

## Football Fandom and Disneyization in Late Modern Life

*In 1999 Alan Bryman coined the term Disneyization to make the case that more and more sectors of social and cultural life are coming to take on the manifestations of a commercial style theme park. Using the principle theoretical components outlined by Bryman (theming; hybrid consumption; emotional performative labour; merchandising) and taking into consideration the views of 56 English football fans, this article considers how those Disneyized processes are received, interpreted, integrated and endured in practice. Combining theory with rigorous empiricism, implications for theorists and leisure providers are discussed.*

Key words: Commercialism; Football Fandom; Disneyization; Disneyfication; Consumer Practice; Late Modernity.

**This paper offers an insight** into the Disneyization thesis as a means to explore the relationship between theory and leisure consumption within late-modern football fandom. In order to achieve those aims, the fan experience is central to this paper with a view to advance conceptual explanations and to consider how Disneyized processes are received, interpreted, integrated and endured by football consumers. **Before these data were presented**, key components of the theory are outlined below.

As a scholarly term Disneyization is a relatively new concept that was derived by Alan Bryman in 1999 though his is not the first account to suggest that modern society is beginning to take on the characteristics of the global film and entertainment company 'Disney'. Indeed, scholars such as Schickle (1986), Walz (1998), Ross (1999) and Wasko (2001) have previously referred to a process of 'Disneyfication', often associated with sanitizing materials (e.g. fairytales or novels) by implementing a programmatic way of operating that transforms objects into superficial, simplistic and increasingly homogenous form. In this sense **those authors (cited above)** agree that 'to Disneyfy' is to adhere to a systematic recipe that ultimately serves to stifle

individuality, magic, mystery and spontaneity in order to maintain a standardized, but commercially successful format.

Accordingly, then, the term Disneyfication has become tainted with a largely negative view of the Disney company and its influence rather than advancing a discussion relating to the wider impact of the emblematic aspects of its operations. Consequently Bryman (2004) opts to use the term 'Disneyization' in an attempt to move beyond those negative connotations and moreover he draws attention to the underlying principles that Disney theme parks exemplify in order to illustrate concomitant effects on the economy, culture and social life more generally. Thus, created on this basis he uses the Disney theme park as a template to illustrate a series of increasingly common procedures that are taken to 'ensure the satisfaction of consumers and to offer new strategies for selling in post-Fordist times' (Horne 2006, p.38). More specifically the Disneyization thesis, Bryman explains, gives space to the influencing power of marketing procedures and an increasing inclination to consume which generally takes into consideration four main components that encourage variety, choice and differentiation. **Those components include:** (1) Theming; (2) Hybrid Consumption; (3) Emotional Performative Labour; and (4) Merchandising.

Theming makes up the initial component. It draws on the assumption that consumer enjoyment or dislike for a service is only partially conditioned by the objective quality of the service itself. The servicescape (e.g. the contrived environment and ambience or the manner in which a service is delivered) is also thought to be a crucial factor of the consuming experience (Pine and Gilmore 1999). Furthermore, whilst typical elements of theming are external to the product or service (e.g. restaurants that draw on well-known and accessible cultural themes such as music, sport, Hollywood movies, geography, history etc.) some company brands and logos 'become

so distinctive that they grow to be themes in-themselves' (Bryman 2004, p.18). Beardsworth and Bryman (1999) refer to such theming as 'reflexive' given that the theme, the brand and its expression are indistinguishable. In any instance, theming is part of a strategy of differentiation that is deployed in order to allow agents to lose themselves in a contrived experience that will encourage consumption.

The second feature, 'hybrid consumption' refers to the merging of forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres. Those forms become interlocked in a deliberate attempt to create a destination that will hold consumer attention and encourage agents to spend more time and money than they otherwise might. For instance, Walt Disney embraced this process when he realised at an early stage that Disneyland had great potential as a vehicle for selling food and various other goods (Bryman 2004). In some instances shops and restaurants were designed to merge seamlessly with the star attraction.

The design of the Star Tours ride in three Disney theme parks for example, 'ensures that visitors walk through a shop containing Star Wars merchandise in order to reach the exit' (Bryman 2004, p.59). It is worth mentioning here that the principles behind such practice are not unique to Disney. In fact Bryman points out that department stores, the high street and amusement arcades have always shown elements of hybridization. However, the point he makes is that in late modern life hybrid consumption has become more formulae and systematically used across the entire leisure sector.

As a third component 'merchandising' alludes to the promotion of goods bearing copyright images and logos. It is a form of franchising that leverages additional uses out of existing well known images and whilst it too pre-dates the Disney theme park, Walt Disney was quick to realise the immense profitability of merchandising and

the significance of the role that it could play in the company. According to Klein (1993) in the years immediately following the arrival of Mickey Mouse (arguably Disney's first major global success story), over half of the studio's profits were attributable to merchandise and in the later years, scholars such as Forgacs (1992) suggest that the cuteness of cartoon characters was designed with merchandising in mind. Accordingly then, the key principle of merchandising is to extract further revenue from an image that has already attracted people.

Finally 'emotional labour' is used by Bryman to refer to a specific delivery of service that, if implemented effectively, can offer a source of differentiation. It is a means of distinguishing services that are otherwise identical in order to make the consumer experience memorable and the customer, more likely to return. In Disney theme parks for instance, employees are akin to performers that invest their time and energy to ensure that customers have a positive emotional experience. This logic is supported by research indicating that customers judge the success of any commercial exchange not only on the quality of product, but quality of service too (Henkoff 1994; Solomon 1998). On this basis Bryman suggests that fostering emotional labour to satisfy the needs of sovereign customers has become a crucial component of the framework of most businesses in the leisure sector.

To reiterate, then, according to Bryman, Disneyization does not only serve as a model for theme parks but for other leisure spaces such as shopping malls and the sport spectacle too. As yet however this theoretical approach is under researched within the sociology of football. **Given that football is often conceived as an increasing sphere of consumer activity (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007; Giulianotti 2002; Horne 2006; Sandvoss 2003), a systematic investigation into the process of this consumer centred theory offers a timely addition to existing literature. For leisure studies**

researchers, and indeed for leisure providers, the following tenders' valuable evidence to explore how processes of Disneyization are received, interpreted and integrated into the life of the late modern football consumer.

