

THE 'TWELFTH MAN' IN THE CYBER STANDS:

Exploring Football Fan Discourse and
the Construction of Identity on
Online Forums

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Memories live longer than dreams.

ABSTRACT

Some football fans go to matches, but what do others *do*? This thesis examines online football fan forums in order to explore the construction of fan identities and positions. By implementing a cyberethnographical approach supplemented by online interviews with fans, it explores how football fan communities operate, discussing aspects of forum management, control and hierarchies, all the while illustrating how these factors contribute to the development of individual and collective identities. In considering this, it presents football fans as inhabiting a multitude of complex positions, taking into account arguments of 'active' and 'passive' fandom and the importance of fan status (Hills, 2002.) I argue that that there has been a significant lack of research into 'everyday' football fandom, with both the mainstream media and academic perspectives preferring to focus on the extraordinary instances of performance and behaviour, which, I further argue, are simplistic in their treatment of fans. Mainstream media representations are addressed; with the latter sections of the thesis illustrating that discourses produced by fans themselves often contrast significantly with dominant narratives at play in the news media.

The football fan is found to demonstrate articulate consideration for his/her own position, with this being frequently determined by the overriding importance of the team's success and the part that the fan plays in this. This is particularly apparent when considering national and regional allegiances, and how these can be seen to present regular areas of conflict in regards to dominant affiliation, yet all the while contributing to the fan's position as an extension of the football club.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

'How can you support a team that you've never seen play live?'

1.1. Context

Sitting in the pub one afternoon I overheard a conversation between two of the patrons. One of them, a Manchester United supporter, was questioning the other's allegiance to their chosen team - Arsenal. The Manchester United supporter was claiming that the Arsenal supporter was not a 'true' fan (his terminology), because he had only been to the Emirates Stadium twice, whereas he had visited Old Trafford 'countless' times. The conversation developed and in turn became heated as both sought to attack and defend their affiliation, presenting arguments and counter arguments in reference to support, passion and dedication. What struck me were two things: firstly, the way in which fandom and support was manifesting itself through what could be perceived to be a private conversation in a very public domain, allowing me to question whether similar interactions play out in other physical, and indeed non-physical spaces. Secondly, the manner in which football could be seen to contribute to constructing individual and collective identities, with references to issues of legitimacy, pilgrimage and the way in which actively going to watch the team you support play a match was constructed as a distinct indication of loyalty and affiliation, and how this compares to fans who consume their text/s in other ways, such as watching televised coverage of matches, or interacting online. I found myself questioning *how* such discourses could be explored, and through what mediums would this be made possible, and what this could say about analyses of football fans and our general understanding of a group that, from a personal perspective, retains far more complexities than perhaps given credit for.

The study of football fans is not a new venture, with numerous theorists having explored the manner in which football fans can be understood, from sociological explanations (Dunning et al, 1988) to analyses of the media's preoccupation with football violence as a dominant discourse (see: Hall, 1978; Poulton, 2005), or the way in which fans are perceived in popular culture as irrational 'fanatics' through fictional depictions (Rehling, 2011; Poulton, 2013); such research has all sought to construct understandings of football fans throughout popular culture, yet, I argue has largely failed to look in depth at football fan communities and interpersonal interaction. This was something initially observed by Meyrowitz (1985),

however since this observation new forms of fan communities have arrived, particularly those facilitated by new media, such as online forums. It can hence be explored as to whether there is scope for work that examines these communities, fuelled by the conception of online fan cultures as being perhaps the most vocal and conspicuous of communities (Whiteman, 2009), particularly in comparison to previous studies that I believe have relied on predominantly speculative, limited accounts, and it is from this argument that my research topic emerged.

The thesis aims to look beyond understanding football as a pastime, to explore definitions, roles, statuses and hierarchies, all the while addressing the overriding significance of fan performance, and how such elements can be seen to potentially evolve over time in relation to the mediums that facilitate such interaction to occur, and subsequent communities to form. Throughout the thesis I argue that fandom is complex and multifaceted; relating with many other identity categories and forms of social behaviour, all the while acknowledging that news media definitions have typically dominated the field with us having little understanding of how this transcends to supporter communities. While research has started to interrogate the role of online media building communities for fans, this has not been the case with football fandom, where in fact we can see the multidimensional levels of being a fan played out in conversations and interactions, allowing us to place these against news media definitions and dominant constructions.

1.2. Topic

My thesis is concerned with exploring football fan interpersonal discourses, with fandom being interpreted as an important part of culture, leisure, sport and identity, which is what this work intends to explore. It aims to identify means through which football fans can be seen to converse and interact, all the while aiming to answer the overriding question of what football fans can be seen to *do* in their everyday, mundane encounters in order to construct individual and potentially collective identities, subsequently allowing us to further understand one of the largest fan groups in society. Identities are defined as the conceptualisation of a fan position both on and offline (Whiteman, 2009: 392), with this being furthered to relate to sociological, cultural and historical positions that have all helped 'shape' what it is to *be* a football fan.

To develop this point, I decided to look at online forums as an example of a fan community. The reasoning behind this was twofold: firstly, I believed it was necessary to explore football

as a means of social collective interaction, with it being a game that millions follow (Bisset, 2013), requiring me to identify a manner through which such mass interaction can be effectively analysed. Secondly, I believed that it was relevant to combine this perspective with the continual emergence of fans into the - albeit relatively well cemented - digital world. As Gray et al explained, when Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers* in 1992, fan communities were often relegated to conventions and fanzines (2007), yet now the migration of many fans to the internet has resulted in a wealth of available material. Furthermore, online communicative means such as forums have become central sites where discussions take place, bringing new possibilities for social interactions and subsequent research.

With football being one of the mediatised sports, not only when it comes to actual sporting events but also supporter activities (Krovel and Roksvold, 2012), it seemed only pertinent to develop such questions about fan activity, identity-formation and emerging discourses to link with an ever-popular medium. It is due to this that I chose to focus on online forums as a means through which football fans collect, converse and create; with this being further explained and defended throughout both the subsequent literature review and methodology, particularly in relation to other approaches. When establishing the specific approach, I opted to research one football club's fans - Swansea City - on one online forum - *Not606.com*¹ - in order to explore the themes that emerge. It was apparent that fandom intersected a range of other identity classifications, such as national and regional divisions, personal integrity, notions of authenticity and legitimacy; enhancing, challenging and engaging with previous research into the area.

1.3. Positioning the Research

When reading into concepts surrounding fandom, football and the development of communities, it was apparent that numerous dominant perspectives arose. Firstly, there was the overriding acknowledgement that fan analysis *in general* has developed to take into account the ever-emerging digital mediums, such as social media, user generated content (UGC), and so forth. Secondly, that football theory has been largely preoccupied with exploring football violence and hooliganism as a primary means through which to not only

¹ *Not606.com* is an online forum with particular emphasis on Premier League football, with separate forums for each team.

categorise fans as a topic in their own right, but to also criticise dominant mass media representations. Thirdly, that any explorations of interpersonal communication *between and among* fan groups themselves throughout online media has either concerned sport *per se*, or has been largely limited in its extent of research, or retained a preoccupation with English football teams and fans as a leading approach. It is also relevant to acknowledge that, while there has been work which has considered the contemporary changes to the world's most popular sport, this has often been overshadowed by debates around football's commodification and commercialisation. Instead of focusing on such arguments, this work aims to centre on the everyday occurrences of fan behaviour; issues that I argue are often sidelined.

As Taylor (1998) stated, 'football is more than just a business - no one has their ashes scattered down the aisle in Tesco.' And, indeed, it is continually the interpersonal communication that is of significance to this research in addressing whether the profile of the supporter has changed (Tapp and Clowes, 2002), and if the 'new' fan is less understood, along with the relevance of addressing specific mediums that, I argue, are potentially sidelined in favour of emerging preoccupations with social media, which I further argue is at risk of drowning out the forum; a medium that allows for rich and fruitful research. Throughout the work, 'new media' is considered in line with Nayar's definition, which describes it as the 'electronic environment where various technologies and media forms converse' (2010: 2.)

In further developing the scope of this work, I believe it is relevant to look beyond England as a principle indication of British national football identity, to provide an original contribution to this area by acknowledging the significance of smaller, arguably 'lesser' nations, such as Wales, to identify the importance of constructing individual and collective identities in specific spaces. After all, as Giulianotti (2005) stressed, football fans have the potential for critical reflexivity - to see, evaluate and understand both themselves and football fandom as a whole. As such, it is only apt that this is appreciated in its entirety in relation to dominant discursive frameworks, all the while relating these to wider issues that, I believe, are imperative to research in order to provide observations that can have potential implications for wider fandom studies.

1.4. Structure

This thesis firstly considers what relevant research has already been done on the topic; focusing initially on fandom in general, before narrowing this down to specifically explore the issue of football fan studies. Throughout the first section of chapter 2, dominant work that has governed fan studies is introduced in relation to theoretical approaches that form the basis of this work, such as the concept of fan visibility (Lewis, 1992) and performativity (Hills, 2002), online communities and normativity (Bennett, 2009, 2013), hierarchies and fan 'status' (Bourdieu, 1984).

Following this, the second section of Chapter 2 considers football fandom in more depth, addressing themes such as football violence and hooliganism as a dominant frame (Hall, 1978; Poulton, 2005), the relationship between the mass media and nationalism (Maguire, 1999; Bishop and Jaworski, 2003), the significance of class, social identity and gender throughout football fan studies (Crolley, 2008; Gosling, 2007; Hynes, 2012) prior to introducing internet communities (Baym, 2000) and how this medium can be explored. Throughout the literature review, prospective objectives and questions are raised, along with understanding what such theories and approaches say about football fandom in general.

Chapter 3 introduces the methodology, where specific approaches are considered in relation to the overall direction of the research. Cyberethnography is discussed and defended as a primary research tool, prior to introducing online interviews as a supplementary method, all the while acknowledging the potential limitations and advantages of such, and how these will seek to attain answers to the research questions arising throughout.

Following the methodology there are four subsequent main chapters, the first of which (Chapter 4) identifies the 'construction' of the community on the forum, exploring the manner in which the conventions of the forum, such as moderators, management and rules, impact subsequent discourses. I consider the processes of fan social capital and status (Bourdieu, 1984) along with normativity (Bennett, 2013), in relation to the structure of the forums linking examples of interactions and participation.

After this, Chapter 5 develops the concepts raised in the previous chapter to look more in depth at active and passive debates; connecting issues of authenticity, validity and identity conflict – addressing how fans contest their affiliation in line with the individual and collective formation of fan relationships.

Chapter 6 investigates further into the concept of identity to look at national identity and the notions of local and national affiliation, exploring such divisions in relation to historical rivalries and the affect this can be seen to have on contemporary fan positions.

Chapter 7 then acknowledges how these factors all tie in to the dominant media representation of football fans, taking one particular example of news coverage and comparing this to fan discussions, all the while linking to questions and themes raised in the previous chapters.

This thesis aims to illustrate the relevance of exploring football fan discourse arguing that this is something that is not just limited to academic perspectives, but rather has implications for 'everyday' life. Fan discourses are constructed as omnipresent and permeating society, all the while emphasising how virtual spaces of communication are socially manifested and often replicative of the rich encounters that play out in offline, 'real' communities, but I further argue - in contrast to some of the existing perspectives surrounding this field - are often richer than such. It aims to explore the concept of what makes a community, going beyond the arguably 'casual' use of the term (see: Kling and Courtright, 2003) to explore how this relates to specific groups of fans, identifying issues of individualisation and homogenisation (Margalit, 2008), all the while aiming to create a unique, relevant, detailed exploration of football fan discourse and the construction of individual and collective identities in relation to one specific forum of one specific team which can be argued to potentially reflect myriad fan and team perspectives - the overriding one being the role of the 'twelfth man' in the cyber stands.

CHAPTER 2 - PART 1: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT FANS?

2.1. Fans: *An Introduction*

While football fans have been the subject of various academic studies, particularly those concentrating on sociological explanations of fan behaviour (see Dunning et al, 1986), there is a distinct lack of research that can be seen to focus on the role of fan behaviour among sport fans themselves, within fan communities, and particularly in regards to specific nations and teams. By this, I argue that there is a need to look in depth at the manner in which football fans interact in modern society, identifying the importance of fan representations and identity-forming in certain communities, as opposed to the (mis)representation of fans through means such as press coverage and fictional depictions. I further argue that there is currently a specific ideology constructed throughout contemporary media reports that contrasts significantly with the discourse provided *among* football fan groups, and which welcomes further exploration. Whether such ideologies have been formed from the repeated media coverage of hooliganism and football violence, or the myriad films and documentaries exploring the atypical behaviour of football fans, there is an apparent divide between the amount of coverage dedicated to football fans through representation, and the work, research and analyses that have concentrated on fan interaction between and among themselves.

This chapter will illustrate some of the key pieces of work that have been dedicated to fan studies on a more 'general' level, before discussing research relating specifically to football fan culture. In doing so, it will firstly demonstrate how the majority of existing theory has either concentrated on fandom as a more generalised, broad issue, or simply been preoccupied with the 'football-fan-as-football-hooligan' discourse, neglecting to look at more 'ordinary' and arguably normative forms of behaviour. It will discuss the various relevant dominant themes before considering the role of 'new' media technologies, such as the internet, in order to illustrate the significance of fan interaction and communities online. In doing so, this chapter will further present the need to undertake research into an area that, I argue, is currently under-represented.

Its aim is to illustrate how far existing models allow us to understand football fandom, and what questions arise through exploring past theory and literature. While this is by no means an exhaustive account of the existing work conducted into fandom and football studies, it none the less aims to critically analyse relevant literature that has sought to present approaches to fandom and football studies, and that which is applicable and relevant to the development of the research in question. The first section of the chapter will provide an overview of the existing research that has been conducted into fandom and the wider theory in this area, before narrowing this down to more specific studies.

2.2. Fans

Fan studies have attracted a wealth of research over the years, with numerous theorists concentrating on the position, role and culture of fans within society. One of the key issues that has seemingly occupied certain theorists is producing a specific definition of the 'fan.' Indeed, it has been claimed by some academics that it is ultimately problematic to assume that any one particular classification of fandom can be exclusively accurate or without question. As Matt Hills, author of *Fan Cultures* (2002) explained, 'one of the key issues is providing a definition of 'fan' and the problems surrounding what is said to be the 'everydayness' of the term (2002: xi.) And it can be seen from this that there are evident issues to be addressed when considering how the term 'fan' is used so regularly, and arguably with little thought, throughout general discourse, that to then ascribe academic definitions and purpose to it invariably creates complications. Despite this, there are theorists in this field who have done just that – constructing and providing definitions of fandom. Cornel Sandvoss, in his work *Fans: The Mirror of Consumption* (2005) described fandom as being the 'regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text' (2005: 8.) This definition allows for the interpretation of fan consumption as a very broad topic, which ultimately covers a range of texts and cultural products, and which furthermore inevitably welcomes a diverse spectrum of content. It hence allows us to attribute the term 'fan' to a range of subjects such as football. However, one specific weakness with Sandvoss' interpretation as largely concerning 'popular narratives or texts' was a position questioned by other theorists in this field, particularly those concerned with 'cult' forms of media, as will be discussed at later points in the chapter.

While it can be arguably difficult to wholly construct an adequate, uncontested definition and description of the concept of fandom, it would seem that it is rarely disputed that fans are one of the most 'visible' and therefore identifiable of audiences (Lewis, 1992: 3.) Whether this is due to factors such as the conventions that many fans attend, or the myriad other ways in which fan behaviour is performed, it can be seen that, in large parts at least, fan activity is observable in numerous ways, and arguably there is little more true to this than the actions of football fans. However, it is important to acknowledge that it is not just the literal physical movements of fans that can be interpreted as a means of performativity, and rather fan behaviour can be experienced and monitored by looking at mediums such as online forums, message boards, blogs and social media, which can be seen to operate as a resource for a group of presumably like-minded individuals to orbit around. Later in this work, it will be considered as to how there is an arguably lack of research into this specific area of fan participation, particularly in relation to football fans, and especially when compared to other factors such as the exploration of fan conventions and more physical means of consumption.

A continuous theme throughout previous work into fandom is the recognition that fans can be interpreted as subjects themselves, as opposed to just the texts that they consume being the objects of study. As Hills explains, 'fandom is not a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically. It is always performative... and [which] performs cultural work' (2002: *xi*.) Hills emphasises the importance of acknowledging how fans act, behave and consume, and further interprets these as being critical factors within fandom studies, as opposed to such work concentrating on the texts that are *being* consumed. This leads us to then consider the role of fan performance and identity in constructing fan behaviour, and how this has concerned theorists in this field. If fans are to be analysed as texts themselves, then such an approach should acknowledge the changing conditions of fan culture, which would clearly be the case with contemporary forms of fan communities, such as those that predominantly exist online. Within this lies the importance of fan performance and behaviour as indicators of fan identity. This notion has been influenced by previous theory, such as the work of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) who place the fan, 'cultist' and enthusiast along a spectrum of identities and experiences. This emphasises the importance of constructing different identities and allows us to further acknowledge and question the apparent complexities that surround fandom culture. Indeed, while the actual issue of 'fandom' as a contested term has been discussed and disputed in relation to various academic arguments and interpretations, what is hard to challenge is the importance of the formation of cultural

identities through means such as textual consumption. The overall relevance of fandom as providing a means to analyse, dissect and discuss the production of identities and cultural positioning is one that is almost a given, particularly in regards to fan identity being interpreted as a form of 'cultural identity' (Hills, 2002) and evidently this goes far beyond a mere affiliation or commitment to a text or object, and rather can be seen to attribute fandom and textual consumption with the ability to contribute to producing significant identity-forming characteristics.

Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) suggest that audience research is moving towards a new paradigm – the 'spectacle/performance' paradigm - which recognises the diffusion of performance into everyday life and individuals' dual roles as both performer and audience in their everyday life. Elements of this, they suggest, can be seen in the work of de Certeau (1984) and Jenkins (1992), but they are seemingly reluctant to locate this firmly within the spectacle/performance paradigm owing to de Certeau and Jenkins' continued emphasis on audience 'resistance.' When considering the participatory aspects of fandom, and the construction of coherent identities, certain theorists have argued that this is typically regarded as a source of empowerment for individuals in struggles against sometimes oppressive ideologies (Lewis, 1992: 3.) This is important as it emphasises how fan consumption can be seen to operate as a form of subculture against dominant socio-political, and arguably otherwise exclusionary, stances. The fan, therefore, is perceived as an anomaly and not the typical member of society who exercises normal, dominant and indeed conformist behaviour. This links in with the idea of 'cultism' as an alternative form of consumption; particularly in regards to fan habits being predominantly interpreted as occupied with atypical texts and objects. As discussed earlier in regards to the arguable limitations with Sandvoss' assumption that fans consume 'popular narratives or texts' (2005: 8), fan studies are regularly concentrated on the alleged use of abnormal or bizarre texts, and what has become well known, throughout both academic and more 'general' discourse, as 'cult' fandom.

2.2.1 The Cult Fan

Before discussing the issue of 'cultism' in more detail, it is relevant to go back to some of the earlier theories concerned with fan identity, such as Henry Jenkins' work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (1992), in which the idea of the 'cultist' was discussed. Indeed, the very notion of 'cultism' with its almost immediate negative

connotations and unconventional characteristics can be seen to play a large role in fan literature, particularly in regards to the construction of fan identities as considered previously in the chapter. As Jenkins stated:

...the fan still constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary culture, one alternately the subject of ridicule and anxiety, of dread and desire... the stereotypical conception of the fan, while not without a limited factual basis, amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. (1992: 15, 17)

While Jenkins addressed fans' use of texts as an essential factor in fandom research, it is important to acknowledge how the regular perception of fans was seen to arguably differ from 'normative' cultural experience. As Jenkins continued:

Whether viewed as a religious fanatic, a psychopathic killer, a neurotic fantasist or a lust-crazed groupie, the fan remains a 'fanatic' whose interests are fundamentally alien to the realm of 'normal' cultural experience, and whose mentality is dangerously out of touch with reality. (1992: 15)

Indeed, the concept of fandom as a type of social dysfunction is one that has been addressed by numerous other theorists such as Lisa Lewis, whose work *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* (1992) considered how fans are 'othered' and presented in opposition to the 'norm'; as a deviant form whose behaviour and approaches are not only in contrast to typical activity, but potentially threatening to the established social order. The significance of this lays in the way that it addresses a fundamental factor within fan culture, which is the assumption and arguably hegemonic perception of the 'fan' and its surrounding community as in opposition to the 'norm.' Further to this, Lewis considered more specific ideologies that assist in the construction of the fan, such as that of 'obsessed loner', which further presents the fan as being devoid of rational social interaction and, potentially, not part of a community. Such conceptions can be questioned as to whether these types of fan interpretations and understanding is indicative of a very individual, solitary fan discourse, and one that is not part of a growing group or community, and this will be integral to consider in relation to football fandom, particularly in latter parts of this work.

When adapting this position to football fans, it can be argued that such fandom is not in this instance reduced to an individual form of consumption, and rather the typical football fan can be seen to be part of a solid community in relation to both other supporters of the same team, and similarly those who are from the same country or nation. Certainly the idea of an ‘obsessed loner’ seems far more applicable to more ‘cult’ forms of fandom and not indicative of something which is essentially quite an accepted and indeed traditional part of social culture. This further supports the argument that individual based textual consumptions can be related to specific forms of texts and narratives, and when applied to the research at hand, it can be argued that football is not such an example and instead potentially acts outside of the typical existing ideologies surrounding fan culture. What is again important here is the role of communities in both supporting and constructing fan consumption, and also in potentially excluding fans and participants. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in her work *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (1988) developed this concept and directly discussed the role of fan communities and groups in constructing cultural positions and identities. She also considered the emergence and role of rational fan entities as opposed to the ‘deviant others’ that is so seemingly largely focused on throughout fan discourse. Herrnstein Smith argued that there is evidence of a divide between rational, knowledgeable fans and irrational, defective consumers. She stated:

It is assumed or maintained...that the particular subjects who constitute the established and authorised members of the group are of sound mind and body, duly trained and informed and generally competent, all other subjects being defective, deficient or deprived; suffering from crudeness of sensibility, diseases and distortions of perceptions, weakness of character, impoverishment or background – and education, cultural, or historical biases, ideological or personal prejudices and/or underdeveloped, corrupted or jaded tastes. (1988: 41)

What can be seen from Herrnstein Smith’s statement is that, in contrast to the previous themes permeating fan analyses that appear to position the fan as an alternative ‘other’, Herrnstein Smith’s perspective instead interprets the fan as occupying a group and being part of a community that is privileged in its access and content. There are two points to address here: firstly, this can be seen to turn other conceptions of the ‘fan’ on its head, as the fan is perceived to be part of a community that essentially ‘others’ those that are *not* members; and, secondly, that within such communities lie distinctive forms of order and statuses in regards to competences; factors that indicate the complexities that surround fan studies and which

clearly welcome further analysis. It can be questioned as to whether such communities include those with ‘privileged access’ whereby fans that are allowed to enter and participate in such communities have an elevated status that is not reflective of a normal positioning; further portraying forms of ‘ranks’ within fandom.

While there is evidence throughout previous studies of the fan taking on numerous complex roles and positions, there nonetheless remain areas that clearly welcome further analysis. The football fan, while arguably not neatly fitting in to the perception of the fan as a ‘loner’ devoid of community, still can be understood to inhabit areas of ‘deviance’ and social abnormality. Hooligans, for example, can easily be interpreted as ‘othered’ in the manner in which they are constructed throughout football discourse and this allows us to question whether unconventional, at times deviant, behaviour forms the basis of most fan studies as opposed to analyses concerning the more ‘everyday’, typical forms of fan consumption. While certain theorists themselves appear to criticise the over emphasis on social deviance as a prevailing form of explanation into fan behaviour, it is likewise easy to argue that a large proportion of subsequent research has concentrated on abnormal aspects of fan behaviour as a primary means of analysis. This is important to consider as it leads us to question whether the more normative, banal forms of consumption can be equally as significant to consider, with the aim of the research in question being to critically consider whether the negativity that infiltrates a large section of fan discourse is warranted in relation to the community-based fandoms that are arguably reflective of the greatest proportion of fans, and indeed football supporters. It is therefore appropriate to address the idea of what exactly the majority of fans *do*, as opposed to concentrating on a small minority. When relating this to football fandom, we can argue that it is the actions of fans in constructing, consuming and interacting with fan texts and others that allow for fans to construct identities and social positions, all of which contributes to fan studies in general. This argument supports Jenkins’ work, where fandom was described as an:

Institution of theory and criticism, a semi-structured space where competing interpretations and evaluations of common texts are proposed, debated and negotiated – where readers speculate about the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to [them]. (1992: 23)

This weighs heavily on the evidence and significance of fan behaviour and interactions where fans can be seen to ‘debate’ and ‘negotiate’ fandom and their personal relationships to the text/s (*ibid.*) In turn, this emphasises the construction of fan identities throughout communities and, as such, Jenkins’ position is one that appears to support the role of performativity in fan culture, along with furthering the argument to focus on the regular interaction and participation of fans in addition to potentially deviant ‘others’.

Indeed, the importance of the social processes through which texts influence and engage people in actual circumstances was considered by Nancy Baym in her work *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community* (2000.) Although concentrating on the role of fandom surrounding soap operas, Baym’s research highlights how studies of fandom should arguably be concerned with the manner in which fans engage, act out, and identify with products and texts of interest, as opposed to simply focusing on more ‘surface level’ studies that concentrate wholly on the text itself. This reiterates other theories and arguments that have called for fandom being represented more on its own terms, something that was again supported by Jenkins (1992) who argued that fandom should not be regarded as playing the role of a cultural object to be understood and represented, but instead as a community, and a term, which must be translated into shape. It can be seen; therefore, that fandom is ‘used’ and subject to numerous social, cultural and discursive practices that all contribute to its reception and understanding.

So far, through addressing some of the principal pieces of work in this field, what can be seen is the recurring theme of certain work concentrating on cultism and cultists as a dominant form of fan consumption. In turn, this has linked with the dominant ideologies concerning negative fan behaviour and particularly the assumption of fan studies as encompassing predominantly subcultural groups. In questioning why this has formed such a large part of the research, we can propose that one of the reasons could be due to such groups containing an element of intrigue and fascination due to the alleged abnormality of fan behaviour. Taylor claimed that ‘fans are not true cultists unless they post their fandom as a resistant activity, one that keeps them one step ahead of those forces which would try to make their resistance taste back to them’ (1999: 161), and this emphasises how cultism, or at least the consumption of cult texts, could be interpreted as in conflict with not only mainstream narratives, but also those that consume typical forms. When adapted to football fandom, we could question whether there is evidence of a ‘resistance’ towards dominant ideologies or positions, or if this

is something that seems to exist separately to some of the more expected, typical forms of fan culture; from there being arguably little ‘resistance’ towards dominant ideologies or positions, or if this is something that seems to exist independently to some of the more expected, typical forms of fan culture; from there being arguably little ‘resistance’ to the dominant social forms, to the apparent lack of singular, individualised fandom with little or no community involvement.

It is apparent that there are numerous questions that arise in relation to the dominant themes throughout previous fan studies that are essential to explore when considering football fandom. What has been discussed so far is by no means a comprehensive account of the theories that currently exist surrounding fan research. There are numerous other theories and pieces of work that have investigated this area in significant depth and which both support and dispute some of the positions discussed. However, this section of the chapter has aimed to provide an overview of some of the fundamental points raised that concern both the definition of fans, and those that further seek to discuss the various attributes that exist. It has introduced the idea of fan performance and behaviour as being an integral issue within fandom, as opposed to concentrating purely on the texts themselves, and it is now relevant to further develop such points in order to discuss and critique a theme that has been briefly touched upon already, and which is consistently referred to in the majority of fan cultural studies, and that is the concept of the fan ‘community.’

2.2.2. Fan Communities and Fan Performances

To discuss and analyse fandom is to witness and monitor the *display* of fandom. Indeed, ‘fandom’ itself is essentially a redundant point unless its actions and repercussions are researched, and one of the principle means through which this can be done is by looking at fan communities and groups. Lewis defined a community as being ‘an environment that is supportive and protective, while also offering identity’ (1992: 19), and such a perspective can be seen to conceptualise the fan community as an intrinsically ‘good’ and positive thing, providing a common ground and arena for, presumably, like-minded individuals. However, this perspective was challenged by subsequent work that has identified the community as often containing elements of conflict. Lucy Bennett, in her work on REM fans' online forum

Murmurs.com, referred to 'drooling'² - a form of 'out of place' fan activity - which positioned some members as in contrast to normative discourses and performativity on the forum (2013), and subsequently became a cause of continual conflict throughout the community. Research such as this allows for fan communities to be exposed as not always offering the support and protection argued in previous work and rather can be seen to contain complexities in relation to discourses of acceptance, normativity and performativity. Hence, this goes against what Bennett defines as preoccupying existing work into fan communities that assumes the 'existence of a consistently singular fan identity' (2013: 212.)

The notion of the community as being a pivotal aspect of fan cultures, and subsequent fan research, was also proposed by Sandvoss, who referred to fandom as being not only a form of cultural institution, but also a type of 'interpretive community' (2005: 10.) This was seen to further support the idea that fandom rarely acts on its own, and again disputed some of the dominant ideologies that construct the fan as a loner, devoid of social interaction. Rather, the fan is perceived to be part of a wider communal group. What is interesting here is the manner in which fandom could be interpreted as a form of dependency on other, compatible fans to both facilitate and reaffirm the individual performance; something that would include a high level of communication and interaction with others. However, a key trait associated with certain fan groups – as discussed by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) - is an apparent lack of social organisation. This can hence lead us to question how much communities are constructed – whether fans can be seen to go against such preconceptions and socially organise collective communities and performance. We can therefore consider the very processes of fandom and how fan activity can arguably originate from a development of both knowledge and skills, and the subsequent action built out of fan performance, behaviour and identities.

Fiske (1989) argued that this type of process or 'performance' can be seen to form part of the struggle of disempowered groups against the hegemonic culture of the powerful. The concept of the fan community is therefore interpreted as a form of resistance, which was further discussed by theorists such as Taylor (1999.) When relating such an approach to football

² Bennett's work on REM fans' forum Murmurs.com explored discourses of order and rationality. 'Droolers' were referred to as a particular subsection within the fan community who were regarded as displaying extreme levels of adoration and desire and having an altered focus of attention in comparison to the 'normative' behaviour demonstrated by others. (Bennett, 2013: 215)

fandom, it can be questioned as to whether there is any evidence of this 'struggle' against the hegemonic powerful culture, and indeed whether any such culture actually exists in this area, or if, in fact, the very fundamentals of football fandom are an illustration and execution of hegemonic behaviour and identity in itself. This is something that can be seen to clearly warrant further research, particularly in regards to identifying the existing ideologies surrounding football fandom and ascertaining whether or not such perceptions are accurate. For Fiske, however, fandom is subversive by design and it is argued that the pleasures of fandom are rooted in this very subversiveness and also 'in the pleasure of producing one's own meanings of social experience, and the pleasures of avoiding the social discipline of the power bloc' (1989: 47.) It can therefore be seen that fandom is essentially acting as a struggle for power *against* pre-existing power. Fiske's conceptualisation is understood by other theorists to have its roots in de Certeau's (1984) understanding of everyday life in industrial capitalism as, primarily, a site for struggle, whereby those disempowered do not create their own products and symbols, but instead subvert the meanings of those imposed on them. In its subversion of symbols and its intense involvement with popular culture, fandom is argued to have become a carnivalesque space, which, as Bakhtin (1986) stated, allows for the temporary subversion of the existing social order.

When adapting this to Jenkins' (1992) work, it can be seen that there is a heavy emphasis on both the performativity of fan culture and also the role of power relations throughout fan communities. As Jenkins stated:

I am not claiming that there is anything particularly empowering about the texts fans embrace. I am, however, claiming that there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives. Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts, but rather exceptional readings. (1992: 284)

Such performativity can indeed be seen as a visible factor within football fandom, particularly in regards to carnivalesque behaviour. From rebellious activity such as hooliganism to the more everyday practices at matches, it is apparent that football fandom manifests itself in visible, identifiable and indeed performance-based displays. As Andrew Blake in his work *Chants Would be a Fine Thing* (in Perryman, 2006: 106) asked: 'where does it come from, that organised singing, chanting and cheering, while paid professionals entertain and represent us?' While chanting can be seen to raise communal emotional

temperature before a physical confrontation, it has also been argued to be indicative of semi-structured parts of fan ritualised culture, and further illustrates the significance of fan performance as a means to witnessing and researching fandom. This specific form of performance has been further explored by Clark (2006) and Bisset (2013), both of whom refer to the way in which vocal support is constructed as a means for fans to help their team/s to victory, clearly linking concepts of physical demonstrations of fandom to fans acting as a potential extension of their text, which will be discussed later in this work.

From this, it is also further apparent that there is substance in the way fans not only perform their consumption, but also how this is given meaning through the construction of power relations when adapted to both the fan community, and also the individual fan. What is further relevant to consider is not just the existence of communities, but also the different forms that these can be seen to take, which leads us to address further theories and approaches that have addressed such groups' workings.

When relating this to football, we can explore how fans themselves can be seen to produce their own fan texts, and likewise subsequent communities. As Sturm and McKinney argued in their work on hyper consumption and theorising sport fandom in the age of new media, football is not only saturated with advertisements and products, but knowledge about the games and players that are followed (2013: 358.) In analysing this, we can see how fans themselves are constantly producing new knowledge, performances and data with this saturation coming not just from the top, but from the bottom too (*ibid.*) One of the key ways in which fans can be seen to perform their fandom is through producing their own texts, objects and communities, and when exploring this in relation to football fans, we can see that such a proliferation of blogs and user generated content (UGC) can be seen to do more to increase interest in the mediatised and commodified sport world (McKinney, 2013: 357.)

Such work is vital to consider as it allows us to understand the significance of football fans articulating themselves as active, participating, creating and *performing* throughout the overall consumption of their text/s and furthermore develops work conducted into football fan performativity in offline environments to consider how this transcends to online communities. However, while work such as Sturm and McKinney's is relevant to mention in relation to overriding discourses and themes, it is nonetheless limited in its predominant concentration on the commodification of sports fandom, as opposed to further exploring the

significance of actual communities. Before developing these points in more detail, it is firstly relevant to address another point within community-forming fandom, and that is the role of the 'imagined community.'

2.2.3. Imagined Communities

While fans habitually utilise physical, offline communities such as conventions and meetings, there too is emphasis placed on the significance of less tangible means of contact, and how this operates on, arguably, just as large a scale. Benedict Anderson developed the term 'imagined community' (1991) when discussing the role of 'the nation' and the spread of nationalism. The imagined community refers to the way in which a group of people, who are unlikely to ever meet or come into physical contact, are regarded as a 'community' through the sharing of ideas and positions, and as such indicates the ability to exist as a group that is not bound by geographical limitations. As Anderson stated:

[the nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined... Finally [the nation] is imagined as a community because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (1991)

Although Anderson's work is primarily concerned with the interpretation of 'the nation' as a specific example, there are clear aspects of the 'imagined community' that transcend its original intended meaning/s, and which can be applicable to studies into phenomena such as fan cultures. The relevance of Anderson's notion to fan studies can be seen in the way that the fan, as a consumer of certain texts/objects, shares a common ground with others and, despite factors such as geographical boundaries – understood by Anderson as playing an integral role in members 'not being able to meet or even hear' of others – the social and cultural impacts of shared consumption and ideas among certain fan communities is clearly a fundamental part of fan culture (Sandvoss, 2005: 55.) To elaborate, it can be argued that with the invention of the internet in particular, there are countless ways in which fans can interact and form 'communities' that are not bound or determined by geographical positions and physical interaction. One particular example of this is the online forum, as it enables users to

converse and interact with numerous other participants irrespective of their location. This has been explored by scholars such as Lucy Bennett whose work considered the REM fan forum Murmurs.com in relation to discourses of normativity (2013.) As considered earlier in this chapter, Bennett found that there were often instances of conflict throughout the fan community, which can be seen to play a significant role in relation the construction of imagined communities as being intrinsically positive. Such aspects will be explored in further detail when considering some of the specific examples from the research at hand, but for now it is relevant to address the overall significance of such communities and how this has been considered by other theorists.

Sandvoss (2005) proposed that the relevance of such communities lies in the fact that they offer something that goes beyond the premises of face-to-face interaction with other fans and developed his concept of the fan community to discuss the issue of ‘symbolic pilgrimage’ (2005: 57.) By this, Sandvoss claimed that fans can be seen to experience their own version of a fan ‘place’, and that this is not subject to the limitations of physical positioning. This is relevant to address, as while it does not discredit physical fan places as holding any less significance, it nonetheless firmly illustrates how communities are integral to fan culture and that these can come in various forms and hold an equally strong attachment. Sandvoss claimed that fandom is best compared to the emotional significance of the places we have grown to call ‘home’ (2005: 19), which is not just a physical attachment, but also emotional and ideological. This allows us to approach questions concerning whether fans associate their fandom with a sense of home, and this is particularly significant to football supporters, whereby recent research such as Krovel and Roksvold (2012) stated that one of the main reasons behind fandom emerging was due to connections stemming from fans’ upbringing. For instance, fans can be seen to interpret their team support as being something that was perhaps established as a child, and which has its roots firmly in ‘home life’; be it a family connection or the town that they grew up in (Bale, 1993, 1998.) Similarly, fans in different fields of popular culture often refer to their own fandom in terms of emotional ‘warmth’ or a sense of security or stability (*ibid*) and it can hence be explored as to whether this is predominantly achieved through ‘imagined’ communities and cultures, or through physical interaction and pilgrimage to relevant fan sites – factors that, again, will be explored throughout this research. For instance, when relating this perspective to football fandom, it could be questioned as to whether there exists a divide between the physical and emotional ‘imagined’ aspects of fandom, or whether fandom is exercised as a combination of different

forms of community and interaction. This is another example of the many questions that arise through attempting to assign existing theory onto the issue of contemporary football fan culture.

