His only crime was Taig honesty - Rangers fan 18

it is not an offence to call someone a 19th Century Terrorist but if you add bast*rd on then it is an offence! Still baffled by SFA involvement - Rangers fan 19

Bakhtin (1981) views all language as fundamentally dialogic, with every comment responding to previous comments and anticipating future responses, situated in a social context of many voices. In the case of Rangers fans, their sectarian expressions are not isolated insults; they are part of an ongoing dialogue among the in-group itself. Bakhtin wrote that *'the word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder... it cannot speak monologically... isolated from all social, historical, and ideological contexts'* (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 249). In this case, coded sectarian terms on the forum are rejoinders in a historical conversation as they carry echoes of past exchanges between Rangers and Celtic communities. For example, calling someone a 19th Century Terrorist is dialogic in that it answers a whole history of conflict (the Irish Republican narrative) and answers contemporary constraints (it says Fenian without saying the word). The phrase only makes sense against the backdrop of what Rangers fans are known to comment on or what terms are deemed as sectarian, as it's shaped by that context of previous conversations.

Bakhtin (1981) also suggests the concept of 'heteroglossia', which coexistence of multiple social languages and perspectives in discourse. Here, I note 'heteroglossia' in the Rangers forum through the mix of comments and references; the language of football fandom, the language of sectarian history, parody, and irony, and even the sanitised language of official moderation all intermix when talking about Kyle Lafferty. It was clear that Rangers fans often commented in a double-voiced way. For instance, they imitate what they think Celtic fans behave like while commenting from their perspective. Bakhtin (1981) implies that this means none of these comments exist alone, and they gain meaning by positioning themselves in opposition against Celtic

fans. Every sectarian nickname or joke acknowledges the other side's presence as a framework to make sense:

Turns out the incident was in Belfast. Not even the usual pedo lovers on the wind up.
- Rangers Fan 20

You can hear the accent of the scum fan. - Rangers Fan 21

Are the British Army even still in Ireland? - Rangers Fan 22

We live in a very lopsided country with yahoo's in control of the narrative, anything which offends or is against celtic is deemed sectarian. The call it out bigots, speirs, etc, are very selective on what they call out. Their crusade is in essence selectarian. - Rangers Fan 73

Selectarianism only works one way. - Rangers Fan 23

Daft bigoted racists, why should "the Brits" pay heed to them and leave a part of Britain anyhow? Shame this racist behaviour is seemingly acceptable in another part of Britain, namely Scotland. - Rangers Fan 24

How can "Sectarianism" be taken seriously in this country. When they choose to ignore the parts that don't fit their agenda - Rangers Fan 25

Can someone remind me of how many games that fenian Lennon got banned for when he called us Orange Bastards on the pitch at Ibrox. Aye, the SFA are a bunch w ankers. - Rangers fan 26

What was interesting was that it felt like the comments were crafted as if Celtic fans were listening. This adds to the tension that language amongst football fans is confrontational and performative, sustaining the feeling of an ongoing feud (Carvell, 2013). In Bakhtin's (1981) sense, truth itself is dialogic; here, Rangers' truth about the other is shown through a continuous argumentative exchange. A clear example appears when a Rangers user accuses Celtic's Neil Lennon of being the most bigoted player while simultaneously calling him a 'Fenian bastard'. The poster is answering an imagined Celtic claim of victimhood with a counteraccusation, but in doing so, he does not realise that they are proving the very point about sectarian abuse. This kind of irony, where one voice undermines the other even within one utterance, is exactly what Bakhtin (1981) would highlight as the multi-voiced nature of such discourse. Every statement contains traces of the larger conversation as the poster knows '*poor Neil Lennon*' is a narrative out there and they are responding to it.

Kilvington et al., (2022) found that most online fans adopt a narrow view of prejudice and downplay discriminatory incidents, seeing abuse as mere banter or part of the game by distancing their group from blame and focusing on external enemies. Communities reinforce a narrative that preserves their positive self-image (Kilvington et al., 2022). The concept is relevant to this study as Rangers users protect their identity and any member who symbolises that identity, often by dismissing critical evidence and morally defending the indefensible. Consequently, Lafferty receives robust forum defence (e.g., portraying him as a proud Protestant targeted unjustly), while any critique is seen as a betrayal by rival fans. The online disinhibition effect contributes, as Rangers fans feel encouraged to use hostile language in defending their icons without the restraints that would exist. The overall result is that the forum remains intact and reinforced by active participants. Defending controversial figures thus becomes a point of pride and identity for the group, and the absence of internal opposition (Celtic) means sectarian language and attitudes surrounding Kyle Lafferty remain entrenched and normalised in the online space.

5.6 Summary

Analysis of the case of Kyle Lafferty on Kerrydale Street demonstrates that James McLean and Kyle Lafferty draw on the emotions of belonging between the Celtic and Rangers communities. This is complete with rituals, symbols, and a demonised out-group to unite against. Celtic and Rangers fans continue to endure through the process of history and through the involvement of social institutions that have long codified sectarian division (Bradley, 2022; Conner, 2011). In the digital age, it finds a new lens where users utilise sectarian performances beyond the stadium. However, it is essential to note that this is not to say that sectarianism is absolute. Outsiders might view such language as hatred, but for those inside the forums, it carries social meaning. It is a performance of loyalty and defiance that generates collective effervescence (in Emile Durkheim's sense) and a heightened emotional state where online fans feel swept up in a cause with fellow fans.

Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums, therefore, become a carnival arena where normal etiquette is suspended and taboos can be voiced (Pearson, 2004). Football fans who might never articulate sectarian views in polite society comment on these

online spaces and treat the events of McClean and Lafferty as an emotional escape from everyday restraints (Ludvigsen, 2023). As Goffman (1997) would argue, fans are performing a role that adopts a persona that obeys the unwritten scripts of their tribe. In the moment of posting on threads, fans who do not personally hold sectarian prejudices participate because their fandom is a separate reality in which these beliefs are accepted and promoted. This creates and maintains group cohesion (Bale, 2002; Hutchins, Rowe, and Ruddock, 2009). In other words, sectarian terminology is a social fact (Durkheim, 1982) and an external cultural practice that compels and rewards participants with a sense of togetherness.

The stories of James McClean and Kyle Lafferty show an important feature of contemporary sectarianism as it adapts and persists in new forms. Even as explicit sectarian behaviours like bigoted chanting in stadiums faces crackdowns, the underlying 'us vs. them' ethos finds new outlets through symbolic proxies. Specific individuals by virtue of their background and actions come to stand for an entire side of the divide in these spaces. McClean and Lafferty are prime examples of how two people, who have never played for the same club or even in the same league at the same time, can nonetheless be cast as avatars of Celtic and Rangers' eternal feud. By elevating these players to symbolic status, online fans can continue age-old hostilities in a narrative form that borders the edges of what is socially allowed. Open anti-Catholic or anti-Protestant statements are offensive but abusing 'IRA-lover James McClean' or mocking 'bigot Kyle Lafferty' becomes an accepted stand-in.

The language used makes the sectarian intent clear as McClean is attacked because he's an Irish Catholic nationalist (with slurs like fenian and references to the IRA), while Lafferty is derided because he's a Rangers Protestant who voiced anti-Catholic sentiments (earning nicknames like orange b*****d from Celtic fans). Each side thus keeps the other side's folk devil figure constantly in discourse, which in turn reinforces in-group solidarity (Cohen, 1972). Celtic fans feel correct in their belief that anti-Irish sentiment is rife, and this justifies their own continued hostile view of the Rangers establishment. Rangers' fans feel that their culture is under attack by people like McClean and those who support him, which justifies doubling down on their loyalist identity and viewing Celtic supporters as closet sympathisers of the IRA.

What's interesting is that using proxies like McClean and Lafferty to fight sectarian battles has implications for how the problem can be addressed. On one hand, it localises the conflict which Boyd-MacMillan et al., (2016) argue is a slight improvement over random sectarian abuse. On the other hand, it keeps prejudices alive in a different form. The target is a person and the identity they are linked to but everyone in the subtext understands the communal dimension. This coded sectarianism is harder to police. A comment saying '*Can't stand that poppy-refusing scumbag*' does not mention religion or ethnicity, yet the intent is rooted in those factors. Similarly, a message like '*Good riddance Lafferty... bigot got what he deserved*' may seem anti-bigotry but often carries an undertone of '*that's how all those Rangers lot are*'. The discourse around these figures therefore continues stereotypes as McClean is painted as a militant Irish republican and Lafferty is painted by as emblematic of bigoted Ulster loyalists. Either exaggeration captures the whole person as McClean is by many accounts a family man and well-liked teammate who has strong convictions (Sky Sports, 2024); Lafferty, outside of that outburst, had a reputation as a cheerful character and even had friendships across the sectarian divide (BBC, 2024). But this is lost when they are reduced to symbols.

In the end, these two football players experiences offer a microcosm of why sectarianism persists. It adapts, finds cover in new online methods and continues to be fuelled by a potent mix of historical grievance and modern fan identity. Tackling it requires the subtle ways it expresses itself through harmless fan talk about players. As McClean himself posed the question '*What is the difference?*' discrimination by any other name is still discrimination (Morning Star Online, 2020). And as the saga of McClean and Lafferty shows, until that is acknowledged on all sides, the proxy wars will rage on and mirror the old firm fault lines in each new generation of digital fan culture.

CHAPTER 6: THE 'NEW FIRM?' - CELTIC VS RANGERS

6.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to build upon the findings of McMenemy, Poulter, and O'Loan (2005) by examining the 'Old Firm' rivalry within online spaces. It begins with an analysis of comments surrounding the 2023 League Cup final between Celtic and Rangers in which Celtic secured a 2-1 win. Striker Kyogo Furuhashi scored twice as Celtic retained the Cup at Hampton Park in Glasgow on the 26th of February 2023. Since 2011, Celtic have won 26 major trophies compared to Rangers' 3 (BBC, 2025). This has added to fan expectations; shaped by how supporters talk about success, rivalry and identity. Discussions on the Celtic fan forum Kerrydale Street and the Rangers' Follow Follow were observed for the whole month. I captured these discussions to see if sectarianism remains a pervasive and complex part of the fan culture surrounding the 'Old Firm' derby. The chapter will use examples and user interactions from the Cup Final period by applying the theoretical lenses introduced in chapter 3 in more detail. Chapter 5 on McLean and Lafferty has provided the theoretical groundwork on identity, imagined communities, and performativity amongst football players. This chapter is now situating those concepts within the online

experience of Celtic and Rangers communities. In doing so, it argues that sectarianism is a living culture being rewritten in the present within the unregulated spaces of the internet.

I begin my observation with the Kerrydale Street forum. I then move on to the Follow Follow forum to gain a full understanding of the comments made from both sets of supporters. After the match, there were expressions of celebratory posts from Celtic fans and a high volume of angry and resentful posts from Rangers' supporters. The chapter begins by examining the pre-match build up and the nature of the posts during the match and the aftermath of Celtic's victory.

6.2 Kerry Dale Street Forum: All Eyes on the Final

Fans were building excitement for the upcoming final. By recalling how 'we've beaten them before', Celtic fans collectively framed the upcoming final as the next chapter in a proud historical narrative. I noticed the emotional mood of these discussions was full of pride, anticipation, all bubbling up as supporters remembered Celtic's greatest Old Firm moments together. Importantly, this online memory-sharing illustrates what Doidge et al., (2020) describe as mnemonic socialisation within fan communities. Rather than being passive consumers of official club history, fans become active participants in transmitting and reinterpreting shared memories. Doidge and colleagues, in their study of football ultra culture, observe that fan groups create invented traditions, which are ritualised practices and stories repeated over time and serve as a socialising force for group members. Through these rituals, members learn what to remember (glorious wins, heroic players, celebrated goals) and even what to forget (e.g., inconvenient losses), thereby constructing a collective memory that preserves the group's traditions and core values. Below is an extracted thread from Kerrydale Street forum that first shows this:

Please do these manky Hun bastards today bhoys - Celtic Fan 1

I'm eff steaming now. I hope I last until 11 but it's a long way away now. eff it. Anyway, get into this shower of mangey, tax dodging, zombie scum carrot Celtic. Right through them - Celtic Fan 2

In our struggle to find form it seems to have been forgotten that the huns are absolute pish. Could you image a 6-2 like we did under Martin ON - Celtic Fan 3

Reply: Aye, they've largely been pish. Even Huns have said they've been pish. It'll probably be an almighty battle of pish today, but the Huns are rated higher on here than by some of the most delusional, bark at the Moon Huns. And it's also pish. - Celtic Fan 2

Reply: We're not bookies favourites. On Paddy Power the Huns are 7-5 with Celtic 17-10. I suspect it will be the same with the other bookies. - Celtic Fan 1

Been watching back old games all weekend. Oh Ah Samaras! A repeat of that needed today! And maybe Jota can do the Broony²¹.... hik - Celtic Fan 2

Reply: Weve been doing the Broony all morning pal hahaha - Celtic Fan 1

It appeared that Celtic fans use historical events (e.g., battles, political struggles, bygone matches) to bolster the narrative of the rivalry. By crafting their traditions and norms to maintain their collective memory, Celtic fans ensured that each new discussion emphasised the same common values of their Catholic Irish Republican identity. As such, it was clear that this was collective memory at work. Bradley (2022) supports this by implying that Celtic fans provide occasions for unison and the awareness of the imagined community during fan rituals. In the online space, they achieved a similar effect through shared narratives and inside jokes that only those steeped in the club's knowledge would understand.

Spracklen (2022) argues that being a sports fan is about forging emotional connections within an elective community of fellow supporters. The pleasure fans get from the game is about the collective feelings shared with other fans. Here, I noticed that the forum threads were full of reminiscing posts, seen as structured outlets for collective affect. Remembering past fixtures together allows fans to re-experience the rush of winning in the virtual space (Nuttall, 2018). Such interactions demonstrate what Spracklen (2022) considers as affective fan practices where routine and embodied generate shared emotional energy and reinforce bonds. In this way, 'nostalgic forum

²¹ The Broony is a football celebration made famous by Celtic captain Scott Brown

chatter' performs important emotional work as it increases excitement and strengthens a collective consciousness. However, it became apparent that certain users actively contributed to the wider sectarian dynamic. Some forms of language were deliberately employed to provoke and antagonise the Rangers football club. For example:

I'll go for Goldson being the hun allowed up to 8 fouls before he's booked. And a blatant handball ignored. We will still beat them. 2-0, Kyogo and Hatate to score. We've already had enough lapsed catholics getting chased around Hampden for one day. - Celtic Fan 5

Reply: Always flatters to deceive. In the two cup games against the Huns Kyogo had several chances to kill them off and make a name for himself. Missed all of them. It will be a nervous game - Celtic Fan 6

If we get battered by the huns, I'm going to burn my new Celtic shirts (live posted on Instagram for clout), cancel my sub to Celtic TV and I will stop following the club on social media. That'll show 'em. - Celtic Fan 7

Reply: PMSL²² - Celtic Fan 6

Not going to bother watching it, expecting to be pumped and embarrassed off a very average huns team, should be walking into this expecting to destroy them. Something very wrong at us. - Celtic Fan 7

The huns appear to be supremely confident of beating us this weekend and leapfrogging us. They're also confident of beating PS - Celtic Fan 8

Feck it, the Huns are getting pumped. Intae them - Celtic Fan 6

At this point, it was clear that labelling Rangers fans as 'Huns' reaffirmed the Celtic fans' in-group identity by belittling the out-group. According to Jones (1998), strong group identification is linked to greater conformity to group norms and values, meaning if insulting the rival is an accepted norm among fellow supporters, individual fans are likely to adopt that norm to fit in. Cunningham (2014) further adds that collective action in large networks relies on shared social norms. This is seen here as the forum's large network of Celtic supporters collectively treats 'Hun' as an acceptable term and reinforces it routinely. Using the slur becomes camaraderie within the community; It is a form of verbal out-group derogation that bonds the in-group by insulting the enemy (in this case Rangers). This point also resonates with Hogg and Abrams (2006) observation that group cohesion is enhanced when members follow common

²² PMSL is textspeak for "pissing myself laughing"

behaviours and language. Therefore, what might start as banter about Rangers is underpinned by social identity processes as Celtic fans collectively sustain sectarian expressions because it encourages their group esteem and distinctiveness.

It is evident that once a term like 'Hun' is used in the subculture's vocabulary, fans may use it carelessly as part of how they talk about their spaces (Jones and Fleming, 2007). This shared norm excuses the word as just a component of Celtic/Rangers rivalry by masking its sectarian undertones. Indeed, Poulton and Durell (2016) note that fans often deploy words in thoughtless ways without a clear understanding of their origins or the original weight of their meaning. In their case study of Tottenham fans' use of the Y-word, they found that the meaning of pejorative terms can evolve within fan culture, diverging from their historical context. Similarly, many Celtic supporters using Hun might insist they intend no sectarian hatred as it might mean a Rangers fan in their eyes (Giulianotti, 2007). This is because the term is evident in their forums dialect and may downplay its offensiveness by seeing it as just football banter rather than bigotry (Hickey and Roderick, 2024). However, Millar (2016) and McBride (2022) argue that the widespread use of Hun perpetuates sectarian stereotypes in Scotland. They note that it signals the other side is an enemy other deserving of ridicule, reinforcing the historic Catholic-Protestant divide that underlies the Old Firm rivalry. In sum, what one side defends as innocent banter, the other side experiences as coded sectarian abuse.

Nil by Mouth, Scotland's leading anti-sectarian charity, considers 'Hun' as offensive sectarian language used negatively against Protestants or those perceived to be Protestant. (Nil by Mouth, 2024). Even within fan circles, meanings can be unstable, as shown in the Tottenham case, reclaimed slurs can be double-edged and eventually subject to wider societal rejection (In the 2020s, Tottenham's club itself began urging fans to drop the Y-word, acknowledging its hurtful origins despite its internal meaning shift). Therefore, while subcultural context may soften a word's meaning for insiders, the original derogatory power often persists, especially in intergroup settings. The evolution of language in fan communities demonstrates the fluidity of symbols and highlights the clash between insider and outsider interpretations of potentially hateful speech. Below is an example of this at play, where the term 'Hun' is used and 'Orangeism' is also played on:

Huns pandering to their bigot fanbase yet again with an orange strip. They should bring out some training gear with a White pointy hood as it's a guaranteed seller. - Celtic Fan 10

Dirty, orange bastards. - Celtic Fan 11

I probably hate the Orange order more than you 👍 - Celtic Fan 10

Twinkle Twinkle you orange c**t Yer maw shuldnae hae had that punt When she saw yer ugly mug She knew yer da was that big black dug - Celtic Fan 11

twinkle twinkle orange sashes to the ground he swiftly crashes - Celtic Fan 12

Twinkle, twinkle, orange bastard Hope you hit the ground real hard - Celtic Fan 11

Are Gerrards²³ new team colours green, white and orange? - Celtic Fan 13

Ducking orange bastards - Celtic Fan 14

McMenemy and Poulter (2005) research on computer-mediated communication shows that the relative anonymity of online interactions '*provides freedom from constraint but also freedom from responsibility*' (P.17). In practical terms, a user hiding behind a pseudonymous handle on a Celtic forum faces lower social accountability for their words than they would in person. The absence of face-to-face cues (status, age, identity) encourages a more uninhibited communication style. McMenemy and Poulter (2005) further note that the lack of real-life checks combined with homogeneous group membership can allow sectarian language to display in these forums. In a space where nearly everyone is a Celtic supporter, using 'Hun' or 'Orange' to insult Rangers is also cheered by the in-group. New members entering the community quickly see that slurs are part of the local lingo, and they adapt to these entrenched norms to gain acceptance (Cleland, 2010). As such, the Kerrydale Street became an echo chamber of fan antagonism as Celtic fans mirror each other's hostility towards Rangers, and any dissenting voices who challenge the sectarian tone were likely to be shouted down.

Research by Bradley (2022) and Kelly (2011) has shown how religious and ethnic identities become entwined with Celtic and Rangers supporters. For many Celtic fans,

²³ Steven Gerrard - Ex Rangers Manager

supporting Celtic is more than just sport as it ties into an Irish Catholic heritage and a narrative of endurance against anti-Irish discrimination (McBride 2022, Conner, 2011). As a result, tribalism persists because it continuously fuels this group identity. Bradley (2021) further notes that the Old Firm fixture is a memory infused with politics, religion, history, ethno-religious discrimination, colonialism, and anti-colonialism, and these communal memories feed the rivalry's intensity. When such collective memories are activated (as seen in the above threads), they further polarise the us/them divide and justify ongoing sectarian hostility as *'the way it has always been'* (Holligan and Deuchar, 2009, p. 740). The behaviour on the forum is rationalised by fans as defending the Celtic side and heritage against the long-standing footballing enemy of Rangers. It becomes a battleground where Celtic fans collectively perform a us vs. them narrative, seeing themselves as protectors of their club's honour against an opposing tribe.