## **Methods**

In response to recent calls for empirical, rather than conceptually based work into the effects of Disneyization on football fandom, a sample of 56 football fans were interviewed during the course of this study. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing respondents to discuss open-ended questions and to explore in more depth their own understandings of football fandom practice (Hoffman 2007; Silverman 2000). Furthermore, in accordance with Witzel (2000) an interview guide encompassing areas of interest was used to offer a sense of continuity within and between interviews, without adhering rigidly to a strict line of questioning. Rather than serving as an oral survey, these initial probes were augmented throughout the interviews with follow up questions based on specific interviewee responses.

Three broad issues were raised as part of the guide, in order to ascertain how processes of Disneyization were received by participants. The first was related to fandom genesis, under the assumption that this would provide a central reference point from which understandings of fandom practice have developed. As a second feature interviews were directly related to the consumption, appropriation and use of leisure resources. It is important to note that whilst scholars such as Sandvoss (2003) have previously identified consumption as a stable aspect of football fandom, and whilst Duke (2002) suggests that Disneyized processes often meet with resistance within the realm of football fandom - little is known about how fans consume and interpret Disneyized marketing strategies. Third, given that the work aims to explore the lived

experience of football fandom, the routine nature of fandom practice was discussed with all participants as part of the interview schedule.

The duration of interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes and all were audio recorded for transcription verbatim.

### **Recruitment Strategy**

Participants within this study were geographically located within the North-East region of the UK. The North-East was chosen for two reasons: (1) the region is often referred to as ‘the hotbed of football’, a tag that was first used in the 1961 Arthur Appleton book of the same name. As the title implies, football culture is thought to be particularly strong in the North-East, thus providing a suitable background to study the potential effects of Disneyization on the earnest football fan. This region has four professional teams at different levels of the football pyramid. (2) The North-East was also chosen for logistical access to participants, given that the researcher is geographically situated in this area.

To obtain the sample, a university press release was launched in 2008 with a number of local media outlets responding. Media exposure afforded the researcher an opportunity to publicise the research and canvas for volunteers<sup>1</sup>. With each exposure, contact details of the researcher were publicised and interested parties were encouraged to make contact. On acknowledgement of interest, volunteers were selected as participants for subsequent interview according to the following criteria: (1) Given that scholars Malcolm, Jones and Waddington (2000) point to the fact that season ticket holders are most frequently and disproportionately used within academic literature to represent all fans, the inclusion of fandom narratives from a wider range of experiential profiles were selected. This is particularly important in the current context in order to illustrate the influence of Disneyized properties within and beyond the football stadium.

(2) It was deemed important not to privilege fans of top tier teams (e.g. Manchester United, Chelsea, and Arsenal) over and above the majority of fans that support teams outside of this elite group. This has been a common characteristic within recent academic research where authors such as King (1998) and additionally, Sandvoss (2003) have studied fans of a handful of ‘super clubs’<sup>2</sup> and consequently they have ignored the more common examples that I argue most typify everyday fandom. (3) Finally, on the recommendations of Jones (2008) I agree that it is important to be inclusive of female fans and also to take into account a range of age groups.

### **Participants**

56 football fans (32 male and 24 female [aged 18 -56]) were interviewed during the course of this investigation. Of those participants, 27 were current season ticket holders. The remaining 29 were not current holders of season tickets **at the time of interview**, although they did watch or listen to live football multiple times per-week via the media. Therefore, for the purposes of transparency within the transcript extracts **and not for the purpose of systematic comparison**, they are identified as: (1) Season Ticket Holders (STH); (2) Media Fans (MF) to reflect their primary mode of live football consumption at the time of the interview. It is worth noting that **this was not an attempt to categorise fans into a simplistic dichotomy representative of fandom type. Rather, sharing the belief that fandom can be a fluid process across one’s life cycle (Crawford 2004), such labels are used in this instance to illustrate the influence of Disneyized processes irrespective of primary mode of live football consumption.**

In terms of supported teams, 47 participants were fans of one of the following 2008 English Premier League Clubs: Newcastle (N=17); Middlesbrough (N=16); Sunderland (N=11); Liverpool (N=2) and West Ham (N=1). With the exception of Liverpool, those clubs represented here were not noted as top tier Premier League Clubs

(at the time of research). In fact, in the season 2008-09 (e.g. the same season as data collection) both Newcastle and Middlesbrough were relegated from The Premier League into The Championship. Of the remaining participants, nine were supporters of one of the following teams: Hartlepool (N=5) and Darlington (N=4). Key characteristics of this sample are shown below.

**[Insert table 1 here]**

### **Data Analysis**

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews served as raw data to be analysed using a framework of thematic analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) with one difference. Whilst the themes for discussion were determined a-priori (i.e. components of the Disneyization thesis) the extent to which Disneyization components were received, embraced or rejected by participants were unknown. Thus, thematic analysis was applied internally to those themes in order to reveal dominant trends.

Each transcript was read a number of times to gain a thorough understanding of the participant accounts. Transcripts were then re-read in full and emergent patterns were recorded on each transcript. The emergent **patterns** were then summarised and organised to establish any inter-relationships between them. **For example, under the theme ‘merchandising’ it was clear that some initial patterns (e.g. originally labelled ‘Fans not consumers’ / ‘ignorant consumers’ / ‘consumers in denial’) shared certain characteristics with one another. Consequently, those patterns were merged to form a new category ‘contradictory consumers’ for further analysis.** A combined list of **patterns** was then produced and new **patterns** were tested against earlier transcripts in a cyclical fashion. The aim of this analytical process was to produce a thorough and accurate description of the range of opinions, experiences and reactions expressed by participants.



Furthermore, respondent validation was used to enhance credibility of the trends identified by the researcher. All participants were asked to comment on those patterns identified and were invited to feedback on both the preliminary list of themes and interpretations made by the researcher. Five participants responded, all agreeing that the categories presented and the interpretation of verbatim transcripts offered an accurate reflection of interview content.