An additional factor to consider when addressing fan communities on a more broad level is how the concept of 'belonging' to a fan community is arguably seen as part of the attraction of being a fan. With this, however, comes the almost exclusionary basis upon which this is formed (Crawford, 2004: 52.) The very essence of a fan community can be seen to include a select amount of fans with typically similar views, opinions and consumption habits, and whose interests are discussed and shared. To not be part of this community, is to be against the 'normative' roles and conventions and hence, 'othered'. While this is something that has been referred to in previous work, such as that considered by Sandvoss (2005) and Crawford (2004), whereby fandom on a general scale is understood to be an irregular behaviour in comparison to the 'norm', it does not appear to have warranted further discussion, particularly in regards to a more specific form of fan culture and community such as football. Likewise, while theorists such as Bennett (2013) have considered the way in which forums are constructed and the discourses of normativity that are played out, this has again, in this context at least, been limited to music fans, with us hence being able to question its relevance in relation to sport, in particular football, consumption.

It can therefore be questioned as to whether such exclusionary, arguably elite, communities exist within online football fandom, with again the emphasis being placed on the role of new media technologies in constructing groups that are not bound with physical limitations, but which invariably enable fan performance that is arguably reflective of more 'traditional' concepts of fandom. Indeed, this issue of fan performance is something that has played a significant role in certain sections of research and follows on from the notion of fan communities and groups. Sandvoss (2005) argued that fan performances are always constituted between text and context by turning the object of consumption into an activity with a given role within social and cultural relations (Sandvoss, 2005: 44.) This position illustrates the relevance of fan actions themselves, and further reiterates the importance of identifying and addressing fan behaviour. The acting out of fandom has already been established as a pivotal aspect of fan studies and illustrates the role that performance plays within fan culture. Fan performances in everyday life are claimed to be a source of stability and security; performing one of many areas of social interaction (Sandvoss, 2005: 47.) As

Goffman stated, 'conceptualising fans as performers, rather than simply recipients of media texts, in turn offers an alternative explanation of the intense emotional pleasures and rewards of fandom... As the fabric of our lives is constituted throughout contact and staged performance' (1959, 1990), the self becomes a performed, and hence symbolic, object. In this sense, then, fandom is not an articulation of inner needs or drives, but is itself constitutive of the self.

It is evident that, through discussing some of the dominant perspectives on fan cultures, the importance of communities is something that is integral to fan research and which warrants further discussion and debate, especially in regards to more contemporary means of interaction. There are numerous questions and considerations that can be raised from looking at previous theory and research, such as the significance of the emotional, less tangible connection with other fans that, for theorists like Sandvoss, can be seen to potentially override any face-to-face interaction. It can also be considered as to how this can be adapted to the field of football fan studies, particularly in regards to any potential distinction between physical interaction and online discourse, bringing to light previously considered elements such as the ideologies surrounding the 'armchair fan' (Crawford, 2004), for example. These are factors that will be considered in the world and which all subsequently further support the argument for additional research. What is clear is that being a fan can be seen to be both reflective and constructive (Sandvoss, 2005: 48.) While there is evidence of fan communities playing a large role in reflecting the behaviour and performances of fans, the concept of such communities is essentially invalid unless the background factors and dimensions that help form such groups are explored. This assists in developing our overall understanding of fan identities, with one particular facet being the presence of fan hierarchies.

2.2.4. Hierarchies of Fandom

One of the principle features to consider when addressing the ideas of fan performance is that of the apparent hierarchies within communities. It has so far been discussed as to how fan communities – and within this the concept of fan performance – help to construct the overall area of fandom, particularly in regards to the studies that surround the field of analysis. However, while it is necessary to consider the overall idea of fan communities, there too exist subsections that can be explored, such as the alleged 'hierarchies' that occur. The idea of hierarchies is necessary to discuss as it is arguably through the construction of these that

power relations and fan interactions really come to light. While it would be naïve to suppose that a fan community's participants would exist on a wholly neutral, equal manner, it is further necessary to address the fundamental struggle for power that helps to construct not just the understanding of the community as a whole, but also the relevance of individual fandom, and this has been something repeatedly discussed by theorists in this field.

Hills' (2002) work in particular draws upon notions derived from Bourdieu (1984) concerning the processes of cultural distinction. Indeed Bourdieu's work offers another way for theorists to analyse both how fan 'status' is built up, and the relevance of this to fan cultural studies (cited in Hills, 2002: 46.) Such an issue of status was discussed by Hills who acknowledged the significance of a Bourdieuan perspective in relation to the role of social hierarchies, and in particular the exercise and emergence of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984.) Bourdieu can be seen to discuss fandom in various ways in line with his major categorisations of cultural groups. To Bourdieu, there exist various 'fractions' that all contribute to the degrees of positioning throughout society. The first is presented as the *dominating* fraction of the bourgeoisie, which is typified by ostentatious displays of culturally valuable pieces, such as works of art. Typically, Bourdieu does not attach the label of 'fandom' to the dominant bourgeoisie as fandom can be seen to be regarded, within this discussion at least, as 'culturally improper' (1984: 386), which relates to the role of fandom as a culturally and socially positioned discourse. In contrast to the dominating fraction is the *dominated* fraction of the bourgeoisie, which relies on – and further seeks to increase – highly developed cultural capital by 'liking the same things differently, liking different things less obviously marked out for admiration' (*ibid.*) Following this, the 'petit bourgeoisie' is believed to be able to recognise 'legitimate' culture but not possess sufficient enough knowledge of it. There can be said to be, then, an evident distinct gap between the recognition and knowledge of fan texts, which are said to not be able to bring the rewards, or the legitimacy, of official cultural capital.

Working class tastes, to Bourdieu, can be seen to actually merit the debasement of the term 'fan' itself (1984: 386.) Bourdieu views this fandom as a form of 'illusionary compensation' for the working class fan's lack of social and cultural power. As such, fandom is clearly positioned as an alternative means to attaining and achieving social power and, arguably in turn, status. The flaw with this account, however, is that it assumes the legitimacy of a fixed and monolithically legitimate 'cultural capital.' To elaborate, it would appear that Bourdieu's

concept, when adapted to the issue of fandom at least, appears quite a static and limited approach, and arguably fails to address social and cultural mobility as a means to enable textual consumers to move and develop their fandom/s. For Hills, there appears to be aspects of Bourdieu's work that are applicable to the concept of fan culture as being not just subject to social communities, but constructed hierarchies whereby fans share a common interest while also competing over knowledge and access to the object of fandom and status (Hills, 2002: 46.) This emphasis on competitiveness further iterates the projection of fans as 'players' within this community and allows for it to be related to Bourdieu's idea of people investing in knowledge, in social contacts and, in turn, culture (*ibid.*) Such cultural capital is believed to relate to our place and position in society and, so too, the overriding class system (Hills, 2002: 47.) Within this, the role of fan consumption can be seen to identify social positions as a means to providing cultural positions, and subsequently supports the idea of there being hierarchies and power struggles within areas such as fan communities, along with further developing the relevance of fan performance. This area of fan studies can be understood to be a concept particularly applicable and relevant to sport supporter culture. Back et al (2002: 95, cited in Crawford, 2004: 55) provided an example of how sport fans are subject to the ideologies of what constitutes 'real', legitimate fandom, which in itself acts as a form of hierarchical system. Whether it consists of attending live games, being a fan of a club for a certain amount of years, or having an authentic 'connection' to a given team or area; such factors are almost synonymous with any fan debates arising during sport discussion – particularly those concerning football.

Adding to this is the importance of the stadium as a form of 'spectacle' for visiting fans. This is developed through the various discourses surrounding football fandom that highlights sports grounds as holding great significance and relevance to supporters. However, this idea of the spectacle does not operate as a means of singular performance *for* its audience; rather fans themselves are interpreted as part of the theatre of football matches. This 'acting out' and display of fandom sees fans not only embark on pilgrimages to relevant fan sites, but also become involved in symbolic singing, and chanting, for example, therefore allowing us to consider how such actions link in with fan hierarchies. This again supports existing literature that has considered how such fan interaction and the performativity aspects of fandom, in addition to the arguable reaffirming of identity and power relations. To refer back to Bourdieu and the hierarchies within fan communities, it can be further discussed as to how objects of cultural knowledge are ultimately caught up in various 'networks of value' (1984.)

This illustrates how the value surrounding both fan objects and fan culture are essentially dependent on the subjective position of interpretation and the communities and fan in question. By this, it can be argued that fan objects, texts and discourses are subjected to individual perspectives and interpretations, and that any given 'value' or 'power' is very difficult to articulate from the outside. When relating this to football fandom, it could be understood that such support is at times illustrative of very personal, unique and individual connections and that, while there exist communities, groups and areas that allow for the acting out and performance of fandom, fandom is by its very fundamental nature a subjective position. Whether this relates to the personal connection felt by an individual supporter to their chosen team's ground, or the myriad other reasons behind 'becoming' a fan, these are aspects that invariably are indicative of a particular intimate – arguably at times private - involvement that can be seen to be dependent on the individual in question. What is interesting here is that there is seemingly a distinction between the apparent personal, individual background to becoming a fan, and the subsequent collective communities and identities that are formed by interacting with others. To further recognise the influence of aspects such as cultural capital, for example, it is therefore imperative to address issues such as fan subjectivity, cultural and social mobility and the network of value that attempt to explain the struggles over the legitimacy of cultural capital as a means to understanding fan performance and communities.

Garry Crawford's work *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sports and Culture* (2004) concentrated on the specific role of sport consumption and its position within fan studies. Crawford argued that the attitudes of professional and devoted sports reporters reflect those of elitist opinions towards art and high culture as considered by Bourdieu (1984) and discussed briefly in this chapter. To Crawford, such cultural capital is regarded as an almost 'natural' ability, and not one that is gained through tuition or learning. This emphasises that it is not the cultural significance or value of the text or object of fandom in question that is important to consider, but an overall knowledge that seemingly constitutes and warrants its position at the top of fans' hierarchies; again issues that support the idea of this network of value. Such a position seeks to illustrate how fandom is not exempt from cultural factors that exist and dominate in other areas within society.

Despite the significance of Bourdieu's work, particularly in constructing a backdrop to some of the subsequent, and more recent, theory, there are nonetheless limitations with this

account, and this was discussed by theorists such as Fiske who, in *The Cultural Economy of Fandom* argued that Bourdieu cited 'economic and class as the major, if not the only dimension of social discrimination' (1992: 32) and in turn criticised him for neglecting gender, race and age as playing a significant role in social status. Furthermore, Bourdieu is said to 'fail to accord the culture of the subordinate with the same sophisticated analyses as that of the dominant' (Fiske, 1992: 32) emphasising clear inequality of consideration throughout Bourdieu's position. This is also a criticism repeated by Sarah Thornton (1995) who stated that Bourdieu does not relate the circulation of cultural capital to the media, meaning that the media is purported to be seemingly neutral or inconsequential within processes of accumulating different types of fandom.

Such critiques are imperative to work concerned with fan studies as they illustrate not only some of the fundamental problems with existing research and theory in this particular area, but on a wider scale highlight how there are rarely settled, uncontested areas that consider the issue of fandom. Indeed, it could be argued that the type of fan culture or community in question nearly always determines such approaches, and that it is incredibly difficult to neatly typify such a broad area. Further to this, Bourdieu's focus on these subcategories of capital, which are said to be at play within the field, is something that has been discussed and considered by Hills (2002: 52.) Hills contributed to the arguments against Bourdieu's work by stating that in addition to cultural capital, there is the emergence of 'fan social capital' (2002: 57) whereby, while there no doubt exist networks of fans that participate in organized, collective fandom, there too are exceptions, such as extremely knowledgeable fans who may consciously and actively refuse to participate (*ibid.*) This again emphasises how there is certainly no clear-cut definition in regards to ascribing particular definitions or indeed value on to fan activity and behaviour, and this is especially pertinent when considering these in relation to any apparent hierarchical community.

Arguably, then, this warrants further analysis as it points to other sections of fan literature being dependent on the specific fan culture that is being discussed. It is also consistent with acknowledging the position of cultural capital as not only emphasising those that are at the 'top' of fan hierarchies, but also those that demonstrate potential deviancy and minority behaviour. In turn this relates high taste culture as arguably promoting rationality in contrast to emotionality (Jenson, 1992, cited in Baym, 2000: 37.) This ties in to the apparent

suspicion that such subcultures cannot think, or indeed act, rationally on their own, again supporting research that constructs such dominant perspectives of fandom.

Also prevalent within this is the importance of the fan community in separating and distinguishing between fans and non-fans. Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1988) argued that certain members of fan communities are ‘duly trained and informed’, while those outside of the community are denigrated or devalued. This presents the importance of fan communities merging in constructing specific roles and positions of fans, not just within these groups, but also in regards to ‘outsiders.’ This is supported by Hills, who stated that fans are argued to achieve certain levels of recognition or authority about certain subjects or texts (2002: 58.) When relating this to the previously discussed dominant themes surrounding fandom, it can therefore be seen that there is clearly a prevailing approach within fan studies that emphasises the importance of communities, not just in regards to the distinction between fans and non-fans, but also in providing complex relationships *within* the group. While it has so far been apparent that the notion of fan hierarchies is a crucial aspect to discuss when considering fan communities, there are nonetheless critiques of this position, particularly in regards to the separating of fans and non-fans, such as the work of Herrnstein Smith. It can be seen that Jenkins (1991, 1992) – although never specifically denying the existence of hierarchies of fandom – does not address them explicitly and rather implies that they do not occur by focusing on the more ‘grass roots’ production of fan culture (McDonald, 1998: 136.) While it is hard to deny that such hierarchies can, and do, exist among certain fan communities, there are invariably additional factors to address. When considering this, Andrew McDonald argued that fandom, like the legitimate culture Bourdieu (1984) described, while hierarchised in certain ways, is not explicitly recognised as such by fans themselves (1998: 136.) By this, it is proposed that the alleged hierarchies within fan communities are potentially only understood through an outside, analytical perspective, as opposed to something openly acknowledged and contested among fan groups themselves. This can be seen to consider the fan’s perception of the self and the role of fan identities within fan cultures, and illustrates that it is not simply the representation of fans to outside audiences that is of importance, but also the role and acknowledgement of fans within their field. This can allow us to question the role of ‘outsiders’ in relation to fan communities, which is something that is particularly relevant, and further something that will be discussed in greater depth when considering how such communities can, or rather *should*, be studied.

So far, I have discussed how there exist a number of significant theories and positions throughout fan culture that are relevant to consider and address in relation to the research in question. While this section of the chapter has largely considered more broad topics, it has nonetheless aimed to provide an overview of relevant theories along with work and texts that are applicable. It is now necessary to address some of the principle studies that have been conducted specifically into football fandom, prior to considering those that have explored 'new' media.

CHAPTER 2 - PART 2: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT FOOTBALL FANS?

2.3.1. The Hoolifan

One of the most well researched areas within football studies is hooliganism and football violence. Indeed, after the wealth of sociological explanations that surround the field, the media coverage of football related violence is arguably the second most discussed topic. Garry Crawford's work supports this view as he claims that the majority of academic fan studies into football have centered on hooliganism as opposed to the more 'ordinary' forms of support (Crawford, 2004.) An example of this being Leicester University's research in the late 1980s, whereby researchers attention was predominantly focused on hooliganism and violence (Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: 29.) It is hard to dispute that football violence is not only a well-researched area within contemporary media studies, but also one which continues to warrant a wealth of news coverage, with the vast majority of literature concentrating on press representations and few appearing to consider new media forms like blogs, message boards and social networking websites. It can also be argued that hooliganism has become almost synonymous with football; it welcomes a wealth of discussion, not only from an academic perspective, but also from media commentaries, sports presenters and, of course, the general public and fans themselves. Indeed, it is not just media coverage following instances of violence that is relevant to acknowledge, so too is the fact that hooliganism can be almost regarded as a genre in itself (Crawford, 2004: 130), which is reflected in the sheer amount of media content that has arisen, in addition to the commodification of the hooligan within popular culture. There is now an ever-increasing amount of documentaries and fictional depictions (see, Poulton, 2013) that seek to satisfy the public's desire to witness such acts of violence, and furthermore attempt to explain them in relation to fan behaviour. The significance herein lies with the media's general role in football, and when adapted to an issue like hooliganism, this can be seen to not be limited to press coverage of actual events, but instead incorporates a range of approaches and events.

Despite the fact that large sections of previous work have concentrated on hooliganism as a specific means of football discourse, with fictional depictions and 'hooligans' themselves

being the subject of analysis and scrutiny, there is undoubtedly a link between the media's preoccupation with football violence and its treatment of the sport overall. However, we should firstly question and consider why it is that hooliganism has, and indeed continues to, warrant the amount of press coverage that it does. It has been argued by numerous theorists that hooliganism, somewhat predictably, is regarded as a very 'newsworthy' (Allan, 2004) subject. It generates a wealth of interest from the general public and media audiences, not least due to its very visible, threatening and deviant constructed social position. Likewise, the public is believed to generally have little other experience of hooliganism other than through the media's representation/s; a factor that welcomes the recognition that the average member of the public will seemingly not encounter an instance of football violence, yet will be subjected to a large amount of press coverage informing them of the potential 'threat.' This is an important observation as it indicates how not only does the amount of hooliganism coverage not relate to the threat as a whole, but also further illustrates the manner in which the issue is elevated to the degree of severe social concern, ultimately distorting its perception and propelling its role in popular culture (see Weed, 2001). This is something that has preoccupied certain theorists, with academics such as Stuart Hall berating the misrepresentation of football violence in the press, arguing that such reports have negative repercussions in regards to fuelling a desire for more stories leading to a widespread distorted perspective of the 'problem' at hand, and also in potentially inciting future violence among the alleged perpetrators. Hall referred to this phenomenon as the 'amplification spiral' (1978), an offset of Stanley Cohen's (1972) 'deviancy amplification.' However, it is more relevant to this work to address whether this position has potentially changed due to new media technologies that essentially enable media audiences, spectators and supporters alike to be able to witness – arguably first-hand – the acting out of more 'everyday' football fandom, subsequently allowing audiences to view fandom as not simply a manifestation of football violence. Forums and message boards clearly enable the immediate discussion and debate of numerous topics and issues, as opposed to the one-way, 'top down' model of media representation.

Yet, arguably more important than the origins of hooliganism's coverage and its ultimate effects, is the addressing of the dominant means of reporting that permeate contemporary discourse and those which influence and affect all subsequent understandings of the typical football fan's position in society. One such concept is that of the alleged 'spectacle' of football hooliganism and indeed certain types of fandom, which was considered by Duleep

Allirajah (2002), a writer for *Spiked Online*, who argued that it is the pleasure of watching football violence unfold that excites and interests the audience, and not any typical social concerns of the general public. Coining the term 'hooliporn', Allirajah claimed that hooliganism operates as a form of entertainment. Certain fans are seen to be acting out of their own personal entertainment, which subsequently entertains a waiting audience. Allirajah further referred to the documentary *Hooligans* (2002), which aired on BBC2 to support his position. He claimed that the series served little investigative purpose and simply provided a voyeuristic account of hooligan action. This alleged 'packaging' (Franklin, 1994) of hooliganism as entertainment can be seen to ultimately reflect a form of audience desire as media representation is arguably adhering to, and furthermore satisfying, the overriding dominant discourse of hooliganism as a meant to entertain, as opposed to being a valued and authentic representation. Not only are news values satisfied in regards to generating and maintaining news audiences, but also in providing a dominant perspective of the social issue. This is furthered by the alleged tendency of news reports to contain 'tactical' (Pouton, 2005) means when presenting hooliganism, such as a lack of contextualisation of the issue, and a subsequent reliance on providing coverage of fan behaviour with little or no explanation as to why this was, or is, occurring. This is a recurring theme throughout past research, with theorists such as Hall (1978) and, more recently, Giulianotti (1999) addressing the significance of the manner in which media reports present football violence, and which all seeks to support the idea of hooliganism and the reporting of such as entertainment-driven. As Giulianotti stated, hooliganism is now regarded as a 'wider' interest and its coverage throughout the mass media encourages a 'voyeuristic journey into the world of alcohol, danger and overt masculinity' (1999: 51.)

Indeed, such representations can be seen to tie in with the surrounding concept of inaccuracies that encompass the reporting of 'hooligan' fan behaviour and how this relates to more general fan communities, with the importance here being what has been found about football fans themselves as opposed to concentrating on the hooligan element of football discourse. Williams and Wagg (1991) accused the media of having an 'appalled fascination' with hooliganism and claimed that the media mainly focus on hooliganism as its only form of reporting that concerns fans. In comparison, positive news stories are few and far between while negative reports continue to prevail. While it is hard to argue that this is an issue unique to football and not representative of the wider workings of the media, it is still pertinent to address, particularly when attempting to construct the dominant approaches of

media coverage of football fandom and is something that furthers the argument that more 'everyday', banal fandom needs to be considered – not just due to the apparent 'gap' in existing research, but also because of the current state and positioning of contemporary media coverage.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the media's preoccupation with football violence as a dominant discursive practice is the reporting that followed the Hillsborough disaster³. While it is not necessary to explain the actual events surrounding the disaster, it is significant to acknowledge the relevance of the subsequent reporting which was heavily focused on the alleged hooligan acts committed by certain fans on victims. Despite Hillsborough being blamed on bad crowd management; a factor that instigated a change to all-seated facilities following the 1991 Taylor Report, *The Sun* chose to cover the event with its, now infamous, front page entitled 'THE TRUTH' (see Appendix 1.) *The Sun's* reporting presented the event through a dominant football violence perspective, claiming that football fans were pick-pocketing and urinating on the dead with there being little report into the actual cause or events of the disaster. Phil Scraton in his book *Hillsborough: The Truth* (1999) explored how *The Sun's* decision to focus on this hooliganism slant throughout its reporting resulted in uproar from the general public, particularly those in Liverpool. Such a reaction resulted in a complete boycott by certain members of the public, which is still reflected in *The Sun's* low circulation throughout the area to this day.⁴ What is relevant here is the manner in which the public was mobilised by such arguably inaccurate reporting, to the degree that the publication in question was boycotted and called to account, ultimately rejecting dominant forms and actively questioning the representation of the football fans involved in the disaster. This illustrates the manner in which such (mis)representation can be constructed as not only being visible from an analytical perspective, but also by those directly involved. We can further question and explore the significance of addressing such representation in relation to the relationship this can be seen to have on fan discourses between fans themselves; factors that will be explored in later chapters of this work.

³ The Hillsborough Disaster occurred on 15th April 1989 at the Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, UK, during the FA Cup Semi Final between Liverpool FC and Nottingham Forest. 96 people were killed and over 700 injured after overcrowding resulted in a crush forming. To this date it is the worst stadium-related disaster in British history.

⁴ In protest at *The Sun's* coverage, numerous readers boycotted the newspaper, resulting in it still having a low circulation in Liverpool and the surrounding areas in comparison to other parts of the UK. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-17113382>

While hooliganism and Hillsborough could no doubt be discussed in far more detail in relation to the role of football violence throughout fan studies, it is necessary to address the significance of the reaction to certain aspects of (mis)representation and furthermore consider how this can relate to some of the issues considered throughout this research. For instance, when looking at discourses surrounding fan interactions and ‘normative’ behaviour, we can further address how this potentially contrasts with dominant media reports and, if this is the case, how such reports are interpreted and received between and among fans themselves. Following on from media representation and the alleged pre-occupation with football violence, we can now look at other issues within such coverage, such as the regular manner in which the media chooses to cover football and its fans, such as the significance of language and the role/s of national identity.

2.3.2. Language, Nationalism and National Identity

While the coverage of Hillsborough is a particularly overt example of media manipulation and false reporting, there are evidently more subtle and repeated forms of coverage that infiltrate media audiences, and this was of particular importance to theorists such as Hall (1978) who considered the use of language throughout football coverage as a means of strategically managing media reports to construct dominant perspectives. Referring to it as ‘editing for impact’ (*ibid*), Hall’s work found that there were, and arguably continue to be, regular tactics implemented throughout specific language use that all help to construct an overriding perspective of football fans and hooliganism. Hall claimed that reliance on war-like connotations and military metaphors all position the issue of football fandom and the potential for hooliganism in a clear manner, and stated that the idea of the sport-war connection is particularly evident during the coverage of major sporting events such as international tournaments. One specific example that initiated a wealth of following research was Euro ’96 with theorists such as Maguire, Poulton and Possamai in their work *Weltkreis III: Media Coverage of England versus Germany in Euro ’96* (1999) looking at the manner in which certain events of Euro ’96 were largely reported to be exaggerated and misleading when concerning fan behaviour, but that furthermore there was a tendency throughout the news media to connect to issues of national identity and patriotism through the inclusion of previous historical events (1999: 442.) This illustrates how emphasis is placed on establishing the importance of sport in the construction and confirmation of national identity; something that has since been developed by other theorists such as Bishop and Jaworski (2003.) This is

important as the role of national identity can be seen to be something that is not applicable to simply the hooliganism element throughout fan discourse, but also general, more everyday fandom that has been introduced previously in this chapter.

When discussing the role of national identity, Poulton (2005) argued that the overt reliance on military history, war-like language and nationalistic undertones has been part of a search for the real definition of 'Englishness.' Poulton claimed that the crux of this issue and the apparent quest for the reassurance of nationality, which ultimately concerns the foundations on which the sport media represents the nation, with a continual emphasis on knocking 'them' as opposed to promoting 'us' (*ibid.*) Yet, while this apparent desire for national identity through certain reporting techniques can, and has been, commented on and referred to by theorists in this field as being potentially xenophobic in its representations (Poulton, 2005), others have acknowledged how it acts as a form of 'festival for escapism' for readers (Maguire et al, 1999) and as such is not a wholly negative manifestation of fandom. As one report in the *Daily Telegraph* noted '... in the boiling of twenty million kettles at half time and the donning of plastic bowler hats at Wembley, the disparate English had found a patch of common ground on which to link arms and rejoice. Perhaps only football and war could produce that kind of unity...' (June 24th, 1996: 2, cited in Maguire, Poulton and Possamai, 1999: 443.) It is through this that the construction of national identities within media coverage of football can be further explored, particularly in regards to how these media representations enable and contribute to identity forming. Likewise, we can question whether such patriotism is something that can be seen to be an aspect of supporter culture within fan interactions as opposed to being restricted to press coverage that has dominated previous research.

When relating this idea of fan connections, communities and identities back to hooliganism, it can be argued that there exist further factors to address, particularly in regards to the problems surrounding the conceptualisation of the 'football-hooligan-as-football-fan' who operates as part of the community and, indeed subsequently, the nation. Bishop and Jaworski (2003) looked at the 'de-authentication' of the hooligan-as-football-fan within the press and argued that numerous reports contain orchestrated language that both presents the hooligan as a deviant fan and not representative of football fans in general, and simultaneously as part of a dangerous collective. This clearly creates a contrasting position, with Bishop and Jaworski arguing that while hooligans are both 'othered' and labelled throughout the press by use of

pejorative language, there too is the issue of certain fans being interpreted as an 'embarrassment' to others. This is interesting as it invites further discussion into the various complexities surrounding fan cultures and how the role of 'rogue' fans, such as hooligans, can potentially be seen to fit in with more 'everyday', 'normal' fan performance. Throughout such discussions it is evident that there is the prevailing fundamental fascination with the deviancy of others and that there continues to be an attempt to distinguish essentialised meanings from their (mis)representation (Crabbe, 1999: 443.)

While there has been more recent work that has considered the relevance of nationalism throughout sport, it has largely focused on aspects that are not wholly relevant to this work. For example, Martin Johnes - while frequently researching into the ideologies surrounding Welsh national identity - has predominantly focused on rugby as a dominant sport through which identities are formed (2008), where such research has largely taken on the form of interviewing fans directly, as opposed to exploring discourses at play throughout fan communities. There are likewise further examples of work that has explored national identity, however these are typically limited - either in the scope of the research, or in their overall significance to this work at hand. For example, a vast proportion of work conducted into identity-forming between football fans has largely been undertaken outside of the UK, such as (see Krovel, 2012) while those dedicated to British football fans have largely concerned England as a dominant discourse (see Perryman, 2006); failing to look in detail at other nations and regions, thus identifying a significant gap in the existing literature.

This leads us to consider the concept of new media and online technologies, such as online forums in particular, as enabling more visible forms of fandom to be constructed and subsequently monitored, particularly in relation to themes that have emerged throughout previous work, such as national identity. Whereas previously it may have been the case that football fan actions and behaviours were largely only experienced by either the fans in question, or through interactions in the stadiums or the local pub, it is now the case that such discussion and, of course, debate is now accessible to anyone wishing to view the forums, blogs and message boards of the fans themselves. This is important as it illustrates how such contemporary media forms have essentially revolutionised the way in which fandom is witnessed and absorbed. There are factors such as the immediacy of fan involvement and reaction that is simply not the case with more traditional forms of media coverage. Such factors will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter when the overall role of internet

communities is explored, however for now it is relevant to address the position of internet forums in relation to the observation of football fan culture. What can be seen throughout the discussion of hooliganism and some of the dominant themes residing in existing literature is that the vast majority of research surrounding football clearly tends to focus on violence as a primary concern. This ultimately comes with its own problems, as Carrington stated, 'it is undoubtedly limiting to view football fandom only through the lens of hooliganism, as some commentators have tended to do, thereby downplaying other aspects of football spectatorship that cannot be reduced to a propensity for violence' (cited in Perryman, 2006: 81.) Carrington can be seen to highlight how there are unquestionably other factors involved within football fandom that are not adequately explained by concentrating on violence, and one such theme that was introduced earlier in this chapter and which warrants further exploration is the issue of nationalism and national identity.

2.3.3. Nationalism and National Identity

Throughout a large amount of research into football hooliganism is the recurring theme of national identity. Previous work has heavily covered the issue of nationalistic undertones and, to this point in the chapter, has primarily focused on the role of hooliganism throughout such discourse. Carrington claimed that nationalism is increasingly defined by sociologists not in terms of biology or genealogy but in terms of the cultural processes and representations through which nations attempt to tell stories about themselves (cited in Perryman, 2006: 71.) Part of the significance of referring to nationalism in media reports is said to lie in the blurring of boundaries between patriotism and xenophobia, with theorists such as Poulton (2005) concentrating on the tactics employed by news media when covering matches and the occasional ensuing 'violence.' There is the need to question the acceptability of such nationalistic rhetoric. Indeed, one of the developments within this is the way in which fans, and furthermore the team in question, exercise their commitment to others. In relation to this, previous work has considered the identity-forming techniques of certain representations of football fans and indeed the crucial question of what it is to be an 'English' football fan. Despite there being infinite differences and divides throughout such a large public, there is allegedly the widespread belief throughout dominant media coverage that English fans are a type of homogenous collective with shared sporting history and allegiance (see, Bishop and Jaworski, 2003.) And it is this idea of camaraderie and allegiance that in turn connects with the 'imagined community' as proposed by Anderson (1991.) However, this can be called into

question as if it generally is the case that the majority of news coverage interprets football fans as a monolithic collective, essentially devoid of individual identity, will this then be replicated throughout other types of fan discourse, such as online communities, or will it differ in accordance to whether or not fans are representative of themselves.

To again refer back to nationalism, we can further question how - if such nationalistic approaches are a normative, expected form of reporting that receives little questioning other than from an analytical perspective - 'rogue' fans, such as the hooligan, fit into this construction. Indeed, hooligans can be believed to be a rather difficult concept to understand due to the fact that the hooligan is essentially part of footballing culture, yet is not conforming to the ideologies of 'glorious England'. This is something addressed by certain theorists such as Bishop and Jaworski (2003) who considered the problem with the hooligan going against desired ideology and image in comparison to the collective of football fans, and we can further this to address how hooligans, for example, are constructed and received throughout discourse played out by fans themselves, as opposed to just press and media reports.

There have been numerous pieces of literature that have focused on the significance of nationalism throughout news coverage. Typically, such coverage is said to be of relevance due to the manner in which national identity is believed to be synonymous with a vast amount of football media reports. In addition to exploring whether such factors are significant throughout fan circles, we too can address some of the theory that has looked at the nature of such national rhetoric and how this is not always done in an overt, sensationalist manner. Michael Billig proposed the idea of 'banal nationalism' when he stated that 'the metonymic image [of banal nationalism] is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building' (1995), and this can be adapted to football coverage to explain how nationalism potentially infiltrates reports that are not obvious until dissected, with this transcending other mediums that sees fans congregate and converse. To further understand the significance of nationalism, it is necessary to address the *kind* of national identity that the media can be seen to attempt to construct. The idea of 'Ingerland' as proposed by Perryman (2006) can be interpreted as positioning England as the mainstay of nationalism. This can be understood to be of further importance for readers in their self-identification as football fans, and is therefore necessary to consider when addressing the construction of fan identity and the means through which

coverage contributes to this production. Likewise, with existing literature focusing on English football, there is evidently space for such discourses to be developed to consider regional affiliations, and fans from smaller nations, such as Wales. For example, Roddy Bisset's work on Aberdeen football fans explored some of the ways in which fans could be seen to articulate their Scottish identity through supporting specific football teams (2013). While Bisset's work is an example of research conducted into nations other than England, it nonetheless is limited in its reliance on a small number of interviews among a relatively small number of fans. Clearly, then, such approaches can be developed and explored in order to identify how existing research, proposals and literature can be related to online communities of football fans of specific smaller nations, as will be discussed further in later chapters.

What has been identified so far is that there is the widespread belief and understanding that football can be seen to symbolise the key characteristics of a nation's identity. As Carrington stated:

The symbolism of national sporting sides, and sport itself, has therefore acquired political significance in trying to not only promote particular notions of what British identity is, and should be like, but also as a way of trying to put the 'Great' back into Britain at a time when Britain, economically and politically, is no longer a major player in world affairs (Carrington, cited in Perryman, 1999: 71.)

This statement is relevant as it indicates how such feelings surrounding football can be reflective of the sociopolitical state of the country and nation at the time. When related to England and its sporting achievements, it could be argued that supporters' hopes are accentuated by the arguable discontent and lack of political and economic successes of the country, and as such fans put their emphasis on sport. This notion was expanded by Mark Perryman who, in his work *The Ingerland Factor: Home Truths from Football* (1999), reiterated the significance of sport supporting national identity, arguing that football mirrors some of the issues concerning national identity crises:

Given sport's central place in many nations' sense of self, it is not surprising that sport, and in particular football – the world's most popular sport – has not only been seen as providing a sense of collective identity, but also, paradoxically, seen as reflecting some of the debates about the 'crises' of English identity. (Perryman, 1999: 75)

Perryman also discussed how there are particular, distinct versions of 'Englishness' throughout football discourse; from the negative connotations surrounding football violence as discussed previously in the work, to the alternative, 'positive' England (1999: 14) that is constructed during large international events. Such acknowledgements are relevant, if not limited due to its concentration on English identity, as opposed to addressing fans from other areas. This is something that can be built upon in this research in order to consider the significance of particular nations in relation to constructing identity, while likewise considering previously raised points regarding the significance of fan communities themselves. Perryman's work also supports that conducted by Maguire (1994) who considered the discursive practices mobilised to construct common sense perspectives and feelings of 'belonging', and this can be adapted to the role of football fandom online and questioned as to whether such sentiment is replicated among fans themselves or restricted to other forms of media representation. While it is apparent that there are dominant perspectives throughout media coverage and representations of fans, little research has considered whether such ideologies are present within fan communities. The idea of football fans online operating as a form of 'homogenous collective' can be explored and questioned, in addition to identifying the various identity forming patterns that would arguably emerge. As Blain et al (1993: 12) stated, 'sport has been an important area through which collective identities have been articulated' and it is this role of collective identities that is integral to the research, taking in to account some of the positive ideologies and issues of 'belonging' that have played a significant part in previous work.

Perryman's work can be seen as integral to the understanding of certain aspects of football fan culture. Although not focusing specifically on online forums as a means of fan interaction and performance, he nonetheless discussed the various ways in which football fan culture is changing and developing, which further illustrates the need to research this area. Perryman also considered the role of hooliganism within football discourse, claiming that 'non-violence must become a core value for being a fan' (2006: 30), which stresses that for football fandom to be interpreted in a more progressive manner from the prevailing 'fan-as-hooligan' perspective, there is the need for it to be reinvented. This further links in with the position that football fans can be seen to have in contemporary society, particularly in regards to national meaning and identity. For Perryman, being a football fan is the epitome of social form. He claimed that it is now almost impossible to avoid football; from the TV channels

full of live matches to the endless documentaries and chat shows, Perryman states that mediums such as the Internet have all changed what was once a private devotion to become something far more public and visible (Perryman, 2006: 51.) This seeks to emphasise the initial observation and argument in this work that football is more than just a sport and instead represents myriad other issues that all help to construct and maintain social form. But, while theorists like Perryman can be believed to argue the importance of acknowledging the role of fan culture within football, there is still a distinct lack of research that has gone beyond media representation to look at the ways in which football fans perform their own fandom. There are clearly dominant perspectives presented, such as the role of nationalism, and it is therefore necessary to delve further into this issue and merge these separate fragments to consider the overall positioning and role of football fandom online.