At the same time, collective memories on these forums are selectively constructed and reinforced by the community. Halbwachs (2020) suggests that the collective memory of any group is not a neutral reflection of the past but is a carefully manipulated construction shaped by those who hold the power to define it. Those with influence within the community can reinforce certain narratives, ensuring they align with the group's identity and values. The process strengthens a feeling of authentic and emotional connection among Celtic fans. It solidifies a version of history that supports a collective purpose (Giulianotti, 2002). Referring to the Unionist colour 'Orange' illustrates how the forum reinforces in-group solidarity while drawing sharp boundaries against out-groups (Rangers) (Edgell et al., 2020). It reflects the complex intersection of sport, politics, and religion in forming the Celtic fan's identity and dynamics. Kerrydale Street thus becomes both tools and objects of power as it actively circulates the group's preferred historical sectarian narrative (as tools), and they are moulded by that very narrative and the social pressure around it (as objects). This dynamic strengthens an authentic and emotional connection among Celtic fans; by collectively remembering and retelling certain stories, they deepen their bond and commitment to the club's cause. Another example is shown below:

They signed Hagi before covid ffs how can they still owe money for him? :lol:
Remember who you're talking about here, the (dirty orange) bastard offspring of a

club who stiffed football clubs, face painters and even Bhutta the newsagent. - Celtic Fan 16

The only thing that ever looked good in Orange is a Terry's chocolate orange. And an orange. - Celtic Fan 17

Aye, take that you fvcking Hun b&statds, looking at you TikTok Buffalo Billy 🤔😂 - Celtic Fan 18

Reply: Nice day for it at Hampton. £45 well spent, Billy. - Celtic Fan 19

Reply: Lovely day for it Billy. Daft tramps. - Celtic Fan 20

They're just a shower orange bastards, that's all you need to know - Celtic fan 21

The Hun lives to publicly display their anti- Catholicism, from orange walks to world record pallet burning. Depriving them of the platform at Celtic Park to spew anti-Catholicism live on TV is a good thing. - Celtic Fan 22

Indeed, my closer analysis of the Kerrydale forum conversations revealed obvious sectarian slurs and an us vs. them mentality that goes far beyond harmless football banter. Celtic fans use labels for Protestants and Unionists and reinforce a sense of identity defined in opposition to these groups. This reality challenges Bruce et al., (2004) claim that sectarianism in Scotland is largely a myth by demonstrating that deep-seated bigotry is still openly performed in contemporary fan culture. It also complicates McBride's (2018) view that sectarianism should be understood primarily as a form of anti-Irish racism. While McBride highlights the historical anti-Irish (anti-Catholic) prejudice faced by the Irish Catholic community, the Kerrydale Street discourse shows that sectarian antagonism can also manifest in reverse. The anti-Protestant and anti-Unionist sentiment indicates that prejudice is not unidirectional but ingrained on both sides of the cultural divide. Having established the general tone of the forum, the next step was to examine how these performances play out in the context of the live match. In the following section, I turn to the match-day action on the forum to see how such hostility and identity reinforcement intensify during the game.

6.3 Celtic Fans and the Battle in Play

When Celtic scored their opening goal, the emotional mood of the forum shifted. The thread erupted in celebration with proud comments of 'Yasssss!' appearing. In that

moment of euphoria, Celtic fans' posts merged into a single chorus of triumph, reflecting what Durkheim (1982) terms as collective effervescence and the rush of unity during a shared emotional high. At that point, I could sense the emotional impact on the forum; it was not a mild joy, but an energy performed via caps-locked outcries, celebratory GIFs, and emotive slang. Below is an example of this at play:

Zombies on the ropes here - Celtic Fan 23

GET IN CELTIC!!!! - Celtic Fan 24

Not sure if the ref was playing the advantage, or was just thinking "get it right up you, ya fenian c*nts, Im giving you f*ck all on the edge of the box". - Celtic 25

Reply: Delighted to see Alfie's²⁴ wee hun face after that goal. As already said, this will haunt them for weeks. Delicious stuff - Celtic Fan 24

Thank God for that! Go gettem' Bhoys - Celtic Fan 26

Huns will be strong, then the hoards are all "turned the corner" "starting to gel" no taig would get in our team WATP²⁵ HAHA Until the next dry humping, most fickle support on the planet (of the apes) - Celtic Fan 27

Send the Huns back to hell - Celtic Fan 28

Need a couple of pints to settle the stomach here - Celtic Fan 29

Throughout the match thread, Celtic supporters' commentary illustrated classic in-group versus out-group dynamics. On one hand, fans heaped praise (and trust) on their side by celebrating players' skill and commitment and rallying each other to get the job done. This enthusiasm both boosts the in-group (Celtic) and simultaneously denigrates the out-group (Rangers supporters) as headed for humiliation. Such posts reveal how in-group affirmation and out-group ridicule are two sides of the same coin in sectarian fan discourse. Positive self-stereotyping and glorification of Celtic went together with derogatory characterisation of Rangers as inept. Lianopoulos et al., (2020) study on local and distant fans notes that fans gain self-esteem from their group's prestige and therefore have a motive to emphasise positive distinctiveness of the in-group while belittling the rival. Here, Celtic fans use this method by referred to Rangers through mock-terms like 'Sevco,' 'the zombies' or "the huns'. This ritual of

²⁴ Alfie is short for Ex Rangers Striker Alfredo Morelos

²⁵ WATP is an acronym that stands for 'We Are the People'

renaming the Other in sarcastic terms serves to strip Rangers of respect or even basic personhood. For instance, calling Rangers fans 'zombies' casts them as mindless undead and thereby elevates the Celtic collective by contrast.

Notably, the Celtic fans also engaged in in-group praise, though often in a rough, tribal idiom. Key Celtic players were praised, and moments of skill were celebrated as evidence of Celtic's superiority. After Celtic's goals, fans expressed praise for the goal scorers ("Kyogo, you beauty!" would be a typical response) and for the team's fighting spirit. It was clear that this positive discourse about the in-group enhances collective pride and unity. It aligns with the concept of basking in reflected glory, where fans share in the glory of the team's achievements as if it were their own (Cialdini et al., 1976). Indeed, many fans used first-person plural pronouns to discuss Celtic's performance, indicating how fans merged their identity with the team. This collective self-referencing further solidified the in-group boundary as the 'we' did not include any Huns. As such, language on the forum served two functions as it uplifted the forum through affirmations and shared triumphs and it derogated Rangers through slurs. Both ways reinforced each other; celebrating Celtic often went together with mocking Rangers, producing a charged loose environment in which collective identity was continuously asserted.

Interestingly, I noticed that Celtic supporters also adopt sectarian slurs for themselves as a form of group solidarity. This dynamic of reclaiming a derogatory label is noted by Popa-Wyatt (2020), who observed that people may use historically pejorative terms about their own community to reinforce their identity as an embattled minority. In practice, some Celtic fans proudly self-identify as 'Fenian' a term originally used as an anti-Irish Catholic insult. Here the term 'Fenian' was recontextualised as a badge of honour, symbolising the Celtic faith and Irish heritage. By using the slur about themselves, Celtic fans aim to neutralise its hateful meaning and turn it into a marker of pride. Below is an example of this at play:

We will still beat them. 2-0, Kyogo and Hatate to score. We've already had enough lapsed Catholics getting chased around Hampden for one day. - Celtic Fan 26

Reply: the fenian penalty spot coming into play there. - Celtic Fan 21

Rangers bench hahahaha! Hun manager incapable of self-reflection is music to my Fenian ears. - Celtic Fan 27

We party tonight, because we never stop.” - Ange Postecoglou Roger that boss. Set Fenian to scheidtfaced. Mon the Celtic amigos. - Celtic Fan 21

I'm absolutely certain we have broken them. Was he looking to see what he was having for dinner No billy burgers in the bins outside my flat. Fenian falafel only. That's probably what annoyed them. My multicultural bin. I have no idea what I'm talking about at this point :lol - Celtic Fan 21

Reply: Extra fenian points for you. - Celtic Fan 22

The above somewhat agrees with Morrow (2017), who suggests that sectarianism is often expressed through the symbolic nature of football fandom. Here, the comments reveal how some Celtic fans appear to adopt and appropriate sectarian words, using it to underscore their perceived marginalised status (Waiton, 2018). The use of 'Fenian' also demonstrates a clear sense of Irish Catholic identity among Celtic users, who view it as an ethnic boundary marker for their virtual community. Millar's (2016) analysis on Irish rebel songs in football underscores that sectarian words can be lost in the insular fan culture where its use is commonplace. He further adds that notes that Scotland's offensive behaviour legislation struggled with defining what counted as a sectarian song or chant, partly because fans would argue over intent and meaning, but the embedded bigotry in terms is clear in usage if not always acknowledged by those using it. It was at this point where I began to note how sectarian words (which are considered offensive) are reclaimed and redeployed against perceived discrimination. I also started to understand how the Kerrydale Street community reaffirms its collective identity using such terminology.

Bruce et al., (2004) highlight that football serves as a place where insulting language in the form of chants is used, even if they would not be used in everyday life. This means that those who cannot attend matches can still be a part of the rituals as they discuss the match through virtual spaces. Rheingold (1993, p3) further adds that *'People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind'* meaning that the absence of physical connection can allow for a more open and unregulated form of expression. This seemed to appear on Kerrydale Street as the second half progressed. I noticed an increase in humour and sarcasm throughout the forum, and jokes and banter seemed to intensify as Celtic

extended their lead to 2-0. Celtic fans felt the need to situate the final within the wider historical and religious tension between Celtic and Rangers supporters. This is extracted in the section below.

Jota needs to step up second half - Celtic Fan 30

Reply: Anyone any update on Jota? Tell your mate to stop worrying about Jota and get back to abusing the Queen, the crown and glorifying in the IRA - Celtic Fan 31

Reply: What do you mean? LOL - Celtic Fan 30

Reply: The Hun lives to publicly display their anti- Catholicism, from orange walks to world record pallet burning. Depriving them of the platform at Hampton Park to spew anti-Catholicism live on TV is not a good thing. - Celtic Fan 31

Reply: I probably hate the Orange order²⁶ more than you 👍 - Celtic Fan 30

Huns pandering to their bigot fanbase yet again with an orange strip. They should bring out some training gear with a White pointy hood as it's a guaranteed seller. - Celtic Fan 31

Reply: If one thing is going to end them it's utter Fenian domination. Another Celtic treble please. - Celtic Fan 32

Dixon (2013), Numerato and Giulianotti (2018), and Cleland et al., (2018) all show that football plays a key role in forming cultural practices, functioning as acts of signification that convey and reinforce collective meanings. Here, meanings are constructed using religious and ethnic labels, historical grievances, and the framing of Rangers FC as extensions of broader empirical struggles. This reflects a sense of 'cause' where ideas of Irish nationalism are expressed through football allegiances and the sectarian words used to convey it (Hewer et al., 2017). Becker's (1963) work on the labelling of deviance is also relevant here, as it underscores how individuals and groups contest the meaning and legitimacy of specific social categories. Terms like 'Fenians' or 'Huns' are not descriptive but symbolise an intergroup setting based on belonging (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Consequently, I came across a thread based on how Celtic fans were interpreting and reacting to the orange-coloured kit worn by the Rangers goalkeeper Allan McGregor. The dialogue quickly escalated into a heated discussion around the

²⁶ The Orange Order is a Protestant organisation with origins in Northern Ireland

political and religious symbolism associated with the colour. Below is that conversation thread.

Good Chance that! - Celtic Fan 33

Mcgregor in his orange kit LOOL - Celtic Fan 34

Get it up you mccoist you dirty orange cnt - Celtic Fan 35

"World famous atmosphere", says Rory As they do the bouncy!²⁷ eff dirty orange carrot - Celtic Fan 36

Go on you orange bastards.. You good orange bastards - Celtic Fan 37

The Hun lives to publicly display their anti- Catholicism with that organge kit. from orange walks to world record pallet burning. Depriving them of the platform at Hampton Park to spew anti-Catholicism live on TV is a good thing. - Celtic Fan 38

Huns pandering to their bigot fanbase yet again with an orange strip. They should bring out some training gear with a White pointy hood as it's a guaranteed seller. - Celtic Fan 39

Cheating orange bastards State of they arseholes with their orange to - Celtic Fan 40

Reply: They're just a shower orange bastards, that's all you need to know - Celtic Fan 35

Here, references to Orangeism set the tone, framing the kit as an infringement of the Kerrydale Street community's identity. What followed was an eruption of antagonistic banter as Celtic fans used terms like 'taig' and 'Masons' at each other, reviving historical slurs and stereotypes. In sectarian phrasing, 'taig' is a derogatory slur for Irish Catholics often aimed at Celtic supporters given the club's Catholic roots, while 'Masons' alludes to Freemasonry which is traditionally associated with Protestants in Scotland. By using these labels, Celtic fans were tapping into the deeper sociopolitical conflict between their communities by effectively saying much more than just the words themselves. Each insult carried decades (if not centuries) of historical baggage related to the Protestant vs. Catholic (Unionist vs. Nationalist) struggle.

²⁷ The Bouncey - A chant which involves bouncing up and down performed by Rangers Fans

heard it was Celtic fans in disguise. Typical taig behaviour - Celtic Fan 36

are you happy with hun's in our team Are you happy with tarrier taig tottie howkers in your team? - Celtic Fan 37

Reply: Not proven of diving Fecking guilty of being a taig I think that was the full tweet! - Celtic Fan 38

Clive Tyldesley will be on their taig list. Said he's not a Rangers fan and would happily work for Celtic tv. Must have sensed the stench over there already - Celtic Fan 39

Jesus, these masons are going to give them a penalty a game next season - Celtic Fan 40

Hopefully it is a bad day for Masons. - Celtic Fan 41

Notably, the exchange was intense but also combined with dark humour and wit. In fan culture, there is often a fine line between hatred and banter. Participants may cloak offensive epithets in sarcasm or jokes, downplaying their severity. As Kavanagh (2019) observes in a study of Northern Irish Rugby culture, many who exchange about sectarian expressions consider it just be banter and treating their mocks as fun rather than “real” sectarianism. Indeed, on the forum, calling someone a ‘Taig’ or accusing referees of being ‘Masons’ may have been partly tongue-in-cheek but a ritualised way for Celtic fans to comment using historical references. Nonetheless, even ironic usage of slurs reinforces the us-versus-them mentality. The community’s collective understanding of terms like ‘Taigs’ ‘Huns’ or ‘Masons’ is common in Celtic and Rangers fan dialect, ensuring that everyone grasps the underlying insult and its link to the fixture (Hayes, 2006). In this sense, the humorous smokescreen amplifies the antagonism by keeping those historic prejudices alive in the forum.

Furthermore, the forum’s use of historical narratives and callbacks to Orangeism shows how social memory is used in real time. Celtic fans peppered the conversation with references to the Orange Order (Orangemen), William of Orange, or other legacy terms (King Billy), thereby grounding a kit colour debate in the grand narrative of Protestant-Catholic struggle (Bradley, 1993). Such references function as insider knowledge within the community as they signal group identity and bond online fans through shared heritage. The online community’s social memory is consequently on full display, and past conflicts and symbols are referenced to frame present-day football matters. This aligns with Cairns (2000) findings that sectarian terms

incorporate their history into everyday culture and sectarian values are objectified and stored in tangible symbols and an oral culture of songs and slogans, ready to be deployed even in casual settings. In the forum, the sectarian slurs and in-jokes are essentially the songs and slogans of the virtual space, carrying old hostilities into contemporary fan talk.

At this point, it emerged that Nazir et al., (2022) description of sectarianism as an unstated attitude, a way of thinking about the other that shapes behaviour but is rarely spoken aloud can be challenged. This is because the virtual community openly displays and discusses these sectarian attitudes in articulate ways. I got the sense that comments seemed to be based on instinct and emotion. As I continued observing until the full-time whistle, it became evident that other forums of counternarratives, based on the experiences of Catholics, the Irish, and anti-establishment politics, were at play. Comments supporting Irish republicanism appeared with phrases such as '*Up the IRA*' '*IRA*' and '*O'Rifles of the IRA*'. These comments appeared sporadic without any contextual link, echoing the unmediated nature of football fan dialogue. What is interesting is that academics, such as Devine (2004), suggest that remarks referencing the IRA (Irish Republican Army) are not seen as sectarian because the IRA was not a Catholic organisation. Many Protestants were members at different points in their history (Taylor, 2014). However, such a view is contested by Scottish authorities, as support for the organisation can be seen as one side of the cultural and political divide. Millar (2016) adds to this as for many in Scotland, particularly those of a Protestant, unionist, or loyalist persuasion, the ideological association with the IRA can indeed be considered as sectarian against them. At this stage, I recognised that 'identity performance' emerged in response to the IRA comments, which, while not overtly meaningful, still carried sectarian undertones.

Giddens' structuration theory (1998) offers a useful lens to understand why humour felt so natural on the forum. Giddens (1998) suggests that individuals draw on established cultural scripts and on their practical consciousness to interpret and respond to events. In this case, long-standing cultural practices provided a cultural script for how to react when Celtic won. As such, it felt that Celtic fans relied on these ingrained social habits and rules of fan behaviour to make sense of the situation on the forum. This demonstrates a conceptual link between the offline terrace culture and

the online fan sphere, where the same norms and coping mechanisms that fans use in the stadium are carried into their digital interactions (Woods and Ludvigsen, 2022). As such, online Celtic fans fell back on humour as a familiar way to navigate the post-match climate. This further aligns with Giddens' idea that people act based on routines and social knowledge they have already internalised. By joking together online, Celtic fans reinforced their group identity and made sense of the final using the cultural tools they knew best. For example:

Anyone who thinks the league is done with the masons in the VAR room has got another thing coming. This is all for Sevco's benefit and we'll be dragged into a title race with the bastards whether we like it or not. - Celtic Fan 45

Hahahaha! Bad day for Masons - Celtic Fan 46

Any links to their goal? The orange order, the masons, goats etc - Celtic Fan 47

The masons in black still remain our biggest threat to the title in my opinion. Every one of them for the watching. - Celtic Fan 48

Reply: 😂😂😂😂 - Celtic Fan 45

To the guys in the white mini bus who shouted "fenian basas" as I walked up the stairs to 10am mass this morning - hope you all have a safe journey home and a great evening 😂👍 - Celtic Fan 48

any Hun carrot that goes on holiday has to be decked out in some orange tap and union jack shorts. :lol: Walking about displaying a King Billy tattoo whilst spending money in a predominately Catholic country. - Celtic Fan 50

Reply: Can't stop laughing 😂 - Celtic Fan 51

This normalisation of in-group humour means that sectarian stereotypes and slurs become part of the Celtic in-group's accepted narrative. When offensive jokes rely on ethnic, religious, or other group-based stereotypes, they reinforce those stereotypes while making the behaviour seem routine and acceptable. In other words, humorous acts turn harmful ideas into a familiar cliché of the community, clouding awareness of its real-world impact (Doidge, Kossakowski and Mintert, 2020). As Pope (2017) suggests, narratives that echo stereotypes can enhance a community's sense of itself as a distinct social entity. If the members accept these stereotypes, they are unlikely to object to the humour built upon them and doing so would mean going against the idea of the community. In this way, humour turns into a bonding instrument and a

social shield as it brings the group together through shared ridicule of Rangers, and it shields the group's prejudices from scrutiny by framing them as innocent and fun. As such, group members who might privately find a sectarian joke uncomfortable could be discouraged from speaking out, lest they be seen as not having a sense of humour or not fully belonging to the forum.

Attention turned to Rangers supporters and their online practices, to examine whether similar patterns of identity performance, sectarian discourse, and ritualised expression emerge within the Follow Follow forum. The next section will explore the Rangers fan community's perspective from the Final.