### ***Category 1: Theming and Football Fandom***

Theming provides a veneer of meaning and symbolism to the objects to which it is applied...In infusing objects with meaning through theming, they are deemed to be made more attractive and interesting than they would otherwise be (Bryman 2004, p.15)

As Bryman (2004, p.17) explains ‘sources of themes can be many and varied’ and this corresponds with the experiences of the current sample of football fans. Within this category I draw on diverse examples in order to illustrate the extent to which theming infiltrates the practice of football fandom. The examples used range from the themed promotion of food and drink by competing leisure providers, the themed match-day executive packages on sale at football grounds and the targeted marketing of football clubs and sponsors for the purpose of appealing to a global audience.

First, there is evidence to suggest that football fandom has evolved to contain a variety of ‘themed experiences’ that are used by commercial organisations in order to make various leisure opportunities more attractive. Drawing on the match-day theme, for instance, helps some leisure providers (such as public houses and bars) to connect to a passing trade audience. Conversely, from the perspective of the football fan, there are many lucrative offers to take advantage of:

Linda: Compared to what it used to be like, local businesses and like franchised pubs, shops and restaurants get on board with football don't they?

KD *How do you mean?*

Well, there's a load to do in and around the stadium and loads of competition to get the punters in. They know (referring to leisure providers) that you will be meeting up with your mates or family before-hand so they tempt you with loads of promotions for food and drink; especially for the football crowd...We go wherever the best offer is on.  
**[Sunderland, aged 30 (STH)]**

By **exercising consumer power** Linda selects the best offer from a pool of competing themed services that must remain fluid and flexible in response to market conditions and sensibilities of the football fan. As Bryman reminds us, theming works on the premise that consumers grow increasingly bored with standardized services and settings with which they are typically confronted and therefore 'themed promotions' (like those inferred above) are often used to create a range of diverse experiences with the aim - to attract a wide demographic to the business and thus, to maximise income. Consequently, leisure providers use themed events (sometimes temporary in nature) as part of a fluid marketing strategy to capitalise on passing trade. Participants were certainly aware of this marketing strategy and were prepared accordingly:

Kirsty:                   When we travel to away matches, pubs in all city centres always put on match-day entertainment...By snuggling up to football, it becomes a football pub for a few hours but as soon as the match is over and the Saturday night crowd come to town you can't get in the same bar if you're wearing a football shirt... We always wear neutral clothes and shoes so that we could go out afterwards as well. **[Hartlepool, aged 33 (MF)]**.

Similar temporary themes were noted of restaurants in the area of any given football ground. For instance in Darlington, participant Carl<sup>3</sup> recommends 'The Tapas Food Bar' as a venue for football fans before the match. He explains 'It gets in the match crowd because it has offers for fans on beer and food...has football on the televisions and the staff know their football'. He concedes, 'If you went to the same place with your girlfriend at night, the atmosphere is totally different, you know romantic. You wouldn't think it was the same place'. In Hartlepool 'Jacksons Warf' is recommended by Luke<sup>4</sup> given that it has match-day offers and welcomes all football fans to a friendly atmosphere filled with football memorabilia'. In Middlesbrough, Peter<sup>5</sup> mentions

‘Walkabout sports bar for its atmosphere before the match’ but like Carl he concedes that this establishment takes on a different persona on Saturday night ‘to cater for night-clubbers’. In Newcastle, some restaurants that are not in the immediate vicinity of the ground were also noted to attract customers with ‘match-day special offers’:

Ben: We sometimes go to Marco Pollo’s on the Quayside. If you guess the first goal scorer or whatever they will give you a refund after the match if you take back the receipt.  
**[Newcastle, aged 30 (STH)]**

Fans, like those above, are aware of the presence of commercial theming and are awake to the sense that this captures the imagination of and creates excitement for the passing football trade. Subsequently, they are attracted to establishments that become regular meeting spaces due to a themed connection and intimate level of service that helps to differentiate one experience from another. Moreover, fans are conscious that such service based establishments (pubs, restaurants, bars) are not always exclusively football themed, and yet, given that the theme need only last as long as the event itself, this was unproblematic for participants. The fact that restaurants or bars change themed ambience to suit a specific passing trade, even discriminating against the football crowd in the late evening by catering specifically for the Saturday night party theme, or as a space for romantic couples - does not seem to negatively affect consumer relations with football fans.

Theming is loose and fluid in this sense, and yet it upholds a schedule of change that is predictable, stable and therefore reliable enough for fans to depend on. Thus, on the evidence presented here, service based establishments on the periphery of the football stadium can afford to remain flexible in their adoption of themed experiences. They can find comfort in the role of a commercial omnivore, feeding off and responding to the themed needs of a plethora of potential customer types (including, but not exclusively featuring, the football fan). It is quite possible therefore for service

providers to be known and appreciated under the guise of different themed genres without conveying feelings of disruption or disloyalty to diverse customer profiles.

For the football club, theming takes on a different persona. Rather than competing for custom with other external leisure providers, differential match-day packages are made available for the fan. Beyond the notion of simply buying a ticket to watch a game of football, fans have the option to choose from one of the more sophisticated, expensive and socially elevating executive packages. Martin explains:

Martin: You've probably got three types of executive packages. You've got the box where they bring you your meal in and you've got your own bar and you have your own member of staff to assist you and all that bollocks. You've got the one where you can have your dinner and then go out to a posher seat, and then there's 'club 1892<sup>6</sup>' which is basically a step above the common man where you can go and stand in the nicer bar instead without the excessive queuing of the concourse, get a free programme before the game. **[Newcastle, aged 42 (STH)]**

Market segmentation of this type (above) 'increases the inclination to consume' (Bryman 2004, p.4) by creating exclusive packages that are themed specifically in order to sell the same experience (i.e. the live match) at a premium rate. The pricing structure is marked out according to the exclusivity and prestige attributed to a specific themed experience. Furthermore, it is worth noting that those unable to afford 'high end' themed tickets nevertheless perceive this business strategy as desirable for the club:

Neil: The way I see it is that they've got more money than sense but if they are willing to spend it, it benefits the club and I'm all for that **[Sunderland, aged 19 (STH)]**.