2.3.4. Class and Social Identity

Following on from the literature concerning national identity, theorists have argued that the press is believed to further construct fan identities through means such as class and social positioning. It can be argued that there is the common understanding, which is claimed to be perpetuated through the UK press that football fans are typically from a lower, subordinate class. This is apparent through sections of coverage and reports that construct and present typical imagery surrounding the stereotypical 'English football fan.' Poulton (2005) referred to descriptions such as 'beer bellied brutes' being an example of a dominant construction within media coverage, and argued that this is reflected not just through iconography, but also language and prevailing ideologies, and indeed it would be difficult to argue against the fact that the bulk of news reports are typically accompanied by images of the archetypal football fan, many of whom are shown to have shaved heads, tattoos and 'beer bellies.' Going against this dominant picture painted by media reports, however, Carrington (cited in Perryman, 2006: 78) argued that the actual 'type' of football fan has altered recently; from the governing perception of the fan as masculine and working class, to a form of 'new lad.' He claimed that there is now a 'plethora of wannabe working class heroes whose mock cockney accents give them entry into the new lad world despite their privileged backgrounds, and who often claim to speak on behalf of the 'ordinary man on the street' (*ibid.*) This points not only towards the football fan being in contrast to the dominant social understanding of specific class positioning, but also there arguably being no one specific construction of the football fan. This also shows that fans operate under a range of identity-forming means,

particularly in regards to fans seemingly actively trying to achieve a different form of identity and status. This further shows that it is incredibly difficult to produce a neat typology of the football fan as there is no static conception that is without question. Despite this, however, there is invariably a dominant picture painted throughout media coverage that presents the ideology of the football fan, and this regularly points towards a disadvantaged, lower class position of society. Indeed class issues were discussed in work such as Carrington's and were identified as a regular occurrence throughout various media reports of football, with iconography clearly tying in with wider issues of class representation. A.J. Haley (2001) questioned the relevance of referring to class within the coverage of football fans, and further debated the significance of definitive class origins that are so often mentioned, particularly when it is the case that the football fan takes on a range of diverse identities and inhabits various sections of society. This leads us to understand the role of class within fan cultures as being one that can be both explored and questioned, and furthermore we can analyse whether such stances and positioning forms a key factor within fan discourse, or whether this is something that is instead predominantly called upon in media reports. We can look at whether class can be seen to play a large role in discussion among fan groups; whether it is something that is acknowledged, discussed and debated, or if this simply satisfies already dominant perspectives of media coverage.

It can be further claimed that it is imperative to acknowledge the apparent changing nature of not only fans, but also the media technologies and developments that contribute to this understanding. This is appropriate to address as it identifies how both the construction of fan identity and the manner in which fan cultures emerge are certainly not limited to press representations, but rather can be subject to fan interaction and performance in various communities. Indeed class, in certain forms at least, can be understood to be a very visible, identifiable element and this is supported by work that has addressed the media's position in constructing dominant ideologies of the football fan that are based on appearance and image. This idea of the fan being less identifiable within online communities is something that is particularly applicable when considering minority fans and further welcomes discussion concerning race, age and gender as being appropriate subcategories within the realm of football fandom. A particular minority group that has been explored throughout previous literature has been female fans.

2.3.5. Women and Football

It has so far been discussed as to how football appears to be settling in to a revolutionised post-Hillsborough culture whereby 'traditional', white, working class male locals are now being joined by the emergence of 'new fans' entering the game (Crolley, 2008.) And one major factor within this has been the arrival of female fans. Indeed, the role of the female fans within football is one that has welcomed much discussion in relation to the positioning of women in, what is, invariably, typically male-dominated culture. As Giulianotti (2005: 80) stated, 'gender stratification within sport began early' and it is therefore quite an accepted factor within sports such as football that men typically make up the majority of participants and fans.

However, while recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of female participants (Gosling, 2007: 250), women can be seen to be continually marginalised in sport communities. As Crolley (2002) stated, female football fans are 'usually lumped together and perceived as fickle glory hunters, part time supporters, or worse, as slags or gurlies who just go to look at the footballers' legs' (cited in Perryman, 2006: 62.) This clearly emphasises the negative connotations surrounding the female fans, particularly in regards to their alleged exercise of fandom. What is interesting to discuss here is how football has seemingly undergone a minor revolution in regards to the nature of supporting, and Crolley considered this to present how the ambience of grounds has changed significantly to be a 'less overtly masculine' atmosphere (*ibid.*) Crolley further stated that although there exist some females who are casual supporters, as indeed there are males, there are those who 'enter into the spirit' and exercise just as 'macho' behavior as men (*ibid.*) It is therefore apparent that, similar to the ideologies concerning class within fandom and the difficulty in attributing any particular characteristics or definitions, are the problems regarding gender. As Haywood (1996: 251) said, 'being a sport fan can be very important for many women, just as it is for men. It plays an important role in defining individual identities, who we are, where we come from and which social group we belong to.' When considering the significance of online communities in regards to gender issues, it could be argued that women are more likely to engage in discussion on forums and message boards as opposed to other mediums due to the apparent anonymity that such means provide. This is particularly pertinent when considering other, more typically gendered, environments such as stadiums and pubs - typically

ideologically male domains. However, certain theorists have disputed the significance of such positions, such as Clerc (2000) who argued that the level of participation by women on the internet is still significantly less than that of men, and despite the fact that women constitute a large proportion of media and cult fan communities 'off line', generally speaking there is a large divide between the number of women who use online forums. Clerc (2000) suggested that women's social marginalisation, which commonly sees them disadvantaged economically and marginalised in their use of technology means that they are a lot less frequent in online communities. This was supported by Whelehan (2000) who stated that female progression into these male enclaves has been a 'slow and difficult' process. This is particularly apparent with internet sport fan sites, which Redhead (1997: 32) suggested frequently replicate the male dominated world of pub culture, and do not stand alone as any form of genderless environment. Such observations are particularly relevant to the work at hand, as it is not just the statistics regarding gendered use of the internet that can be commented on; rather it is the manner in which gender plays a role throughout the medium. Whether this relates to specific discussions and debates concerning gender, or simply the acknowledgement of divisions between members of forums, for example – such aspects are critically important to consider in relation to both other mediums and dominant media representations of football fans.

It is also relevant to briefly consider the significance of the female fan in regards to more 'traditional' fans as proposed by theorists such as Crolley. Typically, Crolley argued, the traditional fan is threatened by the new fan that is, at times, regarded as an 'enemy' (2002), cited in Perryman, 2006: 63.) This is significant as it could be seen to be representative of more recent emerging forms of fan culture. However, what is most relevant to this work is the understanding of separate fan identities, the emergence of alleged hierarchies, and the roles of both male and female fans throughout football discourse. It can lead us to propose a series of questions in regards to the area of study, such as the role of female supporters in online communities and whether this is interpreted as a more accessible arena in regards to dominant forms of traditional cultures, whereby there can be a certain degree of anonymity for the fan user, particularly as individuals can boast about their exploits and interact, but from a safe distance and non-identifying screen name (Crawford, 2004: 130.) This also relates to the role of potential empowerment, helping to challenge dominant gender roles (Dell, 1998: 105.) In addition to this, we could consider how fan discourse addresses the roles

of atypical football fans within such communities, or whether it is more so the topics concerning legitimacy and authenticity of fan performance that is more prevalent.

A further key issue to focus on is the manner in which the majority of work that studies the role of fans within football is arguably preoccupied with how the media represents these types of fans, as opposed to fans representing themselves. Indeed this is something that has recurred throughout this chapter, and has clearly emerged to be a dominant discussion point that will invariably be discussed throughout latter parts of the research. To refer back to this preoccupation with media representation, it can also be claimed that there is evidence of a concern predominantly with more 'traditional' forms of media coverage, such as newspaper reports, as opposed to considering new media technologies and online means; something that, clearly, plays a significant role in this work and which evidently requires further analysis. This is not due to the need to consider the discursive practices within fan communities, but also the representation of this through more contemporary media means such as online forums and discussion boards. A persistent theme throughout the chapter has been the significance of forming identities; whether this is done by the media through its coverage, or seemingly on behalf of fans through the discourse of violence, it all points towards the significance and importance of identity forming means through football.

2.3.6. Active and Passive Fandom

One theorist whose work covers the issue of sport consumption and fan identity in great detail is Garry Crawford's (2004) work *Consuming Sport*. While Crawford's work is not wholly concerned with football specifically, it does consider wider issues regarding the acting out of consumption and the myriad factors involved with this, particularly in regards to what *makes* someone a fan. Crawford stated that 'much of what makes someone a fan is what is located in his or her personal identity, memories, thoughts and social interaction... however much of this will relate either directly or indirectly to acts of consumption' (2004: 4.) Crawford argued that factors like memories and conversations can be related to events that people have attended (*ibid*) and all subsequently contribute to the construction of fan identity. This all raises questions regarding the identity and performance of fan culture, as opposed to labels and categories that can be seen to be so regularly used throughout media coverage (Hills, 2001: xi) and this all further points towards the overriding importance of patterns of support and the behaviour of fans in constructing identities.

Abercrombie and Longhurst's work supported this when they claimed that 'life is a constant performance; we are audience and performer at the same time. Performance is not a discrete event' (1998: 73), with this indicating that fandom is interpreted as a very active, as opposed to passive, form of social behaviour and consumption. It is arguably participatory (Redhead, 1993), which contrasts with how the media is purported to view audiences as 'passive dupes' (Garfinkel, 1967) that are seduced by the mass media, arguably unable to maintain control or a certain degree of power. This leads us to then consider one of the most often heard 'labels' in regards to football fans, which is the ideology of the 'armchair' or 'plastic' fan (Crawford, 2004: 136.) While this was briefly discussed earlier, what can be further identified is how this discourse has emerged in contrast to the more traditional, participatory forms of fandom that are arguably subsequently more authentic and legitimate. To be an 'armchair fan' immediately implies a less valid form of football fandom in comparison to more dedicated supporters, whereby fandom is performed through discernibly active involvement like visiting stadiums. Crawford considered this in the overall discourse surrounding sport consumption, however what is not addressed is the role of internet communities, such as message boards and forums, whereby fans interact freely. Exploring such issues will allow us to establish how this discourse firstly emerges, and is subsequently sustained. It can be questioned as to whether such terms and labels develop among fans themselves, or whether these are limited to media representation.

Indeed, just as important is how 'armchair' fandom can be interpreted to be a discussion point throughout football discourse, yet is seemingly occurring through a medium that is primarily accessible from a home environment and, as such, could be argued by some to contain very little 'active' participation in regards to more traditional forms of fan performance. What is relevant here is the overall role of authenticity and legitimised fandom. There is arguably the clear distinction between romanticised notions of 'golden era' football in comparison to more contemporary, and ultimately less habitual, forms of fan culture, which sees fans who attend matches as being a prime example of active, conscious support, as opposed to more 'lazy' forms of fandom that require little effort apart from interacting online.

This allows us to further propose the question of whether the majority of sport fans, in particular those that engage in online activity, are fundamentally perceived as passive, with

only a minority being representative of 'true', authentic support. Of importance here is the apparent emergence of binary oppositions (Derrida, 1976), whereby those who attend live sporting events are positioned directly in contrast to those who follow through the media, and indeed this has been furthered by certain theory that has viewed media consumption as a form of secondary support. Redhead (1993) argued that fans that primarily follow football through mass media resources can be viewed as passive, and this perspective was supported by Boyle and Haynes (2000: 189.) Relating to such points, Rinehart (1998: 108; 110) sought to consider the 'active' role that supporters play at a 'live' sporting event and claimed that this sits uncomfortably with the discussion concerning how sports media shows 'construct the audience' and then shapes and directs it. This ties in with Morse's (1983) work which suggested that sport media audiences are isolated from the event/s and forgo the communal pleasures that are experienced by the 'live' spectators.

However, such a position fails to take into account any communal pleasure that can be obtained from being involved in an online community. Indeed it can be claimed that forums and message boards manifest themselves in passive spectatorship and support, and it can be explored as to whether such internet communities are able to provide an equal form of communal pleasure and experience that is comparable to participation at live events. In response to Morse's argument that media audiences are isolated, Whannel (1998: 228) stated that 'the opposition between the communal stadium experiences and the isolated male viewer has problems. Much television is watched in groups, with sport probably being more likely to be watched in communal situations – such as living rooms and bars, in comparison to most forms of television. Morse's analysis, therefore, can be seen to discount the important social dimension of television, and indeed other more contemporary forms of fan community and involvement, many of which do not simply consist of an individual fan consuming a text, but rather incorporate groups of fans watching, discussing and potentially debating events with the same immediacy and participation that surrounds more 'traditional' and arguably 'authentic' forms of active fandom.

Further to this, we can also propose how there is a need to consider how such mediums potentially combine, for example fans using social media while also consuming their text/s in another way, such as watching television. This method of consumption can be seen to raise questions in relation to what mediums can be constructed as active and passive; whether there is such a clear divide as some of the previous research would imply, and what subsequent

research has been conducted that perhaps looks at new media, such as online communities and social media in relation to positioning the fan and their consumption habits. While this is something that will be considered in more detail later in this chapter in relation to existing work into exploring online communities, this section has nonetheless aimed to illustrate some of the principle discussions that exist concerning the divide between 'active' and 'passive' fandom. Certain theorists' positions have been presented and critiqued, all the while considering where work can be developed and explored, particularly in regards to more contemporary forms of fan interaction and communities. What has been continually apparent is that we predominantly experience our interpretations of fan cultures through media representations. As was discussed earlier in relation to hooliganism, there are still many of us who have little experience of fan culture and, particularly, fan interactions outside of the coverage we digest through media representations (Poulton, 2005.) As a result, we invariably receive dominant perspectives that all contribute to the overriding existing ideologies surrounding fandom. We interpret these distinctions, such as those of authenticity, hierarchies and legitimate and delegitimate fandom/s, yet it can be examined as to whether such fractions exist within communities themselves, as has been questioned through numerous issues that have arisen throughout this chapter. It can be further argued that there is a current failure to acknowledge the complexities and fluidity of contemporary fan communities, which contrasts with the primary ways that fans are currently interpreted and researched. As Crawford argued, it is social interaction that plays a crucial role in both introducing individuals to a sport or enthusiast and facilitating their career progression and development as a supporter (2004: 45.) And it is further stated that the patterns of interest, involvement and levels of knowledge are by no means static, but rather change over time; constructing the forum and its members as producing visible texts that can be continually monitored and dissected (Crawford, 2004: 46). This further links in to the argument that football clubs, as an example, can be seen to serve as the projection of fan identity, so much so that supporter and club can be seen as one unit, rather than the club functioning as a fan object (Sandvoss, 2005: 38.)

This highlights how fans connect in various ways and furthers the argument that the manner in which these interactions take place are imperative to the overall realm of both fan studies and football culture as a whole. As such, it is now necessary to develop the work to move away from discussing some of the existing theories and work conducted into fandom and football studies to look more in depth at the role of internet communities throughout relevant literature, and consider the significance of this within the field of football fandom.

2.4. Internet Communities

One section of fan studies that has received the most treatment has been the issue of audience consumption and community, which has been explored by theorists such as Jenkins (1992), Lewis (1992) and Hills (2002.) However, while fan communities have been discussed in depth in certain pieces of research, it has been apparent that few have considered the role of new media technologies in facilitating the construction and emergence of sport communities and groups. While this has been briefly mentioned throughout earlier sections of this chapter in relation to the work that has been undertaken into fandom and football, it is now necessary to focus on the relevant theory and work surrounding internet communities, taking into account the fundamental issues with studying online groups, which will be of major importance during the methodology, and all the while relating this to previously discussed issues of football fan culture; identifying specific avenues that should be explored. Traditionally, television has been referred to as being football's original primary referent (Redhead, 1997), but we can question whether, with the inventions of new technological means through which to consume sport, the internet has overtaken this. This can be seen to be apparent from ever-increasing work throughout fandom studies in general that considers new media. As fan studies develop, so too does the amount of research that focuses on new media as a means through which to explore and attempt to understand fandom, particularly aspects covering audience engagements with texts, such as online gaming (see Crawford and Rutter, 2007.)

Of paramount importance throughout is the construction of the fan community, which was regarded by Sandvoss to be 'sites of consumption', with him stating that they:

Constitute the space in which the hyperreal nature of media spectacle, on which the performances of fandom rests, manifests itself in territorial place... the places mark the return of hyperreal spectacles into the 'real world' and a space in which individuals come to negotiate such spectacles. It is there that the notion of fandom as a reflection of a hyperreal culture or society of spectacle has come to stand the empirical test. (2005: 52)

Sandvoss' quote is relevant to acknowledge as it discusses the physical places of fandom as constituting sites of the appropriation of popular culture, but also the sites of interaction between and among fans that can be apparent in other, arguably less tangible but just as

significant, ways (2005: 53.) In turn, this illustrates the cultural implications of fandom, as audiences are said to develop a sense of place and home throughout fan communities and consequently this can be seen to be where fandom is hence performed most. To refer back to the previous comment made regarding the development of studies into new media, we can see that the emergence of mediums such as social media can be seen to have immensely affected fan communities, and this is reflected in work conducted that has explored the way in which such developments have influenced fandom, with research looking at whether online communities themselves have changed from a preoccupation with forums and message boards, to social media. To some, this has resulted in a change from communities to 'networks' (Bennett, 2013), and this is something that can be explored throughout this work in relation to football, where we can question whether this perspective is reflected in football fandom, or rather limited to other texts.

Contributing to the relevance of communities, Barker (1999) argued that spaces are not 'empty' but rather are filled with social significance and meaning, and this defends the argument that studying online communities is relevant in relation to the myriad ways in which fans can occupy places and positions within society and that these are not limited to wholly physical means. Mass media use, while physically 'located' within certain spaces, is also socially located. As Barker continued, 'the mass media are frequently consumed in social groups, and even if we consume this alone, it will often be drawn on in conversations with others, and... the mass media also provides resources to fuel individuals' own performances, identity and patterns of production, Moreover, our understanding of any media text and the meaning we attach to it will be shaped by our existing frame of reference' (cited in Crawford, 2004: 137.) In addition to this, Barker continued to state that 'too frequently, media use is studied in location to wider social patterns of interaction without seeking to understand how these inform and are in turn informed by social networks and relations. And, as Meyrowitz (1985: x) suggested, 'few [previous] studies have examined both media and interpersonal interaction as part of the same system of 'behaving' or responding to the behaviour of others', and this furthermore supports the continuing argument throughout this work that, when adapted to a more contemporary perspective, there is the apparent need to look at the manner in which media representations of fandom, through more traditional means, have played a key role in previous research, with few pieces combining such representations to look at the significance and position of interpersonal interaction among fan groups and specific communities themselves. Indeed, while there has been a wealth of

emerging research concentrating on new media, there is still a lack of significant work focusing on online football fans. While there is no doubt significance placed on social media as a means through which to explore fan activity and performances, I would argue that this is potentially limited in relation to football fans. Fans can indeed interact with their objects of fandom through twitter, facebook, instagram, tumblr - to name but a few - but the purpose of this research is to look at the way in which fans interact with *each other*. While this is made possible to a certain degree through social media, I believe that a forum allows for the development of specific, constructed communities with residual members to produce relevant discourse on the chosen text of study. This can likewise be seen with UGC such as blogging, whereby I would argue that this is more of a one-way form of communication, with posters producing their own content that is limited in relation to the discussions that can play out. I would further propose that social media should not be seen as usurping other forms of online communication in relation to its significance. As Rhiannon Bury in her work *From UseNet to Tumblr: The Changing Role of Social Media* (2013) found, social media can be seen to enhance rather than replace comfortable spaces that are created, and it is this idea of the already existing space that is of primary significance to this work. Furthermore, work conducted by Booth and Kelly (2013) into Dr Who fans found that digital technology has augmented, not shifted, what it is to be a fan, illustrating how there is still significance in exploring not just physical manifestations of fan performativity, but online ones that are perhaps being bypassed by scholars in favour of the ever new and emerging social mediums. When further positioning my work in relation to this, it can be seen that while there is a plethora of work throughout fandom *in general* focusing on online communities, few of these consider football. More contemporary work that has focused on football fans appears preoccupied with constructing the modern day game as being preoccupied with commercialisation and hyper consumption, thus highlighting the need to develop work that acknowledges a key way in which football fan interaction and activity can be witnessed and monitored in relation to the overarching objectives at hand, and that is through the online forum

2.4.1. Online Forums

Electronic mass media has arguably created a non-territorial – in certain senses at least – virtual space of media consumption. This space, while physically non-existent, is nevertheless socially manifest. To Sandvoss, it exists through fans' readings and negotiations,

through fantasy and interpersonal communication (2005: 53), and the relevance of the computer medium in having a form of influence on personal identity is something also discussed by Nancy Baym (2000) where she considered how the internet gives little time to allow users to think before posting, and in turn creates a medium where users can strategically manage the impressions that are created, with such unique identifying marks all being seen to contribute to spaces such as the internet helping to construct fan identities and cultures. This can also be seen to relate to the question proposed by Hills, whereby he considered what fandom can be seen to *do* culturally (2001: xii, my italics) and this can be partially answered by looking at such sites of fan consumption. Baym stressed the importance of identifying the social processes by which texts influence and engage people in actual circumstances (2000: 18), and it can be claimed that this is representative of fan communities, emphasising the importance of addressing such means. Online communication has been argued to allow new ways of expressing traditional identities (Booth and Kelly, 2013.) Indeed, while there could be the belief that online media is allowing for new dimensions to emerge in relation to fan identity, it is essential to acknowledge the possibility for new mediums to still retain the same fans, as opposed to altering individuals' identities. When adapting this to the example of football fandom, it is clear to see that football is a prime example of a fan culture that inhabits internet communities and websites in a multitude of ways and we can further explore how new media influences and constructs football fan identities. As Crawford stated:

Sports related websites include not only the 'official' sites of teams, clubs and sporting organisations, but also those of associated companies and sponsors, news and information sites, fantasy leagues, gambling sites and whole myriad fan produced sites covering every imaginable sport and almost every aspect of these. Moreover, the internet is not only a static text that its users passively consume, but rather it involves higher levels of participation than most other forms of mass media such as television, radio and print media. (2004: 141)

One of the key points in Crawford's statement is the manner in which the internet is claimed to 'involve higher levels of participation than most other forms of mass media' and as such this ultimately further supports the idea of internet communities as being a principal way through which to gauge fan interaction, while linking to previously raised points regarding the active and passive debate in relation to specific mediums. A particular form of internet community that can be understood to enable such interaction is the online forum, whereby

users can typically discuss and contribute to numerous points or ‘threads’ raised on a website that is predominantly focused around one or more specific issues, topics or themes. Indeed, forums can be seen to play a significant role throughout sports fandom, and while there are other means through which football fans, for example, can be involved online, such as fantasy games (Bruckman, 1996), I would argue that it is the online forum that allows for such high degree of interaction, participation and discussion to take place. As Krovel argued:

Forums and blogs have greatly facilitated the historical study of processes of identity construction and reasoning... [it is] possible to study the collective process of reasoning about issues such as identity and community as they develop, not as they are remembered and interpreted in hindsight. (2013)

Indeed, when compared to other forms such as social networking websites and ‘pages’, I would claim that the forum still remains the most visited and participated in online mediums when related to football fandom. Whereas football fans can engage with objects of their fandom, such as footballers, managers, etc. through means such as social media, I would argue that it is predominantly through forums that fans interact with each other. Indeed, if we were to consider UGC, such as blogging which does result in comments posted from individual fans in responses to content, there are still limitations in relation to the amount of content that is produced which is not comparable to popular forums. Whereas social media has dominated other fan outlets, I still believe that forums are essential to consider and allow for the best possible means of exploration in relation to the aim of this research with this reflecting the argument that forums retain proportionate contribution (Bury, 2013.) Likewise, when considering some of the previous points raised in the chapter, such as the role of communities, it can be acknowledged that a medium such as the online forum allows for a degree of research to be conducted that can seek to explore such aspects, as opposed to other means such as social networking, which I would argue does not allow for this level of interaction and engagement. While this is out of scope for the current research, this could be something that could be looked at in future research, and this will be further explained later in the work.

When considering the construction of such online communities, it can be further argued that those mediated through new technologies, such as the internet, are not necessarily any more imagined than any other form of community (Anderson, 1983.) The internet is not just

passively consumed by its users, as has clearly been argued by certain theorists in this field, but is in itself a cultural text, which is created and recreated by a significant proportion of these (Crawford, 2004: 144) and linking to this is the relevance of online fandom being constructed as just as visible as other forms of fan interaction (Booth and Kelly, 2013.) Indeed, it can be addressed that although many individuals may simply draw on the internet as a source of information, numerous others will actively contribute to the structure and contents of this; and this is particularly evident within many fan communities such as forums, which see members being able to choose to involve themselves and participate in the discussions taking place with many internet users frequently constructing those that already exist. Hills (2002: 180) suggested that internet fan communities, rather than being understood as an imagined community, need to be viewed as a community of imagination. As Hills argued, 'this is a community which, rather than merely imagining itself as coexistent in empty clocked time, constitutes itself precisely through a common respect for a specific potential space' (*ibid.*) Hence, internet communities often involve active participation within this culture, and this is particularly the case with many fan mailing lists and newsgroups which usually contain a limited number of contributors and users; further increasing the sense of coherence and community for these members.

It is relevant to acknowledge the construction of such communities, and furthermore the need to go beyond the existing binary of 'active' and 'passive' fans that *either* exhibit more traditional forms of fandom, such as attending matches, *or* engage in online discussion. Rather, this binary can be complex and multifaceted, and not limited to one or the other position. As Clerc (2000) suggested, in some cases, online communities consist of the same members as those also present in 'off line' encounters. Friends, or people who have met in face-to-face situations, may use the internet as a means of communicating and extending their social interaction. However, for even those who do not 'know' (in a face-to-face sense at least) the people they are engaging with on the internet, it is still the case that the use of the internet, like any other form of mass media, needs to be understood in relation to its location within wider social patterns. What is further important is the manner in which internet communities can be reflective of localized groups and communities, as Shields (1996: 3) stated, 'it is essential to treat telecommunications and computer media communications as *local* phenomena, as well as global networks... [and] embedded within locally specific routines of daily schedules and the 'place ballets' of individuals' that is to say, rigid distinctions between 'virtual' (online) and 'real' (offline) worlds are futile as the uses and

practices of the internet are always located within ('real') everyday life patterns, much the same as any other form of mass media. People's social networks will cross cut those encountered on the internet, people's offline interests will inform what they look at and participate in online (and vice versa) as a resource in fuelling off line social networks, social performances and identity construction. Again, the idea of 'performative construction' (Hills, 2002) appears of use here as the internet provides consumer resources from which individuals can construct individual performances and their identities, and indeed utilise the potential for participation, which is again reflective of other forms of fandom more so associated with football discourse and culture. The impact of the online forum here is apparent as it provides the capacity within which such participation, as mentioned earlier, occurs. It likewise allows for us to propose questions considering whether forums can be seen to be fragmented with the increase in social media, thus not dispelling the significance of social media *per se*, but reflecting on it as a means through which to further our understanding of other online mediums. For some fan cultures, social media has allowed for future new developments, however we can question whether this is the case with football fandom or whether football fans are potentially unique in their consumption and commitment to particular mediums, as pointed out by Bethan Jones in the work *From Usenet to Tumblr: The Changing Role of Social Media* (2013) where she stated that different kinds of fandom use different kind of media differently. As such, I would argue that forums are important even within this new media landscape, furthermore allowing us to consider aspects such as fans who may not be immediately visible through social media, but who are nonetheless crucial to fan communities (Booth and Kelly, 2013: 57.)

While it can be argued that there is clearly a need to research into online fan communities within this field, it does have to be considered, however, as to the potential issues and impact of studying online communities (Baym, 2000: 201.) Each online community can be interpreted as an ongoing creation; manifested, challenged and recreated throughout negotiations and subject to fan activity as a form of textual roaming, as opposed to simply 'poaching' (Aden, 1999.) The issues of responses can be seen to be challenging, or affirming, pre-existing ideologies surrounding the object or text. As such, there are numerous complexities involved when trying to understand the role of the online community within fan cultures. As Fernback stated, 'community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public, but infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse. It has descriptive, normative and ideological connotations [and] encompasses both material and

symbolic dimensions' (1997: 39). With this in mind, it can be apparent that there are fundamental complexities and issues to address when considering fan communities and that the label attributed to this is arguably simplified in its terminology, but multifaceted in its actualities. As such, there is invariably an amount of research that could be potentially undertaken through analysing fan communities, particularly those that are part of a wide sphere, such as the internet and online forums. It is also important to understand that fan communities were around long before the invention of the internet. As Baym stated:

The internet did not create fan groups; they were thriving long before computers existed. On the other hand, the internet has changed them, and for those with internet access, it has changed what it means to be a fan. (2000: 25)

This is something that can be explored through looking at mediums such as internet forums in relation to whether such a position is reflected through any potential change in fan identity and construction in relation to the fan community in question. Through exploring online fan communities on forums we can potentially aim to witness the voices of those who are typically voiceless (Booth and Kelly, 2013) while exploring the potential ambiguity of identity construction between the self and community (Sandvoss, 2005: 64.)

It is clear that the role of contemporary mediums has undoubtedly affected fan cultures, interactions and communities through enabling audience communication and participation in ways that go far beyond the fundamental limitations of physical fan groups. One of the issues within this, however, is the argument that the time spent 'interacting' is not as authentic as traditional fan performance and activity spent elsewhere. Indeed, this is an issue that is particularly rife within the discourse of fan legitimacy, and something that invariably will emerge throughout football fan online cultures, particularly in relation to active and passive fandom, with this reflecting the proposal of the 'armchair fan' as discussed by Crawford (2004) and illustrates a divide that potentially exists throughout football fandom and online communities, with emphasis being placed on forums as a primary example.

Following on from the discussion and debates surrounding active and passive fandom is the general argument that presents the internet as being a consequence of, and contributor to, the individualisation of society. It has been suggested by certain authors, such as Postman (1993) that the internet, by its very nature, dehumanises and isolates its users. Rob Shields (1996)

contributed to this argument by stating that it is not just the internet that is criticised in this manner and that:

Technology is often viewed as a source of separation... in allowing interaction at a distance, first the telephone and now the computer have negated the limitations of physical presence. Conversations are held with distant and absent others. Nonetheless, the local and copresent remain privileged. There is an all too easy tendency to contrast the here and now with the distant. (cited in Crawford, 2004: 198.)

Taking such emerging issues into account, it is clear to see that these observations all point towards the internet's significance as a 'cultural sphere' (Porter, 1997: *Introduction*) and this has been further supported by the work of other theorists such as Hanks (1996) who claimed that online communities are one of many specialised communities in which people are members 'simultaneously and over time' (1996: 221, cited in Baym, 2000: 19) which emphasises the dimensions of space, time and immediacy in enabling fan involvement. This connects with some of the points raised by Hills, such as the notion of 'just in time' fandom (2002: 178), which refers to the way fans can discuss events immediately, or during breaks, to emphasise responsiveness to their devotion. Similar to the ideologies concerning fan legitimacy and authenticating fandom is the emergence of the 'immediacy' of fan comment and community involvement that could potentially reflect a theme within football fan studies. This is particularly applicable when considering fan discussion and interaction online during matches, half-time or immediately after the final whistle, and again will all be factors to consider and discuss further during the research and which can be perceived as indicative of discourses throughout online forums.

Indeed, the significance of the 'timing' of fan responses was something considered by Hills, who stated that new media forms in particular not only allow fans to share speculations, commentaries, thoughts and questions, but also that the timing of these responses can be subject to scrutiny (2002: 178.) This leads us to question whether the immediacy of new media forms point towards an arguably superior method of interactive community, especially when considering that there are few other communicative means that enable such instantaneous reaction. We can further address the impact of this immediacy and how this can be seen to potentially affect or alter fan cultures, particularly in regards to the alleged 'active' and 'passive' binary that has been constructed throughout past research.

What can be further discussed in relation to the technological fundamentals of online media is the manner in which such communication means have altered the overall perception of fandom. While this is an area that continues to warrant greater discussion within fan studies, it is relevant to address the apparent changing role of fandom due to emerging new media technologies. As Jones (2003) stated, ‘more than a decade later, the need for such a partisan representation of fandom has disappeared on both sides of the equation; with the proliferation of multi-channel television and the arrival of new information technologies such as the internet, fandom seems to have become a common and ordinary aspect of everyday life (cited in Sandvoss, 2005: 3.) This plainly emphasises how fan cultures, communities and performance have arguably changed position throughout society due to the abundance of means that allow fandom to be participated in and absorbed. Arguably, before the emergence of such technologies, fandom was limited and restricted to only the most ardent of textual consumers or ‘poachers’ (Jenkins, 1992), whereas now its residence within contemporary culture through more accessible means, such as the internet, has resulted in the number of fans who engage with texts within communities to increase. As such, the concept of fandom is potentially becoming far more commonplace.

However, while it could be claimed that the existence of such online communities allow ‘fans’ to engage on a far larger scale than previously allowed, there is the additional factor of not only just fan culture being enabled to exist, but the regularity with which fans visit and revisit their object(s) of fandom (Sandvoss, 2005: 8.) Whereas fan involvement has often been understood to be related to the physical involvement with conventions, communities, meetings and groups – now it can be interpreted as the amount of website visits or forum threads that are started. It is interesting, then, to compare this level of fan involvement online to the more tangible means of physical pilgrimage and, when adapted to football fandom, it could be argued that there will emerge a clear discussion point in relation to the arguable divide between engaging with online activity – and the recurrence and amount of this – in comparison to going to matches or watching games in the pub. Further to this, there is the argument that rather than exercising entirely new fan practices, digital technology allows fans to augment old practices (Booth and Kelly, 2013: 64), and whether such perspectives can be related to football fandom is hence going to be research and discussed along with the issues and ideologies surrounding validating fandom.

Meyrowitz (1985) argued that electronic mass mediation has severed the link between communicative situation and places, and hence eroded the boundaries of group territory. He stated that 'electronic media may begin to blur the previously distinct group identities by allowing people to 'escape' informational from place-defined groups and by permitting outsiders to 'invade' many groups' territories' (1985: 57.) This leads us to address and consider the impact of new technologies on the 'type' of fan that is given access to communities and whether there is a distinction between outsiders and group members, or the issue of privileged access. This further relates to the concept of power and control, along with the role that this plays throughout online media (Brown, 1998.)

While it is hard to dispute that the internet and online forums in particular are a significant form of fan community to study, there too exist limitations in regards to the manner in which these communities can be explored. As Baym stated, it is both theoretically and empirically difficult to separate out the 'audience' component of the community, without relying too heavily on the text (2000: 19.) By this, it can mean that one of the fundamental problems in researching internet groups is in dissecting the participants and 'fans' from the 'text' itself as the boundaries are, understandably, quite blurred. As Baym continued, 'if one wants to understand a community, you look at the ordinary activities of its participants' (2000: 22) and it would therefore appear that to conceptualise and discuss fan communities in turn requires the studying of the fans themselves. This leads us to subsequently discuss the manner in which online communities are typically studied and furthermore the benefits and limitations of such approaches and methodologies.

An additional aspect within the study of internet communities is the perspective that recognises how media use is always 'located' somewhere, and this has led to an increased interest in not only how the mass media are consumed, but also where this takes place. As Barker (1999) suggested in relation to television use:

Watching television is a matter not only of textual meaning, but also of the place of television within the rhythms and routines of everyday domestic life. In particular, watching television is something we commonly do in specific domestic places, for example the 'living room', with other people to whom we are often, though not always, connected by family relationship. Thus, writers have begun to take an interest in the domestic spaces in which television is watched and to suggest

connections between spaces, activities and the construction of an identity. (1999: 115-116)

This allows us to perhaps identify factors within the users of internet communities, such as forums, which go beyond simply looking at group members, and instead acknowledge the importance of addressing *where* the internet is accessed and how this can be representative of other issues within fan consumption, such as the places that fans habitually inhabit and the relevance of this in relation to addressing how fans typically consume online texts. This again provides evidence of the myriad ways in which such online use can be explored, and such factors will all be discussed in far greater detail later in the work.

Permeating all of these discussion points has been the overriding issue of the importance of understanding both the opportunities and limitations afforded by the internet. Though it can provide access and participation within fan cultures for its users, use of the internet is largely restricted on the basis of numerous social, cultural and economic factors. The internet, as with other forms of mass media, is not in itself inherently 'good' or 'bad', and, as Meyrowitz (1985: 7) argued, 'media, like walls and windows, can hide and they can reveal. Media can create a sense of sharing and belonging or a feeling of exclusion and isolation. Media can reinforce a 'them versus us' feeling, or they can undermine it', and it is issues like this that form the foundations upon which such media forms and its users will be studied.