6.4 Rangers Fans and the Build Up to The Final

I started to observe the Follow Follow forum leading up to the Old Firm final without directly engaging in the discussions. As anticipation for the game grew, comments initially became popular and featured posts of confidence from Rangers fans. As I observed, I was immediately impressed by the clear and consistent use of religious and political signifiers in how Rangers users framed their discussions around the final, their team, and their rivals Celtic. I started to extract this as stated below:

Good luck to the Glasgow Rangers and the Bridgton Derry Boys we are the boys from the Toll we are loyal and we're true and when we meet the Celtic we are ready for our due to the cry of no surrender you will hear a famous noise Good luck to the Glasgow Rangers and the Bridgton Derry Boys²⁸ - Rangers Fan 1

Get tore into these Fenian bastards, Rangers! - Rangers Fan 2

We're bringing it home, We're bringing it home! The Famine is over²⁹, We're bringing it HOME! - Rangers Fan 3

They b@stards are due a hiding as it is - Rangers Fan 4

the famine is over why don't you go home! - Rangers Fan 5

Deporting sounds good to me. Take your filthy, depraved ways home. - Rangers Fan 6

We're gonna need a bigger boat - Rangers Fan 7

²⁸ Billy Boys are Protestants gang from the 1920s who bigoted against Catholics

²⁹ The Great Famine was a period of mass starvation and disease in Ireland

It was clear from the get-go that sectarian connotations were being used on the forum. By referencing the Great Irish Famine and telling Celtic supporters to “go home,” it felt that Rangers fans were positioning themselves as the true Scots/Britons while casting Celtic as eternal outsiders. Bradley (2013) suggests that chants based on Irish migration weaponise historical trauma by mocking Irish Catholics’ suffering and draws a boundary that associates Rangers with Protestant loyalism and Celtic with an alien Irish Catholic other. In this case, football chants were posted on the forum as sectarian signifiers loaded with ethnic and religious meaning. At this point, it felt that this symbolic vocabulary set the stage for how Rangers fans performed their online identities, and the forum served as a theatre for enacting sectarian identities in an exaggerated form. It also illustrated how old ethnic and religious divides adapt to new media to give meaning to interactions. This suggests continuity in sectarian culture moved into cyberspace.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, I took the idea that the Follow Follow forum operates as a digital front stage where fans enact and manage a collective identity (Goffman, 1991). Much like actors in a play, online Rangers fans performed roles recognisable within their online community. They enhanced their posts with symbols of group membership, such as loyalist slogans and insider slang, to signal to other users that they were genuine fans of the Rangers in-group. This performative aspect was clear in the consistent use of loyalist idioms and songs (e.g., references to the Bridgton Derry Boys and the commenting of No Surrender), which suggests one’s allegiance and cultural background. Goffman’s (1955,1967) concept of face-work is useful for analysing how these fans navigate the presentation of self-online. It was as if each fan was concerned with maintaining the face of the loyal Rangers collective, and any sign of weakness or doubt threatened the group’s shared pride. Consequently, I saw fans commenting on the collective face by projecting confidence (*‘We’re bringing it home!’*) and by displaying humour even in hatred (*‘Fenian bastards’*). By demonstrating toughness and loyalty, Rangers fans protected both their reputations and the honour of the community during the build-up. Notably, the forum’s anonymity and the absence of supervision seemed to encourage exaggerated comments so fans can be more belligerent than they might be in person, amplifying certain identity markers. In Goffman’s terms, the Rangers fans were producing a

performance of loyal Ranger-ness, as each posts a small act contributing to the ritual affirmation of their collective identity. Below is evidence of this at play:

Hullo,Hullo, We are the Rangers Boys, Hullo, Hully you'll know us by our noise, Were up to our knees in Fenian blood, No surrender is our cry, We are the people. Were Rangers till we Die³⁰. - Rangers Fan 8

The peasants aren't accustomed to teams attacking them in Scotland. I want to see Rangers right on top of these scum from the first minute today. No let up. - Rangers Fan 9

I look forward to the faux outrage when we're belting out the billy boys - Rangers Fan 10

Hello hello we are the Billy boys Hello hello you'll know us by noise We'll sing the sash and Derrys walls Surrender or you'll die For we are the Billy Billy boys - Rangers Fan 11

Reply: We need more threads like this. Horrible to think we have to share the same country with these creatures. - Rangers Fan 8

While symbolic interactionism highlights micro-level performance, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) helps explain the fierce us-versus-them mentality that was evident on Follow Follow. Social identity theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group memberships, striving for a positive self-image of their in-group relative to out-groups (Tajfel and Turner, 2004). In this case, I felt that some of the Rangers fans' in-group identity was defined in opposition to the Celtic supporting out-group. Tajfel and Turner (1986) further show that people emphasise differences between groups and similarities within their group to achieve positive distinctiveness. It was at this point that I felt that the Follow Follow discussions enacted this pattern. Fans routinely emphasise favourable qualities of Rangers and Rangers fans while vilifying Celtic and their supporters as inferior or contemptible. Furthermore, Berendt and Urich (2016) suggest that fans often portray their side as virtuous and the rival side as having negative traits in line with the general strategy of positive self-presentation vs. negative other presentation. In this case, some Rangers fans kept expressing hostility and reinforcing the social boundary between us and them by calling Celtic supporters 'Fenian bastards'. The sectarian slur

³⁰ This comment is lyrics to the The Billy Boys which is a loyalist song from Glasgow

also praises the in-group as the opposite of whatever 'Fenian' signifies (loyal Protestant vs. disloyal Catholic, true Scot vs. Irish). This language is what Van Dijk (2017) identifies as ideological coding in group discourse, as the in-group is associated with positive actions and values, while the out-group is associated with negative actions and threat. It felt like this dialogue constructed a morally charged dichotomy that boosted Rangers fans' self-esteem through their online community affiliation. Examples of this are extracted below:

Fucking Fenian underclass scum. Apologies for my language but my anger is fully merited after watching that tifo - Rangers Fan 12

Reply: Scumbags. The lot of them need shot. Scum of the earth - Rangers Fan 13

Them ferry from Ireland terminals are going to be busy - Rangers Fan 14

Reply: Maybe The Gaza Strip will have them - Rangers Fan 15

They really do have the most fucked up psyche in the world. Weirdos - Rangers Fan 16

Good Luck the Rangers!! It will just be the Big Beaky Buzzard that's left to Go!! The rest have gone home, Do the Decent thing & F**k Off!! WATP - Rangers Fan 17

It was interesting to see how one Rangers fan referenced the Gaza Strip to ridicule Celtic. I followed this closely and noted another sneered at Celtic's solidarity with one fan posting that '*Gazans are the perpetual victims reliant on lying propaganda, so what better club to align themselves with than perennial vicTIMS?*'. By twisting the word 'victims' this fan associated Palestinians and Celtic fans as supposedly false victims and a dismissal that turns a humanitarian issue into an opportunity to insult Celtic. This illustrates how political expressions are interpreted as sectarian provocation. In Rangers-oriented discourse, supporting Gaza becomes just another trait of the enemy to be rejected. Another fan commented, '*Hamas and the Green Brigade... I hope one day neither exist. The world would be a much better place*'. It was at this point that I noted that these online reactions strongly reinforced sectarian boundaries, and the message internally is that Rangers fans will never side with anything they (Celtic) support, even if it involves war and human suffering. Celtic's Palestine connection exemplifies how political solidarity (that is transnational) extends beyond Scotland to embrace a foreign liberation struggle as alike to Ireland. This reflects a postcolonial

consciousness as Celtic fans identify with Palestinians as fellow colonised people resisting a powerful state, much as Irish Catholics once resisted British domination (Bradley, 2024). On the other hand, Rangers fans' rejection of Palestine reflects their loyalist solidarity with the established order aligning with the state (Israel or, by extension, the UK) against rebel movements, consistent with their Protestant unionist heritage. This dichotomy shows how a global conflict is filtered through the lens of local sectarian identity. Each side appropriates symbols on the digital forums to draw a symbolic boundary. Here, Palestinian flags and slogans have become emblems of Irish-Catholic/nationalist identity, while Israeli flags (and dismissive references to Gaza) serve as markers of Protestant-loyalist identity.

As the build-up to the event continued, many Rangers supporters adopted a pro-Israel or anti-Gaza posture when Celtic's ultra group (the Green Brigade) unveiled a politically charged tifo. It was at this point that I noted that the Israeli Palestinian conflict became a proxy battleground on the Follow Follow forum, where images and comments were used as identity markers. By mocking Celtic's Gaza tifos and framing them as extremists, Rangers fans reinforced their loyalist group unity. This somewhat demonstrated the power of symbolic boundary-making in sectarian identity: even a conflict thousands of miles away can be repurposed to draw the lines of who is friend and who is foe in one of football's most enduring rivalries (Murray, 1994). Below is an example of this at play:

Our existence offends them - Rangers fan 18

Am I seeing correctly there in among the rheptiles an illegal flag (stars and plough) prescribing to an illegal criminal organisation? Why haven't police scotland gone in and taken it and lifted the cu*t? Sure as fu*k they would be in and about it if a flag with UVF or UDA³¹ all over it. - Rangers Fan 19

Reply: That banner's an own goal! The billy boys is back!!! - Rangers Fan 18

vile display reeking of sectarianism and hatred. Out of control and the media is scared of them. Close the bigots and paedophiles down - Rangers Fan 20

What a bunch of sad wankers. I bet celtic are so proud of themselves. Let's get back talking about bigotry to deflect away from child abuse. I think we should just kick the

³¹ UDA (Ulster Defence Association) are a loyalist paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland

fxcking shit out of them for now on. They have got away with violent acts on our support unpunished. Utter fxxking scum - Rangers Fan 21

A reminder of when the football world fell silent to remember the victims of 9/11. Celtic fans chanted *IRA* songs. - Rangers Fan 22

This forum thread shows how Celtic are constructed as a moral enemy through processes of othering and moral panic (Cohen, 1972). The rhetoric demonises Celtic supporters with extreme labels, effectively turning them into Cohen's proverbial folk devils, where figures are portrayed as the embodiment of evil deviance and cast as antagonistic threats to the community (Cohen, 1972). This reflects what Campbell (2023) calls the enemy within paradigm where a dynamic perceived as deviance is transformed into an active threat to social order and provoking inter-group tensions. At the same time, the collective criticism of Celtic supporters serves to solidify the forum. Durkheim's (1953) concept of boundary maintenance is key here as by uniting to condemn the purported deviants, Rangers fans reaffirm shared norms and moral superiority, thus strengthening internal solidarity on Follow Follow. In short, even a conflict nothing to do with football can be assimilated into the Celtic/Rangers rivalry to produce a moral panic and one that constructs each other using hateful terms.

One notable observation before kick-off was the expressions of Britishness and Loyalism amongst fans. Rangers' fans commonly use Union Jack flags, posting symbols like the Red Hand of Ulster³², and commenting slogans such as 'We are the People' to assert their fandom. Bruce (2004) notes that this can be understood as ritualised performances of identity and rivalry. They contend that many Rangers and Celtic fans wind each other up by falsely claiming to have strong religio-ethnic identities as a form of ritual posturing and that most fans are not genuinely consumed by their identity outside the stadium (Bruce et al., 2004). The 90-minute bigot quote used by Kowalski in Murray (2000) also suggests that the tribal antagonism amongst fans is largely performative and a way to bond with your in-group and provoke the out-group during the match, without reflecting deep-seated prejudice in everyday life. Intention vs. perception is key in this point, as Rangers fans may claim intent of honoring their side, but perception might be that these acts are meant to provoke the

³² Emblem associated with the province of Ulster in Ireland

Celtic community. Goodall et al., (2015) notes that both fanbases exaggerate their differences and adopting opposing identities (Irish vs. British, Catholic vs. Protestant, Republican vs. Loyalist) to sharpen the rivalry. This might demonstrate how easily actions can be misinterpreted in the Old Firm context; what one side views as normal pride, the other side sees as deliberately antagonistic.

6.5 Follow Follow Forum During the Game

As the game began, it was interesting to observe the comments made by various Rangers fans about the links to terrorism and Ireland. The references to '*IRA*' and '*Irish Terrorism*' reflected a continued theme during the fixture, with the historical tensions between Britain and Ireland used as a focal point. Comments referencing the conflict in Northern Ireland were also observed. I got the sense that Rangers fans linked Celtic with the IRA by way of further delegitimising them as disloyal to the British state and associated with extremism. As noted previously, such rhetoric may be seen as unacceptable in the wider societal context but is viewed as justifiable and even necessary within the narrow confines of the Follow Follow community. Below is an example of this from a thread:

Any Bear who buys the Record or Sun or Evening Times or listens to Snide is as well throwing money into the collection bucket for the IRA, they are literally funding the Bheast FC propaganda wing. - Rangers Fan 23

Get them deported then. Our country will be a lot healthier and cleaner without those smelly IRA c*nts - Rangers Fan 24

Union bears should have a display at Ibrox for our first home game showing "F*ck the 19th Century Terrorist army" n lets see what happens then - Rangers Fan 26

FUCK THE IRA - Rangers Fan 28

I look forward to the faux outrage when we're belting out the billy boys. - Rangers Fan 29

The language used includes terms such as 'smelly IRA c*nts' '19th Century Terrorist army' and demands for deportation, demonstrating an in-group/out-group dynamic that is culturally rooted based on the offline sphere. This corresponds with Boyle's

(2017) research, which shows how football rivalries in Scotland and Northern Ireland are closely intertwined with competing national and ethnic identities related to the troubles in Ireland. In addition, labelling Celtic fans as terrorists and calling for their deportation shows a stereotype that casts them as unwelcome within a British state in which Rangers fans see as their own. This kind of prejudice, as McBride (2018) notes, is historically embedded in the dominant Scottish Protestant–British identity, where being truly Scottish/British was often defined in opposition to Irish Catholic immigrants. Many of these chants and slurs construct a symbolic enemy out of Celtic fans, conflating them with the IRA or other republican militants. This process of symbolic enemy-construction is a hallmark of sectarian conflict as each side mythologises the other as the embodiment of an existential threat. For Rangers loyalists, the IRA (though officially inactive now) lives on as a folk devil onto whom they can project blame and hatred.

Certain forms of humour were also popular at this time; with some seeing it as acceptable and funny situations linking to the final. In a similar sense, Millward (2008) explores the fine line between banter and racism in chants aimed at opposition players in the English Premier League. He highlights how the anonymity and lack of immediate social consequences can embolden fans to express views that they might not otherwise voice offline. This also links to the point that football forums are online spaces that allow fans to build up their communal identity, and certain humour forms may be seen as acceptable and funny in some situations, but offensive and hurtful in others (Hynes and Cook, 2013). What stood out was that some users challenged the crossover of sectarian comments. The word 'Hun', historically used as a slur to vilify based on Protestantism, appeared in an exchange of thoughts. The following captures this dispute.

Go Home Ya HUNS. Yes, they fuukin are. - Rangers Fan 29

We need to keep a tight rein on what is sung. Maximum vigilance is necessary to keep UEFA off our back. We quite rightly play feck about their IRA shite so let's not kid ourselves on that the modern day UVF are a bunch of girl guides. - Rangers Fan 30

Anything constructive to add? - Rangers fan 32

Just a song mate, chillax. - Rangers fan 33

Here comes the folk who claim to have never sang these songs. I don't see why folk have a gripe with it, it's celebrating the culture of Northern Ireland and a lot of folk are forgetting how many Ulster Scots migrated to Scotland and particularly Glasgow and the surrounding area. Is it sectarian? No. If you are complaining then why don't you start other chants within Ibrox. The Ulster Volunteer Force played a pivotal role within the British Army during WW1. - Rangers fan 34

Up the HUNS - Rangers fan 35

Reply: Yup. That's why UVF³³ is sung today... - Rangers Fan 33

This thread can be viewed through a symbolic interaction lens, as every post solidified the community's collective identity. I felt that the commenting invited validation amongst online users and created a feedback loop of solidarity. What then occurred was users immediately reacting with likes and replies. This endorsement means the message carried greater weight as a community assertion. Over time, repeated messages about the rival (e.g., they're lazy, they lack pride, they're sectarian) become ritualised. Durkheim's (1982) concept of collective effervescence is echoed here as the strong emotional charge of offline support spills into the forum, as fans remember and magnify the game's energy in words.

Another interesting point from the thread above is that fans spoke out about certain comments on the forum as they felt they crossed into bigotry and prejudice. Others then defended the comment, arguing that it excels into the realms of humour rather than actual deviant or sectarian behaviour. Goffman and symbolic interactionism are relevant here as he suggests that identity is performed through specific habits and styles and reinforces deviant behaviours unintentionally (Anderson, 1991). However, whatever the motivation, it can be argued that offensive humour and language cannot be justified as just a joke because it strengthens harmful stereotypes and normalises offensiveness (Billig, 2001). The response of one fan who told another to chillax when they expressed anxieties over a contentious UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) song points out how defending such behaviour is normalised and how critical voices within the group are quickly dismissed. This points to a lack of regulation in online spaces, where sectarian content is downplayed rather than challenged.

³³ UVF is an Ulster loyalist paramilitary group based in Northern Ireland

Goodall et al., (2015) argue that sectarian behaviour is often confined to specific social circles and communities, meaning it is played out during events where large groups assimilate. However, the lack of dissenting voices on the forum and its closed nature of only Rangers fans suggested that cross-community abuse event in public spaces was somewhat limited. This links to the work of Denis (2015), who shows how subtyping, ideology-based homophily, and political avoidance norms reinforce existing biases amongst white Canadians. His report shows how many white Canadians, despite regular positive interactions with Indigenous peoples, continue to hold laissez-faire racist attitudes. Interestingly, this is played out in a similar sense to Follow Follow, where segregation is emphasised. I noted that some Rangers fans were quick to downplay any relationship with their Celtic counterparts. Here, the word 'Tim' is used as a discriminatory term for Celtic fans.

You've got tim 'friends?' that's you on my ignore list - Rangers Fan 34

I'm so jealous. I don't know any Tims. - Rangers Fan 35

Reply: Wouldn't set foot in the ira cesspit , why anybody would want to go there to witness their behaviour is beyond me. You only need to look at the positioning of our fans at the piggery to realise how ineffective in backing our support becomes , all cleverly orchestrated with no compromise , which you seem to miss.They started it by cutting the allocations 30 years ago. We have responded IMO in the correct manner and it's come back to bite them in the arse. We were supposed to just roll over and either accept the bully boy tactics or give in / fall for the victim card. - Rangers Fan 36

This exchange above illustrates the antagonism that characterises the relationship between rival football fans. It is evident that Follow Follow users viewed any interaction with Celtic supporters in real life as a problem, pointing to a deep-rooted hate and divide. Labelling Celtic Park as an '*IRA cesspit*' on the platform actively promotes othering. An implicit bias appears to be at play, where Rangers fans pre-judge and dismiss Celtic based on sectarian stereotypes rather than individual interactions or experiences (Rosie, 2001). As a result, unconscious negative beliefs and feelings about the 'other' become entrenched, hindering any prospect of cross-community dialogue and understanding.

Halbwachs (2020) explains the importance of collective memory in shaping the identity of a group in which impacts their present and future. For Rangers fans, this means

deciding which parts of the club's identity must be preserved to maintain its meaning. From this I started to link why an anti-Catholic rhetoric and the links between religion and terrorism became so common. I noted that for Rangers to define who constitutes us they must first identify them. This means that being online fan is not just about belonging to the Follow Follow group, but also about rejecting those who are seen as outsiders (Celtic). The way Rangers users define their community is built upon a rejection of Celtic which results into an active anti-Catholicism agenda that overflows into match day expression. Simmel (1950, p. 93) notes that *'large masses can always be animated and guided by simple ideas; what is common to many must be accessible even to the lowest and most primitive among them'*. Therefore, this simplicity in identity construction makes it easier to unite Rangers fans around a shared sense of belonging while simultaneously reinforcing the sectarian exclusion of those deemed as other.

An emotional response from Rangers fans appeared on the forum when Celtic scored, making it 1-0 to the side. At this point, I observed users speaking in the third person. McHoul and Miller (1998) highlight that sports fans often refer to their club as 'we' a linguistic habit also seen in discussions of nationality and religion. It is seen as a way of expressing a strong sense of belonging, as if being part of the team is an extension of their own identity. When the goal went in, Follow Follow became more popular with comments about the scoreline. The below thread was extracted from this moment:

What a bunch of sad wankers. I bet celtic are so proud of themselves. Let's get back talking about bigotry to deflect away from child abuse. I think we should just kick the fxxking shit out of them for now on. They have got away with violent acts on our support unpunished. Utter fxxking scum. - Rangers Fans 29

They are 19th Century Terrorist scum but where do we deport them to? The real and decent people of Ireland don't want them and don't give two f fucking hoots for them. - Rangers Fan 30

We can only dream, think of all the kids that would be saved from the paedo ring - Rangers Fan 31

Would happily pay towards the deportation of they 19th Century Terrorist bastards. - Rangers Fan 32

Reply: Our fans get the jail for saying it. Their fans get help from their club to say it. The country is fùckeed - Rangers Fan 33

It seemed that Rangers fans were attempting to joke at the expense of Celtic, and the joke was successful if other users understood the supposed humour behind it. This process of exchange creates a 'us' versus 'them' narrative, which correlates with othering, as Rangers is convinced of its superiority, thereby constructing social cohesion within the in-group through exclusion and difference (Glynn and Brown, 2023). The abuse against Catholicism is evident here, with cases of child abuse being targeted against the clubs' Catholic identity. Brewer and Higgins (1998) add that anti-Catholicism is a sociological process that transcends specific contexts, and the use of a Protestant cultural and political identity portrays Catholics as fundamentally immoral. This strengthens the idea of Rangers as defenders of traditional values and Celtic as a threat to be resisted, even though they are losing the game 1-0.

The language linking Catholicism with paedophilia was not just a one-off but a recurring theme across the forum at that time. Comments such as '*Surely the last time the paedo scum get tickets*' and '*Think of all the kids that would be saved from the paedo ring*' were used as verbal tactics to vilify Celtic and rally support for Rangers. This is done because reports of sexual abuse by Catholic clergy have been documented worldwide, revealing long-term patterns of misconduct and failure to protect victims (BBC, 2021). This framing serves not just to attack Celtic but also to reinforce a sense of moral superiority among Rangers fans. Previous research shows that anti-Catholic prejudice has often been fuelled by moral panics around sex abuse scandals, and Rangers fans seem to be keeping this narrative alive (Walker, 2016). When these narratives emerged, Rangers fans jumped on them as evidence of the moral failings and corruption of the Catholic Church, and by extension, Celtic. This seemed to occur when Celtic were winning, giving more influence on the forum.