The acceptance of unattainable high price structures amongst fans (like Neil) for the benefit of the football club is not uncommon. Moreover, as the central object of fandom and unlike external leisure providers that must work hard to promote themselves to potential customers, 'the football club' denotes what Beardsworth and Bryman (1999) would describe as a 'reflexive theme'. It is reflexive in the sense that it (the football

club) consistently maintains popularity across time and space, based solely on the historical and cultural signs that it produces. Consequently fans are drawn into the theme and spend money accordingly:

Nats: I'm not a football fan I'm a Boro fan. I live and breathe the Boro and genuinely couldn't give a monkeys about any other football team...Red though and through. I pay my money every week for the boys. Come on the lads! **[Middlesbrough, aged 24 (STH)]**

In spite of the consistency of theming in some quarters of football (e.g. relating to the football club as a reflexive theme) it was noted by participants that sub-themes such as football competitions and leagues are often re-branded for the sake of corporate advertisements and global marketing. **Re-branding, in this sense, offers a clear market strategy that attempts to reposition and pair a product (e.g. a football tournament) with a mutually beneficial and successful commercial sponsor. This strategy pursues a form of theming that has proven to develop brand awareness for both parties, given that they are often discussed interchangeably (Bryman 2004; Crawford 2004; Horne 2006). Moreover, from the perspective of the football fan, this late modern development brings with it an added suggestion of excitement that appeals to the contemporary football crowd:**

Carol: When I was a kid it was division 1-4. Now they've got more sexy titles to sell, they've been rebranded to make things seem more exciting. You know – the second division is now the Coca Cola Championship and the fourth is League 2<sup>7</sup>. It doesn't seem as bad when you say it like that...A bit of glamour is good for us all! **[Hartlepool, aged 43 (STH)]**

**Here, Carol is acutely aware of the commercial significance of global theming, but in spite of this, she, and many other participants (e.g. Jacko, Bill, Richie, Kelly<sup>8</sup>) were tolerant of and spoke complimentarily about this process as a model for bringing 'a bit of glamour' to proceedings. In a similar pose, participants also noted that football clubs**

were likely to re-brand football stadiums in order to create a more exciting and globally appealing themed brand:

Paul: 'The Riverside' and 'Stadium of Light' are clever marketing gimmicks aren't they? They sound more appealing for the television and the global audience. It's not the 'grim North' anymore, its names that are much more appealing to other potential fans, say in China or somewhere like that. [Middlesbrough, aged 53 (STH)].

Sunderland's move from Roker Park to 'The Stadium of Light' in 1997, and Middlesbrough's move from 'Ayresome Park' to 'The Riverside Stadium' (formally known as the Cellnet and Later BT Cellnet Riverside Stadium until 2002 due to a themed sponsorship agreement with the telecommunications company) in 1995, are noted by Paul (above) as clear attempts to cast off local depressed images that tend to be associated with the ex-industrial heart of Northern England, in order to create a image that would appeal to a global market of consumers.

Instances, like these, are becoming common place in English football with cup competitions, leagues and stadium names open to commercial sponsorship. For instance, of the 20 'Barclays' Premier League teams in the top tier of English football (season 2011-12), seven club stadiums now hold the name of their sponsor in the title<sup>9</sup>. The latest club to adopt this strategy in November 2011 is Newcastle United. The stadium name was changed for the purpose of commercial theming from its founding name 'St. James Park', to 'The Sports Direct Arena'. Hence, whilst authors such as Duke (2002) speak of a resistance from fans towards commercial theming of this type, it should be noted that resistance tends to be mild in nature as the process of commercial theming continues to gather momentum.

Thus, as Bryman has argued - theming has become standard practice for all manner of institutions and specific football themes are used accordingly. From the pubs

and restaurants that draw on the match-day theme, to football clubs, leagues and stadiums, theming is used to attract custom and to improve global appeal.

### ***Category 2: Hybrid Consumption and Football Fandom***

Hybrid consumption refers ‘the general trend whereby the forms of consumption associated with different institutional spheres become interlocked with each other and thus become increasingly difficult to distinguish’ (Bryman 2004, p.57).

Hybrid consumption is inextricably linked to the process of theming; in fact the existence of hybrid consumption depends on the volume and density of themed consumption opportunities that are available in any one space. Take the match-day experience as a typical example:

Rhona: There’s loads to do...Common facilities, if you like, for the normal supporter are all set out in the con-course<sup>10</sup>. You’ve got the bookies which is Ladbrokes. A number of bars and burger stands just like McDonalds but Newcastle United Catering. You’ve got bank machines, large screen TV’s... **[Newcastle, aged 23 (STH)]**

Similar to the style of US baseball parks that are known to include food courts, beer gardens, video arcades and other consumption elements (Ritzer and Stillman 2001)

Rhona explains that watching the match is only part of the experience. She alludes to various goods and services that are brought together in the stadium, each vying for the attention of the fan. Furthermore, Rachael (below) likens this enhanced experience to other leisure services such as going to the cinema. She explains:

Rachael: Going to the match is great. To be honest it’s just like going to the cinema or something...you buy your ticket to enter and then **browze** around buying this and that. You know, you buy your refreshments, maybe get a programme which is like a preview of a film and as you are doing this you’re part of the atmosphere surrounding the main event. **[Sunderland, aged 28 (STH)]**

Accordingly then, the stadia experience is designed in such a way that the football audience, much like the cinematic audience, value, enjoy and desire the hybrid

opportunities for consumption that are made available prior to the main event. Moreover and further removed from the match-day experience, the stadium also presents a site for hybrid consumption on any regular day.

Andy: There's stuff to do at St. James even when it's not match-day. There's the museum; the biggest Adidas store in the world (which runs the length of the Gallowgate stand); and **Shearer's Bar** which is open all week, through the day as well as at night... It's traditionally a 'sports bar', you've got tele's on all over the place and they do beam back some of the away games that are not televised elsewhere and you have to pay a couple of quid to get in. [Newcastle, aged 50 (MF)]

When describing '**Shearer's bar**' (i.e. a public house that is integrated within the walls of St. James Park Stadium [opened in 2004]) Andy uses the term 'traditional sports bar'. This is worthy of note given that the concept of 'the sports bar' is itself a relatively recent commercial construction that has been used for marketing reasons as a hook to differentiate from other standardized pubs and bars (Bryman 2004; Kraszewski 2008). Thus, the sports bar reveals an explicit case of theming that this participant willingly consumes as an authentic form of fandom practice. Perhaps more significantly, it seems that participants are dependent on hybrid consumption opportunities in order to explain any aspect of practice. Take for instance, Peter's description of a typical match-day:

Peter: On the day of the match, typically, I get the papers to read with breakfast. Sometimes my Granddad brings around Friday nights Northern Echo as well... I have a chat with him about the match and we watch Sky Sports... I check out the internet...log onto the club website and various other general sites like Sky News and the BBC, twitter and facebook to join in banter... If we're playing at home I meet my mates, - then we get the bus to the ground.