2.4.2. Exploring Online Communities

One of the key means through which online communities can be researched is through cyber ethnography, which is a relatively new method of data collection that applies the more conventional methods of ethnography and anthropology online. While this will be considered in greater detail in later chapters, it is relevant to briefly consider some of the approach's strengths and limitations within the context of new media studies of fandom. Typically, ethnography can be criticised for being a 'reductive approach' (Hills, 2002: 66), particularly in the way cultural activities are accounted for in terms of language and discourse. Indeed, it can be questioned as to whether 'asking the audience' can be any guarantee of knowledge or information, or whether this could be a form of 'defending against external criticism.' As Hills further stated, 'the fan cannot act as the unproblematic source of the meaning of their own media consumption' (2002: 67), by which Hills supports the claim that studying fans

within their own fandom, and particularly throughout their own communities, does not come without its limitations. When adapting this to online communities and the exact role of *cyber ethnography*, it can be seen that the 'audience' is approached as a mediated product of performance itself (see Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 96-97) and through which the lines between performance and audiences are essentially minutely reconfigured.

Further to this, the issue of self-representation and self-performance of the audience-as-text welcomes additional issues in the way it creates a second order or implied commodification insofar as the online fan audience consumes a textual construction of itself alongside the commodity text (*ibid*) in addition to the wealth of data available. As Jenkins stated:

The problem working with the [inter]net becomes not how to attract sufficient responses to allow for adequate analysis, but how to select and process materials from the endless flow of information and commentary. What is so exciting is that the net discussion tends to centre on those issues that are of the most interesting to media researchers; attempts to develop aesthetic criteria for the evaluation of television and other popular texts, speculations about media authorships; critiques of ideology and self-analysis of the netters' own involvement with the broadcast materials... the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and on-going interpretive community... (whose) discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher, yet in a form that is legitimately open to public scrutiny and analysis (Jenkins, 2002: 52-3.)

The ethnography of the audience, therefore, can be seen to threaten to abolish the conceptual space or distance required for the formulation of academic meta-readings, leaving no cultural 'outside' for the academic deconstruction and hierarchal reconceptualisation of contemporary social life (Hills, 2002: 175.) By this, Hills can be seen to propose that the position of the ethnographic 'lurker' brings with it a specific set of practices and approaches, which in itself is interpellated (2002: 176.) Likewise, the sheer wealth of information available online brings with it further problems in regards to dissecting and ascertaining the most pertinent to the research. For this reason, the following methodology chapter will strictly consider such issues in regards to the approaches that will be undertaken. Further to this is the fundamentally problematic issue of 'discourse.' This can be discussed here in relation to how social realities are articulated and shaped; people's perceptions of the world, their knowledge and understanding of social situations, their interpersonal roles and their identities, as well as

relationships between interacting groups of people (see Barker and Galasinski, 2001, in Bishop and Jaworski, 2003: 246.) It is through such discourse that ideologies are forced, reinforced and reproduced (*ibid*) and it is crucial here to acknowledge the development and role of new media throughout this. While previous work can be seen to have concentrated on the coverage of fans throughout media reports, it is important to consider the personal interaction and representation among fan communities and groups. Online media forms such as forums enable representations and discourse to be clearly monitored, particularly through the first-hand interaction of message boards that allow for this communication to not only be presented, but also analysed. The next chapter will consider the various methodological approaches considered before addressing the manner in which the research was undertaken. The literature has provided an overview of not only some of the key significant pieces of existing theory and work that are relevant to this research, but also their limitations that allow and warrant a development of work in this area.

2.5. Conclusion

While this is by no means an exhaustive account of what is an incredibly complex area of study and discussion, it never the less has aimed to identify some of the key issues that should be considered when addressing research in this area. It has so far been addressed how the majority of work into football fandom has focused on reproducing dominant perspectives within existing frameworks. This has particularly been the case with the research into football violence and hooliganism, which has already been established as one of the primary fields of work in this area. While it has only been briefly touched upon, it is important to address the subsections of football studies that have governed work up to this point. This can be seen to subsequently support perspectives, such as those held by Crawford, who specified that studies of fan cultures tend to focus on the 'exceptional' rather than the mundane (2004: 105), and this can clearly be seen to be the case both with studies of football violence, and indeed other wider issues surrounding fan cultures. Where research does exist into these specific areas, this has primarily reaffirmed previous findings, such as Poulton's (2005) work on the media coverage of football-related violence, which largely supports Hall's studies into the treatment of football hooliganism in the press. Surrounding this is the widespread acknowledgement that hooliganism receives not only a wealth of press coverage in relation to the actual threat, but also a subsequently significant amount of research as opposed to the more 'mundane' and, indeed, 'everyday' forms of football fandom.

It is important to acknowledge issues such as this as it allows for us to establish the need to focus on an area of fan studies within football that has not, up until now, received much interest. When this is linked with the internet's growth from a cultural phenomenon to a significant site of cultural production (Porter, 1997: *viii*), it can be seen that there is a need to develop work in this area. As Howard Rheingold in his work *Virtual Communities* (1998) stated, 'the social aggregations 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' (1998: 5) and this emphasises the significance of the internet's role in contemporary communication studies. It has been discussed as to how a proportion of the work concentrating on online communities, such as Nancy Baym's (1997) work on soap operas has focused on examples of fan groups that arguably are not reflective of the type of fandom that is reproduced through football. Likewise, a preoccupation with social media as a principle way through which fans congregate and converse can be seen to be undoubtedly applicable and relevant in relation to some fan texts, but perhaps not so much when considering football fans and their methods of interacting with each other, as opposed with just their consumed text, thus sidelining aspects of social media in relation to the proposed methodological approach for this study. And while aspects such as commercialisation have been explored in relation to sport fans, such approaches have tended to situate the fan amid a range of sports and their subsequent texts, as opposed to focusing on the football fan as an individual consumer.

When presenting where this work will 'fit in' to past theory and approaches and produce an original contribution to knowledge, it is apparent that my work firstly aims to develop some of the theories surrounding football fan culture, developing these to consider an approach that, I argue, is often sidelined. There are evidently dominant themes that are integral to the understanding of football fandom, particularly those which have been discussed earlier in the chapter, such as the role and significance of national identity. There are also those that relate to fandom on a far more general level, such as issues of hierarchy within fan communities and the role of performance and fan behaviour. It has been seen, therefore, that there exists a wealth of work that is relevant to discuss and study in relation to the intended research, while acknowledging the need to develop research within this field. It is because of this that I aim to link the concepts and understanding of new technologies, in particular online media, with the 'gaps' that have emerged throughout existing literature.

Arguably football fandom can be seen to be one of the most contested groups of fan culture. Terms such as 'armchair fan' and 'plastic' (Crawford, 2004) contrast with the more 'real', authentic and legitimate support and all point towards there being areas of debate throughout identity construction, and it can be further proposed that there reside myriad subsections within this, such as the role and significance of place, class and gender; factors that have been discussed in previous work but not focused on in the way that this research intends. What is integral to this is the idea that new media technologies, such as the internet and online forums, allow fans to be given a 'voice' and platform that is not evident in other media forms, and it is this emergence of fan interaction that is a pivotal factor to consider within the area of football fandom. As Gray (2003: 125) stated, the changing nature of social and cultural life requires a new understanding of interconnections among types of audience experience, and this change in the level of fan interaction is a pivotal factor to consider as arguably it has been only fictional representations, radio phone-ins and correspondence in response to media articles that has previously instigated this degree of fan involvement. This too is something that has continually tended to focus on the issue of football violence as a dominant form - something that has besieged not only media representation, but also subsequent research and literature.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

The following chapter will introduce and discuss the methodological approaches implemented throughout the research. It will firstly illustrate the objectives and questions that were central to the work in order to highlight how subsequent approaches were decided on. Throughout previous chapters, it has been discussed as to how the research intended to analyse and explore the role of online football fan groups in order to further the current research and work in this area. Aspects such as the key themes currently surrounding football fan studies were introduced, in addition to the role of online technologies, such as internet forums, in contemporary fan culture. The literature review illustrated the need for there to be further research into football fan communities, particularly if we are to fully understand the position of football fandom throughout contemporary society. It was discovered that, of all the communicative means that have been explored in past theory, one of those that was significantly under represented is internet groups, in particular forums and message boards, which can be understood to enable a wealth of interaction and participation, in turn satisfying the research aim which is to identify the discourse and themes that arise when analysing football fan communities as opposed to simply media representation/s.

Central to the work at hand were the questions that arose during this process and which formed the subsequent research objectives. These included:

Central Research Question: *What is the role of online forums in football fandom?*

Sub Question 1: *What dominant themes emerge, when researching online, that help to produce ideologies of the football fan and the construction of online football fan communities?*

Sub Question 2: *How are hierarchies of fandom linked to online football forum participants, in particular in relation to discourses surrounding 'active' and 'passive' fandom?*

Sub Question 3: What is the role of online football fan groups in constructing national identity?

Sub Question 4: How does online football fan discourse compare to dominant media representations of football fandom?

In order to satisfy the aims of this research, I decided to focus on one team and forum as a means through which to explore the role of online football fandom, the justification for which is outlined later in this chapter. Firstly, I conducted a cyberethnography in the form of intensive observation, which was then supplemented by further online interviews with members of the designated forum where necessary. The following sections will illustrate in detail why such samples were decided on in relation to the research objectives at hand.

3.2. Selection

3.2.1 Team

By focusing on one team in particular, it meant that I was able to become familiar with a set group of fans participating in and constructing online discourse. This was necessary as a fundamental part of the research objective was to closely observe and attempt to understand the role of online football fan groups. Due to the wealth of information available, I believe that it was more relevant to narrow the work down to consider one team and its supporters in order to gain a thorough qualitative understanding of this research sample, as opposed to trying to manage too much information that could potentially not provide as in-depth results.

I chose to research Swansea City Football Club for numerous reasons. At the time of writing, the club had recently been promoted to the Premier League having been in the Championship for the past three years. Their emergence in ‘top flight’ football was well documented during the summer of 2011, with a wealth of media coverage both concerning the team’s success and its followers. Indeed, Swansea’s fans have regularly been regarded as some of the most ‘passionate’ and dedicated in the UK and the club’s rich history has been the subject of numerous pieces of work by authors such as Gary Wharton (2005) and Keith Haynes (2003). Swansea’s promotion to the Premier League in August 2011 meant that I was able to research fan discourse and participation during a significant event and era in the club’s history. However, another critical reason for choosing to focus on Swansea City was due to the team

currently being the only Welsh football club in the Premier League. As one of the key research objectives was to explore the role of national identity throughout online football fan groups, particularly in relation to subordinate football nations, I felt that opting for a team such as Swansea City enabled an added dimension in regards to potential discourses emerging concerning the representation of Welsh football in an otherwise largely English-dominated league.

3.2.2. Forum:

In previous chapters, I have discussed the significance of online technologies in relation to football fandom. It became apparent that while there were few pieces of work that had wholly considered the role of computer mediated communication (hereafter, CMC) for football fans, those that did address the significance of online media were more so concentrating on blogs, gaming and social media, as opposed to being concerned with forums as a principle means through which fans participate in discussions and debate. It was due to this that I felt there was a significant 'gap' in the research that welcomed further work, while likewise introducing a medium that satisfied the research objectives.

As discussed in the literature review, I decided not to research into social media, such as facebook and twitter, as I felt that it was more relevant to the research to focus specifically on online communities that were wholly concentrating on football, and particular teams, as I would argue that these are far more representative of football communities. Likewise, I would argue that these allow for a great degree of exploration and analysis in regards to some of the key issues and topics that have been discussed in the previous chapter, such as the position of hierarchies within such communities and discourse surrounding active and passive fandom. While social media no doubt provides an arena for particular football fan pages, groups or profiles, there is not the degree of resources available in comparison to specific forums. Furthermore, previous work has pointed towards forums being potentially more trustworthy as a research source (see: Foux, 2006) and likewise interpreted as a potential extension of face-to-face communication, such was considered in Mangold and Faulds' (2009) work on social media as a research tool. Forums have also been considered to be less of a means of 'one-way traffic' (Mangold, 2009: 359) due to them enabling and encouraging the constant production and replies from myriad members. Such work also identified forums as being a prime example of predominantly consumer produced communication, as opposed

to mediums like twitter, which are arguably more limited in regards to a specific person talking to numerous recipients and therefore preventing more developments of mutual conversation. Further to this, fandom has been understood to be the consumption and subsequent productions *of and about* a text, therefore this emphasizes the importance of production and how online means can be believed to relate to this and facilitate such fandom. Due to this, it is the *production* element that is believed to be relevant in addition to further aspects such as the immediacy and quantity of fan engagement. This is something that is made possible through online mediums such as forums, and arguably is not as pertinent through social media and networking. As Roy Krovel, in his work on identity construction throughout Norwegian football fans stated:

By using forums, blogs and the like, it is possible to study the collective process of reading about issues such as the identity and community as they develop, not as they are remembered and interpreted in hindsight. (Krovel, 2012)

Similar to the issues concerned with choosing one team was the decision to focus on one particular forum. I chose to research *Not606*, which is an active large online forum that, while representing a range of sports, does tend to focus on Premier League football. The forum itself is titled '*Not606*' and this will be referred throughout the research. *Not606* was chosen due to the fact that it is one of the largest football fan forums in the UK and therefore is arguably representative of a wide range of participating online football supporters. The forum is divided into separate team sections with Swansea City containing one of the largest range of threads, topics and participants. While there are other popular forums frequented by Swansea City fans, such as *Planet Swans*, the benefit of *Not606* is that, if necessary, it enables the analysis and exploration of other teams' fans and participants which is not as possible through forums that concentrate on just one team.

3.2.3 Time:

Not606 was formed in March 2011 after the closure of the BBC's *606* forum, which was one of the most visited football forums on the internet. The relatively recent emergence of *Not606* allowed for a concise time frame through which to monitor observations. I decided to research the forum for a year long period – from March 2011 to March 2012. During this time, there was an average of twelve new 'threads' a day, which allowed for a manageable

amount of data in relation to the chosen methodologies. This was also a period of time that saw Swansea City get promoted to the Premier League in August 2011, which allowed for the monitoring of key events in order to ascertain the significance of this throughout fan discussion and likewise satisfy the research's objectives.

During the year long period, I monitored the forum daily in order to ascertain which posts or threads had been started or contributed to. I typically checked the forum at the end of the evening and - irrespective of the number of threads that arose - 'copied and pasted' all of the new text into an individual document. It was important to retain consistency throughout the methodology so, as a result, all data was extracted and stored prior to being analysed. The analysis took into account the research questions at hand, along with recognising the patterns and themes that emerged. I ensured that all of the relevant data - that being content which concerned the pre-determined research topics - was read in detail and considered accordingly.

Throughout the later chapters, 'discourse' is frequently referred to in relation to the content extracted from the forum. In this particular context, Barker and Galasinski's (2001) definition of discourse is utilised, where discourse refers to how 'social realities are articulated and shaped' in relation to 'people's perceptions of the world, knowledge and understanding of social situations' (in Bishop and Jaworski, 2003: 246.) I furthermore take into account how such social realities influence, affect and form interpersonal roles and identities in addition to relationships that form between interacting groups of people (*ibid.*)

The following sections of this chapter will illustrate in further detail the methodological approaches that were implemented in order to undertake the work.

3.3. Cyberethnography

Cyberethnography refers to the study of online interaction. It has been said to represent technologically mediated interactions as a topic in their own right (Hine, 2000: 1) and, as a result, can be understood to be a relatively new research methodology located within an interpretive research paradigm, gaining momentum in use and credibility in reputation (Keeley-Browne, 2011: 17.) One of the key aspects of cyberethnography is the manner in which it operates as a research methodology which is part of a move to reconceptualise the traditional notion of 'the field' (Gajjala, 2000.) By this, it is clear that the internet as a

medium of study is necessary to understand as a phenomenon in its own right, and a further factor concerning cyberethnography is the manner in which it can be believed to complicate discussions regarding representation, authority and writing in both interesting and unique ways (*ibid.*) It is because of this that it is often referred to as ‘cyberanthropology’ due to the manner in which it is heavily focused on not just representation, but the active construction of users’ involvement with online texts being regularly interpreted as embodied digital subjects.

For the purpose of this research, cyberethnography can be seen to be focused on online interactions, displays and performances (Gajjala, 2000), with virtual communities being therefore interpreted as interactive, ethnographic texts where the participants are informants at various levels, such as sharing stories about each other’s lives and continually providing textual ethnographic ‘evidence’ of their experiences to both the lurkers and the audience, and likewise to other informants (Aycock and Buchignani, 1995: 5.) By researching into online forums, it can be clearly seen that the various participants and members of the ‘group’, or community, can be understood to operate in a way that provides first-hand commentary and discussion that is used by other participants and audiences alike.

There are various advantages of adopting a cyberethnographic approach, one being the relative ease with which data can be collected. Unlike more traditional methods of research, researching subjects online can result in data being obtained twenty-four hours a day across the globe without the costs incurred by other approaches. As identified previously in the chapter where I explained the extent to which the forum was monitored, this illustrates how one of the strengths of cyberethnography is the way in which the methodology is not limited by physical boundaries or time.

A further advantage is the manner in which it can be interpreted as a relatively objective research methodology due to there being little researcher control or influence (Ward, 1999: 5.) Participants are believed to remain largely unknown to the researcher, and as such there is a degree of balance between the researcher and the researched. In contrast to other, more traditional, methods of data collection such as face-to-face interviews, it can be argued that the researcher is not able to ‘prompt’ for answers as easily, nor is there the potential problem with interpretation due to the way in which data is written in a public domain that is visible by many, as opposed to being limited to verbal interaction. However, it can be due to this apparent ‘facelessness’ of the encounters that there exist different levels of engagement for

individuals depending on personal preferences and competencies. By this, it can be understood that participants can vary in the willingness to engage and participate. There may be some who want to share more opinions, for example, and who may be more vocal about certain points, whereas others may be intimidated by the technology and/or by the knowledge that, unlike the spoken word, the written word leaves a constant visible stain. As such, it is imperative that any work undertaken in this area is aware that there are various degrees of engagement and participation that influence the research.

Further to this is the issue of the 'digital divide', with online research often being criticised for its reliance on a medium that is not wholly accessible to all. However, when related to the work in question, it cannot be assumed that online discourses surrounding football fandom are representative of *every* football fan; rather they seek to identify a significant section of fan interaction that has previously not received much attention, and it is for this reason that researching online fan discourses is just as relevant as researching fans who attend matches, for example, as that too is not a participation that is accessible or undertaken by all. In further response to this, online research and its content can be argued to be a genuine representative sample of football fandom, as while previous research has been criticised for being preoccupied with online identity play, theorists such as Nancy Baym (1997) argued that the majority of users of the internet do not deliberately construct new identities and instead reflect views and positions that replicate their fandom outside of online communities, or in the 'real' world.

However, there are additional criticisms of ethnographic research, including the apparent difficulties due to 'cross cultural and interpersonal understanding and representation' (Stacey, 1988), with ethnography online understood as being further complicated due to the interactions being limited to bare text, which may be difficult to interpret or understand. It is because of this that supplementary approaches can be utilised in order to support and enhance the original observations and findings. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter in relation to this specific research; however it has been relevant to acknowledge the apparent limitations with cyberethnography as a methodology to illustrate how such issues were acknowledged and considered prior to undertaking the research.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) has been regularly questioned in regards to both its legitimacy and the sheer quantity of information available (Hine, 2000: 14.) It has been

claimed to be limited in its authenticity due to myriad factors such as the little expression that users can provide – there are, for example, no non-verbal signs that are available in face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, there is believed to be limitations for the formation of intimate relationships and expressions of emotion, with users being said to be detached in time, space and warmth of social connection (Hine, 2005: 17.) However, while CMC can be criticised in certain ways, it likewise cannot be assumed that offline encounters are never unrewarding, stilted, tense and unenlightening. On the contrary, online interactions can still be socially rich, providing complex social experience which subsequently can be both necessary and rewarding to research. Howard Rheingold supported this by stating that CMC in fact liberates interpersonal relationships from the confines of physical locality (1993, cited in Thurlow, 2004: 111), a position that is reflective of Anderson who stated that communities are not about numbers or places, but activities and feelings (cited in Thurlow, 2004: 111.) Such criticisms were acknowledged and considered when deciding on the research sample. By choosing one team and forum, this illustrates how the wealth of information was condensed accordingly, with the emphasis placed on understanding and engaging with one particular online group as opposed to stretching the sample to consider other fans and teams, which could potentially limit the level of possible engagement and subsequent analysis.

What is further significant to consider is the position of CMC in society (Howard, 2000 cited in Thurlow, 2004: 75.) Howard referred to the way in which people are increasingly reliant on the internet to achieve a range of daily activities, and to understand society online requires that we study how new communication tools are embedded in our lives and how our lives are embedded in new media. When adapting this to football fandom, recent statistics obtained from the *Football Passions* study (see: http://www.sirc.org/football/football_passions.pdf) conducted revealed that the British spend more time online than watching television, with the average time spent online each day being 164 minutes, compared to 148 minutes watching television. Large numbers of fans also admitted to spending much of their free time online, with some spending up to five or six hours per day online contributing and keeping abreast of team news (*ibid*: 51.) Such prior findings are relevant as they further support the role of online media in day-to-day life, along with the significance of forums as a primary means through which fan participation and discourse can be monitored. With previous studies identifying ‘online contributions’ as a principle way through which football fans engage online, it furthermore illustrates the importance of directing the research in such a way that considers such mediums for active engagement, as opposed to other means such as blogs, for

example. Indeed, despite there being criticisms of CMC, historical analyses strongly suggest that a loss of visual cues need not be accompanied by a concurrent reduction in the 'socialness' of interaction (Joinson, 2001.)

The physical individual in an online world can be believed to function in much the same way that any geographically or culturally bound community functions. As Joinson stated in relation to the telegraph, 'despite the apparently impersonal nature of communicating by wire, [it] was in fact an extremely subtle and intimate means of communication (Joinson, 2001.) Internet based communication, therefore, can be potentially categorised as highly socialised, perhaps even more social than face-to-face interaction (Rheingold, 1993; Walther, 1996, cited in Hine, 2005: 35.) However, despite there being clear arguments that position online groups as legitimate sources, it is likewise important to not interpret them all as being the same. As Baym stated, 'it is fundamentally reductionist to conceptualise all virtual communities as a single phenomenon and hence to assess them with a single judgement... [there are] countless thousands of online groups that vary tremendously' (1997: 63.) This means that it is furthermore necessary to acknowledge that various groups can require different methods of research in accordance to the group and research aims in question. When adapting this to the research into online fan groups, I would argue that the methodologies implemented were done so in relation to the specific forum and objectives at hand; those that were ascertained through the literature review in addition to subsequent research questions.

So far, I have presented the research objectives and furthermore discussed cyberethnography as a principle way through which the work was conducted. It has been acknowledged as to how online social groups and CMC can be, and indeed is, criticised in relation to its legitimacy. However, I would go on to argue that the movement of fandoms from physically based groups to worldwide cyber communities has resulted in the creation of culturally significant texts that produce significant meaning. As Myc Wiatrowski stated:

In moving to online spaces, fandoms remain able to function as traditional communities would be expected to. But the mediated interface and its abilities to allow communities to congregate in greater numbers regardless of spatial or temporal limitations also permits cyber

fandom to amplify their voice, giving them greater power in spaces, as Foucault would have it.⁵

3.4. This Work

Typically, the principles of virtual ethnography include the sustained presence of a researcher in the field settings (Hine, 2005: 63.) This can involve active participation and an acknowledged position in the group or, as was more relevant to this research, the role of ethnographic 'lurker.' I decided to remain an anonymous observer throughout the research. I am not, and never have been, a member of the forum, and I believe that this was important so as to not mislead any of the forum's members; neither did I want to direct the conversation in any particular way. It is due to this that the methodology implemented can be seen to retain elements of anonymous observation, but furthers this to develop an ethnographic approach. The methodology did not simply involve reading what was written but instead developed this to concern the subjects themselves - in this case, the members of the forum, analysing this in accordance to the research objectives all the while retaining the position of 'lurker' within the forum environment.

The forum in question is an open, public forum meaning that anyone can read the content without 'joining' and is subsequently visible to all. However, such a position is not without criticism. The ability of a researcher to anonymously record interactions on a site without the knowledge of participants, the complexities of obtaining informed consent, the overriding expectation, if not the illusion of privacy, in cyberspace, and the blurred distinction between public and private domains fuel questions about the interpretation and applicability of current policies for governing the conduct of social and behavioural research involving human subjects (Frankel and Siang, 1999.) To overcome this and maintain a stable presence in a virtual environment (Hine, 2000: 89), I decided to contact the main moderator of the site, which was made possible through accessing the list of members to inform that such research was being undertaken. The response from the moderator was positive, with the research being welcomed. I was clear about the manner in which the research was being conducted and the methodologies that were being implemented, and - to further ensure that the research

⁵ No date: see:

http://www.academia.edu/491940/The_Dynamics_of_Fandom_Exploring_Fan_Communities_in_Online_Space
s Last Accessed August 1 2013

remained ethical - I ensured that members' identities would remain anonymous when referring to any specific data along with providing members with the option to refrain from participating in the interviews.

While every effort was made to ensure that all ethical issues were considered, there was nonetheless the ongoing problem concerning the role of talk in a public or private domain. In relation to the forum, talk is very much taking place on a public place, however it can be questioned as to whether this means that the talk is still public with the notion of privacy being continually problematic in a medium that is visible to all. While it can be argued that the web is a public domain with its contributors recognising that, there are still issues concerning anonymity with theorists such as Joinson (1998, cited in Thurlow, 2004: 62), stating that anonymity does not necessarily mean that users are not identifiable. A further aspect to consider is how, if users are interpreting themselves as relatively anonymous, this could result in less inhibitions throughout the contributions, particularly when compared to other, more traditional, means of communication and representation.

Indeed, it has been argued that such participation can create de-individualisation whereby users and contributors have a loss of control due to social influence and a 'strength in numbers' perception, which results in participants being more likely to take a view or opinion. In order to address the issue of anonymity and identification, I ensured that none of the members of *Not606* were referred to by username, and rather were assigned a number (e.g. member 1), if relevant, pertaining to the examples supplementing the discussion chapters. Referring to 'member 1', for example, interchanges throughout the thesis and does not denote one particular member; rather is separated dependent on the extract in question in order to separate fans in specific moments. While there is the argument that user cans can, for some, connote relevant aspects of fan identities, particularly in relation to specific research objectives, I believe it is necessary to ensure the anonymity of fans on the forum due to the content, at times, being deemed inflammatory or provocative.

Quotes are extracted from the forum in order to support wider theoretical approaches and are not necessarily included in chronological order, instead being arranged thematically. When referring to any quotes, and in the instance of any swearing, this is included verbatim which should be noted in relation to asterisks, for example, that would have been written by the

members themselves. Where particular jargon is included, this will be defined and explained where necessary.

This leads me to now address the key themes that were identified in the literature review as playing a significant role in the present work surrounding football fandom. It was necessary to illustrate these as they enabled me to acknowledge the current dominant themes surrounding the area, in order to build upon and compare these to recent findings. Such themes included the role of *fan communities*; the issue of fan *status* and *hierarchies* among fan groups and whether such hierarchies are apparent among fans themselves or simply through an analytical perspective; *hooliganism* and football violence; the notion of ‘*othering*’ and *normativity* and how this relates to authenticity; and the *immediacy* and conventions of online technologies in regards to *active* and *passive* fandom along with the significance of forums providing a ‘voice’ to football fans in contrast to dominant media representations. A final issue that was consistently addressed in previous research and which was earlier identified as warranting further research was that of national *identity*, whereby a large number of theorists considered its significance throughout media representation, with few addressing its role throughout fan discourse. As such, it was decided that this was a principle theme that would be explored in addition to analysing whether there were further dominant issues that became apparent through the research with the findings being arranged thematically throughout the chapters. Observation, however, could only reveal a certain amount of information so as to develop the work; I conducted online interviews, where relevant, which will be discussed in the following section.

3.5. Online Interviews

Online interviews are often opted for in situations where populations are not easily accessible in an online context (Coomber, 1997: 199), which was the case with the research at hand whereby members of the forum were located in various countries. I decided to conduct online interviews with selected members in order to develop some of the original findings from the cyberethnography of the forum. The aim of the online interviews was always to *supplement* the primary research methodology of observing discussions on the forum with there being no intention to ensure that such methodologies were balanced in relation to the amount conducted. It was important to note, however, that capacities for new technologies should not be taken for granted (Hine, 2005: 9.) While online interviews cannot be conducted face-to-

face, they can however replicate a more two-way interaction between researcher and research subject, unlike other forms of cyberethnography. Whereas initial sections of the research relied on observing the discourse and interaction of members on the forum, online interviews allowed for developed findings in the form of a one-to-one engaged interaction. However, similar to other forms of cyberethnography, and indeed research approaches in general, are the ethical issues that inevitably emerge (Buchanan and Ess, 2008.) Interviews require the need to be adept at creating comfortable spaces for informants and interviewees to share their experiences (Hine, 2005: 17.) Likewise, it has been claimed that there is a general tendency for people to disclose more online than they would perhaps do in a face-to-face situation, with Hine stating that it is ‘...not completely clear why computer based research tends to lead to more candid responses than pen and paper or personal interviews; (2005: 33.) As Hine explained, it is ‘more of a two-way revelation which requires careful ethical design and consideration... the benefits of online research do not arise automatically from the technology, but require considerable sensitivity and reflection on the part of the researcher’ (2005: 20.) It is due to this that mutual self-disclosure was pinpointed as an integral part of the research. Due to the lack of simple gestures like nodding and eye contact, there is the argument that understanding and perceptions of others have to be negotiated by text (Markham, 2004.) As such, the interviews were conducted in such a way that allowed for any questions to be welcomed and subsequently answered by the researcher. The participant was asked whether they understood the question being asked, along with its purpose, while ensuring complete confidentiality.

3.5.1. *Why online interviews?*

Online interviews were utilised as they added depth beyond the analyses and observation of the forum. When themes arose and were discussed, they were supplemented by further interviews in order to develop the research. It was only after the initial observations and cyberethnography were undertaken that relevant themes became apparent that were subsequently necessary to elaborate on.

3.5.2. *Sampling*

Online interviews were conducted with a sample of forum members (10 members in total) depending on the number of post counts, in addition to a selection of ‘moderators.’ This was

decided on in order to attain a sample that was representative of a range of members and participants that had various levels of involvement, and potential influence, on the forum. It was ensured that there were an equal number of participants in accordance with different levels of post counts and, in order to ensure that there was adequate ethical consideration adhered to, none of the information obtained from the interviews was made available for any of the other members to see.

3.5.3. Conducting the Interviews

The interviews were conducted online, via the ‘private messaging’ (hereafter, PM) function of *Not606*. The member was contacted and informed of the intended research being undertaken. In the initial message, the interview questions were provided so that the member was able to see the questions that were being asked prior to agreeing to participate. In doing so, this ensured that the member was fully aware of the type of research being undertaken. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary, and – as stated earlier – each member was informed that the interview was completely anonymous.

3.5.4. The Questions

As stated previously in this chapter, the questions were chosen with the aim of developing some of the issues that were already identified via the cyberethnography and those which are stated previously in this chapter. As a result, the questions developed after ascertaining the key discourses surrounding the chapter and progression of the research so far. The primary aim of the interviews were to develop some of the points that were potentially not as apparent through mere observation, and those which needed furthering in order to satisfy the research’s objectives (see Appendix 2.) The questions were constructed so as to supplement the initial findings and hopefully extract information that may potentially be less accessible through simple observation due to some of the issues discussed previously in this chapter, such as concern about ‘revealing too much’, for example. Furthermore, due to some of the ethical implications identified previously in the chapter, such as the limitations of anonymity when including examples of discussions and debate throughout the forum, it was apparent that conducting interviews would potentially erode some of the issues surrounding this in relation to disclosure and being able to supplement key topics with specific examples. It is likewise relevant to note how certain questions, or themes, may not become apparent through

mere observation, such as why fans become fans. It cannot be assumed that certain topics will arise out of their own accord and it is due to this that questions were constructed in accordance to aiming to answer the overriding research objectives.

For each chapter, I chose to construct a case study, detailing a specific example that was relevant to the work in question. By including a case study, I sought to provide a first hand example that illustrated some of the key observations and thematic approaches apparent throughout the findings, ensuring that each chapter clearly demonstrated a specific aspect of its topic/s.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to illustrate some of the methodological approaches and considerations that were applied in accordance to the research objectives. It has clearly stated the aims of the work in accordance with the information discussed and obtained in previous chapters, particularly in relation to the various themes and issues considered. The research questions were provided in addition to the ethical considerations that were relevant to approach when working online.

What is important to acknowledge is that cyberspace is not to be thought of as a space detached from any connections to ‘real life.’ It can be argued that cyberspace has rich and complex connections, with interactive media being understood as both culture and cultural artifact (Hine, 2005: 63.) As such, the approaches utilised to analyse and research into this culture need to be appropriately considered in relation to the medium. While every attempt was made to ensure that the methodologies implemented were as objective as possible, it is relevant to address that virtual ethnography is often understood to be ‘necessarily partial’ (Hine, 2005: 65.) As Hine stated, ‘our accounts can be based on ideas of strategic relevance rather than faithful representations of objective realities’ (2005: 65.) As such, the research approaches aimed to balance the desire to explore specific areas in relation to pre-determined questions, with the necessary objectives required for legitimate research.

It is furthermore prevalent to address how such forums are not representative of everyone, with an example being the typical age demographic of the fans that can be believed to frequent online football forums. It is due to this that the research did not claim to be

indicative of *every* football fan, rather a significant representative sample of those that participate in online discourse. Indeed, I would argue that it was a fundamental requirement of the research to consider how people make use of available technologies and how these intersect with the research goal/s in addition to presenting any further issues and commentary that help to construct contemporary football fan discourse.

CHAPTER 4 - FORUM FANS UNITED: CONSTRUCTING THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

In days gone by I would enjoy being on the North Bank, just to hear the random comments from supporters in the crowd. Sometimes the banter was better than the football itself...

4.1. Introduction

Some football fans go to matches. These are, after all, where supporters are seen to congregate; where fans participate in witnessing their team potentially succeed. Where flags are waved, songs are chanted, and referees are bellowed at. Where lager can no longer be swilled, where standing is no longer tolerated, and where police patrol in numbers. But, while some football fans go to matches, many do not, or rarely, yet still consider themselves as fans. So what do they *do*? Do fans seek to replicate the interaction, 'banter' and sense of togetherness that visiting a stadium can be seen to bring? If so, how? How important is this apparent sense of community and involvement to football fans? And how is this constructed in other areas where fans interact? While fans have been able to talk about games, assess players and the nature of being a fan at pubs, games and on radio programmes, they now have a new form of meeting and discussion point through the online forum, and it is this that I intend to analyse.

The following chapter will discuss the concepts of the online 'community' before looking at specific elements of its construction. It aims to explore definitions that have positioned communities as being supportive and protective environments (Lewis, 1992) that do not operate as 'resistance activity' (Taylor, 1999), deciphering whether such communities provide safety, or come under test. Furthermore, it will consider individuals within this community, referring to Bourdieu's conception of fan social capital (1984) in relation to the construction of fan positions and potential hierarchies. It will account for both fan/fan and fan/object relationships (Williams, 2011: 268) in order to effectively convey the manner in which fan practices can vary and develop.

Such aspects are integral to consider as this work aims to analyse and dissect football fan discourse on an online forum, with this being interpreted as a primary medium through which fans congregate and converse.

The chapter will firstly provide a brief overview of the forum, before then addressing the central discussion point of what football fans *do* on forums by looking at key themes such as the role of members, moderators and management; hierarchies; uses of the forum, and the subsequent development of fan identities and positioning in order to answer this section's research question:

What dominant themes emerge, when researching online, that help to produce ideologies of the football fan and the construction of online football fan communities?

For this chapter, I include a case study of a particular thread and the subsequent discussions that emerged. The 'What Went Wrong' thread was a series of posts concerning banning and whether this should be implemented as a means of forum management. Banning is explored in relation to issues of normative behaviour as discussed by Bennett (2013.) By establishing normative behaviour on the forum, it will allow us to explore subsequent emerging issues in order to establish how the forum is constructed in relation to accessing the discussions that arise and the management in place around this.

4.2. *Not606*: An Overview

Not606 was set up in 2011, mainly as an alternative forum to the BBC's 606⁶ which closed earlier that year. *Not606* has forums covering football teams from a range of leagues across the world in addition to various other sports. The Premier League's section contains all the teams that, at present, reside in the English Premier League (hereafter, EPL), with Swansea City FC currently being one of them. Next to the team's name is an indication of the amount of posts and threads relating to that team on their particular forum section. At the time of

⁶ The BBC's 606 website was a collection of forums covering numerous sports with each team having its own dedicated forum. It ceased operating on May 31st, 2011. See: <http://thenextweb.com/uk/2011/08/14/how-the-bbc-606-radio-show-kick-started-an-online-football-community/>

The reason behind BBC 606's closure was relatively unclear with there being no direct explanation provided by the BBC but was largely said to be due to a 25% cut in the BBC's online services and a subsequent restructure.

writing, Swansea City's post number was 97,788 – meaning they have one of the highest number of posts and what can be referred to as 'active' threads in comparison to other teams – therefore providing a wealth of information to explore and analyse in relation to the overarching research aims.

4.3. Members, Moderators and Management

One of the principal aims of the research is to address the role of fans on the forum, in particular looking at issues such as identity construction, the emergence of discourses surrounding fan communities, and how fans can be seen to interact and engage with each other through an online medium. This relates to the central research objective concerning what fans can be seen to *do* on football forums and, in light of aiming to answer this, it is essential to understand the construction of such communities, looking in part at the role of members themselves in addition to moderators and forum management, in order to see how roles themselves are defined and how fans perceive the workings of community and indeed what exactly the community is.