Collins et al., (2016) note that fan communities are built through shared emotional experiences and symbolic rituals, which generate strong feelings of unity and group solidarity. In the Rangers forum, sectarian language and traditions function as exactly these kinds of rituals. By collectively singing songs, chanting slogans, and sharing inside jokes that demean their rivals, supporters create a charged emotional atmosphere (collective effervescence) that bonds them together against a common enemy. An example is the Rangers anthem *Billy Boys*, a Loyalist song with the line '*we're up to our knees in Fenian blood*' which explicitly celebrates violence against

Catholics (Davies, Flint and Kelly, 2013). This song became an integral symbol of the club's Protestant identity and is used to assert dominance over the Catholic other (Bradley, 2024). Even though such chants have since been banned by Scottish authorities for their sectarian content many online fans continued to perform them, valuing the ritual as a declaration of who they are. It felt that this emotional energy of these collective performances strengthened in-group cohesion and a sense of moral certainty within the fan community. For example:

Still here, still proud.... we are the Billy Boys we won't stay silent. The songs are lod the spirit louder. No surrender we fight with Rangers till the end - Rangers fan 34

We stand with Glasgow Rangers and the Bridgton Derry Boys. The score might be against us, but loyalty never fades. When we face Celtic we don't hesitate we rise to the roar of No Surrender - Rangers Fan 35

Hullo, Hullo the Rangers boys fight on. Behind on the pitch but never in pride... They can score first but we never back down. We are the people Rangers till we die - Rangers Fan 36

As the final came to an end, I turned my attention to the Follow Follow forum to check out the number of comments made after the game. What was interesting here were comments based on conspiracy theories surrounding the match officials, which were mixed with sectarian undertones. Rangers' fans seemed to reinforce each other's sense of collective purpose even though they lost the game 2-1. One thread discussed how Rangers fans should get involved in politics, noting that unionist politicians are useless and urging involvement to fight back against the marginalisation of their community. This call to political action shows how club fandom and Unionist/Protestant identity intertwine as the club is an institution under attack requiring defense in all arenas. This kind of narrative is powerful in reinforcing an imagined community. It paints Rangers supporters as a united in-group under siege by outside enemies, thereby strengthening internal bonds. Socially, what's happening is the construction of a common enemy and a classic tool by which communities solidify their own identity (Anderson, 1983). Rangers' fans on the forum rally together around the idea that external conspirators are against them, which in turn validates their fellowship and loyalty to one another. As Anderson's framework would predict, the shared story of referees conspiring helps each fan imagine the millions of fellow Rangers fans sharing in the same righteous anger and solidarity, even though they've never met. This demonstrates the imagined closeness as each supporter envisions

others out there equally outraged and united in defending the club's honour. Below is an example of this at play:

Burn the fucking place to the ground. Dirty scum cúnts. - Rangers Fan 4

Reply: Reckon the ref is a fenian? - Rangers Fan 41

Defo a fenian.... He was shite - Rangers Fan 42

I love and hate this game in equal measures. I struggle to understand these referees. I've heard folk talking about the F word. Actually calling it the F word. What the actual f*ck. How did the word 19th Century Terrorist get so outlawed. I swear to god them and their victim mentality that they use so often. Boils my piss - Rangers Fan 43

Scotland is now a Roman Catholic Country. The Protestant Church of Scotland is dying on its feet and if the decline continues in its present form, the church will fold completely in around 25 years. This is reflected in the media and political circles, where all forms of Protestantism like the Loyal Orders are made out to be knuckle dragging joke figure bigots. Sad days in what was once the land of the Reformation. - Rangers Fan 44

There is no such thing as a decent Celts fan. They are all paedophile condoning scum. - Rangers Fan 45

I'm sure there'll now be lots of newspaper articles and comments from politicians and academics about how the word '19th Century Terrorist' has been misinterpreted and hundreds of Rangers fans consequently have been wrongly convicted of sectarian behaviour today - Rangers Fan 46

In this moment, fans speak of the club and its supporters as one community that is being marginalised. Describing Rangers as an institution under attack that needs defending in all arenas shows that supporters perceive threats not just on the football pitch, but in cultural and political spheres as well. Rangers fans were effectively saying that their way of life and identity (embodied by the club) are endangered. This reflects a communal sentiment with the idea that the Follow Follow community must be defended against outside forces. Here the imagined community ethos is fuelling real-world action as fans are encouraged to mobilise politically because of their shared identity. In Anderson's (1983) terms, the Rangers supporters' imagined community has a strong enough sense of comradeship that it's driving them to participate in collective action beyond just commenting about the game. The forum thread is essentially rallying the troops, urging that everyone who identifies with this community should step up and protect it. After a period of intense activity, the volume of comments

on the Follow Follow forum gradually declined. At this point, I concluded my observations and began to draw together the key patterns of interaction and behaviour that emerged.

6.6 Summary

The observation of Celtic's Kerrydale Street forum and Rangers' Follow Follow forum has underscored that sectarianism remains a pervasive and dynamic element of fan culture in the digital age. It is far from being a myth of the past (Bruce et al., 2004) as sectarian antagonism are performed and reinvented in these online spaces. The analysis shows a continuity of sectarian discourse as both Celtic and Rangers supporters employed sectarian slurs (e.g. Hun, Fenian, Taig, Orange bastard), negative historical references, and violent imagery as part of their match day conversation. In addition, these patterns illustrate how football fan forums act as channels for collective identity work where fans reaffirm who they are by vilifying them (Cleland et al., 2023). This ongoing reproduction of sectarian language demonstrates that the Celtic and Rangers rivalry still draws on entrenched religious, ethnic, and political fault lines, which are rewritten in the present, especially in the unregulated arenas of the internet.

A key insight from this chapter is how online anonymity and fan collectives express sectarian expression. The anonymous nature of the forums provides freedom from constraint but also freedom from responsibility for participants (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2012). In these settings, sectarian statements carry fewer social repercussions by encouraging provocations that might be curtailed in offline interactions. This links with broader research on computer-mediated communication by Kilvington and Price (2019) who note that when protected by pseudonyms, online fans experience lower social accountability and often leads to aggressive posts. In the Celtic and Rangers forums, this translated into a sectarian rhetoric being exchanged as routine. What might once have been confined to 90 minutes of stadium chants (Kowalski, 2009) now fills daily online dialogue which is unmoderated and normalised. The forums function as echo chambers of in-group ideology, where members mirror and magnify each other's sectarian taunts without external checks. Newcomers learn quickly that using

words like 'Hun' or 'Fenian' is part of the accepted nature of rivalry, reinforcing a cycle wherein hateful jargon is both consequence and cause of group cohesion.

The persistence of such language highlights the power of social identity processes in these fan communities. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) holds that individuals originate self-esteem from group affiliations and will seek to achieve positive distinctiveness for their in-group by stressing differences with out-groups. This dynamic was apparent on both forums. Fans reinforced the in-group's image of praising their own team's virtues and historic triumphs while layering disrespect on the rival out-group. This is done by mocking them as inferior, immoral, or even sub-human. Some Rangers supporters, for example, echoed loyalist slogans (No Surrender, we are the People) and celebrated their Britishness and at the same moment labelled Celtic fans 'Fenian bastards' and '19th Century Terrorists'. Conversely, Celtic fans revelled in their Irish heritage and collective pride by embracing the term 'Fenian' as a badge of honour, even as they mocked Rangers fans as 'Huns', 'Orange bastards' and 'Zombies'. This process of positive self-presentation and negative other presentation is characteristic of sectarian discourse and reflects what van Dijk (2017) describes as the ideological square of prejudice where fans emphasise their good qualities and emphasise their rivals' bad qualities.

Critically, this chapter brings new evidence to longstanding debates about the nature of sectarianism in Scottish football. Scholars like Bruce et al., (2004) have argued that sectarianism is often an exaggerated myth rather than a genuine personal prejudice of most fans. The idea of the 90-minute bigot suggests that bigoted chants are a brief performance confined to offline match contexts and not reflective of deep-seated hatred. However, the data from Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow show that they incorporate sectarian comments before, during, and after the game, extending into everyday online life. In fact, by treating slurs and derogatory jokes as normal fan discourse, the observation reveals a level of comfort with sectarian language that denies any claim of total detachment. The forums show how sectarianism operates as a social practice and a background process that both communities have learned to live with and reproduce. This insight reinforces McBride's (2018) argument that beneath the surface of Scottish society, sectarianism endures in coded ways, even if many would deny being sectarian themselves. The study, therefore, gives concrete

examples of what sectarian attitudes look like in an online setting, moving the discussion beyond abstract notions of sectarian myth and into the realm of everyday meaning-making among fans.

Both forums also show how support for Celtic and Rangers becomes a vessel for expressing broader ethnic and religious identity, suggesting that the Old Firm rivalry remains a memory infused with politics, religion, and colonial history (Bradley, 2021). Understanding this is important because it means efforts to tackle sectarianism cannot focus only on overt behaviour (like banning songs in the stadium) as they must tackle the root narratives and identities that fans use in their own communal spaces. Moreover, the research provides new ideas by recording how these identities are negotiated in real-time through online conversations. This is important as prior studies of sectarianism have often relied on surveys, interviews and analysis of events (Flint and Powell, 2009; Law, 2018; May 2015). By contrast, this chapter captures unfiltered peer-to-peer communication, offering a glimpse into how online fans articulate and reinforce sectarian attitudes when they believe no one outside their community is observing. This methodological contribution, aligned with online ethnography approaches used by Millward (2016) and Cleland (2012), helps move the discussion from theorising about sectarian fan culture to witnessing it in action. It also exposes the ease with which global political issues like Israel and Palestine can be incorporated into online conversation thereby broadening the conception of what modern sectarianism encompasses.

This adaptability suggests that sectarianism is less about theology and more about a social identity habitus; a learned way of seeing the world and the rival, passed down through fan folklore and now through digital content. Recognising this can help researchers and experts design better interventions. For example, anti-sectarian initiatives like Nil by Mouth (2025) already acknowledge that terms like ‘Hun’ and ‘Fenian’ are sectarian slurs that reinforce division and stereotypes. However, the findings reinforce why these words matter as on both forums they are currency for bonding, but each usage also reaffirms a worldview that treats the other community as inherently lesser or threatening. Without addressing the comfort and meaning fans derive from that worldview, simple condemnations of language may not suit. Finally, the chapter has shown that what persists is a deep reservoir of sectarian themes, such

as the songs, slurs, symbols, and stories that remain at hand and are published to serve the drama of us vs. them. Equally, what is still not present is any loss of these attitudes despite modern campaigns and a more secular society (Bruce, 2019). As such, the internet's unregulated spaces have given it a second life as it is away from public scrutiny.

Understanding the performative and emotional dimensions of Celtic and Rangers fandom, as well as how hate can be both earnest and performative, and how communities form around pride and prejudice, helps explain why sectarianism language survives. This understanding is a crucial step toward change. Only by acknowledging the lived reality of these fan communities, such as the emotional rewards, the sense of belonging, and the narratives of justification, can policymakers, educators, and clubs hope to craft interventions that resonate. Overall, the Celtic and Rangers rivalry as captured in this study, is more than a football feud; it is a social theatre in which broader issues of identity, memory, and power play out on the public stage of cyberspace. Recognising it as this is the first step in imagining a future where these energies are redirected from hate towards constructive and inclusive community activities.

CHAPTER 7: THE DEATH OF QUEEN ELIZABETH II

7.1 Introduction

The death of Queen Elizabeth II was an important moment in my research as few events in modern British history have generated such a strong public response. The occasion was emotional across the sporting world and prompted reflection on the Queen's legacy from people from all backgrounds. What made this moment unique was the differing feelings that Celtic and Rangers fans held toward the Queen and the British monarchy. As previously mentioned in chapters 5 and 6, both sets of fans are connected to their national and ethnic identities. In this chapter, I argue how identity and sectarian divide intersect with the mourning of her death. Throughout the chapter, I argue how football fans engage in public discourse about the royal family and how their national and religious identities based on the British and Irish conflict shape their responses. I also explore how sectarian behaviours appear online and how fans construct their fandoms away from football.

This chapter first begins by presenting the reactions among Celtic fans on Kerrydale Street. Many supporters met the Queen's death with humour and reflected a long-held anti-establishment streak of Irish republican sympathies. Secondly, I present the

conversations among Rangers fans on Follow Follow. Here, the mood was one of grief and devoted loyalty to the Crown. Thirdly, I bring these two stories together to show how the Queen's death became a flashpoint on both forums as both turned into a contest of online identities. A process like that described in chapters 5 and 6 was used. As news of the Queen's death unfolded, hundreds of online comments appeared in the space of hours. This moment is described in the following section.

7.2 Celtic Fans Respond to News of Queen Elizabeth II's Death

It was clear from the outset that Celtic fans were not holding back in expressing their feelings about Queen Elizabeth II's passing. Strong opinions quickly filled the online space. According to Kennedy (2016), many Irish Catholics view the Queen as a contested figure, and this was evident in the initial reactions of Celtic users. I got the sense that Celtic fans saw it as a moment to discuss the history of Britain and the troubles in Ireland. This was interesting as football was not the primary discussion point, but rather a vehicle for Celtic fans to post comments on the bereavement of such a figure. As expected, Queen Elizabeth II's death triggered a collection of responses. I found this particularly interesting, as the forum turned into a digital space where collective memory and contemporary criticism converged among many in the online community.

As the news broke in real-time, I logged into the Kerrydale Street Forum to see how people reacted. I quickly noticed a thread about the Queen and clicked on it straight away. As anticipated, a range of opinions were shared. Since the Queen's passing unfolded over a period, it allowed fans to reflect on and gather their thoughts before expressing them once the official announcement was made. Below is an extracted conversation that I came across for the first time.

Going to be some laugh when the Queen dies, isn't it? They're going to be so raging at everything that goes on. Can hardly wait - Celtic Fan 1

They'll postpone the football because this country is now a jingoistic hell hole - Celtic Fan 2

Reply: Mate who cares, the Queen's dying 😊 - Celtic Fan 3

If she dies in Scotland, it will be Operation Unicorn³⁴ - Celtic Fan 4

The big question of course is do the Huns stick a picture of Charlie up in the dressing room - Celtic Fan 5

I wonder if some sort of calamity befell the entire royal family leaving Andrew as the heir, would they stick a picture of him up, you know with them all being child abuse campaigners of late - Celtic Fan 6

Covid saved Gerrard the Queen saves GVB³⁵ - Celtic Fan 7

I noted how comments often used sarcastic and exaggerated scenarios to highlight the absurdity of national mourning. Several users then apologised for not shedding tears or suggested, tongue-in-cheek, that the UK government might expect everyone in Scotland to wear black for ten days. Celtic fans started to target the solemnity that the public and authorities tried to promote by mocking mourning rituals. Sarcasm allowed online users to critique power structures (Goodall et al., 2015). This wit was a common way for users to challenge opposing mainstream narratives under the cover of banter. The humour used by Celtic fans was often far from moderate, crossing into overt sectarian and offensive language. Sectarian labels made their appearance in these discussions. Rangers' supporters were referred to as Huns.

In the context of the Queen's death, some Celtic fans framed the event as a blow to the 'Huns' pride, with comments highlighting that Rangers were in mourning for their figurehead while Celtic was unbothered. Such language, steeped in the Catholic and Protestant divide of Glasgow, illustrates how interwoven banter on the forum is with sectarian identity. Insults targeting the British royal family as well as the loyalist community were expressed almost casually, reflecting a normalisation of this rhetoric within the community. I noted that using these loaded terms set an us versus them mentality as such misfortune gave pleasure to Celtic fans (McGlashan, 2020). It reinforced that fans stand in opposition not just on the football field but in cultural and political allegiance as well. For example:

F the crown, and all the other hun pubs in Bellshill that refs drink in - Celtic Fan 8

³⁴ Operation Unicorn is the secret code/plan if the Queen or King die in Scotland

³⁵ GVB – Giovanni van Bronckhorst who was Ranger's manager during that time

f we get done for an anti monarchy banner whilst the Huns get away with that night at the proms BS the club need to tell UEFA to go feck themselves - Celtic Fan 9

Amhran Na bhFiann ³⁶ - Celtic Fan 10

They are coming to take you away. Sleep with one eye open. - Celtic Fan 11

Hun TIFO³⁷ will have Lisa Simpson and she's no happy either - Celtic Fan 12

Eff UEFA and this mourning. Interesting precedent they're setting with not taking any action against the huns. - Celtic Fan 13

The sectarian undertone in some of this humour also highlights the nature of online fan discourse, as it is political and tribal (Mcmenemy and Poulter, 2005). At the time, banners like 'Sorry for your loss Michael Fagan' (see appendix image 2), which Celtic supporters displayed during a European match, were a straightforward political statement of dislike towards the royal family. For context, Michael Fagan intruded into Queen Elizabeth II's bedroom at Buckingham Palace in 1982. In forum discussions leading up to and following that incident, fans celebrated how this angered Rangers fans and proudly noted the global media attention it received. This shows that humour and sectarian language work together as part of a performative repertoire (Turner, 2013). It allowed Celtic fans to claim a form of cultural victory and to bond over a shared sense of rebellious identity (Conner, 2014). In a community whose history and identity are always at the forefront, jokes and insults about the Queen's death were not throwaway lines; they were affirmations of who the Celtic fans are and what they stand against.

One thing to note is that the British monarchy is not an abstract, apolitical institution; it is a strong symbol of the very forces that Irish nationalists struggled against (Liston and Maguire, 2022). Celtic supporters often view Queen Elizabeth II as responsible for centuries of Irish suffering (Kelly, 2023; Bradley, 1999) and forum discussions around her death referred to this legacy. Online users raised examples such as Bloody Sunday in 1972, when British paratroopers killed unarmed civil rights protesters in Derry Londonderry, and the 1981 IRA hunger strikes that took place under the Crown's watch (Bairner, 2013). Such events, which occurred during Elizabeth's reign, were

³⁶ Amhrán na bhFiann - The Irish national anthem which translates to "The Soldier's Song"

³⁷ TIFO - A large visual display made by fans

cited as reasons why they felt no sadness for a monarch seen as complicit in British oppression.

As a club founded by and for Irish immigrants we are never going to have any positive feelings towards the Queen or the royal family in general. Forces working for the crown have helped keep Ireland as an island a divided entity where once it was one country. Although in my mid 40s I expect to see our island once again become one nation. The royal family have never apologised for the famine, probably the most catastrophic event in Irish history which was caused by Britain. So not many in Ireland will mourn the Queen's passing. - Celtic Fan 16

The monarchy has no respect for our community. None should be given back. Being forced into this act of 'respect' isn't something that sits well with me. I won't be in Poland tomorrow, but whatever way each and every punter there wants to do is up to them. Playing along gives it legitimacy. Standing in respect of the British monarch would arguably do more harm to reputation Celtic fans have internationally as a counter culture to the prevailing British orthodoxy. - Celtic Fan 17

The Irish cause was a common theme, and the Queen's passing was not regarded as a significant loss by many Celtic fans, who were more focused on the goal of Irish unification. There was a strong feeling of affiliation to Ireland and an awareness of the historical injustices it endured under British rule. As Bradley (2024) observes, supporting Celtic plays a key role in the expression of Irish identity within Scottish society. He further notes that it is an important lens through which to understand identity formation in multi-ethnic Britain. In Scotland, Catholics of Irish descent have historically been a minority, often treated as the other in a Protestant-majority society aligned with British royalty (McBride, 2018).

I noted that this collective trauma of Irish history becomes a significant part of how the Kerrydale Street community fandom is defined. Dixon (2013) and Numerato and Svoboda (2021) suggest that groups reconstruct the past to make sense of the present. As such, I started to notice that online users actively brought up the past to frame their interpretation of the Queen's death. In doing so, they were constructing an understanding of the event that fit their inherited view. This helps explain why the language on Kerrydale Street was harsh. For Celtic supporters, showing respect would betray their collective memory and identity. Their memories of oppression passed down through generations or lived directly form an ideological basis that justifies and necessitates a sectarian tone. The online forum thus becomes a space of

collective memory, where stories of historical injustice are told to reinforce the correctness of current attitudes (Boyle, 1995; Millward and Takhar, 2019). Sectarian language in this space is not random abuse; it is linked with a historical narrative that portrays Celtic fans as offspring of an Irish Catholic struggle against the British Crown and military. The language choice on Kerrydale Street reflect this narrative at every turn.

Furthermore, the group bonding displayed by Celtic supporters during the Queen's mourning period can be partly explained through the concept of identity fusion. Identity fusion is a social-psychological phenomenon in which individuals' identity becomes merged with their group identity, producing a willingness to undertake extreme actions for the group (Newson, 2019). In the context of an online forum, many supporters experience their club and its associated cultural-political stance as core to who they are (Newson et al., 2023). This intense form of group allegiance was on display in the days following the Queen's death, as Celtic fans translated their online rhetoric into real-world protests at football matches. The below thread demonstrates this point:

I thought the eff the crown banner was absolutely spot on, displaying justified disdain for the institution itself (and the queen and the king, two birds with one stone) without getting personal. Then I saw the Michael Fagan³⁸ one and laughed until I was sick
Bravo, everyone involved - Celtic Fan 18

Hats off to the GB and Bhoys for those banners last night, eff any hand-wringing Celtic fan who has a problem with it, eff any forelock tugger who loved the queen and eff the crown - Celtic Fan 19

Thought those banners were class (as expected). Hope there are plenty more on Sunday - Celtic Fan 20

I agree, the banner was a missed opportunity They should have went for something more eloquent like, "ANDREW IS A DIRTY F*CKING NONCE" - Celtic Fan 21

How do I donate all of my annual income to the Green Brigade's tifo fund for the Queen? I cannot wait. - Celtic Fan 22

The motivation of users to ignore social norms and risk backlash is an example of identity fusion at work. Fused group members are known to disregard personal or legal

³⁸ Michael Fagan is known for breaking into Buckingham Palace and entering Queen Elizabeth II's bedroom in 1982

consequences to uphold what they see as the group's core values (Knijnik and Newson, 2021). In this case, Celtic fans prioritised solidarity with their group's historical and political ethos over any expectation of deference to the monarchy or conformity to public sentiment. They are willing to endure criticism, potential sanctions, and even the anger of their own club's management to make their point. At that time, I noted that UEFA opened disciplinary proceedings against Celtic for the display of political banners at the Shakhtar match (BBC, 2022), and there was talk of club fines or other penalties. However, such outcomes seemed to do little to deter fan behaviour in public and online.

Identity fusion also involves a strong emotional investment and a feeling of relationship among group members (Newton et al., 2023). I noted that online Celtic fans describe the club and its fan community in family terms and as a brotherhood or a family. This sense of connection can drive members to act on behalf of the group as they would for close relatives. The performative at the Queen's commemorations exemplified this phenomenon. Fans who joined in on the forum were effectively declarative, even when placed in a context that pressured them to do otherwise (Tinson et al., 2023). The public nature of their rebelliousness in stadiums filled with thousands of people and cameras broadcasting to millions suggests that Celtic fans derive strength and validation from acting together. It was precisely because they acted as a fused unit that they could turn what might have been private on the forum into a public display.