KD: *What do you do when you get there?*

I always get a programme and put my bets on. Two pints in the stadium, meet some others and hang out...watch the dancing girls, Boro's answer to the Spice Girls [laughing]...There's different entertainment all the time...local kids playing 5-a-side, the good old mascot, competitions to hit the cross bar, raffles, and tunes to get the crowd going...

KD: *What about half time?*



Peter: At half time I get a meal deal. Pie and chips usually. We are well known for our balti pies. Maybe a coffee if it's cold...Afterwards we either go home or to the pub to discuss key points. **[Middlesbrough, aged 26 (STH)]**.

Here Peter makes explicit use of various modes of consumption to describe the match-day experience, acknowledging two sites for hybrid consumption. First, hybrid consumption occurs in the home – involving the delivery of newspapers and the consumption of themed television programmes and internet websites. Second, within the stadium vicinity – purchasing a drink; gambling; match-day programme; and a meal deal. Additionally the presence of pre-match entertainment in the form of dancing girls, club mascots, museums and sports shops, are akin to the American style of delivery which creates an atmosphere to encourage continued consumption (Duke 2002; Bryman 2004).

On such evidence I suggest that processes of theming and hybrid consumption play a significant **and increasing** role in the evolutionary process of football fandom. It should be noted however, that whilst I am not suggesting that fans are necessarily duped by the mechanics of Disneyization, I argue that the design of the match-day space purposively creates an atmosphere conducive to consumer behaviour. In other words, the excitement of match-day sociability when combined with hybrid consumption opportunities, converge to create a carnivalesque atmosphere capable of lulling consumers to drop their guard and hence, to spend more freely:

Charlene: Match-days are just good fun. I go with my dad and like it's the best mood I ever see him in all week, it's just a special atmosphere that does something to you. Like you end up doing stuff that you wouldn't normally do.

*KD: Like what?*

Charlene: Well, like gambling, eating junk food, drinking Bovril and that. If I wasn't at the match I wouldn't do any of those things, and like, my dad is never that generous normally. **[Newcastle, aged 21 (STH)]**

As the examples (above) illustrate, the match-day experience displays all of the characteristics of a specialized shopping sphere designed to encourage spending, and concomitantly, customers appear to be grateful for this opportunity. Participant Keith<sup>11</sup>, for instance, recalls attending football 30 years ago and insists that he would ‘be the first to complain if standards went backwards’. He continues, ‘it’s a privilege to step foot in the stadium we’ve got now...fans are well catered for...we’ve got nothing to complain about’. In this capacity, leisure services within the stadium offer a form of comfort that the football fan can rely on:

Linda: I don’t buy that much when I go to the game... Though, I do want opportunities to buy, say, good food or a coffee if I want one. I do want a professional service, and I like the all the trimmings, like large screen TV’s in the concourse, the club shop and that... I do like the feeling that new stadiums offer - The buzz. It’s not just the match that people like, but the choices that we have within the stadium – they are second to none and that is one major reason that I choose to spend my leisure time there. **[Sunderland, aged 28 (STH)]**

*KD Would you stop going if certain services were taken away?*

Linda: Well, I can’t say yes for certain, but I would have to seriously reconsider my position as a season ticket holder... Tickets are that expensive now that I expect a quality service... the club must continue to look after paying customers.

Whether fans choose to consume (economically speaking) or not, hybrid consumption opportunities are valued. Moreover, if removed, fans, like Linda (above) suggest that they may reconsider their situation as season ticket holders in future. This position demonstrates an attitude that must please leisure proprietors. As Linda suggests, it seems that the desired reward for loyalty is that the club should ‘look after the fan’ by offering more opportunities to consume and spend money within the ground and beyond.

In essence then, hybrid consumption opportunities have infiltrated and consequently altered the match-day experience by virtue of creating a variety of themed options for sports fans to consider. Once considered by potential customers, strategies

for selling and maintaining customer satisfaction are employed by sales staff via the concept of emotional labour.

### ***Category 3: Performative Emotional Labour and Football Fandom***

Probably nothing epitomises or exemplifies emotional labour more than *the smile*.  
(Bryman 2004, p.105)

The term ‘performative emotional labour’ makes reference to the use and strategic promotion of emotion for the explicit purpose of enhancing customer satisfaction. With this, service providers ensure that employees are well drilled with various techniques such as smiling with authenticity and relaying only positive messages to potential customers (Hochschild 1983, p.4). When implemented correctly then, the promotion of emotional labour can help to differentiate one customer experience from the next and encourage continued brand loyalty (Henkoff 1994).

For the current participants this concept resonates in diverse and often conflicting ways. First, fans have a confused view of who ought to embody emotional labour. Football players (as employees of the club) have a duty, according my participants to display in their performance an emotional intensity which is admired and celebrated when it is embodied and disparaged when it is perceived to be lacking:

Ian: Rob Purdie would be my favourite player. He’s a one hundred percenter. He lays it all out there on the pitch and that’s what the fans want to see. He wants to win and understands how important it is to the fans. **[Darlington, aged 26 (MF)]**

Martin: I’ll tell you what it is. That fucker couldn’t care less [football player Michael Owen]. He’s played about five games and he’s picking up a big fucking cheque every week. Even when he plays he looks as though he doesn’t want to... All of the fans out there would give their right arm to represent Newcastle. He’s a waste of space. **[Newcastle, aged 42 (STH)]**

Attitudes towards football players Rob Purdie and Michael Owen respectively illustrate the desirable and undesirable characteristics that are attributed to sport workers based

on emotional labour. However, in spite of this there is little evidence to suggest that such attitudes would impact on customer relations with the club in the sense that the Disneyization thesis alludes to. For instance whilst Bryman (2004, p.105) suggests that ‘as many as two thirds of customers stop purchasing a service or product due to dissatisfaction with an employee’, it seems unlikely that football fans would curb spending habits due to the negative attitudes of star players. The likelihood is (given the global status of the player) that a disinterested and emotionally superfluous Michael Owen would (e.g. financially speaking) benefit rather than harm business relations with fans.