4.3.1. Members

Like many other forums, *Not606* provides details of each member's post number, in addition to where they live, how long they have been a member, 'points' that are allocated for posting and creating threads, and a subsequent 'level' of membership (see Appendix 3.) To join, forum users provide a minimal amount of personal information, which enables them to create a profile and hence post on the forum, in addition to creating their own threads and blogs.

One interesting observation concerning members is the way in which users are awarded points that directly relate to the amount of posts that have been made – essentially the input that a particular user has had to the forum. Ultimately, contribution is rewarded by a visible-to-all indication of that user's standing on the forum. While this is similar to the conventions of other forums, it nevertheless illustrates the value that is placed on users' continual involvement, and the fact that seemingly the quantity of posts, for example, can be indicative of the user's position and standing on the forum. This immediately evokes issues concerning fan attachment and commitment, as it is apparent that the amount a member posts provides an indication of involvement around a particular subject – in this case, football. This can lead us

to consider the relevance of fan participation, particularly in relation to other users, such as the difference in post numbers and the discourses that surround this – both of which will be explored in further detail later in the chapter. Supporting this, Hills' (2002) work identified fans as acting as subjects themselves, whereby they can be believed to be always performative, with the importance residing not just in what is being written by fans, but the actual actions of those writing it (2002: *xi*) and, in turn, the management that facilitates or limits this.

Of further importance is the significance of the term 'member' of the forum, as opposed to 'user.' *Not606* consistently refers to 'members', which can be argued to evoke ideologies in regards to the user being a part of something, such as a group or community, as opposed to someone who simply utilises or consumes a product. The emergence of this term, and its potential connotations, can be seen to arguably reflect discussion and debate concerning the contrast between consumerism and citizenship (Lewis, 2005.) Being deemed a 'user' of a product can potentially infer a 'top down' level of involvement, whereby there is little choice or power in the relationship between the product and its recipient. In contrast, citizenship has been said to imply a degree of active choice-making and conscious involvement (*ibid*), and this directly links to members of *Not606*, whereby fans actively elect to sign up to the forum by creating their profile, presumably from the motivation to contribute and interact with others, as opposed to being voyeurs or passers-by. We can hence further presume that those who contribute do so with the desire to communicate with other supporters of the same football team and who retain similar interests along with the element of active participation, as opposed to fans simply acting as consumers via other mediums that offer less possibility for contribution. The importance of this desire to join and become a member of a specific forum could imply that it is most likely that fans will then become involved and discuss their affiliation and dedication to the object/s of fandom, resulting in a potentially harmonious community due to shared interest and mutual involvement, however through analysing the forum we can question as to whether this is fully apparent.

The very fundamentals of forums, however, have been defined as enabling users and members to gravitate around a particular subject that results not just in discussion, but, importantly, in debate. The online forum has been referred to as retaining participatory aspects of fandom while allowing the construction of coherent identities (Lewis, 1992: 3), implying that users participate through shared interests. However, it can be argued that

forums are, at times, quite the opposite, with fans contesting and debating affiliation and authority. Hence, it is not just mutual appreciation that is acknowledged, but also a constructed discourse surrounding knowledge, experience and input that surround specific points of discussion, further presenting the forum as a medium through which cultural expressions of identity are manifested and contested.

The significance of such debates regarding online forums – while also being the subject of past theoretical analyses – encourages us to look further at emerging aspects of forum management, and – to use a more medium-specific term – moderating. Indeed, if a forum attracts a diverse range of members debating certain issues relating to aspects such as commitment and support, then it can be argued that there needs to be a particular enforcement or constructed control in place to assist in organising the ensuing interactions, and it is this which will be discussed in reference to specific and relevant findings from *Not606*.

4.3.2. Moderators and Management

On *Not606*, certain members take on ‘moderator’ positions, and these are assigned a role that enables them to edit, delete and essentially manage a range of posts and threads in order to implement an element of control throughout the forum. Indeed the very term ‘control’ implies that there are invariably measures in place that assign a structure of authority, whereby other members vote to choose who they deem to be more suitable. Moderators on *Not606* have their status identified on their profile, which is subsequently visible to all. From this, it is clear that there is a spectrum of identities and experiences throughout the forum, providing proof of the complexities surrounding different members and their positions (Hills, 2002.)

Throughout the forum, there is regularly a wealth of discussion about the issue of forum management, with this emphasising the significance of moderators and how the roles of such are understood to be of importance to the construction of the forum. Certain threads are dedicated to discussing who should moderate and how this should be executed, and indeed – while it is the case that members have a certain degree of input in regards to the initial election of moderators – there is furthermore a range of perspectives when it comes to

particular instances of forum control and the potential suitability of certain members to play a part in this. One post concerning the recent appointment of a moderator stated:

Well done, another good quality read. Thanks for taking the time and effort to write the match day threads and also take on the role of moderator... you're doing a grand job (22.09.11)

This clearly demonstrates the manner in which users perceive moderators to take on an active role, bringing to light issues of authority and subsequent approval from other members. In this instance, the moderator's position is praised, with reference to 'job' highlighting the manner in which moderators are constructed as serving a defined purpose. In turn, this constructs the moderators as retaining a source of empowerment and specific authoritarian identity (Lewis, 1992: 5.) What is of further significance is the way in which members self-impose the structure of author – not just from the initial recommendation and subsequent votes for moderator election, but also through the manner in which moderator activity is subject to the reaction and continual feedback from other forum members. While some moderator activity is praised and constructed as a necessary means through which the forum output is controlled, there too remains criticism and concern that is regularly voiced. This criticism tended to focus on moderator activity that is seen to be unnecessary, such as moderators deleting posts that were deemed offensive, or 'locking' threads to prevent any further discussion. While this is invariably subjective opinion which often resulted in debates among members themselves, there was nonetheless regular consensus that moderators were repeatedly eager to involve themselves in the majority of threads and discussions. As one member said:

I see you as now becoming very dictatorial and taking your role as a mod too seriously... the mods are all getting too heavy handed (24.10.11)

Such statements on the forum could be argued as illustrating an 'us and them' mentality as moderators are referred to as '*the mods*' (own italics), hence being constructed as potentially in contrast, or opposition, to other members. These positions are repeated throughout the forum, with there being praise when moderators' actions are understood to be appropriate or necessary, but similarly held under scrutiny during times when their input is questioned. There seemingly has to be a balance between the actions of moderators being seen as

appropriate, but likewise not too 'heavy handed', and the level of discussion concerning this is acknowledged through threads that are created with the sole purpose of encouraging discussion surrounding the ways in which the forum is run, with this being wholly related to the influence and input of moderators, particularly in regards to members that are deemed to be disruptive to the forum's 'community.' In addressing such disruption, it is firstly necessary to understand what is perceived as normal and acceptable behaviour on *Not606*. Exploring negotiations of power and normative behaviour was the focus of Bennett's (2013) work on 'Droolers' on REM forum Murmurs.com. Bennett found that there were instances of intracommunal oppositional identities, which linked to how certain members were believed to be non-compliant with the normative discourse constructed on the forum. For *Not606*, there is a clear set of written rules (see Appendix 4), and in addition to those clearly constructed, there is likewise the main indication for members to populate the forum with relevant discussions that nonetheless maintain the central value of respect, which can be seen to reflect Czikszentmihalyi's argument that the fundamental purpose of a group is people being 'all in it together' despite any disputes and conflict that may arise (2002). Adding to this, Thornton's study of club cultures (1995) built upon Bourdieu's forms of capital by constructing the notion of 'subcultural capital', further exploring the 'complex stratifications and mobilities of contemporary youth culture' (1995: 92) that is involved in producing clubbers' subcultural identities. Thornton presents the concept of 'subcultural ideologies' in constructing individuals as being not 'anonymous members of an undifferentiated mass' (*ibid*), but rather entailing claims of authority and the presumption of inferiority of others (1995: 10.) Such perspectives allow us to further propose the significance of exploring the apparent divisions and characteristics of identity, particularly when this is constructed in potential opposition to others.

When relating this to *Not606.com*, we can see that there is a significant amount of discussion that is dedicated to covering the management of the forum and moderators' roles, as opposed to specifically football topics, illustrating how the construction of communities and individual positions within this is something that is played out throughout the forum itself, and not limited to outsider observation. Some of the most popular threads on *Not606* focus on the positions of members and the relevance of having moderators whose actions are considered both suitable and beneficial to the 'future' of the forum. Such issues will be explored in greater detail later in the chapter, however it is first necessary to address one of the principal ways through which moderator activity is subject to scrutiny. This is when they

are addressing specific issues on the board, such as individual disruption from other members.

One of the main ways through which moderator activity is dissected and debated is when the issue is raised of banning members and the role that authority members have in allowing who is able to post on the forum, especially when dealing with threads that are regarded as going 'off topic'. It is interesting to acknowledge how there is a significant amount of discussion awarded to the impact of threads that stray away from football themes, however, in doing so, it is apparent that members themselves are creating threads that deviate from the forum's intended purpose. During the time of analysis, there were over ten threads created that served the purpose of discussing the running of the forum and in particular the role of moderators.

To further explore the significance of the moderators on *Not606* and the overall construction of forum management, we can look specifically at a case study of a particular thread in which members discussed and debated the issue of removing - or 'banning' - a particular member. The member in question was said to constantly 'misuse' the forum with their actions going beyond the normative intentions (Bennett, 2013) of the forum; aspects that allow us to explore the establishment of group 'norms' throughout *Not606* and subsequent codes of practice (Baym, 2000.)

4.4. Case Study: 'What Went Wrong' (24.10.11)

One of the fundamental ways in which *Not606* is constructed is through the regular discussions surrounding the control and management of members. A key way to explore the discourse and issues that arise concerning this is to consider a particular case study of one thread on the forum. A thread that attracted in excess of one hundred replies was entitled 'What Went Wrong' (24.10.11) and was formed in response to a member whose posts were deemed to be both disruptive and problematic. The member was said by one to 'poison the board every time they visited'; with another member stating that they 'bombard the forums with insults and lies.' The thread concerned a number of posts that had been deemed provocative and were understood to be deviating away from the forum's intended purpose. This resulted in a debate surrounding whether or not the member in question should be banned, and what should be the appropriate course of action with the level of discussion clearly reflecting Jenkins' (1992) observation of passion surrounding disputes. What followed

was a clear divide between those who believed that the member should be 'removed' from the forum, with posting rights revoked, and those who felt that the input did not warrant that reaction. This further brings to light the contrasting perceptions surrounding member behaviour and how others interpret this, in addition to the intervention of moderators and any potential banning implementation, with these issues being seen as key throughout previous research into online communities, such as Bennett's (2011; 2013.)

What can be additionally seen is that the issue of banning went far beyond addressing the one particular incident itself, and rather involved numerous members presenting their opinions. As such, the disagreement and debate was occurring within a shared frame of reference (Jenkins, 1992), allowing us to illustrate how such action relates to the wider workings of the forum, further supporting Jenkins' argument that such aspects would constitute a 'tacit agreement about what is worth asking' (1992), proven through a wealth of posts being dedicated to the subject of banning, clearly constituting this as an aspect of collective concern, indicating what the fans are 'about' as a community.

Interestingly, there was actually very little discussion surrounding what the poster was alleged to have specifically done, or reference to any actual threads; rather the discussion developed to focus primarily on the issue of moderation itself, with one member in support of banning stating:

I don't see why he shouldn't be banned. Personally, I ignore him, but if the majority want him banned then that is fair (24.10.11)

This can be seen to highlight the relevance of looking at the input and opinions of the majority and what can be regarded as the general consensus of various members, with this being reflective of the democratic procedures put in place to elect the forum's moderators and how these develop to consider retention issues of current members. In this instance, potentially opting to ban a member from *Not606* could be seen to be an issue that should be discussed by other members and not just subject to a decision made by a moderator, with this illustrating the significance of members potentially having involvement in decision-making on the forum, particularly when compared to moderators, whose actions can be seen to be routinely scrutinised, assessed and discussed. As such, peoples' sense of fandom throughout the forum can be established as not 'floating free' of frames of reference, and instead subject

to and tested by aspects that infiltrate the whole forum, with members indicating that they are the kinds of fans who are valuing open, yet respectful, discussion.

The 'What Went Wrong' thread developed to include discourses surrounding 'accepted' and 'normative' behaviour, with this being interpreted as typical and ideal standards and modes of practice (Bennett, 2011) and in turn, there was evidence of de-authenticating those who act in conflict to normative behaviour (see Bishop and Jaworski, 2003.) Members discussed the way in which certain behaviour could reflect and present the overall community, despite such actions being generally accepted as input from a small minority. As one member stated, 'there are more decent fans on here than twats, so please don't tar us all with the same brush.' The significance of this lies in the fact that members can be seen to clearly discuss the relevance of how the actions and input of certain forum members could be seen to be potentially indicative of more negative perspectives, allowing the construction of homogeneity to be raised in relation to whether the frowned upon actions of a few were reflective of the members *en masse*.

This process allows us to further consider how the forum is constructed in relation to the importance of minority member groups presenting a picture that is potentially reflective of all, bringing to light the role of the audience, and those who view what is presented on the forum, in relation to overall understanding of the forum and the opinions voiced. We can question who it is that can be perceived to matter in regards to viewing the discussions and debates, and whether this could be understood to be other football fans of alternative forum sections, any 'newcomers' to the forum, or passers-by. Indeed, what is interesting here is the way in which a forum can be constructed as allowing for continual interaction and contribution from a varied audience, contrasting with UGC such as blogging, where there is arguably one or more principle auteur, presenting distinct content to a set audience. In contrast, I would argue that the forum's audience is blurred containing members, lurkers (Hine, 2000: 25) voyeurs and management, presenting the medium as complex and varied in enabling myriad forms of communication among myriad identity spectrums (Hills, 2002.)

What is relevant to this is the way in which *Not606* is potentially presented as being only viewed by members themselves, and not 'outsiders', with little indication of members referring to any other audience other than themselves, adhering to Hormoen's observation

that: 'in the forums, we assume that participants produce comments that they expect to be read mainly by other supporters of the club' (2012: 162.)

Such issues are present when we analyse the manner in which such discourse is constructed. The 'What Went Wrong' thread developed to look in turn at the arguable irony involved when a thread that is encouraging involvement and interaction from members in regards to a central discussion point is threatened with closure, particularly when this purports to be done so for the 'good' of the forum. The poster in question, whose actions were under scrutiny, responded in part to the debate by claiming that banning - as a method of intervention from moderators - is essentially redundant when considering the limited general input that the poster had on the forum:

As you are all so aware, I so rarely visit your board, banning me - as you are suggesting - would be absurd (24.10.11)

The importance here lies in two aspects; firstly, the poster refers to the forum as being arguably owned, or possessed, by the other members through the stating of 'your board', implying that the poster is seemingly constructed as an outsider in contrast to the majority of members. Secondly, the poster alleges that banning is 'absurd' due to the fact that it would not be a deterrent for someone who has little involvement on the forum in the first place. This is significant as it highlights how banning, as a method of control, could be interpreted as futile unless it is implemented on a member whose input is regular, and who arguably wants to retain his or her involvement. What is further interesting is that while there is a certain degree of theory surrounding people voluntarily leaving fan communities (see, for example Margalit, 2008) in addition to the closure, or cessation, of fan forums (see Whiteman and Metivier, 2013) there is little exploration of banning and the removal of fans from specific fan communities by other fans. While there is the argument that communities are fluid and open to change (Brown et al, 2008: 307), implying that members can articulate who makes up their community, with such perspectives evolving, or changing over time, there is little consideration for those who are extradited from specific communities and do not leave of their own accord.

To refer back to the specific incident of banning, despite such approaches being questioned by some, there were other members who believed that banning was the only viable option. As one fan said:

[he] bombards the forum with insults and lies... ruins any good debate or topic raised here. Whilst I enjoy the banter, and occasionally the support shared between our clubs, this guy is simple an abusive idiot. This site will be a better place without him (24.10.11)

Indeed, this can lead us to question how, even if banning is contested as a principle way through which forum control can be executed, what other option would be viable. Clearly, with the issue of banning commanding such a level of opinion from others, it can allow us to understand that in itself it is perceived as a 'last resort' in exceptional circumstances, with there perhaps being little else to implement. As another member stated:

He comes on to every thread and derails it. Every thread has become the same -petty squabbles about nothing in particular and it's boring as shit. I like to talk about football. If he wants to wind people up and talk shit then bugger him. For years, he's been doing it and everybody has always said 'oh, it's okay', but it's consistently spoiling threads so sod it. I didn't want to ask for this... (24.10.11)

This indicates how, to some, while banning a member from a forum may be understood as ineffective depending on that individual's active involvement, it is still perceived as the only feasible option. Continually, discussions arise concerning the execution of power by the moderators and the significance of this, and while there is the primary issue concerning banning certain users on the forum, there is likewise a preoccupation with the construction of power by the moderators and the overall significance of this. To some, the influence and intervention from moderators is arguably no better than the actions of those who are being discussed:

I don't know who the mods are anymore, or why I bother, but there does seem to be a fair amount of big egos on here (24.10.11)

And indeed there is a degree of discussion that revolves around how moderators operate on the forum, with particular emphasis on intervention on certain threads and discussions.

Furthermore, some members voiced their concern at certain moderators who were believed to amend and edit posts in line with what was perceived to be acceptable forum content:

Mods are allowed to edit posts if there is an actual reason to do so, however changing what people say to have a laugh stinks of someone who isn't mature enough to be a moderator of other users who happen to be just as childish as they are (24.10.11)

Such behaviour, while reportedly executed by a minority of members, was nonetheless believed by many to evoke issues of mistrust, and was inappropriate enough to allow members to question the moderator 'status':

If [they have] been altering the posts, then the site is ruined. His mod status should be taken from him, or he should do the decent thing and leave (24.10.11)

This is significant as it illustrates how - while there is still discussion developing concerning the potential banning of problematic members - an element of members' concern centres around the issue of the role of moderators. Whereas banning can be contested among certain members in regards to its effectiveness and the issues surrounding this, such debates can be seen to be furthered to look at the additional implications of moderator intervention, and the general positioning of senior or 'authority' members in contrast to other 'normal' users of the forum, linking in with the discourses surrounding hierarchies and how the correct, respectful behaviour for authority members is constructed. Indeed, the role of moderators is something that regularly arises throughout discourse concerning membership and control on *Not606* by members themselves. It is apparent that certain members question moderator actions, with this being particularly apparent during forum discussions such as that of banning specific members.

While the specific thread concentrated on banning a particular member, what can be seen is that further issues emerge concerning members themselves and their positioning on the forum. There was continual discussion on the 'What Went Wrong' thread about the member in question and whether or not they should be removed from the forum, but, arguably just as importantly, was the level of discussion that was dedicated to addressing not just moderator roles, but also the positions of other members and how this related to the wider workings of the forum. Regularly, members were seen to look at their own identity and roles on the

forum, and how this is relevant when considering issues of contestation or debate, such as banning. As one member stated, 'some of us are victims of our own tendency to bite', which illustrates how there is a degree of self reflection undertaken when considering the relevance of members' roles in relation to others who are deemed to deviate from 'normative' and expected behaviour on the forum. Such acknowledgement illustrates the importance of more typical members being aware of the role that they play in the wider workings of the forum. Instead of interpreting potentially deviant behaviour as being in opposition to more accepted levels of interaction and involvement, there is an element of majority responsibility.

However, while some member/s can be perceived to assess their role/s in relation to specific members' behaviour, there are likewise others that reject potential responsibility, opting instead to focus on their specific instances of deviant input:

I'm damned if I'm going to walk on eggshells. If anyone comes on here insulting me, my city, my football club, or my fellow Jacks, then they run the risk of receiving something in kind (24.10.11)

What can be seen to evolve from this is the importance of the discourses that arise surrounding the reactions from *Not606* members when addressing the issue of banning. As one member states, 'thing is, we're all squabbling, so he's got what he wants', with this being seen to be important for two reasons: firstly, there is the relevance of the debates between members surrounding banning that can be believed to be of just as much importance to some as the original contested posts themselves, and, secondly, how this can lead us to consider and address the importance of the forum operating as a potential community through discourses surrounding the apparent threat to any harmony between the group of members. We can further examine the interpersonal interaction between members and how the responses play out (Meyrowitz, 1985: *x*) particularly the significance of this being throughout virtual spaces of consumption (*ibid.*) The relevance of this lies in the fact that there is clearly a construction of a community on the forum in relation to the collective group of likeminded individuals gravitating around a particular subject, and furthermore in line with previous work that has defined communities as arena where people are 'all in in together' (Czikszenmihalyi, 2002.) As such, the internet - and forums in particular - operate as non-static texts that allow users to not only consume, but rather incorporates more regular participation than most other forms of mass media (Crawford, 2004: 141.) The internet,

therefore, is further constructed as a cultural text and not simply a site for passive consumption (*ibid.*)

4.4.1. Banning and the *Not606* Community

When looking at the 'What Went Wrong' thread, it was apparent that - in addition to discussions and debate surrounding the specific banning issue - there were further aspects being brought to light concerning the overall role of other members and the construction of *Not606* as a forum. While members discussed the options concerning implementing control on the forum and what moderators could deem appropriate, there were certain members who furthermore presented alternative means of action. One member suggested creating a specific thread with the sole purpose of allowing problematic users a certain space that can be occupied, with all relevant posts being 'moved' there by moderators themselves. This option was posted by a member who referred to the problematic poster as being 'disruptive' towards the 'community' on the forum - illustrating how non-normative behaviour is constructed and interpreted as differing from typical consensus and involvement (Bennett, 2013.) Of further relevance is the demonstrated interpretation of a collective *community*, in contrast to a group of myriad opinions and perspectives. By presenting the forum's members as being a community *between themselves*, it invariably evokes issues concerning belonging and fitting, whereby members are deemed to all seemingly contribute to a set of ideals and behaviour, which is executed through one particular medium, contrasting with perceptions identified previously in the work, such as the fan occupying space as an 'obsessed loner' (Lewis, 1992) or a 'scandalous category' subject to anxiety and ridicule (Jenkins, 1992.)

This is further apparent when we look at examples posted by certain members who refer to others as being able to 'collectively deem' whether a user's actions are disruptive, particularly when they are for little other reason than their own amusement. Such language reflects how - similarly to previous discussion points about the issue of banning - the majority of members should have a say over any action taken. In addition to this, there is no doubt significance in the power of not only numbers, but also the overall group and community operating as a unified entity, potentially in opposition to disruptive and deviant behaviour of members who, nonetheless, make up that very community. To summarise, while it can be understood that there exists majority opinions that often push certain movements and decisions, such as the

election of moderators, there is nonetheless a construction of an entire collective through which the importance of the forum as a whole, lies.

When analysing the concept of the 'community' and its relevance in relation to *Not606*, we can look at issues concerning the manner in which certain members are perceived as jeopardising the forum and its intended purpose. Throughout the 'What Went Wrong' thread, there were often references to the impact of the poster when compared to the typical threads and input by other members. The importance of this lies in how it reveals the conventions of the forum, where normative practices and behaviour dictates whether or not the forum retains harmony. Referring to a specific incident where the poster in question was regarded as singling out a specific member and creating an argument, the member stated:

I'm glad you mentioned the word community, that's what I feel hasn't been happening when people get abused. He hasn't had the right support from HIS community, i.e. you and other moderators. Where was his community when that happened? (24.10.11)

Such comments, while providing instances of debating and contesting personal relationships (Jenkins, 1992: 23) furthermore echo previous sentiment about the notion of the forum being constructed in a manner that implies a community, as opposed to simply a group of people, tying in with Margalit's observation of fandom as being a community that contributes to the wellbeing of the individual fan and to his/her sense of belonging (2008: 222.) Indeed, while a number of people - or members - on a forum can have separate input on certain posts or threads, what is important to acknowledge is the way in which *Not606* demonstrates members acting as a collective. Whether this is apparent through the democratic 'voting' processes in place when electing moderators, or deciding on appropriate courses of action, there are continual examples of members operating together to both direct the forum, and also arguably support each other in certain situations. These actions, then, clearly demonstrate the construction of a community as satisfying work by Lewis (1992) who referred to a community as being an 'environment that is supportive and protective, while also offering identity' and not operating as resistance activity (Taylor, 1999: 161.) This can be supported by information provided through the supplementary interviews, whereby members often explained that being part of a forum meant they felt 'part' of something, again reflecting discourses emerging from observations from the forum. When considering how members can be constructed as 'belonging' to a particular community, we can consider how this ties in to

notions of conflict, as discussed by scholars such as Lucy Bennett, whose work into REM fan forum Murmurs.com explored the manner in which certain fans were 'othered' in relation to issues of normativity and, ultimately, expectancy (2009). This illustrates how there are often aspects of discord on the forum, emphasising how this is not limited to 'othering' those who are outside of it (Herrnstein Smith, 1988.)

While there is ultimately a certain degree of disagreement and, at times, conflict concerning specific issues on *Not606* - such was the case with the overall banning debate - there is nonetheless a more general understanding that members should 'stick together' against those that threaten the forum's core purpose and, arguably, its values. Such sentiment supports theory surrounding communities as retaining like-minded individuals and is reflected in statements such as:

I did enjoy it when this thread started... comrades in arms, us against them and all in it together - a rather unparalleled uniqueness for footie fans (01.11.11)

Through exploring such sentiment we can both address the apparent division that is evident between existing members of the forum, and likewise the way in which such normative behaviour can be believed to contrast to traditional expectations of football fans. The importance of this resides in the fact that, like previously discussed points earlier in the chapter, there is an apparent degree of self-reflexivity by members of the forum in relation to their positioning in contrast to an expected construction; in this instance, the football fan. By presenting football fans as being 'in it together' and this being an 'unparalleled uniqueness', it clearly presents *Not606*'s members as acting in opposition to typical constructions of football fans (Crabbe, 1999.) While it can be questioned whether such discourse is unique to the topic at hand, or reflective of more general perceptions, there is still the relevance of the perceived reaction from the forum's members, and subsequent community, as a whole. When related to the 'What Went Wrong' thread, it can be seen that there was not only a divide among members as to whether or not the poster should be removed, but also debate concerning the type of reaction from other members that was received:

[they] fly in, makes some retarded comments, gets us all arguing then probably sits back in his chair in front of his screen and is chuffed because, for the first time in the pathetic fucker's life, people are actually giving a shit about a contribution he has made (24.10.11)

This highlights how the reaction from members is important, and how it is not just the actions of the poster in question that was being contested, but the relevance of the reaction from others and how this potentially reflects the forum in general:

We are all aware of certain individuals who have agendas, which do not fit in with the ethos of this board. By and large we are a gregarious, welcoming group. Indeed visitors from other clubs take great pains to tell us how much they admire and respect Swansea City and its supporters, and that's us, by the way (24.10.11)

Such statements lead us to explore the apparent 'ethos' of the board by questioning the reaction from members when certain behaviour is deemed to operate as part of an agenda in contrast to its desired workings. The language here clearly develops previously raised points concerning normative behaviour and those in opposition 'not fitting in' and how this should be understood to be isolated, minority cases that are not reflective of Swansea City fans or the club in general, furthered by another member stating that 'we and the club can do without you.'

The community's relevance can be furthered when we consider the way in which communities can be believed to be significant to individual football fans. When addressing this in relation to Aberdeen football fans, Roddy Bisset stated that:

From the perspective of the fan, each team invents its own collective personality and trait: it is not relevant whether these stereotypes are positive or negative (2013)

This is important as it implies that the significance of a community doesn't necessarily consist of it having to satisfy overriding positive presentations of fans, but does have to be unique in regards to the team in question. Despite this, however, there are numerous instances throughout *Not606* of fans discussing the manner in which Swansea City fans are renowned for demonstrating commendable behaviour. Indeed, the significance of Swansea City fans being respected and admired because of their conduct can be seen to highlight the importance of the forum being a means through which fan behaviour is witnessed and potentially judged. Similar to previous points addressed earlier in the chapter concerning *who* it is that observes actions and developments on online forums like *Not606*, this can be seen to be further

relevant when discussing the community as a whole and the relationship between individual members and the collective of fans. The relevance of such fan behaviour can relate to instances of performance-based displays (Jenkins, 1996) and allows us to question how this sits in relation to visible actions, as opposed to private messaging, for example. We can further consider whether this potentially reflects the displays of fandom outside online communities, tying in with aspects of chanting and the carnivalesque atmosphere of stadiums (Blake, 1999.)

However, while we have discussed at length the relevance of the community both in regards to its interpretation and understanding from members themselves, in addition to its external perception by other audiences, there is likewise significant discourse concerning the way in which new users are 'welcomed' to the existing community. Indeed, it could be understandable to assume that such a community of individuals whose input is subject to continual feedback and influence of other members, may be quite structured in its retention of residual members and not open to new ones, tying in to Herrnstein Smith's argument of those outside of (offline) communities being 'othered' (1988.) However, this is typically not seen to be the case, as demonstrated through posts interpreting Swansea's fans as 'welcoming', for example, with similar sentiment surrounding the role and relevance of new members on the forum being repeated throughout numerous discussion points and topics, and this is something that will be explored next in relation to the overall forum's construction.

4.5. New Users: Welcome to the Board!

While *Not606* has a range of members who have been 'part' of the forum since its inception, there are those that are deemed to be 'new users' having signed up in later months. It is relevant to address and discuss the significance of new members to the forum, as it is apparent that, while it could be believed that existing members may not be keen on others joining an already strong community, there is instead evidence of a trend whereby members are keen to embrace new participants. As one stated:

Welcome to the board, it's good fun here... we usually have a bit of banter that sometimes goes off thread, but it's all good. Post what you like, when you like, and enjoy! All the jacks⁷ on here are great in fairness (13.01.12)

This demonstrates how there is evidence of members being welcoming towards new users, satisfying Crawford's observation that sports fans are often 'not exclusive in occupying space' (2004: 52.) Yet there is likewise evidence of fans feeling protective of the community when others threaten it, as was the case during the discussions and debates surrounding banning certain members. This allows us to question the significance of *who* it is that is encouraged to engage in *Not606* posts and threads, and to what degree the forum is open to any other participants. It could be argued that - if the forum could be construed as being protective of the direction in which certain discussions and topics go - then there would be a potential mistrust of new users, however typically this is not seen to be the case. There is continual support from existing members when it comes to new profiles being created, with members regularly contributing to threads that are created with the sole purpose of welcoming new members. Whether it is a simple 'welcome aboard', or a more detailed invitation to participate in the threads and share opinions and insights, it is quite apparent that new members play a pivotal part in ensuring the continuation of discussions on *Not606*. This is relevant as it highlights how there is seemingly no threat towards 'traditional' fans, allowing us to further question whether online activity can be seen to reflect offline. As Booth and Kelly (2013) found in their research into Dr Who fan activity, often online actions are extensions of offline, meaning that there is potentially little contrast. When relating this to the concept of new fans on the forum, we could question whether new fans are indeed welcomed in a similar manner, or constructed differently.

What is further evident is that through analysing the topics and discussions surrounding threads dedicated to new members, we can see an indication of the perception of the board itself from current members. To elaborate, while some members take the opportunity to welcome new members with a simple greeting, others can be seen to use it as a means to

⁷ Swansea City football fans are often referred to as 'Jacks' - a term that is also regularly used to describe those from and/or living in the city. It is believed to stem from the 'Swansea Jack' - a Newfoundland dog who lived in the North Dock area of the city during the 1930s and which was used as a rescue dog by local lifeguards. Over the course of its short life, the dog rescued numerous children and adults who had come into difficulty in the sea.

demonstrate certain conventions, or expectations, about the forum. This is evident through posts such as:

State your opinion, whatever it is, nobody is right or wrong on here as they are all just opinions. Have fun, as we're a friendly bunch who can have some heated debates... but we're all Jacks at heart (16.03.12)

The significance of this lies in the fact that there is seemingly a constructed perception of the forum as acting not just to host debates, but also to allow a congregation for those whose main interest and purpose for posting is due to being a 'Jack' at heart. Such sentiment is furthered by statements such as, 'you'll notice that even when it gets a bit tetchy on here... it's only because we care about the Swans', and indeed it is relevant to acknowledge that such recognition of the conduct and actions of existing forum members is at its most apparent when members are explaining the general functions and ethos of the forum to those who were previously 'outsiders' to the community, perhaps far more so than throughout discourse between existing members. Furthermore, these observations can be seen to go against dominating theory, such as that produced by Sandvoss, whereby fandom was alleged to manifest itself in territorial space (2005: 52) as fans can be seen to be open and willing to discuss opinion and perspectives regarding how the forum operates. While there is no doubt evidence of *Not606* retaining space that is predominantly occupied by members, there is seemingly little to imply that such space is 'territorial' in the sense that others are unable to participate or deterred from learning about its facets.

In considering the relevance of the community as a whole, we can also address the way in which the community is constructed, particularly in comparison to external groups of fans, or those which congregate offline. Bauman, (2007) referred to the concept of a 'cloakroom community', whereby communities are regarded as being 'commitment free' meaning anyone can enter or leave without there being the demands of the 'real thing'. In this respect, an online community could be constructed as being potentially less important, or valid, in comparison to those that are formed in 'real' life. However, this can be contested in regards to *Not606*, particularly if we consider Krovel's (2012) definition of a football fan community:

The identity and community of football fans are tested, constructed and reconstructed every week in the competition with other clubs. There are winners and losers, both among players

and fans. The psychological processes of identification is being tested over and over again (2012: 4)

This seeks to demonstrate how communities, irrespective of their positioning off or online, are all subject to the same interactions and experiences. This was further supported by findings from the interviews conducted with fans on *Not606* whereby a repeated reason for engaging online was due to being able to replicate offline fan habits, such as 'having banter' with other fans and sharing in celebration or commiseration.

What is further relevant to address is the significance of new members being constructed and portrayed as an essential component in the *survival* of the forum. Indeed, while we can discuss the significance of new members in relation to their positioning on an already existing community, what is vital to acknowledge is the role that new members can be perceived to play in allowing for the continuation of *Not606* and its future. This was something that was repeated throughout discussions surrounding the issue of banning, where the future of *Not606* regularly came in to debate. Previous statements from members such as: 'what will destroy the forum is the censorship of saying what you think, when you think it', which - aside from the issue of banning and the content in which the statement is said - still illustrates the significance of protecting the forum and ensuring its future, linking in with Margalit's notion of football fans all having a strong interest in the continuity of community (2008: 227). While there was initial discussion surrounding the issue of banning itself, this soon developed to look more in depth at the forum's survival, and instead of focusing purely on the arguably negative issues such as control over particular members' involvement, there was further talk about what could be deemed to be 'good' and beneficial to the forum, indicating the emphasis placed in ensuring that *Not606* thrives. As one member posted:

For a forum to grow, it takes all kind of personalities with different views. I've lost count of the times I've taken stick off people for having a different viewpoint and was mocked as a result (24.10.11)

This statement clearly illustrates how there is relevance placed by certain existing members on the type of input involved that will result in the forum not only surviving, but potentially *growing*. Indeed, while there may be complexities and fluidity in relation to the construction of the forum, its growth and survival is paramount, as stated by Margalit (2008) - 'the fans'

community is a modern one, and although it has transformed in some respects, it expresses its wish for continuance.' This is important as it can allow us to address the relevance of a forum being able to develop and involve more members and new users, but likewise retaining its self-imposed regulations and control over the continual output, such was the case with threads such as the banning debate. Likewise, this ties in with previously raised points regarding how forums could be seen to be sidelined in favour of social media, emphasising how there is the significance of forums developing in line with members themselves' aims and objectives. Unlike some theorists' observations that media forms such as online forums has resulted in communities expanding to be more like networks (Bennett, 2013), I would argue that from observations raised so far, the forum in question satisfies myriad definitions that demonstrate features pertaining to a construction of a coherent community.

As such, this calls to question what this indicates about the conventions of the forum overall, and the potentially contrasting discourses at play when it comes to retaining existing conventions but also welcoming new members. The overarching thread throughout this appears to be the importance of keeping the board active, with statements such as 'we need to keep the board active so that we can keep it alive, that's what it's all about' resonating throughout much of the discussion. This leads us to consider, then, how there is significance in the fact that the input from certain members who are deemed to be deviating from the forum's primary focus and potentially disrupting the board, are still nonetheless contributing to its content and can be regarded as playing a part in keeping the board alive. Indeed, the banning thread in question can be seen to have attracted in excess of 100 replies, making it one of the most popular threads that month. Such issues are of pivotal importance as there is the implication that, while members are seemingly dismayed at having to discuss issues surrounding the behaviour of others, the fact that such threads are attracting such a high degree of engagement and ensuring that the forum remains 'active', it could be argued that this is potentially more important than the actual intended discussion point itself. As the line, 'that's what it's all about' indicates - to some, ensuring that there are a certain number of active threads commanding regular input is central to the survival of *Not606*.