Osbourne and Coombs (2013) notes that performative defiance of this kind strengthens the fused identity further. Consequently, I observed a shared atmosphere of 'standing up for beliefs' entering the fan forum. It reinforced what it means to be a Celtic supporter for current and future members. These acts served as a ritual that deepened the emotional bonds among those involved. The following thread demonstrates this point.

Could we please have a tifo of a Highlander and an Irish piquet Jacobite warrior charging the Culloden battlefield with "Slainte Mhor"³⁹ written underneath? - Celtic Fan 24

Half scarf/half lizard skin - Celtic Fan 25

³⁹ Slainte mhor translates to great health in Scottish Gaelic

Reply: The Huns one.....half dead/the other half dead as well. - Celtic Fan 26

The settlement is one of the main reasons why your more hardcore huns have a chubby for the royal family. In their warped minds it confers a sense of superiority on them, and a sense of 'other' on the uppity Kaffliks. - Celtic Fan 27

I don't give two f*cks who the King or Queen is and whether they are alive or dead. - Celtic Fan 29

I love the Celtic family and all their skull duggery! Pierce Morgan is foaming at the mouth today. Brilliant! - Celtic Fan 30

So. What's the craic tomorrow lads? Huddle? - Celtic Fan 31

Tiocfaidh ar La.⁴⁰ Free Scotland. Our day will come. - Celtic Fan 32

Identity fusion is often characteristic of only a subgroup of fans rather than everyone, yet the actions of a keen few can define the public image of the whole group (Swann and Buhrmester, 2015). In this case, the fused core of Celtic supporters set the tone of the overall fan response, illustrating how a committed minority can represent the identity of the larger collective on the public stage. Fans' performative defiance of the Queen's commemorations was the clearest possible statement of, as one forum user put it, '*Tiocfaidh ar La. Free Scotland. Our day will come*'. For context, '*Tiocfaidh ar La*' is an Irish phrase and a prominent slogan of Irish republicanism within the context of Northern Ireland and the broader fight for Irish unification (Panzer, 2015). This captured the essence of Celtic's political subculture as Irish republican, anti-establishment, and unafraid to clash with societal expectations in defence of that identity.

As I concluded my observation for the day, I started to see that Celtic fans were intensively covered by the media, and the framing of the Queen's passing cast the supporters in a harsh light. In the immediate aftermath of the banner and chanting incidents, headlines described Celtic as shameful, vile, and disrespectful (GB News, 2025). Television pundits and public figures also condemned the Celtic supporters who mocked the Queen's death. Such reactions in mainstream discourse positioned the Celtic fan base as a deviant minority unwilling to observe basic dignity during a

⁴⁰ *Tiocfaidh ár lá* is an Irish phrase that translates to 'Our day will come'

time of collective grief (Conner, 2011). The narrative in many outlets implicitly (or explicitly) contrasted Celtic fans with other football supporters, especially Rangers fans, who were praised for their loyalty and respect during their tifo display (Daily Record, 2022). By framing the story as one of commendable unity marred by a pocket of extremist fans, the media largely reinforced the idea that national mourning was the proper, expected behaviour, and that Celtic's supporters were an out-group deserving of disrespect. The following section examines this aspect in more depth.

7.3 Celtic fans response to minute's applause for Queen Elizabeth II

Only a few days later, Celtic played a domestic league match away at St Mirren, which was designated to include tributes to the Queen. Despite the Celtic manager's public plea to fans beforehand to be respectful during the planned minute's applause, a section of the Celtic support once again chose defiance (BBC, 2022). As the stadium began a memorial applause for Queen Elizabeth II, many of the visiting Celtic fans disrupted it by singing 'If you hate the Royal Family, clap your hands' while holding up a banner with the same phrase (See Appendix image 3). The childlike tune of the chant made the act rebellious; Celtic fans were not only refusing to observe the tribute, but doing so in a mocking, upbeat manner designed to mock the seriousness of the occasion. This reflects a broader issue within football culture, where minute's silences have been replaced by applause due to concerns that silence can be disrupted (Tinson, et al., 2023). The moment drew immediate criticism in the press, but it was a proud assertion of identity for the fans involved. This was a calculated performance of disagreement, done in unison and full view of the media and other spectators. The event began a forum thread that started discussions about this moment.

We've annoyed all the right people so far. And I hope the poor wee sensitive cherubs who have been lining up to take a pop at us this week are absolutely raging come Sunday evening. I'll be incredibly disappointed in the away support if they're not. Minutes applause? Turn your backs and do the huddle. - Celtic Fan 33

If I didn't clap for Modric, I'm not clapping for that deid bint. - Celtic Fan 34

There won't be a minority on Sunday. - Celtic Fan 38

Boo, boo and boo again. And again. - Celtic Fan 39

From a social identity perspective, the reactions can be understood as part of the ongoing construction and maintenance of group identity. Jenkins' theory of social identity emphasises that identities are formed through a dynamic interplay of internal definition (how a group sees itself) and external categorisation (how others see the group) (Jenkins, 2014). In the case of the Celtic fans, internally they define themselves as a community with values including Irish republican sympathies and opposition to British establishment symbols. Externally, they are often categorised as a troublemaking or antagonistic group whenever these values are provocative. This internal/external tension was visible around this moment. There was a sense that the forum expressed the work of Bradley (2008), where the identity of who they are (a group that won't bow to the Crown) was in direct counterpoint to who they are not (loyal subjects of the Queen, as shown by the rival Rangers fans). Celtic's identity affirmation came through drawing a sharp boundary between themselves and the out-group.

Jenkins also stresses that identity is something people do and enact through practice and interaction. It is not just something one passively has (Jenkins, 2014). In this light, the Celtic fans' performative rebelliousness was an act of doing identity. They actively performed what being a Celtic supporter meant in that socio-political moment; it meant posting anti-royal comments, mocking symbols of Britishness, and standing apart from the majority's expectations. Through these interactions, the identity of the group was sustained. Every message on the forum was part of this identity work. For example:

Is all their focus on Celtic? No one else disrupt a minutes silence? Is singing "lizzie's in a box" less of an insult than singing "if you hate the Royal family clap your hands" - Celtic Fan 40

It was brilliant in so many ways. Maybe it was an obvious joke, but the wit and subversion of the applause is a triumph. - Celtic Fan 41

If you love a happy ending clap your hands. I'm sure we'll all be singing that at the end of the season you bitter hun carrot - Celtic Fan 42

Excellent from the fans, nailed it 100% - Celtic Fan 43

don't think I've ever been more proud of being a Celtic supporter mainly because we seem to be the only support in Britain not bowing before our so called superiors. In

2022 everyone else is still doffing their cap and bringing shame to the working classes. Upsetting the Rupert Murdoch owned media is a happy byproduct of the last week too.
- Celtic Fan 44

If we've annoyed any hun bastard we are on the correct track. - Celtic Fan 45

If you think the banners were a good idea then I'm sorry but you're absolutely spot on. Never been so proud of the GB⁴¹ - Celtic Fan 46

The sectarian vocabulary and anti-royalist language above serve as tools for fans to assert a political identity that refused to be subsumed into the British national narrative. From an academic perspective, this is an instance of how everyday discourse is embedded in historical and ideological contexts (Van Dijk, 2013). The Celtic fans' performative expressions are acts of meaning-making that maintain a collective identity and continuity with the past. Through their comments, these supporters enact a form of collective remembering and boundary-policing, ensuring that their identity as Celtic fans (and what that historically implies in Scotland) remains unconquered (Boyle, 2017; Kelly, 2011). In the face of a nationwide expectation of reverence, language became a site of cultural contestation, illustrating that in the realm of social life, language is not just a mirror of identity, but a battleground on which identity is affirmed and fought over in online spaces (Darvin, 2016). The thread above demonstrates the political nature of language choices in context; choices through which the community tells who it is.

The rituals surrounding the Queen's death were also noted in ways that illustrate Barthesian semiology (1967). Take the minute's silence/applause, which is a ritual intended to signify respect and unity. In mythic terms, such a ritual communicates that the whole nation shows respect as a natural, collective act. When Celtic fans interrupted the tribute with their chant, there was a sense that they were effectively hijacking the signifier and flipping its meaning (Barthes, 1988). The applause was transformed into an opportunity to voice dissent on the online forum. In effect, the Celtic fans held the tribute ritual (signifier) and filled it with an opposite meaning (signified), transforming a tribute into a moment of disrespect. This kind of rebellious reversal exposed that what was supposed to be a natural gesture of respect was a contested ideological symbol.

⁴¹ Green Brigade: Celtic FC ultra group

Furthermore, Barthes' theory helps illuminate why the two communities (Celtic and the broader British public) could interpret the same event so differently. For the British public, influenced by the royalist myth, Elizabeth II's death was a loss and the end of an era of goodness, and any mockery of it was seen as blasphemy (Barthes, 2006). For the Celtic fans, the event presented an opportunity to exaggerate the morale of their own story. That their loyalty lies with a different history and a different set of values. In the process, they demonstrated that mythmaking is not the sole area of elites or media (Cobley, 2015). Fan groups, too, actively produce and sustain myths that give meaning to their collective experience (Herd, 2017). The confrontation over the Queen's memorial rites was a clash of myths; one of British unity and royal purity versus one of Irish identity and resistance.

As I continued to observe comments on the forum, I noted that Celtic supporters' discourse around the Queen's death was notable for how it was delivered. Much of the commentary was loaded with irony, dark humour, and a symbolic undertone. When news circulated that a minute's applause rather than silence would be held before the St Mirren match, a user on Kerrydale Street posted:

The St Mirren fans will have to give one hell of a round of applause to drown out the boos from the away end. (Celtic Fan 60).

In reply, others joked that television broadcasters would manipulate the audio feed to mask the dissent:

They'll just adjust the audio on TV anyway. It'll probably be 60 seconds from the Nuremberg rally⁴² (Celtic Fan 61)

By evoking a Nazi Nuremberg rally to describe the tribute to the Queen, fans also compare British patriotism to fascist tradition through a symbolic inversion at work. The ceremony intended to honour the head of state is verbally flipped into something evil. The use of exaggeration and comparing applause for the Queen with Hitler's

⁴² Series of large-scale Nazi Party events

rallies to shatter any respect for the event. It shows that to these Celtic fans; the enforced mourning is also autocratic. Irony becomes a weapon to delegitimise the script of respect and to bond the in-group through shared humour at the establishment's expense. Furthermore, another prominent feature of the discourse I observed was the use of profanity and sectarian language to express dislike. Words (e.g. fuck, hun) are used intentionally to break politeness. Comments here serve as a form of verbal violence against the image of the monarch. To call the Queen a '*deid bint*' or to display a banner reading 'FUCK THE CROWN' is to insult the feeling of royalty using words. Below is an example of this at work.

If the fucking huns had paid their taxes in 2012 auld Liz might have been able to afford better medical treatment - Celtic Fan 47

Boooooooo - Celtic Fan 48

So. What's the craic tomorrow? Huddle? - Celtic Fan 49

Any tims going to be at Buckingham Palace – Celtic Fan 50

Huns just gonna always hun, they just can't help but be horrible bastards - Celtic Fan 51

Old huns every bit as angry as they've ever been. Pathetic shower of thug tinks. - Celtic Fan 52

I agree, the banner was a missed opportunity They should have went for something more eloquent like, "ANDREW IS A DIRTY F*CKING NONCE" - Celtic Fan 53

I do feel sorry for the other clubs that us Tims stolen all the thunder of abusing the Monarchy. Every club in Scotland that doesn't respect it deserves their moment in the sun, not just us. Boo the bastard haha - Celtic Fan 52

Proud of us tbh. Rebels choice forever. - Celtic Fan 53

Kilvington and Price (2018) point out that offensive language in online spaces is used to indicate an attitude of extreme disrespect. Fans disregard the expectations of politeness and reverence that typically surround high-status figures, thereby signalling a radical rejection of the legitimacy and prestige of that figure. One way to interpret this is through Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1984). In this case, the monarchy holds symbolic power partly because of the honorific language and ritual deference people accord to it, such as titles, anthems,

and formal etiquette. By refusing that language and replacing it with basic descriptions, Celtic fans symbolically attack the throne in a way that undermines its authority. It is notable that even the ex-Celtic manager, Ange Postecoglou, publicly urged fans to be respectful and abide by the protocols of tribute (BBC, 2022), reflecting the strong social pressure to conform linguistically to mourning norms.

What was also on display was the use of sectarian labels on the forum. This situated the conversation along the historic Catholic versus Protestant and Irish nationalist versus British unionist fault line of Scottish society (Bradley, 2017; McBride, 2022). Celtic fans often used the term 'Hun' to signify Rangers supporters or, by extension, British loyalists/Protestants. They also referred to themselves with terms like 'Tim', originally derogatory labels for Irish Catholics that have been reclaimed as badges of honour (Hayes, 2006). By self-identifying in this manner, the online fan transforms sectarian insult into a symbol of non-cooperation. The call to boo for the entire 60 seconds of the tribute, and the emphatic 'BOOOOO!', convey a performative unity; a demand that all Celtic supporters enact the same vocal resistance as an expression of who they are. I noted that this set a clear us-versus-them boundary on the forum as 'we' the Celtic 'Tims' do not mourn the British Queen. Instead, users loudly reject her. Here, sectarian language functions exactly in this way. It reinforces internal unity and external differentiation. The slurs and slang are boundary markers as commenting this way is to signal membership in the Celtic-supporting anti-monarchy in-group who are distinct from those who respect the Crown. For example:

Hope every tim at St Mirren is an unrepentant fenian panda and gives their all for 60 seconds. BOOOOO.! - Celtic Fan 54

The World Wildlife Fenians will make sure the Fenian pandas live to trigger the Daily Mail and Farage for many days to come. - Celtic Fan 55

Well, she was German so that would be a nice touch. Its what Brenda Saxe-Coburg would have wanted. - Celtic Fan 56

Can confirm still alive after taking my life in my hands wearing the hoops in Liverpool last night. - Celtic Fan 57

There won't be a minority on Sunday. - Celtic Fan 58

Boo, boo and boo again. And again. - Celtic Fan 59

I love the Green Brigade and all their skull duggery! Pierce Morgan is foaming at the mouth today. Brilliant! - Celtic Fan 60

For every 2 English centric media columns wagging the finger at our pro-Republican, anti right wing stances, there's 10 in a multitude of other languages singing our praises and commending our political activism and club ethos. Who's going to care if we fail to stay silent tomorrow? A bunch of right leaning, immigrant hating, Daily Mail reading gammons that effing hate us anyway. Good. They can go eff themselves. I'm delighted I'm in opposition to them. They'll go to bat for Prince Andrew, but Meghan is a no good, pesky Jezebel, not because she's a person of colour, no, Sir, but because... reasons. I sincerely hope the away support tomorrow give it everything in that minutes silence. Pyro, smoke the lot. All sorts of Betty in a box shenanigans, - Celtic Fan 61

I found the thread above particularly interesting because it held layers of multiple ironies. It invokes the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) as if 'Fenian pandas' were an endangered species being conserved, and it notes that the mere existence of outspoken Celtic fans (Fenian pandas) will continue to enrage right-wing British media and politicians. By expressing their antagonism in a playful metaphor, Celtic fans achieve a double effect. Internally, it provokes laughter and signals cleverness, contributing to an in-group culture of witty opposition. Externally, it mocks the emotion of those who criticised Celtic fans' behaviour, implying that their outrage is as irrational as being angered by pandas. Further use of parody in these discussions is a strategy of the community trying to turn the tables on the dominant discourse (Rivers and Ross, 2021). Rather than arguing the political values of monarchy, fans reduce the whole scenario to a joke. This resonates with Cable et al., (2022) work on racism in football on social media, where taking a cultural symbol and reformatting it with subversive meaning is an act of conflict. The children's song rhythm of *'if you hate the Royal Family, clap your hands'* itself is an example of parodic overturn. Using a simple, cheerful tune associated with nursery rhymes to carry a political message in the stadium. The amusement that accompanied this chant on the forum illustrate how collective irony functioned as a form of protest.

By repeatedly using sectarian descriptions like 'Hun' and proudly claiming 'Fenian' for themselves, online users continuously constitute the social categories in play. They invoke historical identities, for example, the Fenian rebel versus the loyalist, and make them relevant in the present context of political conversation on the forum. The choice of words signals to everyone that Celtic supporters align with the Irish republican tradition and stand against Britain's royal institution (McMenemy and Poulter, 2005).

In this way, the language of the fans is performative in constructing a counter-narrative identity. I later paid attention to the Follow Follow forum to see if a similar discourse was at play. The next section will unpack this with a focus on Rangers fans.

7.4 Rangers Fans Honour the Queen on Follow Follow

The death of Queen Elizabeth II motivated an intense reaction among Glasgow Rangers on the Follow Follow online forum. For many Rangers fans, the Queen was not just a distant monarch but a figurehead embodying their community's loyalty and heritage (Giulianotti, 2007). This section analyses how online Rangers fans responded to the Queen's death, focusing on the symbolic language, expressions of loyalty, and rituals of mourning through which supporters constructed and reinforced their in-group identity.

As I began my observation, threads dedicated to the Queen's passing were filled with posts that expressed grief in respectful tones and proclaimed loyalty. Supporters shared messages of sorrow and respect, often invoking culturally loaded symbols (the national anthem, royal titles, biblical references) to honour Her Majesty. These acts of mourning were not just personal sentiments; they served to confirm a collective identity (Benkowitz and Molnar, 2012). As Cohen theorised, community exists as a system of shared meanings as it is *'symbolically constructed, as a system of values, norms, and moral codes which gives a feeling of identity within a bounded whole to its members'* (Cohen, 2013, p 9). In this case, the monarchy was a key symbol around which the Rangers fan community united, using shared language and ritual to define who they are. The below thread optimises this point:

Her Majesty was a fine Christian lady and she will be able to look her Maker in the eye as she is called to Glory. We need have no fears for her eternal soul. As she departs this life we give thanks for her decades of unstinting service to Country, Commonwealth and Mankind. - Rangers Fan 1

Don't even know what to say absolutely gut wrenching - Rangers Fan 2

Thanks for everything Ma'am. Rest in Peace. - Rangers Fan 3

Greatest diplomat this country has ever had on top of everything else. - Rangers Fan 4

Gutted truly gutted. - Rangers Fan 5

A tremendous reign. May she rest in peace - Rangers Fan 6

God Bless Queen Elizabeth II. God save the King. - Rangers Fan 7

God Save The King - Rangers Fan 8

I noted that many Rangers fans emphasised loyalty and duty in their messages of grief, aligning their sorrow with the values the Queen represented. One supporter confessed that while *'I'm not a fan of the royal family'* they nevertheless had huge respect for the Queen:

... huge respect for Queen Elizabeth II for her service to the nation. Must be hard to do it because it's your duty (Rangers Fan 9).

This comment is telling; it distinguishes between general royalism and specific respect for Elizabeth's loyal service. Users framed respect for the Queen as a matter of acknowledging her duty to the nation; a concept that resonates strongly with Rangers fans' ethos of duty, loyalty, and service (to club and country). Even those who are not royalists found common ground in honouring the Queen's lifelong dedication, reflecting how that narrative of duty had penetrated the Rangers community's value system. As such, the Queen's image as a servant of the nation merged with supporters' image of themselves as loyal patriots. Their grief was thus loaded with symbolic meaning (Newson et al., 2023). Mourning Elizabeth II suggests an affirmation of the virtues she embodied, which are also claimed as core to the in-group identity of the community

I also noted that the emotional intensity of Rangers fans' grief was often expressed in ritualistic phrases that underscored continuity and loyalty. Immediately after news of the death, messages like *'The Queen is dead. God save the King. We will not see her like again'* appeared on the forum. In this short post, users moved swiftly from announcing the loss (The Queen is dead) to invoking the traditional cheer of the new monarch (God save the King) and finally to a respectful tribute ('we' will not see her like again). By posting these comments, Rangers fans perform the role of a loyal subject and a sense of nationalism even within the informal space of the forum

(Gibbons, 2011). Another member struck a similar tone of dignified sorrow by posting *'The end of an era, we will never see her likes again. Rest in Peace, Your Majesty'*.

Public rituals were important in how the Follow Follow community navigated the Queen's death. Ritualistic observances became acts of identity affirmation as fans drew emotional energy from these symbols (Cottingham, 2012). At the first Rangers match after the Queen's passing, Ibrox Stadium was the site of tribute. The club asked for permission from UEFA to play the national anthem before their Champions League match, a gesture of respect that broke with normal protocol, and when this was denied, Rangers went ahead and did it anyway (BBC, 2022). Fans fell silent for a minute of remembrance, then erupted into a passionate performance of God Save the King. Supporters at one end unfolded a tifo display; a choreography of red, white, and blue cards covering the entire stand and an outline of Queen Elizabeth II's profile with the words 'HER MAJESTY' spelled out below (See appendix image 4). Meanwhile, at a home game in the Scottish league a few days later, a minute's silence was disrupted by some opposing Dundee United fans, to which the traveling Rangers support responded by loudly singing God Save the King and Rule Britannia in defiance (BBC, 2022). These moments were discussed on the forum.