Kev: Big players draw in big crowds though...Even though he’s not playing well you can’t buy his shirt [Michael Owen] anywhere. It’s always sold out. [Newcastle, aged 23 (MF)]

Removed from the emotional intensity of players and in the purist sense of this concept, participants also refer to emotional labour as it is implicit within football club services such as executive packages, stadium tours and visits to the museum. For instance, Dougie<sup>12</sup> recalls that: ‘the tour at the Stadium of Light was fantastic and well worth the entrance fee’ on account that ‘the guide was great with the bairns (children)’. In this instance the employee of the club was heavily praised for ‘coming down to the level of the children’ and ‘making them feel the magic of the place’.

Within academic literature this is something that Illouz (2009, p.396) draws attention to when he discusses the presence of situational emotion. He explains that this phenomenon is often found in the consumption of tourist sites that are designed to produce intense experiences of nostalgia, authenticity, pride and excitement. Thus, in order to understand consumption, he suggests that it is important that we ‘pay close

attention to the ways in which emotions orient the activity of shopping as well as to the ways in which goods are packaged and designed’.

Similar praise and emotional connections were attributed to workers that exist beyond those official club services. For example, those working to sell official and unofficial programmes and even self employed burger vendors that reside on the stadium periphery were praised for displays of emotional labour:

Andrew: I get my burger from the same place each match-day. It’s one of those dirt vans, but the bloke is good craic. We always have a craic about the match and that, and as soon as he sees me he gets my order prepared. He’s a good bloke, he’s like sound.  
**[Sunderland, aged 44 (STH)]**

Whilst the principles of emotional labour are omnipresent and readily apply to various products and services that are provided for the football fandom industry; it is important to note that additional elements of football fandom culture further complicate this process. Here I am referring to a deeper sense of dissatisfaction that can be felt by fans towards the owners, shareholders and management structures within football clubs.

For instance, many interviewees felt unconvinced that the management structure shared an emotional commitment to the team or to the heritage of the football club more generally.

Andy: What happened to ‘the customer is always right’? Not in football they’re not... I work for the Co-op and we would get sacked if we ran our business like the way football clubs do. Alienating your customers is generally not a smart move in business.  
**[Newcastle, aged 50 (MF)]**

Football supporters like Andy (above) voiced their discontent at the lack of consideration awarded to fans by the owners of football clubs in spite of the fact that they (i.e. as fans) consistently spend money at the club. Whilst this can be frustrating for football fans it is also worth mentioning that when confronted with poor customer service, fans do not react in a typical consumer manner:

- John: Boro's PR (public relations) is disastrous at times and they treat us (fans) like shit but we still go back and spend, spend, spend... My mate is the biggest Boro fan; never missed a game home and away and he didn't get a ticket for the UEFA cup final. Disgrace. He was adamant that he would never step foot in the ground again.
- KD: Did he stop going?
- John: That's the thing, no. He can't stop; Boro is in his blood... **[Middlesbrough, aged 42 (MF)]**

This illustrates an emotional differentiation between regular consumer practices and the consumption of football fandom. After all, as Lord Justice Taylor (cited in Mullin, Hardy and Sutton 2000, p.28) reminds us, 'no one has their ashes scattered down the aisle of Tesco's' and hence with Taylor, I argue that fans possess a genuine form of emotional labour that **encourages** consumerist activity.

Consequently then, emotional performative labour can take a variety of forms within football fandom practice. First it works in the purist sense (in accordance with Bryman 2004) where employees or marketing experts are encouraged to provide a positive atmosphere (e.g. by virtue of the implementation of a friendly and emotionally congruent persona) in order to improve the experience for customers, or else encourage customers to buy a product or service. Secondly, fans expect players to embody emotional labour and a certain emotional ethos which outwardly promotes a positive attitude and reflects their own emotional investment. Third, because fans are part of the performance (and consider themselves as supporters as well as consumers) they too feel a certain duty to support the team via economic expenditure on club related material and services.

#### ***Category 4: Merchandising and Football Fandom***

Merchandising is a form of franchising in the sense that it is a mechanism for leveraging additional uses and value out of existing well known images (Bryman 2004, p.79).

Whilst merchandising may not be exclusively related to the late modern period, Bryman contends that the variation and volume of products that are produced and sold by football clubs and governing bodies under the conditions of market exchange have increased significantly. Other scholars such as Horne (2006), Crawford (2003; 2007) and Giulianotti (1999) are in agreement with this position and suggest that even those agents that perceive authenticity to exist outside of the commercial sphere are catered for by museums, classic club shirts and videos / **DVDs** of old / classic games. Participants in the current sample provide evidence to support this assertion:

Jimmy: I don't buy that much really, I don't think that's what footballs about...Jackie Milburn, now he was a player. I bought a few **DVDs** last month of the **1950s** team. Against Man City in the 1955 cup final Milburn scored in the first minute...Aye, those DVD's are great, it reminds me of what football used to be. [**Newcastle, aged 55 (MF)**]

Without exception, all interviewees were owners of football merchandise ranging from scarves, coats and hats, to coffee mugs, curtains and pillow cases, and in turn they describe such possessions as integral to fandom practice. Even those who initially refute the tag of 'merchandise owners' eventually succumbed to this conclusion:

KD: Do you buy football related merchandise at all?