When considering the relevance of the survival of a certain space, it can be discussed as to how fandom is performed through this; being not just physically but also *socially* located (Sandvoss, 2005: 52.) Online communications have often been regarded as an ongoing creation and that which is manifested, challenged and recreated throughout negotiations

(Aden, 1999), and we can further this to address how this relates to fan activity as textual *roaming* as opposed to *poaching* (*ibid*, cited in Sandvoss, 2005: 18.) In relating this to the impact of the future of the forum, therefore, it can be seen that it is through continual fan involvement and direct action that *Not606* is believed to rely on. Alongside the significance of the impact of the future of the forum in relation to the conventions of the community, we can further discuss what exactly it is that can be understood to threaten its existence. Irrespective of the fact that there is a degree of discussion surrounding the role of moderators on the forum in dealing with aberrant behaviour, there is also the potential for other factors to act as possible threats, such as the significance of ownership of space and content and the availability of this to others. As one member stated, 'this board will only survive if it is user friendly, attractive and wide open to all', which signifies the importance of both keeping people on the forum, and also it being 'open' to all, and therefore not deterring others from joining. Of further significance here is how this allows the forum to be interpreted as oppositional to other new media networks, such as social media. As a forum is constructed to 'survive' and grow, we can propose that this is linking to physical and social locations. Sandvoss' conception of *heimat* - the feeling of belonging at a conceptual level as well as in physical space - (in Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007: 163) is particularly relevant here as it can indicate that growth and development of communities can occur socially as well as physically. When relating this to the forum, the very discourses encouraging its development and continuation can be seen to influence individuals' positioning and sense of community irrespective of the medium in question.

What is furthermore important here is the role of new fans in relation to the forum and how this arguably contrasts with conceptions surrounding new fans in football. While this will be discussed at greater length in later chapters, it is nonetheless appropriate to understand the role that new fans play on specific mediums. As was mentioned previously, whereas it could be believed that the integral factors of a forum lie in its content, there is still a huge significance in having a specific arena or medium through which such points are discussed, with this being apparent not just through discussion surrounding the role of moderators and the management of the forum, but rather the overall workings of the forum in relation to its appeal to new fans:

All this crap is driving people away from here. Some say it's the moderators, but I don't think that is the truth of the matter. Leave this area for us to speak about football and our club (24.10.11)

Such issues can be seen to create a divide between those who believe that moderator intervention - as discussed in previous sections - can be criticised in relation to the overall influence on the forum's development, and those who think that the amount of content dedicated to discussing the management of the thread is more so detrimental to *Not606*'s survival. What is apparent throughout is that a key theme underpinning such discussions is the importance of the forum being 'free' and 'open' in allowing the interaction and participation of both current and new members, and this is something that will be explored further in the following section.

4.6. Free Speech: Comment, Debate, Create... *Freely*

Through analysing some of the discussions surrounding banning and the implementation of moderator control on forum input, it can be seen that there is a high degree of rhetoric dedicated to free speech and how this is applicable to *Not606* and its members. Indeed, there appears to be a level of interest regarding exactly how speech should be controlled, and aside from the banning or removal of certain members from the forum, there is often discussion regarding how this activity relates to the ideologies surrounding freedom of speech in general. As *Not606*'s tag line 'Comment, Debate, Create...Freely' implies, there is an emphasis on not only contributing to the forum's content, but also in doing so in a free and open manner. It is seemingly because of this that there is an element of concern when this is threatened by certain constraints. At times, members could be seen to express their discontent at the manner in which the input of members was deemed to be restricted, with one stating:

I think it's unfair that on a site, which prides itself on free comment and debate, tongue in cheek banter is deleted. As I said earlier, only racism, etc. should be removed and unless an explanation is given as to why something has been deleted then I think it is poor moderating to do so (24.10.11)

Reflecting the discontent surrounding moderators' reactions to the banning or removal of certain members, such as discussed previously in the chapter, this sentiment can be seen to indicate that there is evidently a distinction between 'banter' which could be construed as being *tongue in cheek* and harmless, and discourses that are believed to be potentially disruptive to the community. Banter can be referred to as an element that forms part of the fundamental interaction and encounters of fans, particularly relating to constructions of anti-fandom in relation to specific teams or nations. As Kendall stated:

Text based communication limits the communication of information about selves and identities to textual description only. Participants must learn how to compensate for the lack of audio and visual cues. (2000: 259)

Indeed, it is relevant to acknowledge the significance of 'banter' as a means through which fans can be seen to interact and converse on online forums. The very term implies that there is an element of teasing or playful remarking, as opposed to content that could be deemed to be offensive. In constructing a distinction between 'banter' and other, more serious, comments, there is ultimately a divide created that demonstrates how members of the forum articulate what is regarded as acceptable, normative behaviour, in contrast to deviancy. As one member stated, 'having banter and fun on here replicates the terrace humour... you wouldn't stop that at a football match, would you?' and this is furthered by examples from interviews conducted with some members of *Not606* whereby banter was often cited as one of the reasons behind participating on the forum, in turn identifying the light-hearted interactions between fans as playing a significant role in constructing the community. This further indicates how there is acknowledgement between fans themselves of how the online self relates to offline practices (Booth and Kelly, 2013) and likewise the significance of controlling impressions that would be prevalent in any type of social interaction (Goffman, 1959.) When considering the concept of media richness (Daft and Lengel, 1986), this in turn allows us to understand the forum to retain a plethora of complexities not just in its construction as an entity, but in the construction of interactions between members themselves.

What is relevant here is not only how banter and interaction is deemed to be a major factor in daily discussions, including the issues surrounding banning and behaviour, but also how the actions on the forum are compared to imitations of offline, 'normative' behaviour outside of

online communities. Reflecting previously discussed points such as the significance of fan performativity throughout online communities and how this potentially could be compared to actions at football matches, for example, there too is the relevance of the forum operating to not only replicate but also enhance offline interactions.

In addition to this, it was apparent through observing some of the discussions developing that banter was regarded as an important aspect of football fan communication, with some members making statements like 'banter is as much a part of football as football itself', and such sentiment was reflected from the interviews, with fans explaining that part of the main reason they participate in online discussions is due to the 'banter' with other fans; both of the same team and also rivals. What can be questioned, however, is that if elements like banter, for example, are believed to reflect, replicate and at times reproduce the interactions and communication in 'real' communities, then how does this relate to the problems of interpretation throughout an online medium. Unlike 'real' life, the very nature of online interaction implies a faceless, often 'masked' form of conversation which is often anonymous and differing to face-to-face communication and connects to the exploration of how people wish to present themselves in cyberspace (Schau and Gilly, 2003.) Taking this potential for anonymity into account, it can be argued that there is the significance of not just the audience (Radmann, 2012) but also the actors and not only *who* the text/s are produced for, but the context of how the texts are visible. Radmann argued that the new media landscape has blurred the differences between 'onstage' and 'backstage', acknowledging the possibility of being constantly watched. I would further this to propose that the performances on forums are unique insofar as there are little other mediums that allow for such interaction to a range of audiences. While discussions concerning moderation and banning measures were seen to contain arguably private elements, this was all played out in a public domain, showing how methods of control are visible for not just the members themselves, but any prospective audience. To refer back to the concept of 'banter', this itself is something that is recognised by members themselves, with certain posts highlighting how it is difficult to achieve sarcasm and banter on forums, 'unlike outside encounters.' As one member stated, 'I'll always allow for interpretation online, it's difficult to convey sarcasm or banter if people can't see you winking or grinning like in real life', with this illustrating the importance of understanding that, even if online interaction can reflect behaviour and habits prevalent 'outside', there are nonetheless fundamental issues in regards to the differences in mediums, with such limitations being understood and communicated by members themselves. Such differences,

however, are not always limitations, as while forums can potentially not allow for certain constructions of communication, there are nonetheless elements similar to real life encounters, potentially even richer.

In addition to the relevance of banter, it can be argued that there is a high level of dependency on the forum's ability to operate a 'free' policy. To elaborate, there are regularly posts from certain members who emphasise the importance of having an area that allows for such input, with members claiming that *Not606* is 'a lot better and *freer* than the BBC site', (my italics), which further demonstrates how forums can be believed to be individually constructed in regards to the freedom of input and how this can be understood to differ between forums by members themselves and subsequently impact on the communication and participation of members. We can hence question the overall relevance of *why* a forum should be free, and what this can be seen to illustrate about the actions and conventions of forums in relation to what is, or isn't, allowed. When considering the discourse surrounding the issue of banning and the divide in opinion about such issues, we can further address the problem of trying to balance the apparent need for free speech with the previously discussed constraints and implementation of order that is considered to be so significant to certain members. As one member stated, 'freedom of speech is a noble human right, but unfortunately it also extends to those who choose to abuse it,' and this illustrates how there is an understanding from members themselves about the difficulties involved when attempting to manage the input on a forum in relation to the very ethos of what such mediums represent. Indeed, if there is to be a balance in place, there is nonetheless the further question of exactly *who* it is that is able to encourage or execute such management, and how this can be believed to perhaps go beyond issues of moderation and 'senior' applied members, and instead look on a more ground level at 'other' members and general roles and potential hierarchies that are in place. This is something that will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter, however it is still relevant to acknowledge the significance of freedom of speech in underpinning the discourses surrounding contributions to the forum. As highlighted by one member: 'keep up the good work, lads - freedom of speech is paramount for a forum like this...'

The issue of freedom of speech can be seen to involve a range of aspects, such as the significance of the *type* of interaction that is played out - in this case, the relevance of banter as a principle means through which fans communicate - and, furthermore, the issues surrounding the balance of 'free' communication that is nonetheless subject to a certain level

of moderation. While this is an area that could be explored in far more detail, it has been relevant to acknowledge and address in relation to how this operates as a dominant discourse throughout the overall construction of the community, and indeed the forum as a whole, acting as perhaps one of the main fundamental objectives of *Not606* in addition to respect. By exploring the significance of freedom of speech, we can see that this directly links to further aspects such as the potential ownership of the board and its content. While we have discussed the alleged non-territorial space in regards to new members being welcomed, there is still the issue of who exactly it is that can claim ownership over the community, not just in relation to who moderates and manages interactions and participation, but more so the positioning of exact discourses and members' relationship to each other.

4.6.1. 'This is *our* board': Issues of Ownership and the *Not606* Community

When discussing the importance of free speech in relation to the conventions of the forum, it can be seen how such issues connect to discourses surrounding the potential ownership of the board and entitlement to posting, for example. The discussions concerning members having the ability to freely discuss potentially controversial points directly indicates the significance of the control that is implemented throughout, particularly in regards to *who* can post and what content is deemed to be suitable as representative of *Not606*'s community. In acknowledging this, we can further address the relevance of board ownership, and how the forum can be constructed as 'belonging' to someone. Indeed, it can be seen that there is continual mention and emphasis of *belonging* to the forum - be it through the construction of its members as a 'community', or the reaction to members who are thought to deviate away from the forum's intended purpose; there are continual elements that indicate how the board is perceived to operate with its members all contributing to a set objective. With this, come the debates surrounding who it is that ultimately has a say over not just the content, but also the forum as a whole. As one member stated:

This is not 'our' board. I'm sure it's every member's board. It's just about Swansea and therefore is more likely to be filled with Swans fans (01.10.11)

This can be seen to identify the way in which certain fans interpret their positioning on the forum, linking with Radmann's (2012) concept of the public, open forum, which operates as a free arena for potentially anyone to participate in.

There appears to be importance attributed to the sense of belonging, but then this being contested in relation to who it is that oversees who the forum actually belongs to. For some members, they construct the forum as being their possession, with statements such as 'this is our board, and I am entitled to post on it', and this is particularly appropriate when addressing certain people who were deemed to be 'qualified to comment' (*ibid.*) This acts to construct a form of legitimised membership, whereby the forum is structured around a set community of members whose posts are subsequently analysed by others, with the importance of this residing in the fact that anyone can join and subsequently post on *Not606*, yet is subsequently subject to scrutiny in regards to the contribution that is being made. Such attitudes clearly divide members, as there is an indication from those who perceive the issue of ownership impacting on freedom of speech as being both integral to the forum's construction, and detracting from the ethos of *Not606*. This is supported by members saying that they didn't think they needed to have reasons for posting on an open, public forum; again bringing to light issues concerning the perception of the forum being open and accessible to all. Perspectives like this can be seen to be summed up by a statement from one member who declared, 'if you think I am wrong, well, I'm happy to discuss football' - a notion that clearly demonstrates the manner in which the forum can be believed to deviate from football discussion to instead focus on discourses encircling *Not606*'s construction.

In relating this to the forum's community, we can discuss how issues concerning ownership and freedom of speech potentially impact on the overall workings of the forum and the way in which members interact. It can be seen that, while there is continual debate surrounding the control of the forum, there is nonetheless an emphasis on the community that exists and the very reason that members participate in *Not606*. As stated by one member: 'we all have something in common - a love for Swansea City FC, and this is the glue that binds us', and indeed while it can be seen that ultimately the very reason that people are attracted to the forum is the mutual involvement with Swansea City, linking in with Sandvoss' (2005) observation of fan communities as 'sites of consumption', it is likewise the subsequent community that is formed through the collective grouping of members.

This relates to the work conducted by Roy Krovel (2012) into the construction of Norwegian football fans throughout new media. Krovel's work addressed the significance of looking at

new media forms in relation to football fans and furthermore developed the notion of the imagined community by stating that:

All members are of the same imagined community, in this case with a few shared norms and values. While the norms might change over time, they are grounded in respect for the current players in the team. The feeling of belonging to the same community helps bring about a respectful manner of communication among fans. (Anderson, 1991)

This further constructs the significance of 'respect' as a dominant factor throughout the forum. Statements such as 'don't let's spoil the camaraderie that does exist here' helps illustrate how the construction of the community is deemed to be of importance to members and potentially overrides the discussions that take place. It is interesting to acknowledge the wider community and the role that this plays on *Not606*, and furthermore the way in which such discussions can be seen to dominate on the forum. Indeed, it was during the threads concerning freedom of speech and the implications of ownership, that a point regarding football (the Swansea City versus Aston Villa match) was raised - with this being one of the first times that football itself had been mentioned as opposed to discussions centring on the conventions and debates of forum control and management. Such acknowledgements illustrate how the wider workings of *Not606* potentially override discussions about football, in turn dominating the forum in contrast with its alleged central subject. This is significant as it highlights how the forum as its own entity, or construction, is being construed as wholly relevant to members, demonstrated not just by members' discussion points, but also the manner in which football is seemingly side-lined in its favour. Such is the involvement and level of opinion surrounding the role and purpose of the forum, in addition to how it is managed, that members actively discuss these issues more regularly than Swansea City's matches.

However, while it can be acknowledged that there is an evident distinction between the level of discussion assigned to matches in comparison to the workings of the forum, there are nonetheless further elements that are discussed on *Not606* relating to the overall importance of the community between fans and how this relates to individual members. Indeed, as has been previously illustrated in earlier parts of the chapter, there is clearly significance placed on how *Not606* operates as a community, and it is therefore relevant to look further at the divide that is apparent between members who question the functions of the forum and how it

should be run, while also acknowledging how this relates to normative behaviour (Bennett, 2009.)

Relating to this are the ideologies surrounding what happens to deviant behaviour by certain members. As illustrated in previous threads concerning the issue of banning and how this plays a role in the construction of the forum as a whole, we can further develop these points to look at the apparent 'protection' of the board by certain members and reactions to those who potentially jeopardise its harmony and purpose. Such action and involvement allows us to illustrate the relevance of the construction of the community in relation to individual members and how this all helps to create a collective. As identified in previous points concerning the issue of banning certain members on the forum, it can be acknowledged that such actions ignite debate regarding the importance of revoking contributions to the board.

What can be seen is that the active removal of posting rights from a certain member cannot be understood as an individual issue, and rather is indicative of the potential impact that individual members have on the overall community of the forum. To elaborate, *Not606* can be identified as operating as a wider community of separate members, whose purpose is to contribute to a singular group and its objectives. We can question, however, not just what the actual purpose of the forum can be deemed to be, but also whether this is essentially attainable. If it could be argued that a forum's principal purpose is to retain a group of harmonious individuals whose contributions are primarily concerned with the topic at hand, then where would the element of discussion and debate reside? Is it entirely plausible to consider that a forum could act as an extension of individuals' opinions, yet retain elements of management and control without impeding opinions and subjectivity. Indeed, such questions can be seen to resonate throughout the discussions held by members with the issue of banning clearly being identified as something that divides members in relation to its purpose and influence. What is further relevant to acknowledge, however, is not just the act of removing someone from a forum and subsequent community due to certain behaviour, but the significance and impact of an existing member actively seeking to leave a community, and this is something that will be addressed in the following section.

4.7. 'Thinking of Calling it a Day': Leaving the *Not606* Community - 28/11/11

It can be seen that a huge emphasis is placed on the relevance of the community that is formed on *Not606*, particularly in relation to individual members and their personal contributions and interactions. In constructing a community of members, *Not606* allows for member to feel a part of something, and this is important to acknowledge not just in relation to the individual members' involvement with Swansea City FC, but also in how this is manifested throughout engagement and interaction with others. Such involvement can be seen to be further significant when it comes to members electing to leave the forum. While this chapter has previously looked at the manner in which members exercise elements of their involvement with the football club and how the dimensions of the forum are relevant in relation to this, it is likewise important to acknowledge the relevance of members not only feeling a part of the forum, and community, in the first place, but the issues involved when members seemingly choose to leave and the effect this can have on the forum's dynamics.

One of the most relevant series of posts in relation to this was a topic entitled 'Thinking of Calling it a Day', whereby a member - who had been part of the forum for many years and actually retained a moderator position - created a thread to seek input and advice from others over his decision. The thread was instigated by the member's reaction to a series of posts from others; some of which were deemed to be disruptive and reflecting the forum in a negative light. Posts such as: 'I don't want to be associated with this forum anymore', clearly illustrate the way in which certain members can be seen to interpret the content on the forum as indicating the positioning and perspectives of individual members. What followed was a series of posts from others whose aim was to change the opinion of the member and ensure that they stayed, with statements such as 'don't let them drive away a super moderator', indicating how there is evidently a divide between the actions of minority members on the forum in relation to those who maintain a respected standing: in this case, the member in question wanting to leave retained a moderator position.

What is further relevant throughout such discussion is the manner in which members can be seen to engage with each other, not just in opposition to certain other members, but also when it comes to directing the forum in a particular way. One member referred to others as being 'virtual mates', indicating how the relationship between members on the forum potentially reflects those that are formed offline (Booth and Kelly, 2013), indicating the type of

connections between members that can be seen to have been formed irrespective of members not interacting outside of *Not606*. While there is the possibility of relationships forming between members, there is still the issue surrounding the implications that form when conflict arises. Throughout the 'Thinking of Calling it a Day' thread, there was continual conversation surrounding the response from the moderator in question in relation to posts from others, and how this impacts on their decision to remain a member. The moderator stated that they 'didn't need the hassle', of remaining a member, which further illustrates the manner in which - to some - the forum can be constructed as causing stresses that potentially override any benefits of membership. This is something that evoked reactions from others who were quick to support the moderator in their decision, but likewise aim to respond to the criticism of how minority input has affected the forum as a whole. As one member stated:

I haven't read these comments, but I must say one thing... you're a valued and honourable poster on here and I have immense respect for your views and debating skills. We have our ups and downs, but I think we both know it is sometimes just a case of the irresistible force meets the immovable object. There is nothing but admiration from me towards yourself and the way you look after the board. I may have a moan now and again, and indeed be a bit of a pain, but I respect and value your input on here. Please reconsider your stance. (28.11.11)

Such sentiment is further supported by statements from others, such as:

This board needs people like you. You bring balance and are fair-minded. I regard you as one of the most valued members. If it wasn't for the likes of you and the rest of the BBC 606 massive then I would not have come to this forum. (28.11.11)

This clearly highlights how, while there is the clear construction of the forum as a community, there is still nonetheless a high level of emphasis placed on the importance of individual members. In this case, the moderator in question is interpreted by some as playing a large role in the forum being as it is, and further statements that refer to the board as the '*Not606* family' help to support this. In doing so, there is continually the promise that others will respect and support the individual's decision while ultimately exercising concern over the potential future of the forum; something that dominated previous discourse surrounding the direction in which the forum could be seen to go and the influence that certain members can have over this. This is further apparent through statements such as 'it is the likes of you and

others that keep a balance on forums like this', and 'without people like you, this would simply have become a platform for uneducated sensationalism and sheer bad manners.' And this seeks to emphasise previous points made concerning how moderators - despite creating divides in relation to how such involvement should be executed - are still predominantly perceived to be operating for the good of the forum in implementing necessary elements of control. Of further relevance to this is how, as mentioned previously in the chapter, online communities can be believed to reflect those created offline, with the communities often consisting of those who would meet in 'real' world scenarios (Clerc, 2000.) In developing this, we can question the significance of members leaving the community as potentially indicating behaviour that transcends the boundaries of the medium. Margalit (2008) argued that fandom means having no real exit, developing this to state that:

Infrequently, a fan may cease to be a fan; at a deeper level, however a true fan will not be able to find any viable substitute to replace the 'old flame' and will be viewed by former friends as a deserter, if not a traitor. (2012: 227)

However, while there is little indication of voluntary 'exits' from online communities being explored in depth, there are instances throughout the forum of members viewing the moderator as a deserter, with some members reacting that they 'never had him down as a quitter', indicating that there was an element of disrespect in relation to the choice being made; a factor which is crucial when considering the key tenets of the forum's purpose.

The importance also lies in how the discussions surrounding the moderator actively leaving the forum resulted in a split of opinion. This was acknowledged by members themselves, but despite this implying a potential divide throughout the community, instead actually inspired discussion surrounding how such differing views aid to construct the forum itself:

Having a different view is what stimulates debate; everyone agreeing about the same thing means a forum isn't worth bothering with... what's the point? (28.11.11)

This clearly shows how such communication all helps to form the nature of the forum in relation to it operating as an arena that allows, and indeed at times inspires, debate amongst its users. However, while there is evidently an appreciation of this being enabled and encouraged among members, there is seemingly a limit to disagreement and debate,

particularly when this can be regarded as pointless and detrimental to the forum, with statements such as 'viciousness and pointless attacks will eventually kill off healthy debate and banter', emphasising how there is a fine line between what can be understood to be beneficial, relevant debate, and that which is regarded as unnecessary and damaging. Indeed, when discussing such issues, it appears that - similarly to the threads concerning banning and the ideologies surrounding this - one of the principle concerns is the lack of 'respect', which is seemingly exercised by certain members. Such sentiment reflects the issues discussed previously regarding aspects of typical and expected behaviour, with respect being identified as a primary way through which members articulate their normal positioning.

Following on from this is the relevance of one of the moderators leaving, as opposed to a 'normal' member. This is indicated by statements from other members referring to the moderator as 'retiring' from their position, bringing to light how such a position is construed by others as reflecting a position of authority, and also how it operates as a job with responsibilities towards others, and indeed the forum as a whole. In constructing this specific form of positioning, not only does it further create evidence of distinction between the different types of membership, but it also brings to light indication of how the forum is constructed around individuals playing specific roles in relation to the overall community. What is further relevant to address is the way in which this relates to issues of hierarchy in relation to the positioning of members throughout the forum, as demonstrated by one fan's post:

A forum like this should be about fans' opinions. I personally don't get the hierarchy on these forums but I respect people like you who govern or police the sites. You put a lot of energy in to it which we should all respect you for. (28.11.11)

Clearly, statements such as this indicate how there is an acknowledgement of hierarchies by members themselves and that this is not something that is only apparent through an analytic perspective. As such, it is necessary to further explore these issues in relation to any emerging discourses that are apparent, all of which help to construct the community.

4.8. Hierarchies

As seen in the previous section, the notion of hierarchies on the forum is something that has arisen in discussion among members, and it is this wrangling for status and legitimacy (Whiteman, 2009: 392), which can be seen to relate to social negotiations of identity. While this was apparent throughout some of the posts on the 'Thinking of Calling it a Day' thread, it likewise is something that has been discussed previously in relation to particular moderators and how such positions differ from 'normal' members. Of significance to this is the manner in which online communities are regarded by some to contain 'normal' members due to them not being limited to the most ardent of textual consumers (Jenkins, 1992) and, as such, the forum exemplifies the ideologies surrounding access that is not privileged, and instead is largely open to all. However, while such communities can be believed to extend invitation to a range of fans, there ultimately comes the issue of how such fans coexist in relation to potential 'levels' or 'hierarchies' of affiliation, commitment and, ultimately, fandom. Indeed, the notion of there being an almost tiered manner in which authority is executed relates to issues such as the democratisation of particular mediums and communities - both in relation to the overall allocation of moderator duties, and in the way in which fans can actively contest and debate their fandom with others in an open, and largely uninhibited, way. Such aspects relate to issues of 'active' and passive fandom, both of which will be discussed in the next chapter, however for now it is pertinent to acknowledge the specific hierarchies of membership throughout *Not606* and how this can be seen to link to aspects of ownership and claim over content and domains; further developing some of the points raised in previous sections.

Through analysing some of the discussions concerning hierarchies on *Not606*, it is evident that the ideologies surrounding this as a concept permeate a range of discussion points. Whether it can be seen to be manifested through members discussing claims over content and domains and whether this resides with fans themselves, or throughout debates about how certain fans react to specific instances of Swansea City news, it is clearly apparent that issues surrounding hierarchies are evident throughout a plethora of topics on the forum. Of particular relevance to this are some of the posts encompassing the debates surrounding fan allegiance to previous managers. One example was a thread that concerned ex-Swansea City Manager Roberto Martinez and any potential 'loyalty' that resided with fans after his departure for another EPL football club. Discussing the return of Martinez to the Liberty Stadium for his current club's fixture with Swansea City, one member stated:

People always move on in football. I shall politely applaud him on the field, due respect shown, then sit back and cheer our lads. (04.12.11)

Following this, numerous responses ensued that criticised the fan's perspective towards Martinez - purporting that such actions were indicative of supporting a 'traitor' to the club and were, likewise, not reflective of a 'true fan.' Such loaded language and discourse helps to construct the further divisions that arise in relation to specific instances of fan conduct towards others, indicating how internal hierarchical structures can be seen to make fandom a site of exclusion (Baym, 2000.) However, while these debates can be seen to command a large proportion of the forum, it is relevant to look beyond the specific topics at hand and analyse the manner in which these discussions indicate further issues surrounding the overall construction of the forum in relation to member hierarchies.

Examples of fans debating their affiliation ultimately ignite conflict regarding how individual fans can be seen to interpret the significance of their own fandom/s and arguable allegiance and knowledge of football. However, such perspectives can be fundamentally flawed in relation to analysing fan positioning/s. Firstly, we can question whether the manner in which such affiliation is contested - i.e. through an online community - is essentially reflective of a hierarchical positioning, and whether participation is as clear-cut as could be assumed. There no doubt remain fans whose allegiance and dedication could be compared to those online, but who actively refuse to participate (Hills, 2002), and - as discussed in the first chapter of this work, the very notion of fan 'social capital' can be incredibly hard to objectively typify (Bourdieu, 2002: 57.) When relating such observations to the example at hand, the input from fans regarding past managers clearly points towards a divide between those who regularly pass comment on different football issues, and those who deride the arguable arrogance demonstrated by certain fans. As one post illustrated: 'none of us are managing football clubs, maybe some of you should apply for the Swans job and get Rodgers sacked if you could do better?', with this highlighting how there are not only contrasting positions in relation to how such positions are interpreted by individual fans and others. Indeed, when analysing the role of individual fans on a forum like *Not606*, it is apparent that there is not only continual debate around footballing topics, but that this is consistently furthered to look at fans' individual commitment, knowledge and, ultimately, authority to potentially post and contribute to the forum. This is indicated through statements such as 'you said on the other

thread that you know your football... I don't see much evidence of that', indicating how an overriding theme throughout discussions on the forum is how fans are critiqued in relation to any potential knowledge that they might have.

While previous work has interpreted fandom as retaining discursive dominance and hegemonic struggles over interpretation (Johnson, 2007) we can further this to argue that such struggles go beyond interpretation and look at aspects of knowledge and direct involvement. Such examples are explored by looking in greater detail at some of the threads that concerned past managers, whereby there was a large degree of response from numerous members who provided input into not only their opinions of certain past managers, but also articulating how this perspective was formed in relation to previous experiences, knowledge and indeed the general individual relationship that the member has with Swansea City. To elaborate, we can see how such threads pose an example of a repeated pattern on the forum, whereby an initial topic is raised, which then deviates into a discussion surrounding individual fans' positioning/s. An example of this can be seen from one member who presented their opinion regarding Swansea City's managers, stating:

In the fickle world of football, we really need people to believe in. My loyalties have never changed. When Rodgers leaves, I shall then support the next manager. I really don't support managers who have left, as this takes a slice of my support, and I want all of it to be 100% Swansea. (04.12.11)

Posts such as this not only identify a specific opinion concerning the issue of Swansea City's managers, but also further illustrate how individual fans construct and demonstrate their own support. Statements such as 'I want all of it to be 100% Swansea' illustrates how fans can be seen to present indications of their own fandom, through openly demonstrating how this is perhaps in contrast to those who are less legitimate or dedicated. This is something that is apparent throughout numerous other fans' posts, and as such can be seen to allow others to comment, and for debate to ensue. In this instance, there were statements from fans that resulted in responses in relation to the purported level of allegiance, such as 'presumably you watch *Match of the Day* too, does this mean you should be involved with team selection?' all of which clearly illustrates the manner in which fans can be seen to debate the level of fandom and, potentially, the extent to which specific fans are qualified to comment.

Previous work has stated that fans rarely have a meaningful say in the running of the(ir) club (see Margalit, 2008), however there is none the less the conceptualisation of fans as the social, or at the very least *moral*, owner. This is something that has been further researched by theorists like Ruddock, Hutchins and Rowe (2009) whose work considered MyFootballClub – an online means through which fans participate in managing a football team. The involvement of fans in creating and managing an online football team demonstrates a development from media consumption to cultural participation (Couldry, 2004: 19.) Such participation is further evident throughout online forums as fans - while not directly involved in a specific gaming medium - nonetheless discuss the way in which they feel clubs should be run.

Ultimately, such interaction leads to debate and contestation among fans, and this is particularly apparent when conversation turns to the background and history of being a fan and how this then relates to interpretation and reception from others. It can be seen that there is arguably a divide created when fans are perceived to be potentially 'undervalued' in regards to others on the forum - whereby a hierarchy is created in relation to moderators, management and other members that potentially doesn't reflect the positioning that the fan in question is used to in relation to other fans. This allows for the construction of an oppositional form of fandom, whereby fan allegiances can be analysed in relation to others'. With comments such as: 'your condescending super fan post shows you up for what you are', the terminology 'super fan' is used in a derogatory way to imply that there are negative connotations surrounding those that could be accused of claiming to be 'more' of a fan than others, hence potentially turning the existing conception of hierarchical division on its head to consider how those deemed more authoritative by their own accord are not immune to criticism. However, in addressing this we can consider that, despite certain fans' perspectives of hierarchies as connoting a negative relationship with the club, this is nonetheless contributed to by the forum's construction of fan positions in relation to post numbers and member 'levels', as mentioned previously in the chapter.

This further leads on to debates regarding individuals' relationships with Swansea City and, particularly, how this then impacts on any alleged degree of knowledge or affiliation that is subsequently interpreted by others. Indeed, one of the most prevalent issues arising throughout the threads concerning 'becoming' a Swansea City fan, were from those who claimed to have been a fan for the longest amount of time:

I know more than I would ever let on - been with the Swans for over fifty years and worked at the Vetch and the first season at the Liberty. I'm well known there and have no problem getting through security to see people. (13.08.2011)

This clearly highlights how certain fans construct their positioning on the forum in relation to the length of time they have been a fan, and any direct involvement that they may have had with the club, while also implying that there are fans who do not revel in openly demonstrating their allegiance, as indicated by the opening line: 'I know more than I would ever let on.' In truth, the length of time of being a fan appears to be one of the most significant factors in identifying fandom. This is apparent not just through observing the interactions online, but also through the supplementary interviews whereby repeated sentiment pointed towards reasons behind continued support being due to a long term affiliation with the club in question, reflecting posts on the forum such as:

Member 1: PMSL - no connection to the club? I think as someone who has supported the club for 35 years I have plenty of connections. (13.08.2011)

Member 2: You can't claim to have as much affection, knowledge or connection with a club that someone has been following for 40 years as their local club, just because you decided you liked the Swans (27.08.2011)

It is apparent that one of the most repeated topics and themes throughout the forum is that of fan affiliation, linking both the length of time a member has been a fan with whether or not they are a supporter of their local team. This is something that was found to be of primary relevance throughout Bisset's work on Aberdeen football fans (2013) whereby the role of supporting a local team - in this instance, Aberdeen - was seen to be a main indicator of allegiance. Those who supported Aberdeen, as opposed to other teams that were guaranteed success, were said to have their 'pride outweigh constant winning' (Bisset, 2013.) This was further explored by Mainwaring and Clark (2012) who stated that fans did not want predictability with their support, preferring to direct affiliation towards those where success was rare. Indeed, this is of relevance to the work at hand, as numerous fans demonstrate and legitimise their personal affiliations with Swansea through constructions of long-term

allegiance and support, irrespective of whether or not the team has been successful at a particular time.

Numerous threads can be seen to develop to encompass fans not only discussing but debating their alleged allegiances in relation to the impact that this has on his or her standing as an individual supporter. Furthermore, this is something that is not only apparent through external observation, but is also addressed by fans themselves with a degree of conversation being dedicated to discussing the level at which such interaction develops. To some, the sheer amount of conversation about fan affiliation and, presumably, hierarchies, is unnecessary:

This has turned into it again. I've said it loads of times. I don't want to delete stuff, I'm trying not to, but if someone asks a question about FOOTBALL, why does it need to be turned into this tripe? (09.07.2011)

As such, it is apparent that the conversations dedicated to discussing fan affiliation at times deviate from the topic at hand to instead solely focus on the individual fan in question. This can be seen to support previous observations made earlier in the chapter, whereby there is again evidence of the topics of conversation detracting from football and instead focusing on fan relationships, both to the text and to each other. While this invariably evokes reaction and contribution from numerous members, which is proven by the amount of threads that develop to this effect, there nonetheless is a repeated pattern that sees others berate the amount of space dedicated to such subjects, with statements such as: 'get a life and start supporting your team', clearly illustrating how - to some - the dominating discourses surrounding fans and their own relationships only seek to imply a lesser form of affiliation to the overriding text in question:

It seems that some people on here just get a kick out of thinking that they're better than others (19.06.2011)

We can question, then, the relevance of fans being 'more' of a fan than others. Why, for example, is this important to individual fans? Is this something that is inherently present in the majority of football fans, or - as believed by some members on *Not606* - simply used as a defense mechanism by those who do not have as much 'proof' of affiliation and commitment, such as not attending matches, for example. What is apparent is that such hierarchies are

consistently acknowledged by fans themselves and not just those viewing from an analytical perspective. Hierarchies - and the continual positioning of individual fans on the forum in relation to other members - are something that permeates the vast majority of threads on *Not606*, in addition to being a theme arising throughout supplementary interviews. We can propose that there exist communities *within* the overriding *Not606* community in regards to the way in which fans occupy a particular space and are construed as having valid input and opinions, therefore illustrating how explorations of such need to acknowledge the multifaceted complexities at play throughout such communities instead of constructing them as an individual entity.

What is further evident is that, throughout all of the observations made in regards to the dominant themes and topics arising on *Not606*, there is continual proof of discussions predominantly focusing on aspects that would not be construed as wholly football-related. Previously in the chapter, we explored notions of fan affiliation and hierarchies, the relevance of managerial structures and community on the forum, in addition to numerous subsections that have emerged as playing a role in the overall construction of *Not606*, and this has largely been due to such issues being repeatedly discussed and debated. In truth - at the time of research - very few topics could be seen to be dedicated to specific matches, for example, and this is something that was identified by members themselves and is explored in the following section.

4.9. Let's Talk about Football, is it? Uses of *Not606*

Through analysing some of the dominant discourses emerging on *Not606*, it is apparent that very few threads were dedicated to the sole purpose of discussing specific football-related matters, such as actual matches, results, or news from Swansea City. This helps to illustrate the fact that the actual uses of the forum could be deemed to be quite different to the forum's intended usage, and as such it is relevant to look at *why* exactly fans opt to post on *Not606* - through both analysing the interactions between members themselves, and by asking them through the series of interviews that were conducted.

Ultimately, *Not606* arose from the demise of the BBC's 606 forum. As such, a number of fans migrated from the BBC's forum when *Not606* started. However, we can question why it

is that fans chose to 'settle' on *Not606* as opposed to alternative forums such as Planet Swans.⁸ For some, it appears that *Not606* was chosen due to its size:

When 606 closed there were a lot of alternatives and certain clubs' supporters went elsewhere. It's that simply there are over 14,000 users on the forum and 1.4 million posts - stats don't lie (20.09.11)

And there is a degree of discussion provided by members explaining not just why they opted to join *Not606* but also exactly why they choose to post:

Member 1: I have to be honest with you, when I heard that they were closing [BBC's] 606 down, I was a little worried about how I was going to get my daily fix of Swans banter. But I need not have worried, it's been great to continue the banter with old friends from the old site and great to see many who used to read the old 606 coming and joining in with us all. Well done lads and ladies, and long may it continue (20.09.11)

Member 2: I think ultimately this will be everybody's replacement for 606 (20.09.11)

Fans also discussed the significance of the forum's specific content, with posts such as 'a forum's content is king – make it interesting and people will post' in addition to explaining the offline situations that lead to online activity. For example, some members stated that they contribute due to [the forum] being available '24/7', while others said that it was due to it being accessible from work.

When there is discussion about specific matches, this is typically done constantly during matches, as was the case during Swansea versus Aston Villa (27/11/2011) - there were posts during the game, such as 'come on', 'get in', etc. but also immediately afterwards: 'just got back from the game and I'm still buzzing' - illustrating the immediacy of posting online as soon as they're back from the match, which ties in with Hills' (2002) concept of 'just in time' fandom, whereby fans post during breaks, highlighting how often the timing of responses can come under scrutiny. Such observations are relevant as they can be seen to position the football fan as contrasting with a degree of previous work that has concentrated on other fans.