Rest in peace Ma'am God Save The King. - Rangers Fan 9

A sad, sad say. Thank you for serving our nation in the way you did. You will be sorely missed. RIP - Rangers Fan 10

Rest in Peace Liz, gutted - Rangers Fan 11

Britain will never be the same or feel the same again. Rip Elizabeth - Rangers Fan 12

Put Charles up beside her on the wall. She will always be our queen - Rangers Fan 13

Dundee worst cunts on earth. I didn't know about this video. Horrible - Rangers Fan 14

Dundee should be ashamed of them self's of there latest song on the loss of our greatest players but in such a cesspit of a country we now live in the press media an others don't blink an eye their goings on RIP our glorious queen who now they can't harm no more - Rangers Fan 15

They're a special breed of moron, soulless scum.- Rangers Fan 16

Not only in Britain but throughout the world respect has been shown for the Queen at this time. They are absolutely on their own right now, let them spout their bile, let them stand with Trevor Sinclair⁴³. They seem to hate everything, they don't belong here. - Rangers Fan 17

The monarchy's role as a pillar of unionist ideology was evident in how Rangers fans commented on the Queen and now speak of the King. They did not view her as a figurehead; they saw her as their Queen, a figure of their community (Giulianotti & Gerrard, 2001). Queen Elizabeth II, often referred to as Liz in contexts, was for Rangers fans a sort of family member. This bond intensified the ideological unity as defending the Queen's honour was emotional imperative. Emile Durkheim's theory suggests that when a community comes together to perform rituals, people undergo a feeling of collective unity and transcendent emotional energy known as collective effervescence (Durkheim, 1953). Rangers' fans, therefore, treated these practices with almost religious worship which is evident in the language users used to recount them.

I noticed that one fan emphasised the conduct of the crowd, implicitly contrasting it to the disrespect shown by others:

A minute's silence impeccably observed by Rangers fans as always.... - Rangers Fan 17

The phrase '*as always*' suggests an ethical duty fulfilled, i.e., we always do this right. The narrative then turns to the emotional release as fans posted '*Then we take the roof off Ibrox with a rousing rendition of God Save The King and Rule Britannia*'. The pairing of those two songs, the national anthem and the patriotic song Rule Britannia, is significant. Together they capture the twin pillars of the Rangers identity mythos: devotion to monarch and country (God Save the King) and celebration of Britain's imperial/military heritage (Rule Britannia). Singing them in response to a perceived slight (the minute's silence disruption) was a way for the group to reassert its values.

⁴³ Ex footballer who tweeted '*Racism was outlawed in England in the 60s & it's been allowed to thrive, so why should black & brown mourning*' moments after the Queen died

Some who watched from far commented that they '*stood up in their living room*' for the minute of silence and sang along with the TV broadcast. The forum thus became an extension of the stadium ritual and a place to process and celebrate what they had done together (Millward, 2008). Members congratulated the club and one another, and even those not usually disposed to patriotism admitted the ceremony moved them. Such expressions are instances of what Clifford Geertz call mythmaking (Geertz, 1972). The community, through these ritual acts, was crafting a narrative of itself. The myth reinforced is that Rangers fans are loyal, respectful, and united in honouring the monarchy, unlike those outside the group. Below is an example of this at play:

Truly devastating. This country is all the worse for her passing – Rangers Fan 18

Knew it was coming but still so so sad . What a remarkable person she really was . - Rangers Fan 19

These minority republican scum showed themselves up last night for the rancid stinking reptiles they are. Because their placemen in the MSM are trying to sweep it away, doesn't mean the vast majority of decent people don't know about it. They are being vilified all over the country, and deservedly so. They are traitors to our country and should be shunned everywhere. I take nothing to do with them or their disgusting religion, and feel much better because of it. - Rangers Fan 20

Rest In Peace Your Majesty. Your service to your country and your subjects knew no bounds. As I now shed tears I'll remember you for the rest of my life. God Save the King. - Rangers Fan 21

Thanks for you're service to our Country.- Rangers Fan 22

One thing I observed during my time on the forum was the use of royal emblems and imagery in tributes. Rangers' fans somewhat treated this with a quasi-sacred respect. The giant tifo at Ibrox, for example, was later made available as a remembrance photograph for purchase. A thread titled '*Cracking picture of the display for the Queen on sale*' shared the image link and some fans admired it as a piece of history. The display itself was an effective visual symbol of fusion as it merged the figure of the monarch with the collective figure of the Rangers crowd (Harper, 1988). In that moment, I noted that supporters were the Queen's flag-bearers which brought a vehicle of symbolic meaning in a visual context (Huggins, 2018). By circulating the photograph afterwards, online users were glorifying that ritual within their collective memory.

Baker (2019) notes that owning memorabilia provides a narrative like that of an icon or artefact; it acts as a reminder of shared unity and loyalty amongst football fans. In forum discussions, online users also spoke about wearing black armbands, Union flag badges featuring the Queen's profile and other insignia to games during the mourning period. These small personal rituals extended the mourning into daily life which signalled membership within the Rangers community. Anderson (2016) describes the nation as an imagined community knit together by simultaneous, homogeneous acts of attention. Here, the Rangers fans enacted a small-scale imagined community of mourning. By agreeing on rituals like silence, song, and symbols and executing them together, fans imagined themselves as one body upholding their shared values. The effect was to strengthen the sense of in-group cohesion at a time of uncertainty.

As I continued, I noticed that many comments appeared to be filled with anger and hate towards Celtic and the Irish in general. The next section explores this further.

7.5 Rangers Loyalty to the Queen Sparks Tribute and Outrage

While Rangers supporters were united in mourning the Queen with respect, their discourse also turned towards those outside the group who did not share their sentiments. In-group identity was sharpened through contrast with out-groups, especially Celtic fans and others perceived as showing insult. The Queen's death became a flashpoint for the long-standing rivalry and sectarian divide between the two Glasgow clubs. Indeed, as Rangers fans were posting anthems of loyalty, a section of Celtic's support were mocking the Queen's death with opposing chants and banners (see appendix 2 and 3). This behaviour was reported in the press and did not go unnoticed on the Follow Follow forum. To Rangers supporters, it was nothing short of a violation; a confirmation of everything they believed about their rivals' lack of patriotism and decency. Below is a thread that demonstrates this:

Again we have to live with this shower of scum and if they get there way with an independence vote we will have only ourselves to blame as a lot of our support vote with them in elections they are told who to vote for and if we dont wake up we will live in a Republic ran by they shower. - Rangers Fan 22

Scum club Scum team Fenian fans - Rangers Fan 23

The only reason the famine song was shut down was because the Irish were worried they might actually go home and wanted absolutely nothing to do with them. Shameful fenian rats - Rangers Fan 24

%^*& them and there faux Irish identity Grievance monkey rats - Rangers Fan 25

They travel with Crown passports. Fenian Bastards!@ God Save Our King - Rangers Fan 26

Known for their anti-Monarchy stance' Should also mention their pro-IRA and pro-child abuse stance as well. Not reported. - Rangers Fan 27

adly. Its what we have come to expect from that lot. There is a pretty sizeable element of that support who have no moral compass whatsoever. Glorify child killers and turn the media turn a blind eye to child abuse. I mean cmon to feck how lower could you actually stoop?! - Rangers Fan 28

It is essential to note that outrage on the forum serves multiple purposes. It condemns the out-group's behaviour (Celtic), affirms the in-group's values, and identifies a broader social antagonist (the media) that the fan perceives as biased in failing to defend those values. The tone is one of moral outrage as words like 'Fenian' 'Scum' and 'Pro-IRA' indicate that the fan sees Celtic fans mockery as a moral transgression (Goodall, et al., 2015). This moral framing of the rivalry, good and respectful Rangers versus bad and disrespectful Celtic, was a recurring theme. Users referred to Celtic supporters and others by showing anti-monarchical reactions in sectarian terms. By casting the disrespectful others as sub-human or inherently vile, Rangers fans reinforced their own identity as the morally upright side.

In social identity theory terms, I noted that Rangers fans engaged in a downward comparison to boost in-group positivity. This dynamic increased the out-group's negativity by using sectarian language to solidify the in-group's sense of superiority and cohesion (Hogg, 2016). Fans also referenced the widespread public mourning in their hometown to shame those who disrespected it. This behaviour showed how territorial tensions between power and identity manifests in fan interactions, particularly through their use of mourning rituals as markers of group belonging. For example:

Thousands lined the streets of Dundee last week to pay tribute to the Queen. These scumbag vermin... are an irrelevance. - Rangers Fan 29

They have a British passport. They speak the queens English. They use the queens currency - Rangers Fan 30

That's what I've always said. You love Ireland so much why don't you %^*& off and live there. No one is stopping you. Life would be so much simpler for everyone. - Rangers Fan 31

They're a cancer on our society. I'd say send them home, but Ireland doesn't even want them. - Rangers Fan 32

A feeling of being under attack by hostile forces (be they rival fans, media, or political actors) also appeared through my observation. The Queen's death and its aftermath provided fuel for this narrative. Many Rangers supporters felt that authorities were too lenient on anti-monarchy displays and that Scottish political leaders accepted or even shared the Celtic fans' sentiment. Below is further evidence of Follow Follow users angrily commenting on the silence of politicians.

Absolutely shameless. Kier and his party should be washed out of Parliament at the first opportunity. The only green thing about them is their republicanism. - Rangers Fan 28

Isn't it ironic that for all the years we've been painted as the bad guys who hate everything, last night has just exposed the massive truth. We are a pro-British, protestant club. There is absolutely nothing wrong with being that and there never should be - Rangers Fan 29

They're a cancer on our society. I'd say send them home, but Ireland doesn't even want them - Rangers Fan 30

News try and portray themselves as the progressive 'good guys' and us bears as the 'bad guys', but with their sick behaviour with regards to The Queen and sick songs about the IRA, Lee Rigby, Walter Smith and Jimmy Bell etc they show everyone that they are are the 'bad guys'. - Rangers Fan 31

Her Majesty seen off 6 popes, you tragic bunch of paedophiles. - Rangers Fan 32

Nothing can surpass raping children mate. I see The Sun in their report still managed to call them " the hoops" 19th Century Terrorist filth - Rangers Fan 33

Here, we see how outrage becomes politicised into an identity narrative as fans perceive a double standard where anything remotely Rangers related draws criticism from authorities, but offensive acts against the monarchy are ignored. This reinforces the forum's belief that Rangers fans are a victimised in-group in a country run by antagonistic forces (nationalists, republicans). The effect is to tighten in-group bonds in the face of a hostile out-group environment (Brewer, 1999). Kings (2001) research on collective memory and football hooliganism has shown that perceiving one's group as under attack or treated unfairly can heighten group cohesion and radicalise reactions. In this case, online posts are often overflowing with a sense of sectarian language and righteous anger, which in turn draws agreement from others and rallies fans in a discursive sense.

The psychology of outrage is at play in these interactions. Expressions of moral outrage serve several functions for the football forum. Finn (1994) suggests that expressing outrage can act as a signal of one's identity and values to the group, thereby enhancing one's standing as a loyal member. This type of outrage was visible on the forum; users who used sectarian terms, such as those referring to Celtic, often received many likes and approving replies. In line with Newson et al., (2023), this functioned as a performative affirmation of in-group loyalty, where fans needed to respond in a biased or defensive manner to potentially threatening challenges. In addition, shared outrage fostered in-group solidarity by outlining a clear us-versus-them narrative through sectarian terms. The more outraged Rangers fans became at Celtic's mockery, the more users repeated how they cared about the Queen and everything she symbolised. Outrage can also serve as an emotional outlet for grief and fear amongst football fans (Waiton, 2014). The Queen's death may have prompted anxiety about the future. Directing sectarianism at those who insulted her memory was a way for Rangers fans to channel uncomfortable emotions into a more aggressive feeling.

For Rangers supporters, the Crown is a symbol of the Union and of Protestant Loyalist heritage (Davies et al., 2013; Giulianotti and Gerrard, 2001). These macro-political identities are channelled into football fan antagonisms. Thus, the Queen's death became another arena for the Old Firm rivalry, but with higher stakes because it transcended football. As such, the forum on the days after the Queen's death saw an

increase in political talk, despite being a football forum. I noted that online users associated attacks on the Queen with attacks on the Union. Some raised the upcoming debates on Scotland's constitutional future, asserting that the loyalist community would not forget who mocked the Queen if ever a referendum came. The following thread demonstrates this:

There is no doubt that ALL these so called Irish and Scottish 'Republicans' would not be if we were still under the Catholic House of Stuart. In fact they would be full blown Royalists. No question about that. They claim to be Republican when in actual fact all they are is uber Catholic / Anti Protestant / English bigots. Hypocrites of the highest order who prob don't even go to chapel unless it's a funeral or communion for a bevvv. Scumbags. - Rangers Fan 34

Her Majesty even in death has made the Union stronger than ever this past week - Rangers Fan 35

These minority republican Tim scum showed themselves up last night for the rancid stinking reptiles they are. Because their placemen in the MSM are trying to sweep it away, doesn't mean the vast majority of decent people don't know about it. They are being vilified all over the country, and deservedly so. They are traitors to our country and should be shunned everywhere. Never forget this. I take nothing to do with them or their disgusting religion, and feel much better because of it. - Rangers Fan 36

I'm going to church this morning with my young family , we will hear significant story of Queen's connection to our faith. We will complete a two minutes silence in honour of our Queen, sing hymns to help the transition of our beautiful monarch to her eternal place, whilst healing our hearts. God Save The King will then be sung. I know it will make me feel better to have our lord guiding us over the next period of mourning. Hope it will diminish the negative feeling , I have towards politicians who have created regulations to suppress the protection of the Protestant religion. - Rangers Fan 37

It was clear that sectarian language on the forum serves explicitly to maintain group boundaries. Derogatory nicknames like 'Tim' are used as political insults. By using such terms in the Queen-mourning threads, online users signal that any Celtic or nationalist perspective is not just a different club preference, but an out-group identity tied to Catholicism and republicanism. Similarly, flags and songs on the forum operate as group totems as the display of Union Jacks and singing of God Save the Queen became ritual affirmations of in-group values, while reference to Irish and Scottish Republicans invokes a folk devil (Cohen, 2011). This outrage on the forum functioned as group-boundary signalling. Rangers fans performed their solidarity by accusing Celtic's supporters as disrespectful.

Overall, the analysis of Follow Follow highlights that the death of Queen Elizabeth II was a catalyst for sectarianism. Long-standing divisions between these fan communities, rooted in Scotland's historical Protestant/Catholic, Unionist/Nationalist fault lines, predated this event by decades (Bradley, 1999). The Queen's passing lit sentiments that were already ingrained. Rather than aggravating new attitudes, it offered a high-profile symbolic trigger that allowed hostilities to flare into the Follow Follow forum. In this case, Rangers supporters were reacting to what the Queen represented in the context of their fandom and the event became a proxy battle in the ongoing culture war between them and Celtic. This underscores that the Queen's death was a spark for pre-existing sectarian divisions, which dramatically illuminated them, but it did not cause those divisions.

7.6 Conclusion

Queen Elizabeth II's death served as an emotive flashpoint that brought the enduring sectarian currents of the Celtic and Rangers rivalry to the surface in digital spaces. By examining reactions on the Celtic forum Kerrydale Street and the Rangers forum Follow Follow, this chapter has shown how a national event that is unrelated to football, diverted through the prism of each community's historical identities and antagonisms. The Queen became not just a mourning figure but a powerful symbol onto which each fan base projected its values, grievances, and sense of self. In doing so, Celtic and Rangers supporters reaffirmed the deep-rooted sectarian narratives that continue to underlie their fandoms. This conclusion draws together these observations by showing how the Queen's image caused divergent responses shaped by collective memory, identity performance, and online community dynamics, and what new understanding this provides about contemporary sectarianism in football fan culture.

A key finding from these discussions is how closely linked national symbols are with sectarian identity performance. The figure of Elizabeth II functioned as a cultural challenge on both forums where Celtic fans proved their Irish-republican credentials by insulting her, while Rangers fans proved their British-unionist credentials by honouring her. In this way, the Queen's death did not create new sectarian attitudes so much as it activated longstanding ones under a visible spotlight (McBride, 2022; Bruce, 2019). This supports the notion that sectarian sentiment in football fandom can

be stimulated by symbolic triggers that link with historical group narratives (Bruce et al., 2004; McBride, 2018). In effect, Queen Elizabeth II became a proxy through which each fan base narrated its identity, where on one side, she was a figurehead of an illegitimate order to be ridiculed; on the other, she was the head of a hierarchy to be honoured. This exemplifies Barthes' concept of mythologies (1957/2006) in modern form, where the Queen's image carried opposed mythic meanings in the two communities and revealing how signifiers can be loaded with contrasting ideological meanings depending on the audience.

Importantly, the nature of online forums as arenas for fan expression played a role in how these sectarian responses unfolded and what they meant. McMenemy and Poulter (2005, p 488) notes that the internet can be a '*rich breeding ground for extremism*' by granting a platform to voices and views that mainstream society would typically. Both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow show this dynamic; in an era when overt sectarian chants and banners at stadiums are shortened by social pressure and regulations (Goodall et al., 2015), online communities still offer an unfiltered outlet for such attitudes. McMenemy and Poulter (2005) observed that the freedom of online environments can make sectarian discourse more pervasive and eviller as fans feel encouraged by anonymity and in-group. The analysis upholds this point. Celtic supporters on Kerrydale Street, behind usernames and in the company of like-minded fans, employed slurs like 'Hun' and 'orange bastards' that would be condemned in public arenas. Likewise, Rangers fans on Follow Follow spoilt in comments such as '*filthy Fenian rats*' and '*they don't belong here*' expressing raw hatred toward Catholics and Irish republicans in a way that rarely surfaces in face-to-face settings. Celtic and Rangers fans enact what McGlashan (2013) calls performative hate speech, attacking the out-group with language fuelled by emotion rather than reason. The purpose of such speech is to signal in-group loyalty and out-group dislike, often by using sectarian words and insults.

This chapter extends the work of McMenemy and Poulter (2005) by illustrating how a specific real-world event (the Queen's passing) gets translated into an occasion for online sectarian performance. Notably, the digital context not only reproduces old sectarian behaviours but also morphs them and the use of irony and parody by Celtic fans (e.g. the children's song rhythm of if you hate the Royal Family clap your hands)

represents a strategic adaptation of sectarian expression to the internet culture by allowing hateful sentiment to be covered in fun forms. This suggests that sectarianism online is an evolving subculture that fuses traditional grievances with the language of digital humour and virality (Goodall et al., 2015; Rivers and Ross, 2021). In the process, the purpose remains what Boekman and Turpin-Petrosino (2002, p. 209) identified for hate speech *‘to send a clear message to the victim and his or her community’*. Every slur and slogan posted was intended to intimidate or belittle the other side’s community and to solidify the fan’s standing as a faithful in-group member.

The reactions documented also reveal the psychology of sectarian fandom. Both Celtic and Rangers forums displayed evidence of what Swann and Buhrmester (2015) and Newson et al., (2023) term identity fusion. This is where an extreme alignment of personal and group identity fosters a willingness to sacrifice or act radically for the group. On Kerrydale Street, the most active users demonstrated fused identity through their eagerness to experience risk in defence of their group’s values. They openly delighted in UEFA fines and media condemnation, seeing those as badges of honour that prove Celtic fans against the establishment. On Follow Follow, identity fusion manifested in the emotional pain fans expressed at the Queen’s death and the aggressive posturing to defend her honour. Strong fused Rangers fans reacted the more passionately when they felt their identity was insulted, hence the rage of their response to Celtic’s mockery, which they perceived as a direct affront to their community’s essence. This intense group alignment also helps explain the kinship rhetoric both sides used as Celtic fans spoke of the Celtic family and roused each other to act as one in protest. This is while Rangers fans rallied around being the loyal subjects of the Queen and harmonised in comments and threads. Such language and behaviour highlight that for many online supporters, being a Celtic or Rangers fan is far more than a casual association and more of a primary identity that carries deep emotional and even quasi-spiritual weight (Webber and Turner, 2024).

The chapter thereby contributes new evidence of how fused fan identities drive sectarian expressions in the online realm, consistent with recent work linking identity fusion to willingness to engage in pro-group behaviour (Swann et al., 2015; Newson et al., 2020). It confirms that the sectarian division is self-sustaining, and the more online fans act in unison or impose sectarian norms, the more they reinforce the

emotional bonds and collective myths that led them to do so in the first place. It underscores that sectarian identities are not static as they remain anchored in the historical mythologies about the Queen. This indicates that efforts to reduce sectarianism must reckon with its ability to resurface in new forms, especially online spaces where regulation is limited and community self-policing often allows sectarian comments to be made. At the same time, the chapter also highlights that meaningful dialogue or empathy between Celtic and Rangers fanbases is not present. In these threads, each fan base spoke about and against the other but never with the other. Despite sharing the same news event about the Queen, the two forums created parallel realities and a reminder that online spaces can create segmented public spheres that never intersect (Sergeant and Tagg, 2019).