Tim: No. It's just not me. I mean, I've got all of the accessories, but they last for years, you know? The scarf, the hat, the gloves and the coat. I get the top (replica shirt) every other year. You've got to have those things as a fan, but you don't buy them all the time. [Pause] On reflection though, that's quite a lot isn't it? [**Middlesbrough, aged 54 (MF)**]

To illustrate how this dependable and sometimes unconscious relationship between fan and consumer goods continues to thrive as a feature of late modern fandom, a line of questioning regarding the origins of practice began to reveal the crucial role that commercial merchandise can play in ones early experiences and concomitant initiation into the practice:

Kelly: Even before I could talk my dad had got me a Newcastle baby bib, which said ‘The best dribbler at St. James Park’ and it went from their really. Every birthday or Christmas I always got Newcastle presents I think just to make sure that I was still a fan. **[Newcastle, aged 25 (MF)]**

Supplementary to those Disneyized marketing strategies that are used to sell a product or service, participants (like Kelly above), illustrate an accompanying process. Here I refer to the conscious acquisition of merchandise for the purpose of gift exchange. According to McCracken (1986, p.78) the process of buying merchandise for others reveals the conscious presence of ‘exchange rituals’. He explains that the gift giver chooses a particular offering because it possesses meaningful properties that he or she wishes to see transferred to the gift receiver. In other words, ‘the giver’ invites ‘the receiver’ to define themselves in its terms (e.g. as a fan of the associated football club). Thus, removed from Bryman’s assertion that ‘merchandisers must tread carefully’ not to upset or disillusion parents with ‘excessive marketing of temporary goods’ (2004, p.100), the evidence in this instance indicates that agent’s desire, use and rely on merchandise to satisfy a personal agenda:

Andrew I’ve got two kids and yes, I think it is my duty to make supporters out of them.

*KD How do you do that then?*

Andrew I think it’s about being enthusiastic about the team and showing how important it is to you...Me and my brother’s and dad just buy them all the gear and all the novelties. My son is only six and his bedroom is covered in Sunderland wallpaper, curtains, been sheets, cuddly toys, posters all that... His uncles always keep him up to date with latest gear and he loves it. **[Sunderland, aged 44 (STH)]**

It is clear that merchandise can be used as a coercive tool to stimulate an interest in the practice or to promote a continuation of tradition. This pattern then becomes a routinized occurrence that is particularly acted out on **birthdays**, Christmas holidays, or to mark the beginning of the new football season as participant Stuart recollects:

Stuart: ...Any presents that we got were generally football related. We were just football crazy really. Any new promotion, stickers, coins, magazines and that, we just had to have



them...I just always wanted the next thing. That's what my little one is like now. Learned it off his dad [**West Ham, aged 45 (MF)**]

Such reflexive accounts allow us to consider the possibility that one's desire for merchandise is a learned process that is passed down in an active and reciprocal manner from one generation to the next. Furthermore there is evidence to suggest that desire to consume in this manner can bypass personal taste. Participant Wayne, for example, indicates that he dislikes the colour red but makes an exception for all Middlesbrough FC merchandise and Michael too infers that he is 'always first in the queue' to buy the replica shirt regardless of its personal appeal. Moreover, when asked if he feels exploited by the extent of merchandising in respect to the changing designs of the replica shirt, Michael responded:

Michael: Not really. I'd be gutted that other teams were getting new designs while we got nowt to look forward to... We surely wouldn't want our teams to wear the same strip over again, that would just be dull... It adds a bit of spice to proceedings. We always chat about what the strip will look like, the new designs and that. It kicks off the season with a bit of excitement; everyone's like 'have you seen the new strip'? [**Sunderland, aged 20 (MF)**]

Likewise, whilst other participants were more sceptical of the rate that new strips are designed and sold to customers, they still sought to purchase the shirt.

Martin: Don't get me wrong I don't object to sales of the shirt, it's just when they change it too often that they bug me. For a while in about '96' it went wild. There were about five different strips in the space of two years. For me, that was taking the piss...Generally though, the way I see it is that buying the strip once per year is like paying your subs. [**Newcastle United, aged 42 (STH)**]

The reference to 'paying ones subs' (above) suggests feelings of duty to purchase based on emotive connections to the club and the concomitant outcome of effective marketing strategies featuring theming and hybrid consumption displays. The club shop is perhaps the most significant venue for merchandise displays of this type, often selling everyday household objects for a premium price:

Tim: ... items that are sold holding your team's identity (club badge) become desirable...Like I've said, Middlesbrough wallpaper or bog roll is no better than Asda's own economy brand, but for a football fan it is worth the extra pounds shillings and pence... Logic goes out the window for most fans. [**Middlesbrough, aged 54 (MF)**]

The attraction towards symbols of self and group identity appear to be symptomatic of a learned response, ingrained into a habitus that values the purchase of products associated with the club badge. For instance, participant Kelly speaks of receiving gifts (as a child) from significant others and 'recognising the importance of the badge at an early age'. Similarly, Tim acknowledges his role as a parent to pass on the tradition of fandom by 'kiting out' his son 'with all the gear'. In support of this finding Crawford (2004) suggests that despite the fluidity of late modern life, sports fans are likely to learn and replicate the norms of a particular habitus; and Robson (2000, p.169) too indicates that practical mastery of the practice of fandom becomes embedded into the very perceptions and dispositions of fans to such an extent that actions and thoughts are simply known in practice as 'the way things are done'. This, of course can have positive implications for service providers:

Rebecca: If they played in a black and white bin bag I'd buy it for forty quid (pounds). [**Newcastle, aged 24 (MF)**]

Accordingly then, perhaps the most significant outcome to arise as a by-product of Disneyized marketing procedures is the self regulating relationship that has developed between the fan and the brand logo. In the end - the shirt, the pencil case, the poster and the scarf resemble much more than the physical materials that are used to produce the item. The symbolic presence of the team colours and badge combine with one-another to transform a utilitarian but lifeless item into a symbol of self and group identity that harbours an emotional connection.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided a rare insight into the Disneyization thesis by exploring the experiences that are endured by late-modern football fans. Drawing on everyday experiences in this manner has proven useful in two ways. First, it offers an empirical account that explores Disneyization processes beyond conceptual scholarly writing. Second, and advancing the standard projection of theoretical components, it provides evidence to examine how those processes are received, interpreted and integrated into the life of the football consumer.