⁸ Planet Swans is an online forum that is part of FansNetwork (see: <http://www.fansnetwork.co.uk/football/swansea-city/forum/>) It was created in 2010 and - at the time of writing - had approximately 16,000 posts on the Swansea City football forum.

For example, Bennett's work on music fans online presented a subgroup whereby immediacy of textual acquisition was sidelined in favour of 'delayed gratification' (2011.) However, for football fans there is evidence of a desperate need to discuss the game straight away, rather than abstaining from any new information or interaction. While linking in with Jenkins perspective of fan communities online constituting fully realised versions that are held together through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge (in Hills, 2002: 57), there is furthermore the relevance of this collective, immediate circulation of meaning manifesting itself in debate. As Cleland argued, the internet transformed the opportunity for two-way dialogue – both pre and post-match (2010: 539), yet through analysing the forum there was little indication of pre-match discussion, limited threads dedicated to post-match, yet a huge amount concerning what exactly it is that members used *Not606* for. One member stated:

I discuss the issues surrounding football, and that's the point. Just because you don't agree with anyone's point of view, then there is no need for the idiotic childish abuse. I make a contribution that can then be debated. (23.08.11)

This proves that, for some, the importance of contributing to the forum resides in the fact that it enables debate to ensue, therefore satisfying some of the previous points raised regarding a forum's role in providing the space for not just interaction and discussion, but furthermore debate. To develop these points, we can look specifically at the way in which the forum is used by its members relating to potential processes of acquisition (Fiske, 1992) for its members. While it is clear that the possibility for debate is regarded as a fundamental part of contributing to the forum, it can be addressed as to what exact subjects, themes, topics and points of interest dominate. It has already been established that the vast majority of topics are dedicated to discussing far wider issues surrounding football, but furthering this is the way in which this is interpreted by members themselves. For some, this is perceived as a negative aspect of the forum, whereby football is almost a sideline to other things discussed. As one member asked: 'is football even talked about here anymore?' Indeed, there appears to be the issue surrounding the fact that much discussion goes against the forum's intended purpose: 'this is, after all, a football forum - if people want to 'debate' other issues, then they can go elsewhere.' Furthering this, some members stated that there was a risk of other people not wanting to join *Not606* if the lack of specific football threads continues:

I am interested in talking about football, and there are very few threads purely about this. Surely this will just put other people off from joining us? (26.01.12)

Such statements highlight how certain fans are not only against the fact that the forum facilitates much discussion about wider issues surrounding football, but also the relevance of there being new members to *Not606*. As discussed previously in the chapter, new members are typically welcomed to the forum, particularly when addressing how the forum is expected to survive, and it is this element of survival that illustrates how wider discussion points indicate further concepts such as the future of the board. In acknowledging the dominance of non-footballing topics and themes, it can be questioned as to how this affects general sentiment among members as to the forum's intended purpose. As one member stated: 'sorry to mention football, but the Swans are playing Bolton on Saturday', clearly indicating how there is a belief, among some at least, that football is almost 'second fiddle' to other themes throughout. This was supported by other posts that referred to the content as containing 'thinly veiled football threads', furthermore emphasising the element of dissatisfaction in relation to the forum's content.

However, while there are some fans that deride the general usage of the forum, by and large the majority of members appear to accept and respect the fact that *Not606*'s threads often cover a range of topics and themes. As one member posted:

If it's football and football only that you want, then there are plenty of topics to choose from where the walk is just that. I mainly stick purely to the football myself, there is the odd moment when I have a laugh but that's what it's all about. There shouldn't be restrictions on what content you write, that is not freedom of thought, sometimes humour brings people together and creates a good camaraderie amongst fellow posters, this was a strength of the old 606 (26.01.12)

The importance of this is the way in which such statements link to ideologies surrounding limits on the forum in relation to what should or shouldn't be posted, along with reiterating the importance of the community and how, fundamentally, the type of forum content essentially affects the structure of the forum. Additional posts from members further point towards there being a general understanding of how the forum ultimately covers a range of themes:

Member 1: While the forum does come under the heading of Swansea City FC, I would disagree that it is exclusively football based as several threads lead in different directions, and long may that continue (26.01.12)

Member 2: Sometimes things take a different path but generally there has been solid debate on this board with no problems (26.01.12)

Observations such as this allow us to propose that *Not606* differs from other forums in the sense that it can be seen to cover many different topics, unlike other forums that concentrate on matches and their aftermath, in turn this constructs *Not606* as potentially reflecting everyday life, with this being said to impact immensely on the construction of [our] identities (Winstanley, 2009.)

What can be further acknowledged is the way in which discussing what is discussed is a critical convention of the forum as a whole. There is clearly plenty of appetite for debating things other than football, as – during the time of analysis – of the fourteen threads discussing football issues, only one made the ‘top four’ containing the most replies. In exploring the role of non-footballing issues, there is the flagrant irony in members discussing the limitations of a forum not concentrating on football, and in doing so contributing to the dominance of non-football-specific threads.

Part of the importance of this surrounds how fans can be believed to gravitate around a particular area allowing us to question how exactly this area matters. While there are the dominant ideas that the forum should contain respectful, free discussion, there are evidently problems when this develops to look exactly at what such discussion should entail. Such divisions can be seen to reflect Winstanley’s observation that everyday social rituals and practices contribute in the same ways as political practices to the creation and maintenance of communities (2009), illustrating how there is the overriding community at play that is constructed from day-to-day interaction. This is clear throughout the forum, with statements such as:

If your idea of this forum is abuse first and foremost and sport second then I feel sorry for you, because - to me - *Not606* is about community and sport first. If you can't discuss that then why come here to a sporting forum? (26.01.12)

Exploring this, Krovel and Roksvold (2012: 163) argued that there is a preoccupation with levels of discussion dedicated to opposing supporters and their teams throughout football fan interactions, however when relating this to *Not606* there were relatively few threads dedicated to berating any potential competition, with the exception of Cardiff City fans, which will be explored in greater detail in later chapters. Rather, the forum predominantly harbours discourse that can be said to often deviate from football, which ultimately leads us to consider the significance of football fan communities in not simply gravitating around one particular shared area of interest, but rather deviating from this to cover a range of issues and topics; potentially illustrating that the significance of the community surpasses that of the specific points approached. Despite this, irrespective of exactly what is discussed frequently on the forum, there is the overriding issue of the level of involvement demonstrated by fans - be it through the immediacy of participation, or the 'member level' of members as demonstrated in individuals' profiles, which seeks to construct *Not606* as retaining consistent and regular interaction. As McCourt and Burkart stated:

Fan cultures receive much attention in contemporary media studies, and for good reason. As social and cultural phenomena, they offer researchers a chance to observe seemingly pure play - authentic and often charming self-disclosures and shared identities among enthusiastic participants. (2007: 261)

4.10. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have been able to identify some of the key themes and topics that all contribute to the overall construction of *Not606*, and its emergence as a community. It has been apparent that the forum is multi-faceted in the manner in which an array of themes play out, yet is rooted in the foundations of moderators and management, which all seeks to emphasise the varying roles of members throughout the forum.

The aim of this chapter was to explore the manner in which *Not606* was constructed - both in terms of the more literal bases behind the role of different members and the structure of

authority imposed by moderators and management; and likewise the way in which different discourses could be seen to emerge and how these are interpreted and received among the fan community. In turn, some of the issues identified were seen to provide an overview for further discussion and exploration, such as the significance of moderation and addressing 'deviant' behaviour, but - perhaps more importantly - the emergence of overarching ideologies surrounding alleged hierarchies at play and the construction, reception and interpretation of discourses surrounding 'active' and 'passive' fandom is something that can be seen to warrant further specific analysis.

One thing that became apparent through analysing *Not606* was the manner in which the myriad topics and themes discussed all had a common ground in the sense that most members voiced their concerns for the future and 'survival' of the forum - indicating a shared interest in this respect at least. Such observations can be seen to go against some of the previous theory and work identified, such as that of Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) whereby fans were typically believed to be devoid of social organisation. In truth, the actions and output of those frequenting *Not606* were far from this, with consistent examples of members actively seeking to do what was for the 'greater good' of the forum, be it collectively organising the content, democratically electing moderators and, essentially, working together to welcome new members and ensure that the forum was a good place to be.

It has often been claimed that it is both theoretically and empirically difficult to separate the 'audience' component of the community from the text (Baym, 2000: 19) and it is due to this that it was essential to construct an understanding of the context through which discussion is produced and received in order to explore subsequent themes and issues. In introducing the forum and its structure, we are hence able to further analyse what matters to football fans in addition to what fans can be seen to *do*. As Krovel and Roksvold stated:

For football supporters, a forum emerges as a medium for sharing feelings and attitudes towards - and knowledge about - the club, thus forming an ideal space for the construction of club and supporter identities and values. (2012: 162.)

It has been important to study this in order to seek to answer the overriding research questions and likewise to further an area of study that, I argue, has previously been underrepresented.

CHAPTER 5 - THE PLASTICS vs. THE TRUES: DEBATES OF ACTIVE AND PASSIVE FANDOM

Sir, it is your prerogative to support who the hell you wish, and change that support as often as you wish. I fully accept that, but I will never, ever understand it

5.1. Introduction

Throughout the previous chapter, we looked at some of the principle issues and themes that were apparent when exploring and analysing *Not606* as a construction of both a forum and a community. It became evident that there were numerous topics emerging that helped us to develop a clear perspective of how the forum operates, and in doing so were subsequently able to extract key points that can be further explored in accordance to the overarching aims and objectives of the research at hand. In the latter parts of the chapter, the topics of hierarchies emerged as a repeated factor that was observed both through external observation and analysis, and indeed by fans themselves. One of the primary ways in which debates over fan hierarchies can be seen to play out is through the discussions and debates surrounding active and passive fandom, with this too being the subject of past work such as Crawford's (2004) who explored discourses surrounding 'armchair' fans.

However, as discussed in the first chapter where I identified some of the main pieces of work conducted into this area, there are fundamental limitations with some of the theory that has concentrated on these issues, primarily due to the fact that the majority focuses on external analyses of secondary fan descriptions, as opposed to exploring the construction of such discourses between fans themselves within fan domains. Football has been referred to as creating, and at times promoting, behaviour that not only brings together groups, but also creates fierce rivalries (Bisset, 2013), and it is the construction of rivalry *among* fans of the same team, taking into account Williams' construction of the fan/fan text (2011), which is of significance to the forthcoming chapter, as while there has no doubt been a large degree of work that has considered the relationships between fans of opposing teams, it is the construction of intra team conflict/s and the emergence of this as a dominant element that will be principally explored.

This chapter aims to develop the topic of active and passive fandom, looking in part at some of the subsections within this that all help to contribute to its understanding and significance. It will firstly look at *who* exactly are the fans on *Not606* and how they came to first support Swansea City, before exploring the(ir) origins of fandom, furthermore addressing 'active' and 'passive' fan theory, in addition to developing some of the points raised in the previous chapter, such as the role of new fans within this field; redefining these divisions in line with technological advances that I argue have all helped to shape and develop football fandom.

For this chapter's case study, I chose to include observations from one particular thread, where the issue of season ticket allocation and ticket prices in general was discussed. This enabled there to be a specific example of a thread where wider discourses are apparent, all the while relating these to arguments raised earlier in the work in order to explore the second sub research question:

How are hierarchies of fandom linked to online football forum participants, in particular in relation to discourses surrounding 'active' and 'passive' fandom?

5.2. Who are the fans?

One of the repeated themes that could be seen to arise throughout discourses surrounding the construction of the *Not606* community and its members was the significance of *who* exactly supporters of Swansea City are. Through exploring some of the issues concerning membership, specific concepts arose such as discourses surrounding new members, linking in with dominant ideologies of loyalty, commitment and affiliation. In truth, the fan has been consistently regarded as retaining 'spectrums of identities' and experiences (Hills, 2002), allowing for individual fans to be understood to occupy flexible identities, which are furthermore linked to the constant ongoing psychological process of identification. When relating spectrums of identities to football fans, Giulianotti (2002) argued that there were various identities within football, labelling them: fans, supporters, followers and flaneurs⁹ and we can adapt the last of these to online football fans who are said to potentially be

⁹ Giulianotti proposed a series of distinctions for football fans, explained as the following: *Supporters*: hot, traditional spectators with long term personal and emotional investment ; *Followers*: more cool, traditional, but with a more distanced interest in the club; *Fans*: hot, consumer spectators, mediated relationship through consumption of related products; *Flaneurs*: cool, casual and online connections

constructed as less active and more concerned with the 'gaze' (Urry, 2002) of shifting voyeurism, in contrast to traditional conceptions of the follower. Indeed, when considering *who* are football fans, we can refer to theorists whose work has addressed the process of identification, further highlighting how this can be seen to often manifest itself through issues of conflict. Krovel, in his analyses of Norwegian football club fans, stated that:

Conflict and rivalry remain a significant common ground in the forging of fan identities in football, and socially fans continue to drink, sing and sometimes fight. (2012: 25)

Furthermore, other theories surrounding this concept of identity-construction often relate to the issue of belonging to a particular club and community, but likewise retaining distinctive individual characteristics. As Krovel and Roksvold stated:

[Belonging to a football club] may work as an expression of cultural distinction and, in a philosophical sense, fandom can also be seen as generative of knowledge about something fundamentally human - the passionate adoption of an identity. (2012: 27)

This can be seen to reflect one of the key questions that has arisen throughout this research, and that is how we can explain and understand the relationship between fans in their construction as coherent individuals that also retain shared identities within a larger community, which is supported by Krovel's observation that identity should not be seen as homogenous within communities, but that individual members are multifaceted (2012.) It is this theoretical basis, which allows us to further look at the individual factors affecting football fans, with a principle element within this being the history and background of individuals; why and how they came to support Swansea City, and how these issues have hence constructed them as distinct fans that are part of a seemingly ever-growing community. Can we assume that - irrespective of individual perspectives - fans retain largely similar outlooks and objectives to others? Or, are we presented with debates and conflict that would otherwise be assumed to only exist between fans of rival teams? Such considerations raise numerous questions, and one way to firstly look in more depth at this is to then consider how football fans *become* football fans, and subsequently how they then continue to *be* one.

5.3. Becoming and Being a Fan

One of the main ways in which fans are said to perform and act out their fandom between and among other fans is due to the ongoing construction of fan social capital (Hills, 2002.) Fan social capital refers to the way in which fandom could be construed as potentially acting as a form of illusory compensation for a comparative lack of social and cultural power (Bourdieu, 1984: 386), all the while being dependent on, and acting in relation to, others with shared interests. The very concept of fan social capital interprets fandom as being performative (Hills, 2002) and as such allows us to use such perspectives in relation to the myriad issues that arise when attempting to understand fans as both individuals and part of collective communities. As stated previously, it can be relatively hard to neatly typify the fan, due to the conflicts of operating as coherent individuals, while likewise sharing a common ground with others who potentially differ. Such perspectives are particularly relevant to football fans, as we have already illustrated the various ways in which hierarchies manifest themselves on *Not606*, especially when related to the different positions that fans themselves hold in one specific area and community. However, to further this, we can look beyond the construction of the forum in relation to issues of membership and management, and look at more ideologically bound hierarchies, more specific to individual backgrounds of history, all of which can be believed to be inextricably linked to fan relationships. One main way in which such positioning and understanding is demonstrated is through *Not606*'s fans discussing, debating and contesting their personal relationship/s to Swansea City and the background that has led to them 'becoming' a member of the forum and continuing to 'be' one.

As a business and a culture, football is said to thrive on its passionate fans. The passion about 'who we are' is said to be seen among football fans all over the world (Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: 27) and operates as a confirmation of belonging, all the while being symbolic of citizenship (Russell, 1997: 64; Holt, 1989: 172.) Linking in with the notion of belonging to a particular club and its community is the construction of discourses that surround the origins of fandom. Giulianotti (2002) referred to the idea of 'thick solidarity' whereby fandom originates at childhood when children are typically socialised to a particular club through primary relations with parents and siblings (in Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: 31.) It is through these early experiences that fans are said to become emotional stake-holders (*ibid*) for a potentially long-term affiliation.

The relevance of childhood fandom is something that was apparent throughout various threads and topics on *Not606*, along with the interviews conducted. Fans articulated their dedication, with statements such as: 'I saw my first game at eight years old... still here forty five years later', which emphasises the elements of nostalgia and childhood experiences that are referred to when explaining the history and background of supporting Swansea City. However, while childhood relationships and influence from family and friends have been identified as a key factor in the formation of fandom by numerous theorists and work that has considered the origins of fandom throughout other objects, it was apparent through observing *Not606*, that the majority of discussions that concerned fans' history focused not on the importance of other fans' influence, but instead the significance of loyalty to a particular area, in this instance 'home.' Throughout all the discussions regarding how fans came to support Swansea City, the most commonly cited reason was due to Swansea being a 'local' team, with this being further supported by reasons given in interviews, such as:

They are my local team. It's as simple as that. I like tradition (27.08.11)

Indeed, the notion of 'tradition' is significant here as fans can be seen to construct allegiance off the basis of it being something that is the typical, potentially right and expected thing to do:

I would never support anyone other than my local team... I supported the Swans since I was about 7, growing up with the same influences as other kids, but I still knew to support my local, home team (01.11.11)

And such explanations can be seen to involve toponymic aspects (Bale, 1993) that ultimately relate to, and potentially help to form, cultural identity, with this being said to reflect the significance of football in the context of Britain having the oldest and most developed professional, semi professional and amateur club network in the world (Rookwood and Buckley, 2007) allowing fans to refer to historical, local connections as the mainstay of affiliation:

For me, an attachment would be if you are from that town or city and live there, maybe you actually go to games and support them. To say that you support a team simply because they're on TV is not in any way a real attachment (01.11.11)

What is of further importance here, is how such statements point towards issues of 'real' attachment - immediately implying that there is a dichotomy present between that and 'fake' attachment, in this instance, supporting teams that are not from either a home town or city, or where the fan now lives. Indeed, there likewise is the construction of such affiliation being interpreted as the 'right thing to do' irrespective of whether or not that team can be believed to have had a discernible amount of success. This was a theme that occurred throughout Bisset's work into Aberdeen football fans, whereby fans were said to be proud to support their local team, with this pride far outweighing any pride of winning itself (Bisset, 2013.) In constructing this pride, there is likewise a resentment towards those who don't support their local team, with references to 'glory hunting' (*ibid*) being prevalent. On *Not606*, the main indication of oppositional constructions for those not from the local area, are done through delegitimising their fandom; referring to 'fake' attachment and a lack of true affiliation. Such sentiment reflects Edensor and Millington's work where they explored the Manchester City 'This Is Our City' marketing campaign - a campaign directed at 'core' local fans that should support them, not Manchester United.¹⁰ The significance of the campaign only being targeted at local fans indicates the construction of other, albeit local, teams like Manchester United being seen to attract fans from around the globe and not having to earn or warrant support through true indications of loyalty and allegiance, such as being born in the city or area itself.

This is particularly relevant when considering Swansea City's fans on *Not606* as it is apparent that a proportion of individual fans' explanations of allegiance and affiliation is done so in relation to Swansea City being a team that has to perhaps earn the support of its fans. This contrasts to teams who are instead expected to succeed. As one fan explained:

...basically, clubs like Manchester United leach football fans from different cities within the UK, of course it's people's choice to choose whatever team they like, but a few friends of mine said to me some years ago - why go down and watch the Swans, they are crap and will never get anywhere while they are watching some other team in the Premier League on a television in the pub. It's a joke. I said to them, yes, they are crap, but they are my crap team, from my crap town. What connection do you have? (13.01.12)

¹⁰ The 'This Is Our City' campaign was developed by Manchester City in 2005, with a view to cultivating local support in preference to gaining 'new' support. It was based on the suggestion that 'real' Mancunians support Manchester City and not local rival Manchester United, which is portrayed as a global, non-local corporate entity (Edensor and Millington, 2008: 172-193)

Indeed, such comments regarding a team potentially being less likely to succeed can be indicative of a football team requiring more effort, and arguable input, from the fan's behalf. In turn, this constructs the football fan as being active and working towards success, much like the team itself, which is in contrast to being 'expectant' of results, or 'lazy'.⁹ And it is this construction of lazy fandom that directly links with the active and passive divide.

To refer back to the idea of the 'local' affiliation, we can question how this is defined. To some, local would imply an area where the fan grew up, and what can be called 'home', whereas to others, it could mean something relatively different, as stated by one of the members who said:

Wherever I have been living, I have always gone to watch the local team play as it's something I enjoy (27.08.11)

With this indicating that 'local' is then very much changeable depending on where the fan currently resides and could call to question factors such as the length of time a fan has inhabited a city, for example. For Sandvoss, there is the ideology surrounding what he referred to as *heimat* - a particular feeling of physical, emotional and ideological space (2005: 64) and, subsequently, belonging. In this respect the local can be constructed as that which has conceptual, sociological or moral connections, and not something that is purely physically tangible. This further links to the construction of fans undertaking pilgrimage, with fans being said to 'actively' follow their team. As one member said:

I am a true Jack - have followed them for 35 years, both home and away (27.08.11)

And indeed it is this notion of pilgrimage, whereby fans are seen to physically go to various places for the purpose of watching their team, that can be arguably indicative of a very active form of fandom and something that is potentially identity-forming, particularly in relation to issues of nationalism, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. Likewise, the relevance of supporting a team playing 'away' is seemingly the ultimate demonstration of dedication, as it not only seeks to require the fan making the physical effort to travel away from the local area, but also perform fandom in external, and potentially hostile, environments away from home arenas. The stadium is hence constructed as a physical focus

for something greater and intangible (Brooker, 2007: 164) with numerous posts relating to fans' experiences at away grounds, with the actions of going to such being constructed as an overt demonstration of dedication and affiliation.

So far, it has been discussed how one of the main ways in which fans are said to articulate the background and history of their fandom, and how they came to support Swansea City, is primarily through an affiliation to 'home' or the 'local'; something that, while retaining numerous intricacies, is nonetheless manifested through dominant sentiment surrounding real versus false attachment. It is clear that, to many fans at least, supporting a team that either has connections to you through it being the area you grew up or now live in, or the team that relatives or friends support/ed, wholly reflects and seeks to construct individual fan relations in regards to legitimising their affiliation. Such issues will be built upon in later sections of this chapter, but for now it is necessary to understand that just as important as ascertaining *when* people become fans, is deciphering what it's actually like to *be* a fan, all the while allowing us to refer to wider ideologies that all help to construct an understanding of personal identifications in relation to wider fan communities. One way in which this can be seen to be most evident is through the dichotomy so often associated with fandom, and that is the ideologies surrounding active and passive fans.

5.4. Active and Passive Fandom

Through considering some of the themes and topics that have arisen - both on the forum and through the interviews conducted with fans - it is clear that the issue of personal identification can be seen to manifest itself through different levels of affiliation. On one side there are notions of authentic and 'real' fandom, which contrasts significantly with that which is deemed to involve less effort or personal investment and potentially indicative of a 'lazy' type of fandom. This idea of the different levels of authentic, or legitimate, fandom was referred to by Hognestad who defined the division as 'hot' and 'cold' spectatorship (2012: 31.)

To further these positions, we can look at the binary that is created between 'active' and 'passive' fandom, identifying specific instances throughout the forum that demonstrates such an overriding theme. For the purpose of this work, 'active' fandom has been interpreted as being a first-hand consumption of football, such as attending a match, while passive would be reliant on secondary consumption such as watching televised matches. It is necessary to note

that the fans on *Not606* constructed the division between 'active' and 'passive' that is referred to in this chapter. Throughout the discussions on the forum there was repeated evidence of fans referring to 'active' support as being that which involved fans attending a football match, while 'passive' fans consumed the text in other ways, such as television and the internet.

However, with such definitions come fundamental problems. For example, when referring to 'active' support, we can see that there are many different levels through which one can participate in watching the game. And I would argue that complications have arisen throughout previous theory that has at times provided a rudimentary division that fails to account for the numerous ways in which texts, particularly sport, can be consumed. Bisset sought to define active fans as 'those who actively follow a team' (2013), which is incredibly simplifying in regards to welcoming further definition in order to understand its division, particularly when considering that fans can 'follow' a team in a multitude of ways. There are likewise problems apparent with constructing the 'passive' fan, where theorists such as Redhead (1993) have typically linked passive fandom with issues of consumption, rather than participation - factors that, I would argue, are not mutually exclusive.

Indeed, even when referring to this division for the purpose of this research between fans who attend matches and those who consume via other, more secondary means, there is still the problem concerning the issue of symbolic pilgrimage (Brooker, 2007), where pilgrimage is otherwise construed to retain only physical actions, hence ignoring passage as potentially being spiritual, rather than wholly literal (Aden, 1999.) However, to support the division created, I would argue that while symbolic pilgrimage is a critical factor to consider, there are further unique aspects associated with physical pilgrimage that are not prevalent when considering other forms of consumption. Furthermore, football can be said to be relatively exclusive in the sense that among the arguably 'passive' habits, such as television and new media, there is always the physical text forming a basis for other fans' attentions. Unlike certain fan texts, which are often secondary, the stadium - as a main site of action - plays a critical role throughout subsequent fan habits. I would further argue that there is no such clear divide as the active and passive binary would imply. For example, even fans visiting a stadium can be heavily dependent on media, such as tweeting during the match, being that fan experiences are manifested in a multitude of, ultimately both conflicting and complementing, ways.

One of the main issues that can be seen to surface when exploring the constructed binary between active and passive fandom/s throughout this work is the overriding issue of analysing fans on an online forum, and the very fundamental nature of the work being undertaken. As explained previously when introducing the forum - and particularly in the previous chapter - *Not606* is interpreted as an active online forum, and commands in excess of 90,000 threads (at the time of writing), yet - irrespective of this number - it is, to some, constructed as passive consumption due to it arguably requiring little physical effort in relation to accessing the medium. This could be seen to be particularly apparent due to football containing a divide whereby some fans are seen to go to football matches, while others consume both matches and the subsequent discussions of such via other, secondary means. One way in which we can further explore this is to look at the way in which the object of fandom is accessed and how this influences and allows us to understand the consumption of football overall in relation to the performativity and identity-forming possibilities of individual fans.

Football fans, as stated previously, can be seen to typically access their object of fandom in two distinct ways, and for the purpose of this research, such ways will be regarded as primary and secondary, with primary referring to match attendance, and secondary involving consuming football matches via means such as television, the internet, and so forth. Such a divide can allow us to link ideologies and arguments surrounding the notion of 'real' fans, (Back et al, 2002, cited in Crawford, 2004: 55) and how these operate throughout the medium in question. For example, could a forum that allows its members to voluntarily join, post responses, create threads and blogs, be interpreted as wholly 'passive'? Is this comparable to means such as watching televised matches, which surely requires less participation and involvement from fans? In truth, can online forums be constructed as potentially blurring the boundaries between active and passive involvement? And is there as clear a divide as some of the discourses between fans themselves would imply?

Throughout previous literature, attending football matches has been constructed as being synonymous with fan debates and the construction of football fan ideologies, particularly in relation to discourses of football violence. However, it is not just the physical action of attending a live football match that can be constructed as demonstrable of active fandom, particularly due to the way in which the notion of pilgrimage can be seen to have evolved. Whether it is attending a pub to watch a televised live match, or contributing to discussions

via forums, social media, and other means of UGC, such involvement invariably requires a certain degree of 'activity' from the fan's behalf and, I would argue, is not simply representative of the secondary methods of consumption discussed in the first chapter. Further to this is the significance of the argument that communities online often consist of those that you would meet offline (Clerc, 2000), which supports the idea that online and offline activity is not necessarily conflicting, hence further allowing potential boundaries to be eroded.

When adapting these observations to the mass media, we can argue that the media predominantly interpret most fans as active. This is not least apparent through the wealth of coverage that seeks to identify football fans as either hooligans (see Poulton, 2005), or passionate 'fanatic' attendees of matches (Brown, 1998) - perhaps more so than any other sport. Indeed, it is through acknowledging such dominant perspectives that this work was initially formed, as it was possible to understand that football fans were predominantly constructed as demonstrating active, typical behaviour with little research considering the normative, 'everyday' (Crawford, 2004) occurrences of football fandom, instead focusing on atypical instances of football violence.

We can question whether it is just the press that creates divides between football fans, especially in regards to hooliganism through specific labelling (see: Bishop and Jaworski, 2003; Poulton, 2005), or if this exists throughout fan cultures and their subsequent normative discourses surrounding 'everyday' behaviour and experiences, with the relevance here in looking at what fans *themselves* say, and not just media representation. Such perspectives will be developed in more detail in later sections, however for now it is appropriate to look at the manner in which fans create particular identity constructions, labels and categories throughout football fandom in relation to individuals in order to answer the overriding question of *who* it is that are the football fans.

One typical prototype of the football fan has been said to be that of the working class male; immersed in patriotic passion and biased hedonism (Hognestad, 2012: 25) and we can argue that one of the dominant ideologies surrounding football is that it is interpreted as something that 'working men did' (Russell, 1999: 16.) In turn, this allows football to be constructed as something commanding attention in accordance to the type of fan, and also the way in which such fandom is executed, particularly when it is in direct opposition to the arguable emerging

identities of passive fans. One of the major observations from this perspective is that football can be understood as gendered in its assumption of attracting and maintaining male fans, and those that are subsequently 'active.' As Dierdre Hynes stated, 'football has traditionally been accepted as exclusively masculine... a man's game' (2012: 189), illustrating how football is potentially ideologically male-dominated in nature. This is not something unique to football; however, with Treberge stating that sport is a 'fundamentally sexist institution that is male dominated and masculine in orientation' (1981: 342.) The relevance of football being gendered relates to the exploration of subsections within football fans. In previous chapters, we briefly considered the significant lack of female football fans, and indeed this was also something identified in the literature review. Work such as that conducted by theorists like Crolley (2002) identified the position of female fans as being typically understood as predominantly 'casual', and in contrast to male affiliation and dedication. Yet, Crolley argued that a passive female fan is no more likely than a male one, and as such the arguable negative connotations surrounding a 'casual', wavering support are not something unique to females, and concluded that 'some female fans are casual, as are males' (2002.) Reasons behind such negative constructions of the female fan were said to include women being seen as a potential threat towards traditional fans (*ibid*), and it is this particular element that is of the most significance to the research at hand. We can question how such a threat could be manifested when considering the anonymity granted on mediums such as forums, which are constructed as allowing users to be a 'safe distance' with the potential for non-identifying screen names (Crawford, 2004: 130) while likewise acknowledging that in the rare event when female fans are seen as individual subjects throughout football, there are overriding ideologies constructing them as inherently passive and potentially less of a true fan. The construction of 'less visible' participants is true of every fan engaging in certain arenas of discussion and debate. While Hynes claimed that female fans exist in a web of conflict where they struggle for acceptance, there are crucial questions raised in relation to how this operates when individual fans are inherently less identifiable, particularly through online environments where the body is essentially removed from its physical state. It is not just gender that can be seen to warrant mentioning; divisions such as race and class are also less identifiable. However, it is essential to understand that in fans potentially not being able to witness hitherto obvious signifiers, there too is the problem that arises when attempting to study these cloaked arenas, such as for the purpose of this research. In turn, the forum can be seen to both reveal and hide, to both fans and observer/s.

Such perspectives allow us to present additional questions. For instance, if female fans can be said to exist in a web of conflict where they struggle for acceptance and ownership of the masculinised game (Crolley, 2002), would the explosion of football forums and online communities providing virtual environments for fans to build areas for discussion and collective actions have an impact on female fans, and indeed other fans that are deemed to be in the minority? With the evolution of new media, particularly over the past two decades due to the advent of satellite television and the internet (*ibid*), it could be questioned as to whether such mediums have further influenced what is it to be a football fan, particularly when considering such dominant ideologies. Indeed, when further exploring the role of female football fans, in light of some of the dominant literature introduced in Chapter 2, it can be seen that there is little, if any, indication of females posting on *Not606*, nor was there much discussion centring on the role or significance of non-male football fans. Of relevance here is how such observations - or indeed lack of - tie in with Gosling's observation of there being little consideration of women's everyday experiences of being sport fans (cited in Crawford and Gosling, 2007: 280) whereby the female perspective is arguably underrepresented both throughout media coverage and, seemingly, in fan discourse itself.

It has been necessary to discuss female fans, as, while only a small section of this work has been dedicated to the subject, it is as significant to understand what is omitted, or potentially neglected, throughout fan discourse, as it is to explore that which is included. We can likewise propose, through exploring this exclusion, that there has emerged a new form of fan that inhabits the previously held reign of marginalised female fans, and that is the 'new' fan, which in turn is often constructed as a *flaneur* (Giulianotti, 2005) - belonging only to a virtual community of 'strollers' that in turn threatens the order of existing, 'true' fan communities. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the online (virtual) experience, which can be said to change and challenge the traditional environment of football fandom in crucial ways, with one fundamental challenge being the construction of the online self in established communities. As Turkle stated:

New media are seen to possess a performative aspect insofar as they allow for and foster the users' experimentation with alternative identities. (1995: 276))

And such statements allow us to question if what it means to be a fan has changed, and whether particular discourses have emerged - and continue to emerge - that construct football

fandom in a different light, particularly in relation to the new mediums that facilitate and command interaction and participation from individual fans, while simultaneously retaining existing communities that are arguably caught up in the battle between growth and retention of legitimate members.

In acknowledging the significance of fan types allegedly changing, Krovel and Roksvold's statement clearly illustrates how fandom can be seen to have changed over the decades and how this links with ideologies of the fan itself:

From the early 1990s, the time-honoured idea of loyal fans who would turn up to support their teams unconditionally – in contrast to ‘fair weather’ fans who would only turn up for big games in the sun – the notion of ‘supporting your team’ was expressed, equally, by the purchase of the latest replica top (Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: p 31)

Through constructing these concepts, ultimately a divide is created through which discourses emerge that help to produce separate identities within the overall football fan culture. While football fans can be understood to experience football in various ways, there is essentially a contrast throughout the different 'types' of fan, in addition to the myriad factors that all impact on how exactly a particular object of fandom is consumed, and one of the principle examples of such a division of football fans is the construction of the 'plastic' fan, and the reception of this between and among football fans themselves.

5.4.1. ‘Plastic’ Fans: Is it cash, or do they take plastic?

The construction of the 'plastic' or 'armchair' fan, and likewise the specific terminology of such has been discussed and explored by theorists such as Crawford (2004), and can be seen to play a pivotal role in the development and explanations around football fan identity. As stated previously in the chapter, the notions surrounding passive fandom can be further explored due to such a broad conception containing numerous complexities and subsequent ideologies. To take the term 'plastic' fan, with its specific, orchestrated negative connotations as an example, this can be seen to potentially reflect some of the labelling techniques explored by previous theorists such as Bishop and Jaworski (2003), Poulton (2005) and Hall (1978.) While this is something that is predominantly evident throughout the mass media in its representation of hooliganism, there are nonetheless similarities when considering how

certain aspects *within* 'everyday' (Crawford, 2004) football fan communities are often 'othered' and constructed in opposition to dominant norms, acting to tear down other supporters' identity formations.

One of the principle ways through which divides within football fans can be seen to be manifested is through acknowledgement of the stadium, and attending matches, as being an indicator of allegiance and synonymous with 'active' fandom. As Giulianotti stated:

The supporters constitute a subcultural community of commitment, loyalty and solidarity with the stadium standing as a symbolic representation of the club community and often drenched in topophilic sentiments (2002, cited in Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: 12)

Such statements point towards not only the stadium, and attending matches, being constructed as both symbolic and a site of pilgrimage, but the subsequent simultaneous presentation of fans as 'active'. However, ultimately, within such construction is the opposing dimension of alternative fandom and that is the idea of the 'plastic' fan ideology, of which the relevance to this work was illustrated in part by a specific thread on *Not606* entitled 'Plastic Jack - The Evidence' (19.06.11.) The plastic fan is regarded as being less personally involved with any particular club or team and potentially inhabiting a variety of communities and institutions (Krovel and Roksvold, 2012: 31), likewise not being as committed, or 'active' so as to attend matches, or physically participate, reflecting Giulianotti's conception of the *flaneur* (2005) and 'cold' spectatorship (*ibid.*) In turn this goes against aspects discussed previously in this work that emphasised fans as retaining an allegiance to one specific team, and when considering how this links in with previously raised notions about the origins of football fandom, we can look at Hylland Eriksen (2008) who proposed using the terms 'roots' and 'feet' to understand the identity formation of individual members of a fan community. Roots are elements that are used to identify themselves with place, heritage, family and connection to the tradition of place, while feet designates elements of identity acquired from the outside, such as travel (2008, in Krovel, 2012.) This perspective can be seen to link ideas discussed earlier this chapter, with 'feet' being potentially indicative of 'new' fandom and in contrast to those who pledge support due to family, friend and home connections. To further develop these points, we can consider how this relates to identity construction and connections throughout fan communities, such as on *Not606*, and propose that such divisions all help to define how fans themselves explore their own object/s of fandom. This in turn

links in with Bourdieu's (1984) observation of fan status as a process of cultural distinction, and when relating this to the notion of plastic fans, we can identify how fan social status comes into play as fans debate and contest their fandom both as individuals and collective groups.