The sectarian performances on Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow show that football fandom remains a channel for political and religious identity to be expressed and preserved (Giulianotti 2007; Bradley, 1994). By focusing on this event, it has shown a picture of the system of online sectarianism; how it is sustained through shared narratives and emotions, how it is amplified by digital platforms, and how it continues to evolve while echoing century-old grievances. Ultimately, the event of the Queen's death highlights that sectarian fault lines are still cut in the cultural landscape and are readily reactivated by symbols of the past (McBride, 2022). The challenge moving forward will be addressing the entrenched collective memories and identities that give them life. In shining a light on these forum discussions, this chapter contributes to that understanding, revealing the continuities and shifts in sectarian discourse and reminding us of that symbols like the Queen can still crystallise who 'we' are and who 'we' are not in the context of football fan identity.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Sectarianism in the Context of Digital Football Fandom in Scotland

This thesis argues that sectarianism expressed through the rivalry between Glasgow football clubs Celtic and Rangers has been reconstituted through digital fan forums, where online interactions among supporters reproduce and extend traditional sectarian identities and antagonisms into new virtual spaces. Drawing on the Scottish Government's working definition, sectarianism is understood as *'a complex of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, actions and structures, at personal and communal levels, which originate in religious difference and can involve a negative mixing of religion with politics, sporting allegiance and national identifications* (Scottish Government, 2013, p.5). The evidence from the online ethnography affirms this multidimensional definition, where on Celtic and Rangers fan forums, historical religious differences (Catholic vs. Protestant) are interwoven with political loyalties

(Irish republicanism vs. British unionism), football allegiances, and national identities. In these online spaces, sectarianism manifests as an embedded cultural practice and a persistent thread in the fabric of everyday online fan discourse. The research finds that sectarian expressions online are both collective and performative and serves to reinforce community boundaries and identity, rather than being outbursts of individual prejudice (Goodall et al., 2015). This answers our first research question by illustrating that sectarianism in digital football fandom is best understood as a form of 'identity work' and 'communal narrative'.

The Celtic fan forum Kerrydale Street and the Rangers fan forum Follow Follow function as imagined communities in the sense of Anderson (1983), where a collective identity and sense of belonging allow people to feel connected to a large community. Members who might never meet face-to-face perceive themselves as part of a single nation of fans bound by shared symbols, histories, and antipathies (Bradley, 2017). Both forums cultivate an imagined community of support and rivalry where fans continuously flag their identity through language and symbols. For example, Celtic fans use collective pronouns like 'we' and 'us' to assert a shared Irish-Catholic heritage and cause, while Rangers fans invoke 'we/our' to affirm a proud Protestant-British identity. These habits echo what Billig (1995) calls banal nationalism where the everyday, taken-for-granted expressions of nationhood keep group identity constantly in view. Even outside obvious sectarian arguments, football talk on these forums is laced with markers of identity. Songs, slogans, and insider jargon that signal which side of the Old Firm divide one belongs to. In this way, the digital fandom environment continuously reproduces a sense of communal belonging and difference. It confirms that sectarianism arises from a '*distorted expression of identity and belonging*' (Rosie, et al., 2015, p3.9) in the sense that sporting rivalry becomes a vehicle for historic ethno-religious antagonism.

It was clear that some Celtic and Rangers fans consciously and unconsciously play out roles before their audience of fellow fans, projecting identities and managing impressions as if on a stage (Goffman, 1967). The anonymity of usernames provides a mask that frees individuals to be more performative and extreme in their expressions than they likely would be offline (Ludvigsen, 2023). Some comments were the deliberate performance of in-group loyalty and out-group antipathy, part of what

Guschwan (2016) would say is most closely associated with the theatre. This performative aspect shows that sectarian discourse online was often a calculated impression management geared toward earning approval from the in-group. As Sauter (2014) notes, people write themselves into being, meaning in this case, fans write their opinionated selves into being through sectarian banter and ritualised insults. The forum context thus encourages dramaturgical loyalty as fans sustain a steady persona across interactions that reinforce peer feedback.

Furthermore, this research found that online sectarian expression is collective and interactive. It is a process where each comment is shaped by previous ones and anticipates responses. Fans are continuously in dialogue with the idea of the rival as every slur, nickname and joke acknowledges the other side's presence as a combative audience, even though no rival fans are physically in the same forum (Cleland, 2010). This dialogic nature goes with Bakhtin's (1981) concept of heteroglossia, the coexistence of multiple social voices in discourse. Within a single thread, the research observed a heteroglossic mix of languages and tones; from the formal rhetoric of historical grievance to the slang of football banter were all interwoven in the service of sectarian narrative. For example, on the Follow Follow forum, one might see the moral outrage of a comment condemning republican terrorists followed by a meme-laden post saturated with irony, then a football chant. They are all different voices contributing to the same general worldview. This diversity of voices shows that the subculture is richly textured by employing different ways to reinforce the same fundamental us-vs-them division. As such, every sectarian comment on both forums gain meaning only about the historical and social dialogue around it. Understanding sectarianism in digital fandom therefore requires seeing it as a living, ongoing dialogue among in-group members, steeped in shared history and aimed always at an imagined out-group opponent.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggests that individuals derive self-esteem from group memberships and thus tend to favour their group (the in-group) while disapproving of rival groups (out-groups). As such, the Celtic and Rangers forums demonstrate this dynamic. They are echo chambers wherein loyalty to the group and contempt for outsiders' merge into a strong group ethos (Miranda et al., 2024). The shared enemy in this case is each other; mutual antagonism becomes a central part of what defines

the group. Even cultural triggers such as a football player's identity or a political event can be enough to activate strong in-group bias and out-group derogation in these forums. This underscores that sectarianism online is a structuring principle of group identity and a way for fans to enhance their self-concept by substantiating 'us' and vilifying 'them'. The emotional intensity with which fans engage in this process also speaks to what Newson (2019) terms as identity fusion, an extreme form of alignment where personal identity is fused with group identity. Indeed, some forum fans demonstrate signs of being fused fans who feel completely immersed in their fan group. They react to fan-relevant events as if reacting to personal triumphs or upsets.

Research by Swann et al., (2015) and Newson et al., (2020) has linked identity fusion with a willingness to go to great lengths for the group. The results suggest that many Celtic and Rangers online fans exhibit this fusion as their posts sometimes reveal a sectarian tone and a readiness to defend the group whenever it is perceived to be under threat. Both forums thus provide ground for collective effervescence, in Durkheim's sense, albeit in virtual form. In moments such as derby victory, a controversial incident with Lafferty and Mclean, or the death of a symbolic figure, the research saw a synchronous intensification of emotion among forum members. Dozens of fans would post within minutes of each other and create an atmosphere of unity in sentiment. Durkheim (1982) describes this process of collective effervescence, where, during group gatherings or rituals, individuals experience an intense shared emotional activation that binds them together. On the forums, this occurred through the exchange of messages through a flow of posts, all echoing each other's feelings, reaffirmed to fans that they were part of a united collective (Lawrence and Crawford, 2018). This online effervescence, while facilitated by screens, serves a similar function to the stadium roar or a football crowd as it re-energises collective identities and passions, reinforcing the sectarian divide as a social reality lived by the community.

To understand sectarianism in the digital age, researchers like Bruce et al. (2005) and Rosie et al. (2004) argue that it should be seen as a cultural system. This means it is kept alive through shared stories, everyday behaviours, and a sense of belonging to a group. It is the continuous storytelling and ritual enacted by fans that restore old antagonisms in a contemporary medium. Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums actively produce and reproduce sectarian meaning within fan culture. These spaces

take long-standing oppositions such as Catholic vs. Protestant, Irish vs. British, and them vs us and intertwine them into the everyday language of football support (Goodall et al., 2015). The result is a potent subculture where sport and sectarian behaviour intermix, and where being a true fan often means embodying those inherited biases. This can be seen as an identity practice and a way of doing identity in a group, handed down and adapted (File and Worlledge, 2023). The digital context has therefore given this a new life as it provides a 24-hour platform for communal reinforcement, creative adaptation (e.g. meme culture, coded references), and cross-generational transmission of the sectarian repertoire. It is strong because it is socially and culturally embedded and a shared language that evolves but persists and is intertwined with what it means (for these forums) to be Celtic or Rangers.

8.2 How Online Fan Groups Construct Sectarian Narratives

The case studies of James McClean's poppy controversy and Kyle Lafferty's sectarian slur to the ritualised emotion of the Old Firm derby, to fan reactions over the death of Queen Elizabeth II all reveal a striking common pattern. That online fans constructed narratives that frame events in terms of their forum identity mythos (Davies, 2015). These narratives serve many uses as they affirm in-group values, stigmatise the out-group, rationalise group grievances and superiority, and entertain the community through shared reference points. In essence, online sectarian narratives are a form of symbolic storytelling that allows fans to articulate who 'we' are and what 'they' represent, drawing on a rich repertoire of historical and cultural themes. A key finding from the first study is that online fans use players and public figures as proxies in their sectarian narratives. The case of James McClean is illustrative of this as he became a cause on Celtic's Kerrydale Street forum. Fans rallied around him as a folk hero representing Irish national pride and principled resistance to British militarism.

In discussing McClean, Celtic supporters were recounting a narrative about their own community's values. Posts praised McClean's principles and framed the abuse he receives as anti-Irish racism, thereby casting Celtic fans as the righteous defenders of an oppressed heritage (McBride, 2022). By using the poppy's symbolism, Celtic fans connected a football incident to a long-running national mythology. In this storytelling, McClean is less a footballer and more an icon around which Celtic fan identity is

preserved as he symbolises the Irish Catholic community's enduring struggle against colonialism (Bradley, 2022). Similarly, on the Rangers forum, the case of Kyle Lafferty was also significant. Rather than condemning the slur, many online Rangers posts downplayed it, seeing the incident as a broader narrative of maltreatment and double standards. Some fans deflected blame onto Celtic supporters and the media, suggesting that Rangers or Protestants/British-identifying individuals are unfairly demonised for sectarian behaviour while Celtic's sectarian failures are ignored. It was noted that this counter-narrative conveys an in-group message of victimhood and justification. In both McClean and Lafferty cases, it is seen that online fans construct narratives that turn individual incidents into stage plays about 'us' and 'them' with stock characters of martyrs and villains.

The Old Firm rivalry chapter provides the most expansive view of narrative-building as the entire match became a canvas for sectarian mythmaking. For instance, some Celtic fans framed the Cup Final Win as the latest chapter in their historical saga of triumph over oppression. These posts were often filled with historical references showing that the match is still symbolically linked to centuries-old battles of Irish and Scottish identity (Boyle, 2017; Giulianotti, 2007). Equally, after the loss, the narratives on the Follow Follow forum reinforced resilience and placed blame on Celtic. Some Rangers fans used conspiracy theories based on referees casting the establishment in favour of Celtic, which is ironic since historically Celtic fans claim the establishment bias favoured Rangers (Bradley, 2008; McMenemy and Poulter, 2005). Through this narrative, Rangers fans carry that their in-group remains superior even in adversity. The narratives are flexible, meaning that stories can be used to fit pre-existing sectarian descriptions, confirming one's side as the hero and the other side as the villain.

A notable aspect of both fan forms is their use of symbolic vocabulary and coded references that share a sectarian vocabulary. Online fans employ a host of nicknames, slurs, songs, and memes that encapsulate complex narratives in a shorthand form. Calling Celtic fans '*Fenians*' or Rangers fans '*Orange Bastards*' raises a dehumanising myth of the other side and is loaded with historical connotations (Wilson, 2012). By using them, fans are conveying age-old religious and political narratives that they assign to the out-group. Likewise, comments using songs also serve narrative

functions. When Celtic supporters in the forum quote lyrics of *The Fields of Athenry* or pro-IRA songs, McKerrell (2012) notes that they are using the memory of famine, rebellion, and perseverance against the British, tying their football support to the story of Irish Catholic survival and resistance. Rangers' fans commenting the 'Famine is Over' or 'No Surrender' are doing the same from the opposite side, conveying a narrative of Protestant victory, loyalty to the crown, and refusal to yield to the enemy (Waiton, 2018).

Barthes' (1972) concept of mythologies is useful here as everyday symbols and references in these forums carry a second order meaning that reinforces an ideological narrative. Barthes (1972) notes that such signs convey the concept of a larger idea. A Rangers fan posting about 'defending the Crown' in the context of a football argument is voicing the myth that Britain (and by extension Rangers-Protestants) is a great Empire that must be loyally served (Giulianotti and Gerrard, 2001). A Celtic fan posting an Irish tricolour and an anti-monarchy slogan after the Queen's death is voicing the myth that Ireland/Catholics have nobly resisted British oppression (Hayes, 2006). These myths are the deep structure of the sectarian narratives.

It is also important to recognise how these narratives are constructed in interactive practice. The forums demonstrate a collaborative narrative-building process (Niemann, Brand and Weber, 2024). A fan comments a set frame for instance, *'McClean is getting abuse f"or refusing the poppy; it's disgusting anti-Irish racism'* and others pile on to elaborate the frame. In time, a communal narrative emerges from dozens of contributions. Dissenting voices are typically shouted down to maintain narrative consistency. This look like a choral effect as many voices sing the same refrain, each adding comments to the forum thread. In doing so, both Celtic and Rangers fans signal to each other their agreement and solidarity, which in turn hardens the narrative as a community of faith within the forum (Tinson, Sinclair and Gordon, 2023). Notably, humour and irony are key tools in this construction. The digital context encourages witty one-liners, memes, and sarcastic phrases on topics and a style of communication that can sugarcoat comments as banter (Rivers and Ross, 2021). Indeed, the research noted how ironic sectarian humour became a form of narrative on the forums. For example, in reacting to Queen Elizabeth II's death, some Celtic fans posted tongue-in-cheek condolences that implied pleasure to mock royal

mourning. This moment allowed Celtic fans to take the underlying narrative; that the British monarchy is mocked in their community while maintaining a show of humour.

Both Celtic and Rangers fans online express continuity that today's team and fans are recipients of a historical legacy (Bradley, 2022). Each match and incident casts as another episode in that grand narrative. This provides both online communities with a sense of meaning beyond football as they are protagonists in a larger story (Kretchmar, 2017). It also serves as social pressure that, by perpetuating these narratives, the community conveys to any member that to belong, one must accept and propagate these group-defining stories (Newson et al., 2016). Consequently, there is a normative message that a sectarian narrative becomes a litmus test of loyalty. Online fans who, for instance, challenged their own side's sectarian slur may often be met with hostility, accused of being sympathisers with the enemy or not true fans (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2016). This narrative carries a directive that upholds the tone on both forums.

It is also worth highlighting that these narratives also attempt to convey a sense of validation and release for the in-group. They allow fans to vent frustrations and make sense of negative experiences through an explanatory myth (*we lost because the referees favour them, Lafferty was punished for sectarian language only because it's a witch-hunt against us etc.*). They also reinforce collective memory (Halbwachs, 2020) by retelling and exaggerating events like old games and historical grievances to ensure that others online absorb the interpretation of those events. In doing so, both forums' continuity is maintained, and the narrative is a glue connecting past, present, and future Celtic and Rangers supporters. This is like what Durkheim (1982) said about rituals, that they periodically renew the group's shared understanding and moral order. Here, the ritual is narrative and the repetitive cycle of sectarian comments storytelling around every significant occurrence.

In conclusion to Research Question 2 (In what ways do online football fan groups construct sectarian narratives, and what are they trying to convey?), Celtic and Rangers fans online construct sectarian narratives by leveraging shared symbols, historical references, and interactive storytelling to dramatise the difference between us and them. These narratives use messages that reinforce in-group pride, legitimise

in-group values, and denigrate the out-group, which effectively communicates who Celtic and Rangers fans are, and are not, in terms of religion, politics, and culture. Their narratives are built collaboratively and often humorously, but their underlying intent is to preserve a view in which one's side is heroic or justified, and the other is shameful or threatening. In doing so, online fans are doing identity work collectively by mythologising their community and its struggle in the digital arena. The findings underscore that such narratives are productive of sectarian attitudes, reinscribing the boundaries of the imagined community and ensuring that old animosities are passed on in new forms.

8.3 Fan Discourse vs. Dominant Representations of Sectarianism

The third research question asks how online fandom discourse compares to dominant representations of sectarianism in contemporary Scottish society. This invites a critical reflection on whether the raw, unfiltered dialogue of fans aligns with or challenges the way sectarianism is commonly portrayed in mainstream media, political discourse, and public opinion. The short answer is that there is a significant disconnect. Both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums reveal a sectarian undercurrent that is at once more pervasive and hurtful than mainstream representations typically acknowledge, yet also more ritualistic and community-bound than the often portrayals of sectarian incidents in the media. As such, the findings complicate the picture as they show that sectarianism in Scotland is neither gone (Bruce et al., 2005; McKerrell, 2012; Walls and Williams, 2005) nor a straightforward matter of extremist bigots (Goodall et al., 2015). Instead, it persists in a culturally embedded way that mainstream discourse struggles to capture.

The online fan discourse documented provides evidence that challenges the myth narrative (Bruce, et al., 2005), while also adding touch to the Scotland's shame narrative noted by James MacMillan (Murray, 2000). The observation demonstrates that sectarian thinking very much endures in substantial segments of online spaces, and the fact that some users participate in threads steeped in anti-Catholic or anti-Protestant slurs, historical grudges, and sectarian jokes denies the idea that sectarianism is just a media invention. The attitudes expressed cannot be dismissed as entirely two-faced, even if fans say things tongue-in-cheek, the consistency of the

comments points to an entrenched system of normalised prejudice. In other words, the forums reveal that sectarian discourse is normalised within these communities in a way that mainstream representations rarely admit. The study found that online anonymity allowed fans to voice sentiments they might suppress in public, thereby offering a glimpse into how online fans articulate and reinforce sectarian attitudes when they believe no one outside their community is observing (McMenemy and Poulter, 2005). This suggests that surveys and public polls like those Bruce et al., (2005) and Rosie et al., (2015) cited might under-report prejudice, and people often won't admit sectarian biases but will flaunt them to their in-group online.

In that respect, the data aligns with Thompson's (2002) critique of focusing only on the individual level of prejudice as it shows that at the communal level, in safe harbours like online spaces, sectarian prejudices find free expression. Therefore, against the narrative that sectarianism is largely a myth, researchers must note that the attitudes are real, even if they are expressed in a performative context. The online text confirms that a deep reservoir of sectarian themes still exists, and songs, slurs, symbols, and stories are all on hand to be used, indicating that these ideas live on in collective memory (Halbwachs, 2020). Fans may not commit violence, but they commit to rhetorical violence and dehumanisation of the other group routinely. It perpetuates a climate in which anti-Catholic/Irish/Republican or anti-Protestant/British/Loyalist descriptions are normalised, and where the 'Other' is mocked in ways that would be unacceptable in mainstream workplaces, schools, or mixed social settings (Bradley, 2017).

At the same time, all three results chapters show that online fans are distinct from how sectarianism is often depicted in mainstream media. Media tend to report sectarianism through episodic incidents, e.g., a brawl after an Old Firm game, a sectarian chant heard at a stadium, an outrageous comment by a player or celebrity (Lafferty), which paints sectarianism as a series of extreme flare-ups or criminal acts (Law, 2015; Flint and Kelly, 2013). In contrast, the Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums show sectarianism as a continuous narrative backdrop to daily life (at least daily online life) for Celtic and Rangers fans. This predictability of sectarian expressions and how they are woven into ordinary fan chatter is something dominant representations rarely capture, since they focus on the overt and spectacular. In mainstream society, open

sectarian speech is heavily stigmatised, and one would rarely hear someone openly use sectarian song in public without backlash (Waiton, 2018). This can create an impression that sectarianism survives only on the margins or only in the emotion of football rivalry (Kelly, 2011). But on the online forums, pseudonyms and similarity of audience, fans freely drop slurs and express hatred in broad daylight (albeit virtual daylight). This indicates that the social taboo against sectarian speech, while strong in general society, is relaxed and suspended in these online spaces. The research thereby adds evidence that sectarian prejudices have not evaporated (Bruce, et al, 2005) but have been relegated to subcultural and online spheres where they continue to thrive.

An important observation is that the sectarian discourse online often appears to be more about performative antagonism rather than genuine expressions of religious hatred. In other words, Bruce's (2011) perception that much of what is ritual posturing has merit, and Celtic and Rangers fans themselves often treat the rivalry of one-upmanship in insult and outrage. Indeed, online fans sometimes frame their comments as jokes or use laughing emojis, indicating an element of irony at play (Dixon, Cleland, and Cashmore, 2024). However, this does not make the discourse moderate. A crucial insight from the analysis is whether individuals hate the other religion/ethnicity, as the effect of their collective discourse is to maintain an environment of hostility and separation (Bruce, 2019). Celtic and Rangers fans may identify as bigoted only in the context of football (Flint, 2013) and feel that outside the forum, they can be friendly with the opposite fan base. But inside the forum, they are continuously rehearsing sectarian stereotypes and grievances.

As an example, consider how the forums handled the Queen's death. Mainstream representation of that event highlighted national unity in mourning and respectful silences at football matches (BBC, 2023). Any deviances, like a small number of Celtic fans chanting during a minute's applause, were condemned as misbehaviour in the media. But online, the observation saw that within Celtic's community, anti-royalist and sectarian terminology was wrapped in humour. As such, Kerrydale Street collectively created a parallel reality of that event, where it was an occasion to reaffirm their identity by rejecting what the Rangers community held sacred. The point demonstrates that both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow can diverge from a dominant societal

narrative and create insulated worldviews. Each forum spoke about and against the other, but never with the other, highlighting an echo chamber effect. In society at large, there is at least an attempt to have a common conversation about sectarianism (Bradley, 2022; McKerrell, 2012; Walls and Williams, 2005). But in these online spaces, there is no common conversation, only mutually exclusive monologues. This means that while dominant representations might assume sectarian tensions are easing through intermixing and modern tolerance, but the communities are still often speaking past each other in online comments and never engaging in dialogue that could break stereotypes.