It is important to note that fans were able to reflect on and understand the presence of marketing and commercial enterprise with which they were confronted. Disneyization processes were not described as a concealed or covert form of manipulation, but rather as overt marketing ploys that provided options for fans to consume. For instance participants recognised how leisure providers and corporate sponsors would use football as a theme for commercial advancement and yet associated choice and variety of leisure experiences (i.e. a direct consequence of Disneyization) were viewed favourably by participants and were embraced as part of cultural practice. Far from feeling exploited by the clear marketing strategy applied, fans reportedly felt privileged to be part of an industry in which they were centralized as agents of sovereign importance. *In this sense, as capitalist culture has evolved, it has become integral to fandom practice by providing the tools for further symbolic expression, packaged with intrigue, excitement and the conditions of material comfort. In other words, those verbatim accounts offered in this sample suggest that any negative connotations are far outweighed by the leisure benefits that Disneyized processes can bring.*

This was typified by the descriptions of common match-day practice, saturated with enthusiastic expressions of hybrid consumption opportunities that infiltrate, invade and eventually embody (for this sample at least) perceptions of match-day authenticity.

Whether at home (e.g. newspapers, television programmes, internet websites and chat rooms), in the pub (e.g. live televised football, fruit and quiz machines, food and drink and special themed offers), or at the match (e.g. pre-match entertainment, gambling opportunities, refreshments, museums, club shop, bank machines) hybrid consumption was omnipresent and greatly valued. Moreover, those participants expressed the point that they would complain if opportunities to consume were reduced. This was particularly true of merchandising given that participants expected and desired new products that add excitement to the practice. More than this however, those seemingly inanimate objects (e.g. replica shirt, money box, cup, hat, calendar, scarf etc.) were awarded emotional significance when emblazoned with the club badge or other signifying properties of group identity.

Evidence suggests that this process is learned as a consequence of both leisure opportunities that have become part of everyday practice, and a desire from agents to express tastes and sensibilities to others. Consequently exchange rituals were important in the current context given that they illustrate routine consumption interactions between family and friends and it is through this practice that emotional connections to material objects were formed.

What emerges most strongly from the analysis is that, contrary to previous research that highlights disdain and resistance towards Disneyization (Duke, 2002), those properties were well received by fans in this instance. Thus, despite the purposive targeted marketing that is designed to capitalize on the practice of football fandom, it transpires that fans want and desire to consume under the conditions set out in the Disneyization thesis. Furthermore participants were in essence self-regulating consumers, sustained predominately through the perceived emotional congruence that exists between the fan; market products; and the club (the object of fandom).

As a consequence of a strong emotional connection to the football club, it seems that the practice of football fandom conflicts, in part, with Byman's assertion that poor customer service can be a costly business error. For instance whilst participants value the emotional labour and effort of leisure providers, there are certain forms of poor customer service that go unpunished. To explain, fans are often vocal about the perceived lack of consideration shown by the owners of football teams, and yet regardless of this they choose not to curb spending on club related services or merchandise. Participants did not see themselves as having simple market choices in this respect. Even when dissatisfied with the club or performances of the team, they still felt an overriding, compelling desire to consume based on an inelastic emotional commitment to the team.

This of course has lasting implications for associated leisure providers and social scientists alike. Whilst commercial success is often reliant on customer relations and emotional labour, this is only partially true of football fandom. To those services that exist on the periphery of fandom culture (e.g. themed, bars and restaurants) emotional labour is crucial to maintain custom amidst competition. At the level of the football club however, failed customer relations are not terminal. Fans will gravitate towards symbolic merchandise or special offers that share emotional congruence with the object of fandom and thus, consumption will continue based on feelings of loyalty, belonging and duty to support.

#### NOTES:

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<sup>1</sup> Following the launch of a University Press Release, the following media outlets in the North East of England gave time and column inches to promote the research: **Newspapers:** *The Journal*; *The Northern Echo*; *Hartlepool Mail*; *The Sunderland Echo*; *Evening Gazette*; *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*. **Television:** *BBC North East News*; *ITV North East Tonight*. **Radio Interviews:** *Durham FM 102.6*; *Century Radio 106* (now 'Real Radio'); *BBC Tees - The Neil Green show*; *The Matthew Davies breakfast show*; *The Chris Johnson show*.

<sup>2</sup> See King (1997) 'The lads: Masculinity and the new consumption of football'; Sandvoss (2003) 'A game of two halves'. King's field work was carried out with Manchester United fans, many of whom were contributors to the Manchester United fanzine 'red issue' making them an interesting and yet

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specialized sample. Furthermore whilst Sandvoss purports to have shed light on the everyday consumption of fandom, he does so, not only with reference to fans of top tier clubs in their domestic leagues (Chelsea, Bayer Leverkusen and DC United) but he also assumes homogeneity between fan cultures across geographical space and nationalities.

<sup>3</sup> Carl: [Darlington, aged 23 (MF)]

<sup>4</sup> Luke: [Hartlepool, aged 21 (STH)]

<sup>5</sup> Peter: [Middlesbrough, aged 32 (STH)]

<sup>6</sup> Club 1892 refers to the use of an exclusive bar for those fans that pay a premium for a specific match-day package at Newcastle United.

<sup>7</sup> Coca Cola ended sponsorship with the football league in 2009. *Npower* have been the new league sponsors since 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Jacko [Newcastle, aged 28 (MF)]; Bill [Sunderland, aged 34 (MF)]; Richie [Liverpool, aged 32 (MF)]; Kelly [Newcastle, aged 25 (MF)]

<sup>9</sup> The following Premier League stadiums (2011-2012 season) are named after sponsors: The Britannia Stadium (Stoke City) – ‘Britannia Building Society’; DW Stadium (Wigan) – ‘DW Sports Fitness’; Emirates Stadium (Arsenal) – ‘Emirates Airlines’; Etihad Stadium (Manchester City) – ‘Etihad Airways’; Liberty Stadium (Swansea) ‘Liberty Property PLC’; The Sports Direct Arena (Newcastle) – ‘Sport Direct’.

<sup>10</sup> The term ‘con-course’ is used here to refer to a large open space within the football stadium where supporters can gather before, during or after the game.

<sup>11</sup> Keith [Middlesbrough, aged 45 (MF)]

<sup>12</sup> Dougie: [Sunderland, aged 37 (STH)]

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