The findings also call into question how dominant narratives address sectarianism. The Scottish Government's Advisory Group definition (2013) emphasises that sectarianism originates in religious difference and involves a negative mixing with politics, sport, and national identity, expressed in ways that segregate and exclude the religious other. Dominant discourse, in line with this, often frames sectarianism primarily as religious bigotry (anti-Catholicism or anti-Protestantism) with football as a flashpoint (Kelly, 2011; Bradley, 2017). What the online forums show is that for many online fans, the religious aspect is often incorporated into ethnic and national hostility. Yet, these positions map onto the same Catholic vs Protestant divide by other names (Irish is Catholic, Loyalist is Protestant). This indicates that sectarianism has metamorphosed in language. Dominant representations that look for straightforward religious hatred might miss that football fans phrase it as politics and cultural conflict. The findings pick up on these code words and substitutions, highlighting the need for society to recognise that sectarianism can be expressed in camouflaged forms; a fact that scholars like Rosie et al., (2004) and Flint (2008) have pointed out. As such, both forums uphold the structure of sectarian othering even when explicit religious references are absent. Online users are still segregating and excluding the other community, fulfilling the government's definition, but doing so under banners like national identity and historical allegiance. Therefore, the research shows that the rivalry stems from religious and national divisions, and the contemporary fan discourse is a continuation by proxy of those old battles, rather than a completely new, harmless phenomenon.

This thesis also shows the lack of accountability and counter-narrative in the online spaces. In broader society, sectarian statements often meet immediate criticism from politicians, church leaders, clubs, anti-sectarian campaigners like Nil by Mouth, and on social media by the public (Rosie et al., 2015; Flint, 2008). This creates a public narrative that sectarianism is broadly condemned and socially unacceptable. By contrast, within the open forums, sectarian statements are met mostly with agreement. There is little internal challenge as no user on Follow Follow is going to give a pro-Catholic defence, and no user on Kerrydale Street is likely to defend the monarchy or the Orange Order. The absence of opposition in these discussions means that the forums become more extreme than what dominant representations. It also means the fans rarely encounter the counterarguments to their narratives and leave their views unmoderated by outside perspectives. This self-reinforcing cycle might help explain why some Celtic and Rangers fans seem oblivious to their unacceptability because their behaviour is normalised in their forum bubble.

Overall, the study underscores that any progress against sectarianism will require acknowledging the wider significance of what was observed. That sectarianism remains a meaningful social identity and is expressed in contained subcultures like football fandom and is kept alive through communal narrative and online connectivity. Equally, the comments on the football forums can also mislead as it can make sectarianism seem ever-present in all contexts, whereas our broader societal observation is that many people negotiate Catholic-Protestant differences peacefully in everyday settings (e.g., mixed marriages, friendships) (Walls and Williams, 2005). The truth lies in between, as sectarian behaviour is not always everywhere, but in the contexts that activate it (especially football rivalries and internet echo chambers), it flares up. Therefore, any dominant representation that either dismisses it as a non-issue or treats it as an ever-present problem is incomplete. The thesis provides a more dialectical understanding as sectarianism in Scotland today is often privately harboured and football fandom, especially online, acts as a catalyst that brings it to the forefront and exaggerates it.

8.4 Synthesis of Findings

Across the three result chapters, several thematic threads and theoretical ideas emerge, showing a picture of sectarianism in digital football fandom. The findings demonstrate that the online fan environment serves as a microcosm where social theories of identity, community, and ritual all intersect. The observation saw how identity is constructed and performed, how community is imagined and emotionally charged, and how cultural myths and symbols are perpetuated in the specific context of Celtic and Rangers rivalry. This synthesis also contributes to academic discussions on nationalism, online behaviour and group conflict.

One central insight is the enduring applicability of Anderson's (1983) imagined communities to online spaces. Anderson (1983) conceived nations as imagined communities because members largely will never know each other face-to-face yet have a mental image of communion. In our case, Celtic and Rangers fan forums essentially function as virtual nations. Fans gather in a common cyberspace and feel bonded through shared language and symbols. The Kerrydale Street forum sustains an imagined Irish nationalist community complete with its heroes (e.g., McClean), its commemorative rituals, and its sense of a collective us that spans beyond football. The Rangers forum similarly sustains an imagined Loyalist/Unionist community, linked by loyalty to Protestant British heritage, monarchy, and its heroes. Notably, both forums provide what Anderson (1983) saw as print capitalism providing for nations as a everyday medium to reinforce the existence of the community. Instead of newspapers, it's forum threads and user-generated content, but the effect is like reading daily posts from one's imagined fandom. This research extends Anderson's (1983) concept into the realm of digital fandom, suggesting that in the 21st century, online platforms can serve as the print media of fan communities as they continuously flag identity and keep ethno-religious tribalism ever-present in subtle ways.

Through the lens of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, the study illustrates how both forums are stages for identity performance. Goffman (1959) argues that social life is like theatre, where people manage impressions by adopting roles in front of audiences. The research observed how Celtic and Rangers fans personalised their behaviour to the values of the audience. For instance, posting an insult about the rival or a sectarian joke often gathered positive reactions (the equivalent of applause), thereby rewarding the online fan. Equally, expressing sympathy for the other side or

criticising one's own side's excesses was met with contempt (the equivalent of booing), disciplining the deviant back into the expected role (Goffman, 1959). The Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums also exhibit a distinct frontstage/backstage dynamic. In public (front stage), many of their online fans might downplay sectarian aspects of their identity, but in the forum (backstage, among their own), they drop politeness and embrace a truer self as they see it. This agrees with Goffman's (1959) idea that people maintain different faces in different contexts and that backstage regions allow behaviours that are suppressed frontstage. However, both forums are a backstage that is also a kind of front-stage performance for the in-group. It's a space where performing sectarian comments is desirable and gains one status. As such, one could argue that the virtual communities enabled competitive impression management as fans try to outdo each other in performances of loyalty. This theoretical framing helps explain why sectarian expressions online can be more extreme than offline, as the performers are in an environment that reinforces sectarianism as commitment.

Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (1979) and Jenkins' (2014) social identity framework provided a backbone for interpreting the intergroup dynamics at play between Celtic and Rangers fans. The data consistently reflected SIT's predictions that when group identity is relevant, cognitive biases and behaviours like in-group favouritism and out-group derogation become pronounced. This thesis saw examples of positive distinctiveness amongst online fans who emphasised anything that put their group in a good light while simultaneously pointing out negatives of the out-group (Tajfel and Turner 1986). Jenkins' (2014) perspective that identity is a process enacted on individual, interactional, and institutional levels also resonates. On the individual level, fans internalise the group identity, and on the interactional level and their communications reinforce and reproduce that identity. On an institutional level, virtual users and their historical narratives provide the structure within which these identities make sense. Indeed, on the forum, it can almost be how identity is manufactured in real time as every thread is an exercise in defining us and them, adjusting to new events by assimilating them into the identity narrative. For example, when a Celtic fan responds to a thread, they interpret it through their in-group lens, thereby iterating the identity once more. This aligns with Jenkins (2014) notion that identification is a dialectic of similarity and difference; forum users constantly assert similarity with their

in-group and difference from the out-group. Thus, theoretical frameworks of social identity are validated in this digital micro-society.

Durkheim's (1982) concept of collective effervescence further enhances the understanding of the emotional solidarity observed on both sites. The research shows how key moments led to bursts of collective energy that strengthen online group cohesion. In Durkheim's terms, the forums allowed fans to enter a shared emotional state like a rite or ceremony (Durkheim, 1982). For example, during the Old Firm match thread, when a goal was scored, the Kerrydale Street forum erupted in a unified jubilation for Celtic and despair for Rangers. The results show that after these intense threads, fans often expressed pride and love for their fellow supporters and a renewal of the 'we'. This suggests that online fandom can function just as powerfully to create communal sentiment. In turn, this effervescent unity around these events reinforces the attachment to sectarian narratives as well because those narratives are often at the heart of the emotional surge of rivalry (Benkowitz and Molnar, 2012). Durkheim helps see that beyond cold cognition (identity theory) and performance (Goffman), there is a ritual-emotional dimension. That Celtic and Rangers fans are separately bonded by shared passions, and those passions often find expression through sectarian symbols. The collective effervescence is what makes the irrational bigotry feel profoundly meaningful and even promoted to online users.

The interplay of Barthes (1972) mythologies and Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia in the findings sheds light on how meaning operates in these fan discourses. Barthes (1972) reminds us that cultural signifiers carry layers of connotation and often serve ideological purposes. The research noted how objects like the poppy, the Irish tricolour, the Union Jack, and figures like the Queen are mythic objects which, on one side, symbolise imperial oppression and, on the other, symbolise national pride. Barthes (1972) would call these second-order signs as the literal event (the Queen's death) is considered by its mythic meaning. The forums consistently exhibit this mythmaking; for instance, 'No Surrender' encapsulates a whole view of loyalism, whilst 'Tiocfaidh Ár Lá' (our day will come) used by Celtic fans encapsulates the delayed triumph of Irish nationalism. By decoding these, the research shows that Celtic and Rangers fans reproduce broader ideologies under the guise of football talk online. Barthes further notes that these myths are often accepted as fact by those

within the culture, as fans rarely question the truth of their narratives because the myths have been naturalised through constant repetition.

Bakhtin's (1981) heteroglossia adds the perspective that multiple voices and meanings co-exist and compete in any discourse. The analysis shows that while each forum is monologic, within them there is still a heteroglossia layering as the voice of bureaucracy (quoting news and club statements) mixes with the voice of the fandom (slang, profanity), the historical voice (quotes of songs and historical mottos), and even the voice of the other (many posts are responding to perceived arguments, hosting the rival's voice only to ridicule it). This multi-voiced online environment means that meaning is constantly being negotiated and re-accentuated (Dixon, 2013). Heteroglossia in both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow ensures that sectarian discourse is dynamic and loaded with intention. It also highlights the truth in these communities is dialogic, as one Rangers fan's truth is built in dialogue with Celtic fans' counternarrative. But since these dialogues happen in parallel bubbles rather than directly, each side constructs a truth about the other that is insulated from challenge. The result is a pair of internally coherent mythic worlds that rarely directly engage, and a phenomenon enabled by digital segregation.

This thesis also expresses the debates on the reality of sectarianism as the study provides new evidence into the long-running argument about whether sectarian antagonism among fans is genuine or ritual. By capturing peer-to-peer communication in an online environment, the research shows that even if ritualised, sectarian expressions online are felt at least in the moment and serve to reinforce biases. The evidence suggests that mainstream portrayals, which treat sectarian behaviour as isolated to matchday (Goodall et al., 2015), fail to account for how digital life has extended those 90 minutes indefinitely (Murray, 2000). On the other hand, our findings also support a nuanced version of Bruce's (2019) research that many fans do treat sectarianism as part of the game, a set of roles to adopt, rather than an ideology that dictates their entire social existence. This was evident in how quickly comments could be used on and off in context. Therefore, the thesis advocates a more contextual understanding that sectarian discourse should be seen as a context-dependent social practice. The task of addressing it requires altering the contexts and cultural scripts that make such discourse appealing and normative for participants.

Despite decades of progress in formal equality in Scotland, the old firm of religion, politics, and football remains fixed through online message boards. The Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) confirms that sectarianism arises from a distorted expression of identity and belonging (Rosie, et al., 2015, p3.9), which is still actively expressed in digital arenas. It reminds us that, as much as Scotland may pride itself on moving beyond the sectarian divides of the past, there are still influential cultural spaces where those divides are daily reinforced. The theoretical frameworks applied, from Anderson to Durkheim to Tajfel and beyond, collectively help understand why sectarianism persists as it fulfils fundamental social needs such as community, identity, meaning, and emotional release, although in a negative form. Recognising this opens the possibility of redirecting those needs towards more positive expressions. But it also signals that tackling sectarianism is not a matter of silencing a few offensive comments; it requires shifting the narratives, rituals, and identities that people find compelling. The recommendations below will address the deeper cultural currents that sustain it.

8.5 Recommendations

Future research can build on the methodology by extending it to other platforms. For instance, examining how sectarian discourse plays out on Twitter (where Celtic and Rangers fans do sometimes directly engage with each other, unlike in closed forums) or on newer platforms like TikTok or Instagram, where visual and short-form content may carry sectarian memes. Comparative research with other regions would also be valuable, for example, by comparing Scottish digital sectarianism with online rivalry in Northern Ireland (e.g., Linfield vs. Cliftonville) or with other ethnoreligious sports rivalries globally. Such comparisons could show what is unique to the Scottish context and what is universal about how fandom and group hate manifest online. Academia should also use quantitative approaches alongside ethnography. For example, social network analysis of how sectarian content spreads, sentiment analysis of thousands

of posts to gauge shifts over time, and surveys of forum participants to probe their self-perceptions.

Traditionally, a lot of sectarianism research has been diagnostic (Deuchar and Holligan, 2010; Bruce, Glendinning, Paterson and Rosie, 2005; McKerrell, 2012; Walls and Williams, 2005). Academics, possibly in interdisciplinary teams (sociologists with computer scientists, psychologists, etc.), should pilot and assess strategies to reduce sectarian hostility. For example, one could experiment with counter-speech bots or moderator interventions in forums to see if certain approaches reduce toxic language. Or test if exposing fans to structured inter-group dialogue online changes attitudes. Another research avenue is measuring the impact of certain club actions. For example, if after a joint anti-sectarian campaign, does forum discourse measurably shift? These kinds of studies would provide evidence on what works, guiding policy and club efforts. Additionally, researchers might explore the role of anonymity in depth as the research assumes that anonymity fuels irresponsibility (Millward, 2016; Cleland, 2014; Kilvington and Price, 2018). Another key point is the need for structured institutional support for players targeted by sectarian abuse. While there has been increasing awareness of racist abuse toward football players (Doidge, 2015; Cable, Kilvington, and Mottershead, 2022), sectarian abuse remains under-acknowledged and challenged. Unlike high-profile racism cases, McClean's situation reflects a silence and a systemic gap in institutional response. As such, McClean should be seen as a catalyst for wider evidence on how sectarianism is overlooked in football's anti-discrimination frameworks. Without serious institutional engagement, football players and athletes will remain vulnerable, and sectarian abuse will continue to be normalised.

Future research could use other theories to understand this better. For example, extremism models (Međedović, Kovačević, and Knežević, 2022) may help explain how sectarian fan networks develop and encourage more extreme beliefs. For example, are there gateway communities and radical echo chambers even within fandom? Also, affect theory could be employed to analyse the affective charge of sectarian humour and comments, and how emotions like pride and anger are circulated. Each of these angles would add layers to academic understanding and situate Scottish sectarianism in global conversations on online hate, performance, and identity. Finally, I

recommend that academics studying this area engage in translational efforts that communicate findings accessibly to those outside academia (policymakers, educators, the public). For example, writing policy briefs summarising key insights can close the gap between research and action. Theories such as banal nationalism or identity performance can be simplified and explained to those designing interventions, helping the public understand the effectiveness of addressing daily symbols of division in addition to overt incidents.

The conclusion and the above recommendations underline that addressing sectarianism in digital football fandom requires effort on multiple fronts. Those in charge must evolve and catch up with online realities, football institutions must show leadership in setting the standard, and communities must be engaged in owning the problem and the solution. Meanwhile, academia should continue to illuminate the issue's evolving dynamics and assess how it is reproduced. Moving it in that direction will demand challenging the sectarian myths (Bruce et al., 2005) and provide alternative narratives that can fulfil the mixing of religion, politics, and sport that breeds hatred (Bradley, 2017). The findings of this thesis make clear that the effort is both necessary and urgent, as it touches on the broader questions of how fandom and identity in a digital age perpetuate the conflicts of the past. This may also offer a hopeful example to others researching football fandom in the online arena, showing how old hatreds can be confronted and gradually transformed in the very spaces where they found new refuge.

8.6 Limitations

Whilst my thesis provides insight into sectarian fan discourse in online spaces, several methodological and practical limitations can be acknowledged. First, the data collection was constrained by the structure and accessibility of the online forums, especially the Follow Follow forum. This is because changes in platform functionality occurred during the data collection, and the internal search engine was removed during the study period. This made it difficult to retrieve historical posts to sample content, and some important discussions may have been edited or deleted by users or moderators before they could have been captured. This raises the possibility that

some episodes of sectarian discourse were missed due to technical inaccessibility. Secondly, both forums represent fan environments with opinionated user bases and that behaviour observed may not reflect the attitudes of the broader Scottish football fan population. Key demographic characteristics such as age gender and social background are unknown and therefore complicates any attempt to say how represented views are. Conclusions then must be understood as reflecting the online communities rather than all football fans or society at large. Thirdly, the study relies on non-participant observation of forum posts. The decision not to disclose the presence of the research was taken to avoid influence of behaviour. Announcing the research to online fans would have been deemed as impracticable and likely leanings could have cause users to self-censor. This means that the lack of interaction relies on observation of text. The research could not probe or clarify context as one might in semi-structured interviews.

A further limitation involves the textual online communication. As the forums were text based, the lack of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice or facial expressions were limited. Without clear markers, the research may have misinterpreted humour as serious or miscommunication. This means that some forum posts might carry layers of in-jokes or irony that are obscure to an observer. I moderated this by being a regular user of Kerrydale Street and looking at how users' response to posts and patterns of commentary. Any conclusions about comments must be tentative if there is a possibility that the research was being ill-judged or provocative rather than expression an actual belief. Finally, it is important to recognise that online behaviour may not mirror offline behaviour. Both Celtic and Rangers forums provide a window into sectarian behaviour expressed in an online space. But this window has distortions because the anonymity and physically distant nature of online interaction may allow users to say taboo things they might refrain from saying in person. Thus, the online environment can intensify a sectarian rhetoric, which means these findings do not necessarily imply an equivalent level of sectarian hostility among the general fan base offline. Nor can individuals behave when not behind a keyboard.

In summary, the limitations highlight that the study comes with recommendations. The analysis was limited by what could be accessed and observed in two forums and within a specific timeframe and context. The results are not statistically generalisable and

are subject to ethical and interpretative constraints common in digital ethnography. A reflexive awareness of these shortcomings is important in a project of this nature. Understanding the study's boundaries shows the need for complementary research. This means interviews with fans, analyses of other social media platforms, or offline ethnography to build a more holistic picture of how sectarianism operates across the spectrum of football fandom. By being transparent about these limitations, the thesis ensures that its contributions are appropriately contextualised and prepares the way for future studies to address the open questions that remain.

8.7 And finally....

Overall, the thesis makes three contributions to the existing research. First, it highlights how digitalisation reshapes the performance of identity. Secondly, it provides an account of how sectarian language is embedded in online communities that complicate binaries between sectarian discourse and football supporters. Thirdly, it shows how online communities are active sites where national and sectarian identities are reproduced. This thesis has also demonstrated that sectarianism in football fan culture is an adaptive phenomenon to online culture. It is far from being a 'myth' (Bruce, 2019) as it is performed on online fan communities in digital spaces that serves as virtual terraces. Both Kerrydale Street and Follow Follow forums reinforce in group loyalty and out group hostility through humour, coded language and the use of historical grievances. In this context, sectarian language becomes part of everyday digital fan culture and illustrates old antagonisms reworded in new communicative environments.

The study also makes several theoretical contributions drawing on Anderson's imagined communities to help explain how fans feel part of a collective. Both forums grow meaning through solidarity where Celtic and Rangers identities are reproduced through continual contrast with the rival other (Kalman-Lamb, 2020). The concept of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2015; Newson, 2019) proves valuable in explaining the intensity of loyalty observed. Equally, Billig's (1995) idea of banal nationalism is evident in the constant symbolic flagging of national and religious identity markers. These routine cues sustain an environment where national and sectarian belonging

are normalised. Another key insight is the role of collective memory in sustaining football rivalry. The forum discussions draw on past conflicts that intertwine into the present-day debate. Such practices reinforce boundaries between groups and ensure that historical grievances remain alive in digital discourse (Halbwachs, 2020). Regarding methods, this thesis points out the value of digital ethnography through non-participant observation. By observational lurking, the research was able to capture sectarian expression in its natural and unfiltered form (Hine, 2017; Masullo & Coppola, 2023).

Looking to the future, the thesis opens pathways for more work on online spaces by exploring newer social media platforms and analysis of interventions that challenge hate speech online. This because the findings of the research show that digital spaces are arenas where collective memory, nationalism, and exclusionary identity practices are sustained. Ultimately, this thesis has argued that sectarianism has not disappeared but has found new life in digital subcultures. Understanding this dynamic is vital for both scholarship and practice. Only by recognising sectarianism's digital afterlife can further examination begin to show the way to deal with it in Scotland and beyond.

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CHAPTER 10: APPENDIX

10.1 Appendix Images

1.



2.



3.



4.



10.2 Ethical Approval Conformation



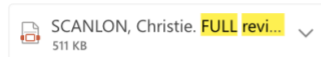
FullReviewUREC

😊 ↩ Reply ↩ Reply all → Forward | 📧 📄 📎 ...

To: ○ Full Review UREC; ☑ Scanlon, Christie

Fri 20/01/2023 16:54

Cc: ○ ResearchGovernance; 🟡 Millward, Peter; 🟢 Sugden, Jack; ☑ Ludvigsen, Jan



Dear Christie

Sectarianism, football fans and Community: Has online culture added a new dimension to sectarian discourse in Scotland?

UREC opinion: Favourable ethical opinion

UREC reference: 23/HSS/002

Research Governance Assessment: Approved – the study may commence.

The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) has considered the above application. On behalf of the Committee, I am pleased to confirm a favourable ethical opinion for the above study on the basis described in the application form, protocol, supporting documentation and any clarifications received, subject to the conditions specified below.