Football fans can be seen to be 'active' in myriad ways. Whether this is demonstrated through cementing allegiance in attending matches, or acting as a means to further or change previous conceptions through fan performativity, there is the fundamental underlying factor of fans acting out their fandom as a means of personal identification. However, while this can be seen to be indicative of a specific, personal means through which fans articulate their loyalty, a problem is raised when other fans are potentially seen to be in opposition to this and construed as fake, or 'plastic.'

The concept of plastic fans was a theme that arose repeatedly throughout the threads on *Not606* and was seen to be particularly apparent when threads addressed Swansea City's recent promotion to the EPL. At the time of writing, the issue of 'new' supporters was seen to be raised on almost every thread, with members making statements like 'doesn't it make your blood boil?' in relation to Swansea's growing fan network, along with discussing the best way in which to deal with the issue of 'plastics':

To be honest, I'd imagine as the season goes on, the novelty of the Premiership status will wear off for fans who just fancied a day out at a Premiership club (25.09.11)

It is through statements like this that we can witness how certain fans are constructed as supporting Swansea City due to them now gaining exposure and success. These ideologies of 'glory hunting' (Crawford, 2004) allow us to see how such a binary is constructed in opposition with those who were fans of Swansea City prior to their recent promotion; further supporting previously discussed aspects of 'length' of fandom in creating and contributing to fan identities while also identifying the significance of seemingly supporting a team that is believed to now retain 'status' unlike its previous history in lower leagues. The ideologies surrounding the 'novelty' of fandom is something that is likewise important, as this indicates that - to some - supporting Swansea City, or even football in general, is something that is new and different, as opposed to those who have held a long affiliation and connection with one particular club. Another interesting observation from such statements is the way in which we

can construe the relevance of supporting only one team, and likewise wholly being immersed in subsequent discussions of that one team. This was apparent on the forum whereby fans who were deemed to exercise activity and connections elsewhere were berated and at times felt the need to defend their fandom:

Because I occasionally visit the Blueturds' board, doesn't make me a 'so-called' fan. Why would you say that? I was a season ticket holder when we were getting crowds of 2,000 down The Vetch. Some posters go to other boards, some don't. There is no restriction on here and that's the way it should be. How many of you were at Walsall in the early '90s? (21.08.11)

The notion of supporting one team and not having to 'share' loyalty was something considered by Bisset, who in his work on Scottish football fans explored how most, typical fans support their local team as well as one of the country's two biggest clubs - Rangers and Celtic (2013.) When researching Aberdeen fans, however, Bisset found that this was not the case with the majority claiming to be 'true' fans as they were loyal in only supporting their local team, regardless of how good or bad they were, tying in with the conventional wisdom within football of fans being blindly loyal (Flynn and Davidson, 1996; Parker and Stuart, 1997.) However, this conception of the fan as blindly loyal can be questioned in relation to contemporary fan consumption. To refer back to the post from the forum, it can be seen that the fan in question, in visiting another thread (Cardiff City's) was criticised as to their apparent allegiance to Swansea City. In defending, they explained their dedication to Swansea City by stating how they were a season ticket holder and attended matches long before the promotion to the EPL. Such discourse allows us to question whether - unlike previously discussed aspects surrounding *where* fans came from and whether they supported their 'local' team - there is likewise the significance of how long someone has been a fan in addition to experiencing the 'old' days when success was rare. This was supported by additional posts on *Not606*, such as 'nothing like success to bring out the plastics' and:

In division two and non-league are where you'll find the true fans. Clubs like ours had a couple of thousand at best who are true fans. The rest are glory fans who only go when the club is doing good (09.07.11)

This indicates how success is ultimately linked with the relative ease of support. In constructing fans who are only supporting Swansea since their rise to top flight football, this

in turn implies that the newcomer fans have it easy when it comes to supporting the team, due to them not having experienced the difficult years of repeated failure. As Bisset argued in his research into Aberdeen football fans, 'the pride that comes with supporting your local team far outweighs the pride of winning itself' (2013), with this linking to Bisset's further observation of fans 'othering' those who are not from the local area and who cannot have the same degree of historical connection, portraying them as glory hunters. Such sentiment was apparent on the forum, with posts such as:

Most of the plastics who go to the Liberty every week won't even know where The Vetch used to be... sad, but true (09.07.11)

This illustrates how the relatively new fans can be perceived to lack the experience of the heritage, history and knowledge of Swansea City that underpins the very essence of supporting them. Indeed, it is this element of nostalgia that appears to present some of the fans as having a deepened personal relationship with the club, and which is frequently demonstrated throughout posts on the forum, such as one member who stated that they could, 'smell the toilets by the centre stand now', and 'spoken like a true Jack mate', further indicating the significance of remembering the 'good old days', which - in terms of footballing success at least - were ironically the very opposite.

When exploring some of the ideologies and issues arising from the notion of 'plastic', we can further look at some specific examples of discussions on the forum to see how such fan issues are debated. Of particular relevance is the way in which the conception of the 'plastic' terminology is something that is seen to separate and divide allegiance among the fan community. This will be discussed in more detail in latter sections of this chapter, but one of the first things to consider is the way in which some 'plastic' fans are deemed as insignificant and at times forced to defend their right to post opinions and have input to the threads. This is seen through comments such as: 'when you're not armchair supporting, maybe come back with an opinion', and this can be seen to be relevant as not only is the notion of 'plastic' fandom related to overt passive consumption, through the inclusion of 'armchair supporting', but also the way in which such fandom is delegitimised and denigrated (Crawford, 2004.) Indeed, this was something that was repeated by other members who could be seen to 'other' certain individuals on the forum, with posts such as:

The fact he's never been to Swansea, clearly knows very little of the history of our club and lives thousands of miles away makes him probably the least qualified of the supporters on here to make a comment (09.07.11)

The relevance of stating that a particular fan was not 'qualified' to comment can be seen to reflect work conducted by Anthony King whose research into Manchester United fans claimed that specific chants such as 'do you come from Manchester?' clearly points towards fans' reactions of those who do not have a firm background, or 'roots' (Eriksen, 2008) for supporting the club (2000.) This construction of fan tourism, King argues, is linked to elements of new support, which is deemed inauthentic if emerging from recent commercialisation of football clubs, which seeks to present the fans as less legitimate (*ibid.*) Such statements are relevant as they can allow us to see how there is the alleged desire for new fans to belong to existing communities, which is said by some to be 'human nature' (Xypolia, 2012), but they then are paradoxically faced with existing fans' reactions to their positioning.

Such examples, while similar in content, nonetheless allow us to question whether the conception of the plastic fan is something that is neatly typified by other members of *Not606*, or whether there are contrasting perspectives and definitions of plastic fans. What is necessary to note here is that throughout the threads concerning new fans and the various issues surrounding this, there was the consistent acknowledgement among members that there were various ways in which plastic fans could be interpreted and received, as one member stated:

My version of a plastic fan is a fan who lives in a small team community, or lives abroad, but only supports a top four club. If that's overly simplistic, then so be it (13.07.11)

And this points towards members having individual perspectives and constructions of plastic fans in relation to their own personal opinions. This was something repeated throughout the interviews conducted, whereby repeated answers indicated that, to some, 'plastic' fans were those that had started supporting Swansea City since their promotion to the Premier League, while to others they were those who had supported them for less than a certain number of years - illustrating that the very construction of such terminology and fan position is ultimately subjective and dependent on the fan in question.

Another factor that is of further significance is the manner in which previous chapters identified how new fans were often welcomed to *Not606*. Indeed, this was particularly apparent in the last chapter, whereby we considered the role of new fans joining the board and how, in contrast to previous assumptions, this was seen as a predominantly positive thing, linking in to concepts of survival and the future of the forum. What is interesting, then, is how new fans are seen as a positive element in relation to the construction of the forum as a medium and arena for debate and discussion, yet potentially threatening when viewed as individual new fans in their own right. Indeed, we can further question how it is that new fans can be seen to fit in to the pre-constructed ideals and ideologies surrounding the online community in question if it is the fact that their pre-determined lack of knowledge, contribution and potential one-team affiliation can be interpreted as offensive and delegitimised in comparison to fans with longer, more credible allegiances. A clear indicator of this paradox is the following post:

I'm not against new fans at all. Nor am I against the Swans making the most money that they can. But, what I am against, are people 'supporting' my team in order to watch a big side (27.06.11)

Which in turn emphasises the difference between being a fan and a 'supporter.' This is of relevance as it illustrates how, to some, there is a distinction to be made between those that are legitimate fans and worthy of being regarded as such, and those who simply support or 'follow' in order to participate in the recent glory days. Furthering this, other members were keen to question the way in which new fans will demonstrate their fandom, asking questions such as: 'how many will make the effort to go to away games?' and 'how many will be wearing a recent Swans shirt?' The importance here resides in the fact that not only is the first question indicating how new fans potentially have to prove their allegiance through making the 'effort' to travel to other games, but also that there is the expectation for new fans to simply be purchasing new merchandise. This presents us with the problem of football needing to attract new fans, but likewise needing to satisfy existing fans by showing a long-term allegiance. The relevance of fans being seen to wear particular shirts reflects Sturm and McKinney's work on hyper consumption, where they argued that in sports such as Formula One, there are discernible hierarchies in place in relation to fans who are seen to 'know' what gear to wear, with merchandise operating as symbolic and performative markers (2013.)

However, what is of relevance here is that when adapted to football fandom, the exact opposite can be seen to be at play whereby it is the new fans who arguably invest commercially, with evidence of such overriding acts being actively charged and tying to the notions of hierarchies. As Giulianotti stated:

Traditional spectators will have a longer, more local and popular cultural identification with the club, whereas consumer fans will have a more market-centered relationship to the club as reflected in the centrality of consumer-fan products. (2002: 31)

Old fans, therefore, would be expected to wear old shirts, demonstrable of the length of their commitment, with their identities remaining resilient among the increased corporate presence (Winstanley, 2009.) Despite this, all fans can be said to be 'imbricated in the commodification of football, even those in search of authenticity' (Edensor and Millington, 2008: 177.) Thus indicating how, irrespective of the division between the signifiers that various fans choose to purchase or wear, there is the overriding aspect of all activity linking to commercialisation, with *all* fans being consumers, and *some* being of texts of value (Ottosen, Clarke and Miller, 2011.) Such points are relevant as they indicate how the changing nature of social and cultural life has required a new understanding of the interconnections between types of audience experience (Longhurst, Bagnall and Savage, 2012: 125) and in relation to football fans, the intensive commodification has introduced new inequalities that hence connect with the commercialisation of fandom (Williams, 2006.) For older fans, therefore, the cultivation of 'new' fans comes in the guise of affluent customers, perhaps commercially aware but not culturally, historically, or socially aware, and this cultivation ultimately comes at the expense of a loyal but poorer bedrock of support (Horne, 2006.)

Furthermore, these observations from the forum can be seen to link with the 'out of town' debate as presented by King (2000) whose research into Manchester United fans found that existing fans developed a new Mancunian identity with a self-conscious significance for a network of fans which was never the case in the past. Arguably, such identity was historically taken for granted and had little significance until presented in contrast with emerging fans. We can relate this to Swansea's fans in the manner that Swans fans, while not necessarily wholly preoccupied with *where* fans were born, were nonetheless concerned with having an affiliation to the local area, constructed in defense against new fans emerging into a pre-

existing community, henceforth constructing a privileged access (Herrnstein Smith, 1988), not just in relation to outsiders, or 'non fans', but also fans within the overriding community who do not fit with particular ideologies.

Through exploring some of the key aspects surrounding plastic fans, we can acknowledge how there are dominant ideologies emerging that relate to the overriding issue of active and passive fandom. We have identified some of the problems that arise, particularly when comparing the role of new fans in relation to previously discussed aspects, and identified a number of examples that all seek to portray the 'plastic' fan in a negative light. However, while the discussions surrounding plastic fans can be seen to dominate the forum, there still exist fans who do not necessarily see new fans as negative, at times seeking to 'protect' them, and this will be discussed in the following section.

5.4.2. Protecting the 'Plastics'

Despite plastic fans having largely negative connotations, as demonstrated throughout this chapter, there are still fans - many of them long term supporters of Swansea City - who do not construct new, arguably passive, fans in such a negative light. Indeed, when exploring the dominant ideologies and arguments surrounding plastic fandom, there arose numerous problems in relation to coherently understanding the manner in which new fans can be seen to be welcomed, yet pose as a potential threat to existing fans. Through previous sections, it was identified that one of the defining factors concerning plastic fans was the manner in which they are believed to only passively consume football and not attend matches. In this respect, however, such a clear definition can raise issues in regards to existing fans, for example, who may not be able to attend matches, leading us to consider just how many fans are actually able to visit stadiums. As one member stated:

The majority of fans are plastic, only a small percentage actually go to matches... that doesn't make them any less of a fan to be honest (26.06.11)

Which indicates how, if it is attending matches that defines whether a fan is plastic or real, then this can be seen to affect any fan, irrespective of how long they've supported a particular team and can furthermore be subject to factors such as finances. This is supported by interviews conducted, whereby numerous fans cited reasons behind not being able to go to

matches as things that were 'out of their control', such as access, finance, work commitments and child care.

While we can acknowledge the complications with attempting to create a clear divide between new and existing fans, there is furthermore the issue of plastic fans relating to teams that are now deemed to be 'popular' and how this is potentially perceived, to some, as having negative connotations, while to others is simply reflective of something commanding mass attention. As one member stated:

You could make this excuse for almost anything in life, surely? Where do you go on holidays? If it's to a popular destination then are you plastic because you didn't go there before it was popular? Do you ever go to see popular bands play? (10.10.11)

This can be seen to link to issues of 'cult' fandom (Hills, 2002), as first discussed in the literature review, particularly in relation to whether such a division ultimately implies a culture of value and whether something being 'popular' is effectively less authentic.

We can further consider whether such ideologies regarding new fans are something unique to football or if such issues exist concerning authentic and unauthentic fandom in other areas too. Indeed, while it would be naive to assume that similar discourses aren't played out in other fan communities, it is still relevant to acknowledge that one of the arguable reasons for such divisions existing is due, in part, to the medium at hand making it possible for new fans to join and participate. The very nature of online forums means that they are predominantly open and accessible to all, meaning that new fans are able to contribute, comment and present opinion on a range of topics around the object/s of fandom, all the while making them susceptible to retaliation. This leads us to further question the role that online forums play in the overall construction of fan divisions. While this was something addressed in previous chapters of this work, it is still relevant to further reflect on this point in relation to whether the very action of posting online can be construed as a wholly passive act, or if it retains elements of active participation. At best, it could be argued that the medium in question is reflective of a grey area and cannot be easily typified or contrasted in relation to other forms of consumption. Despite this, however, through observing some of the discourses surrounding plastic fans play out on the forum, it is apparent that - to the majority of

members of *Not606* at least - online involvement constitutes a passive degree of fandom, not replicative of active attendance and physical pilgrimage.

However, if forums can be interpreted as a passive medium, we can further question whether this is, in fact, such a negative thing? As Morse (1983) argued, passive consumption can actually replicate the communal pleasures of active spectatorship. And indeed this could be seen to be the case throughout *Not606* as members occupy a social space, but do so with consistently active displays, with these also being said to reflect those that are undertaken in physical ways, such as at football matches (Perryman, 2005.) Such perspectives are not lost on the members themselves, with one member accusing those in opposition of 'plastic' fans as being 'cyber warriors', stating: 'all of you are on here and not at the match!' This allows us to question how exactly the forum can be constructed as a passive, secondary medium of fandom when the very debates concerning this are undertaken through this exact medium.

In addition to this are the points provided from the accused 'plastics' themselves, with statements such as: 'I will be watching in the front row of my sofa... and that suits me sir,' and, 'I'd rather be a plastic fan than a real twat like you.' The significance of this lies in fans being confident in defending their fandom, along with fully acknowledging it. And indeed it is not just fans that are subject to attack and criticism that are seen to defend their position/s, but also other fans; many of whom could be understood to have long-term affiliations with Swansea City. One of the principle reasons behind this can be seen to be the belief that new fans are a requirement for the team to succeed. Tying in with previously discussed issues surrounding the emergence of new followers, members of *Not606* can be seen to present reasons why existing fans should be pleased that others are now supporting Swansea:

When a born again Christian sees the light, people are happy. When the population of Swansea sees the light, let's just embrace them. Not plastic, just seeing the light, feeling the love, joining the glorious Swansea as we march into the promised land (08.07.11)

This allows us to see how there is a certain understanding among some fans that explains how new fans should be welcomed, with there likewise being the belief that existing fans all started somewhere. As one member stated:

All I can say is that being plastic is a good start to being a Swans fan (10.10.11)

This leads us to consider whether the importance placed on general support overrides the plastic and active debate(s), and if the relevance should be in maintaining, and indeed gaining, support irrespective of the individual 'level' or type of fandom. Indeed, the relevance of the amount of fans is also something frequently mentioned by members themselves, with posts such as:

I've stayed quiet on this subject, but the negativity showed on these boards towards potential new fans is getting ridiculous. If the excitement of us going up and being a Premier League club brings in new fans (call them Glory Hunters if you must), then what the hell is wrong with that?! The more fans we get the better in my opinion, all the big teams didn't start life getting 40,000 every week, it's a growing process (27.06.11)

This can be seen to link to issues regarding genuine involvement in relation to the overarching aim of the club to gain attention and success. If genuine involvement is constructed as class affiliation (Hormoen, 2012: 160) then the evolution of teams to incorporate new, more commercially minded fans, could potentially reflect how class dimensions throughout football are changing. While this is something that is potentially understood through analytical perspectives, it is likewise now seen to be acknowledged by fans themselves. Along with the importance of gaining new fans as being an integral part of forming club allegiance and subsequent communities, with statements such as:

We have more fans, and I can only see that as a good thing (27.06.11)

There are further ways in which new fans are seen to be an intrinsically positive thing for the club, and likewise something that is to be expected, and these issues can be understood to link in with the ideologies surrounding the freeness of the forum, reflecting some of the points raised in the previous chapter when consider whether the forum can be seen to encourage users to freely discuss certain topics. As one member stated:

Some on here are really deluded. I welcome any new support for our club. This is a FREE forum for all (27.06.11)

The very fundamentals of the forum as a medium mean that it is accessible to all and not only made available to select groups, however there is likewise the fact that members demonstrate their positioning through the number of posts made and their 'member level'. As such, it can be seen that while members expect to freely discuss issues, there likewise are elements of the free forum that create potential divides in relation to new members. This is particularly relevant as it allows us to understand the significance of existing members feeling that the forum is maintaining facets and positions that are important to the overall construction of the virtual space, but likewise the impact this has on the existing community. In relating this to ideologies surrounding 'new' fans and the concept of the plastic fan, there is further evidence from existing members that indicates how, to some, the idea that certain fan groups can be categorised and hence denigrated in relation to existing members is fundamentally problematic:

You reckon there's 10,000 people who aren't going to meet your definition of a 'real' fan?
(27.06.11)

With statements like the above indicating the issues surrounding how, when calling to question certain fans' perspectives and alleged dedication, this can fall foul of labeling large numbers who are still required to provide support and contribute to the community. This is significant as it can allow us to identify how there are potentially further factors at play that all override who it is that are fans, and why it is that it is important to retain them. As one member argued:

Plastic or organic – does it really matter? If they've shelled out the required squids...
(27.06.11)

This allows us to understand how commercial issues are able to manifest themselves in such a way that is crucial to the ongoing future, and survival, of the club, proving how issues that are fundamental to the future of the forum are those, which are reflected by Swansea City Football Club itself. In acknowledging this, we can see how sports fandom is fluid and fluctuates in its affective investments, intensities, energies and performances across daily life (Sturm and McKinney, 2013.)

5.5. Plastic but Collective Identities

Through discussing some of the divisions at play throughout the overall topic of plastic fandom in relation to fan status and cultural distinction, we can see how there is seemingly not such a clear divide as potentially anticipated. One thing that is also apparent is that such conceptions fail to link in with previously discussed constructions of fans as loners and devoid of community (Jenkins, 1992.) Rather, fans can be seen to frequently debate and contest both their own and others' fandoms within specific communities. This leads us to look further at how these communities operate in relation to shared interests. When taking the example of the plastic fan debate and the evidence of there being a conflict of opinion in relation to individuals' perspectives of affiliation, dedication and positioning, we can question how this subjective, intimate and private involvement is debated collectively, and whether there is ultimately influence on the overall community.

The overriding relevance of the community can be seen to be particularly apparent during debates concerning new fans, with certain members pointing out the shortfalls in delegitimising fans that are essentially part of the same community, with statements such as, 'it's harsh calling a fellow supporter a joke'. Such perspectives allow us to construe how - while active and passive debates can divide opinion - there is the overriding significance of the community and elements of togetherness created throughout. Margalit (2008) observed that fans share 'collective memory' and, at times, 'collective trauma', and we can further explore how this affects new fans, particularly in relation to community experiences; factors that will be considered further in later parts of this chapter.

Following on from this, some of the problems arising from the plastic debate can be seen to be due to such a binary being limited in its assumption of two distinct groups of fans: active, and passive. While this was proposed to be problematic in its simplification of fan habits, this was also considered by fans themselves, with statements such as:

You have an overly simplistic view of fans. If you think there are only two types of fans (plastic and non plastic) then you are incredibly naive (23.07.11)

Such examples are of pivotal importance to this work as they clearly identify how fandom is complex and continually developing to include a multitude of variants, and yet this is

something that is not only perceived from an outside, analytical perspective, but within fan communities by fans themselves. To elaborate, we can refer back to previously raised notions concerning the significance of the internet as a medium in its own right. As Crawford (2004) explained, the internet is not just a passive text that its users passively consume, but rather it involves higher levels of participation than most other forms of mass media (2004: 141), acting, in itself, as a cultural text (2004: 144.) This ties in with the debates surrounding active and passive fandom as we can argue that due to the very fundamental nature of the medium in question, it is only natural that such divisions are multifaceted in their actualities. If fandom is to be constructed as maintaining myriad elements, then we can look at the manner in which fans who are deemed to be plastic and newcomers to the community, can nonetheless be seen to have collective identities, and one of the main ways through which this is apparent is by witnessing some of the statements from members of the forums themselves in relation to acknowledging their own community and the significance of it:

You're no less a Swansea supporter than the rest. We just need to live and let live on this board and respect and accept posters' views, even if we feel that they are off the mark (10.10.11)

Through acknowledging some of the members' statements surrounding Swansea City and its supporters, wider issues emerge throughout fan discourse that seeks to construct the active and passive debates in relation to overriding ideologies such as the importance of continuing the community and existing fans. As one member said:

This was never about the 'new' fans really. This is about the 'old and regular' fans and the way the people making decisions overran them (27.06.11)

Statements such as this enable us to look towards the influence that existing fans have on new members and how, while it may be believed that plastic debates are predominantly focused on the emergence of new fans and individual associations, there is the fundamental dominant issue of how such new fans actually affect existing ones and how this resonates throughout wider debates. Indeed, this idea of there being an element of protection on the board in relation to newcomers was further developed by members who accused existing fans of potentially alienating their support, claiming:

...you come online to find 'real' fans giving you abuse because you're plastic? Explain what you mean by real? What is real? Hell, what is a fan? Even the plastics, as you call them, support the Swans – what exactly do you want? Would you rather that the Swans just had 1,000 real fans turning up to each match? (27.06.11)

The relevance of *all* fans supporting the Swans is presented, in relation to the community itself. Communities are said to be forced to adapt to change through ongoing developments such as globalisation (Darby et al, 2007) that diversifies and evolves particular football clubs. This is interesting as it poses the question of how the type of support can be seen to potentially differ depending on the time that a particular fan has supported the team. In exploring this, we can see how this is something acknowledged by fans themselves, with members writing posts such as: 'some fans are more dedicated than others. This isn't some robot world,' which indicates how fandom is perceived as fluid and changing depending on the individual in question, and likewise evolving over time. Questions that can be posed from issues like this include how such support can be proven. While a 'plastic' fan could be believed to be someone who has recently started supporting the Swans, there are still issues regarding how exactly this is first known, and secondly how this is indicative of support; a factor that is, by its very fundamental nature, both subjective and intangible. Not limited to discussion from an outsider perspective, fans themselves can be seen to debate the relevance of individual affiliation, with statements such as:

No doubt our hardcore fans section will demand some kind of 'show your SCFC tattoo' at the ticket office's selection process for prospective season ticket holders, and anyone failing this should be refused entry because they are clearly plastic (22.06.11)

Indicating how there are integral problems involved with attempting to 'prove' and validate fandom, particularly within a set community of conflicting ideals. Despite this, there is clear evidence throughout of fans acting to demonstrate the manner in which fans should support each other due to the central point at hand being the support for Swansea City:

Think I will leave this forum - far too many people on here who seem to dislike fellow Swansea supporters - what's that about? Don't really like all this negativity. Thought the forum would be fun, but it's not really (22.06.11)

Along with disputed concerning the classifications that are rife throughout the forum:

I don't like the way people are trying to classify fans (plastic, real, etc.) a fan is a fan, some go to more games than others, but it doesn't mean you love the club any more than the next person. Everyone is different (19.06.11)

In addition to some fans rejecting the divisions between and among themselves, there is the overriding significance of new media in allowing for such divisions to be constructed. The contemporary restructuring of the manners in which fans congregate and converse can be seen to have corroded previously held local ties. As Edensor and Millington stated, the changing culture of football is:

Bringing together new forms of community association beyond the local. Crowds are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, no longer easily distinguished by class, gender or ethnicity and media exposure and enhanced travel opportunities allow new supporters to pick and choose their preferred team regardless of location (2008: 54)

And I would propose that tying in with this development of football *per se* is the manner in which new media allows for fans to play out discussions and debates surrounding the new form of supporters and, indeed, communities.

In exploring some of the discourses surrounding plastic, new fans and their emergence in communities, it can be seen that there exist numerous issues that all seek to construct the online football fan community as complex and containing fundamental ideologies that relate to individual members, and which are all different depending on the fan in question's perspective. One of the main ways through which such ideologies can be seen to play out, is when related to a specific instance. Even though there is evidence of plastic fan debates permeating the forum and its threads in many ways, arguably the clearest example of the debates surrounding new fans coming into existence is when fans were discussing the issue of season ticket allocation and the price of tickets and this is something that will be discussed in the following section.

5.6. Case Study – Ticket Prices and Season Tickets

'I hope my missus doesn't mind getting bugger all for Christmas'

For the case study of this chapter, I chose to look at one thread in particular that considered the price and allocation of season tickets and ticket prices in general, to further explore some of the examples in previous sections relating to active and passive fandom. Fan activity has already been established as linking to commodification and commercialisation, and we can further this to look at the construction of purchase habits as reflecting potential brand loyalty (see: Brandes, Franck and Tueller, 2011), however I would argue that commercialisation plays an even more significant role in constructing potential divides within specific fan communities.

Throughout the majority of discussions on *Not606*, there is evidence of a wealth of content being dedicated to fans and their positioning(s), be it in relation to a relative emergence of alleged 'glory hunters' after the Swans' recent promotion, or in relation to those that frequent the forum and claim to have authority to comment. Despite this, however, the debates surrounding *who* are the fans among the community were at their most prolific during discussions surrounding the price and allocation of tickets, with this being a principle example of a topic that divided the community. Members could be seen to debate the manner in which 'new' fans were able to purchase a season ticket while others, with perhaps longer affiliation, were not able to get one. To some, this simply reflected the nature of football, stating:

As far as I am aware, there's no rule to say you have to support the team you are buying the season ticket for. You might just like football (27.06.11)

This indicates that there is the acknowledgement that attaining tickets cannot be limited to fans having a certain amount of allegiance. However, to others, the prospect of not having a season ticket while other, allegedly undeserving fans were able to, did not sit well, further linking to notions of legitimate and delegitimate fandom:

Member 1: I'm one of the real fans who doesn't own, and won't have, a season ticket next year (26.06.11)

Member 2: What is pathetic is people not giving a hoot that genuine Swans fans miss out on games because someone that likes football on the whole got there first (27.06.11)

Such statements can be seen to reflect notions of genuine fandom, and is supported by interviews provided by fans, where some explained how the issue of money and commerce in football has often usurped genuine affiliation. The construction of new fans potentially developing support of a football team due to success is not something unique to Swansea, and was explored by King who referred to 'masculine' fans as being those that are traditional with long established support, and how these seek to differentiate themselves from 'new' fans attracted purely by clubs' successes (1997; 1998.) However, there are those that believe that investing in a club commercially, ultimately results in having a say about its current affairs:

I think if you put more money into the club [by going to matches] then you've got more right to complain about current goings on (27.06.11)

Such sentiment can be seen to be emblematic of the commercialisation of football whereby new fans are portrayed as potentially not caring about what is happening to the club, particularly in relation to ticket prices, linking in with Giulianotti's observations concerning how traditional fans are seen to have not just more affiliation, but identification, with clubs:

Traditional spectators will have a longer, more local and popular cultural identification with the club, whereas consumer fans have a more market-centred relationship to the club as reflected in the centrality of consuming fan products. (2002: 31)

Such statements can be seen to portray new fans as being essentially consumers, and this directly links to the notion of season tickets, whereby traditional fans are seen to have more of a loyal affiliation, not fuelled by commercial investment. As Lee stated:

At the level of the ordinary football supporter, the corporate rebranding of English clubs has sought to replace the traditional collective intensity, passion and camaraderie experienced by English football supporters standing on the terrace with an all-seated passive and individualised experience where the possession of an extensive (and expensive) collection of replica shirts, club merchandise and a satellite dish have become the benchmarks by which an increasingly middle class audience has expressed its transient enthusiasm for football. (Lee, in Ruddock, Hutchins and Rowe, 2010: 325)

When relating this to notions of passive spectatorship, we can question exactly where the argument resides. For example, if legitimate fans cannot afford to get tickets while 'true' fans are classed as those that attend live matches, there is invariably a problem that arises when pilgrimage is out of the fan's control. This paradox created further supports the fact that the active and passive debate is not as clear-cut as such a binary indicates, particularly due to external restrictions. When relating these aspects to the issue of season tickets, numerous posts on the forum pointed towards fans berating the 'true' fans who did not get season tickets, stating that 'real' fans would have known to purchase the tickets sooner:

...obviously that can't happen because of the so-called 'real' fans who would have bought the season tickets in March. Another thing is that I know some of the so-called real fans who have bought season tickets for years but are actually Manchester United fans (27.06.11)

With such statements going against the perspectives from others that tickets should have been allocated in relation to the length of support demonstrated by individual fans:

My argument is simply – REAL supporters who have been supporting the club year after year should come first at the front of the queue (27.06.11)

This can be seen to link to concepts of 'real' support and how this is proved. One member stated:

What will really piss me off are the empty seats from plastics that haven't bothered to show up just 'cause it's a mid-week game on a cold/wet November night, and a glamour club isn't playing (27.06.11)

And such statements are integral to this research as they point towards the factors and issues at play in relation to fans 'proving' their affiliation in order for others to interpret their positioning. Linking to previously discussed notions concerning hierarchies throughout fan communities, we can look at how factors such as ticket prices has directly impacted on how fans are able to consume their text(s). As Sandvoss explained:

In the 1990s, TV was entrusted with the task of balancing football's growing popularity with decreased physical access caused by inflated ticket prices and shrinking ground capacities. (2003: 76)

In addition to the shrinking ground capacities, there are further factors at play that indicate how new football spaces have been influenced by restricted access to live games, with this directly affecting fans due to external factors such as pricing determining who it is that is able to attend. This further constructs football and the live game as maintaining factors that go beyond subjective positioning(s) as irrespective of an individual's constructed meaning or dedication to their chosen texts, there are inescapable issues at play. Linking in with this, the new fan can be seen to be constructed as potentially being more commercially minded and able to invest monetarily in their object of fandom, with the existing fans suffering as a result, and in turn a divide is created regarding which fans can be seen to be more deserving, with posts from 'long term' Swans fans including:

Member 1: I am heartbroken, seriously. I am a Jack Army member and I've been to Wolves, Liverpool and Arsenal away. Been to every home game yet I do not even have the chance to purchase a ticket (27.06.11)

Member 2: There should be a record kept for plastics. Fail to show up for a certain number of games and you don't get a season ticket next year (27.06.11)

It can be seen, therefore, that there is an apparent acceptance and at times appreciation of new fans until they are perceived to threaten the existing fans' order. The new fan is welcomed to the forum until aspects such as attaining tickets act in competition and potential opposition, which can be seen to present itself in statements such as:

Please, Swansea City, put something in place for the people who followed you for years and don't let us down. We must be given a priority over people who have just bought season tickets (27.06.11)

Of further relevance here is the way in which Swansea City is constructed as potentially owing its fans something with the 'please, Swansea City' reference. We can question the relationship between fans and the club and whether it can be believed to be ideologically symbiotic and mutual. In furthering this, it is relevant to look at some of the discourses that

played out on the forum, particularly in relation to debates surrounding who should be allocated season tickets. As MacClancy stated:

Sports... are vehicles of identity, providing people with a sense of difference and a way of classifying themselves and others, whether latitudinally or hierarchically. (1996: 60)

And this was apparent through the discussions revolving around who should be able to get a season ticket:

Some would say that they have more right to a ticket because they have been supporting the Swans for x amount of years, some would say that they have more right because they are prepared to queue through the night for tickets. I think it's very difficult to say who is the most deserving (27.06.11)

Such sentiment is rare as the majority of posts relating to season tickets indicated that there was a significant lack of tolerance towards new fans being able to purchase tickets. Statements such as 'they're not wanted at our club' seek to construct a clear divide, while also indicating how there is emphasis placed on belonging and alleged ownership of the club. Further to this is the importance of the stadium as being established as a domain for long-time fans with new fans being seen to firstly not be welcome, and secondly potentially ruining any atmosphere (King, 1997.) With Swansea emerging in to the top league, the repositioning of the team has resulted in the complex process of reconfiguring social interaction and solidarities (*ibid.*) For some, there is the argument that those with alleged long-term commitments would have known to be at the forefront of renewing, stating that 'real fans' would have been prepared, further highlighting the way in which there is rarely general consensus among the community in relation to issues concerning individuals and collective identities. However, despite this, the one thing that most members were in agreement about was the general continual increase in ticket prices:

I have just seen the prices of the game coming up against Fulham on 10th December - I feel really quite strongly that £35 per ticket is extortionate! Where are the student tickets? We are not Chelsea. We are not at the top of the table. We are little old Swansea club with supporters from Swansea. We are not a global brand. (26.11.11)

Of interest here is the apparent small town construction in comparison to larger, global teams and how this has influence over fan consumption and, subsequently, identity. Furthermore, when ticket prices were discussed, the conversation went beyond simply looking at prices to consider the issues within this, such as students getting discounts. Amid the divisions concerning whether or not students should, in general, be allocated reduced cost tickets, there were further issues arising concerning how students could be seen to fit in to pre-existing fan categories. To some, students were portrayed as illegitimate due to largely not being from the local area:

The vast majority of students here are not from the area, so why should they have discount? (26.11.11)

While others offered suggestions for implementing schemes that would potentially result in a subsequent growth and development of fan retention in the local area:

Perhaps the fans should look at local schools instead and reinstate schemes that have been successful in the past. Our future support lies in school children and it's the locals that end up benefiting (26.11.11)

Again referring to the significance of the future of the club and how this can be ensured. There is likewise the importance of developing support among young fans, with statements such as:

Suddenly, we get promoted and the price for these students, who could be loyal fans, has increased massively, alienating them (26.11.11)

What is interesting here is the way in which there is emphasis placed on new fans firstly not being alienated, and secondly potentially being loyal fans in the future. While there has been evidence throughout previous chapters that new fans are typically viewed with suspicion in relation to Swansea's recent emergence in the EPL, there is nonetheless the acknowledgement that such fans are vital to the future of the club's support. When relating this to the issue of active and passive fandom, there is the conflict that arises when new fans are potentially discouraged from participating, yet are essentially required to ensure the club's development and growth. In truth, it can be proposed that there is ultimately a contradiction in balancing

the role that new fans can be seen to play. This likewise links to the significance of such discussion and debate taking part on the forum, considering aspects within football fandom that are seemingly physically manifested, but discussed online, with the forum being perceived by certain fans as a primary means through which to contest such issues:

We are all supporters and have different opinions. Some of us can't afford to go, some of us can, it just pisses me off that our once great club is becoming a money-orientated monster that we all hoped it wouldn't become. I know that on the pitch we are very frugal and are receiving the plaudits but on forums like this we get to see the true effects that are happening.
(26.11.11)

There is continuously the overriding acknowledgment of fans in offline communities, with questions posed such as 'how will it affect the community as a whole', illustrating how such discourses are often played out in relation to the outside community and not limited to those that directly participate in the discussions.

Despite continual evidence of conflict throughout the forum, particularly in relation to active and passive fans and non-normative behaviour, fans are largely in agreement in regards to two factors. Firstly, the overriding future of the forum and the club, and secondly, any evidence of injustice in relation to ticket prices, for example:

The bottom line is that we all seem to be agreeing on one thing - please put the fans first
(26.11.11)

As such, we can consider how the forum's fans' actions, in this respect, are evident of fandom operating against wider oppressive ideologies (Lewis, 1992: 3.) In this instance, the fan community is mobilised to overlook potential issues of conflict and disagreement and to focus on addressing a factor that affects all fans, irrespective of their positioning as 'plastic', new, or long-term supporter. Rather, there is evidence of fans working towards communal pleasures (Morse, 1983: 83), yet still retaining intricacies throughout the forum in relation to individual stances. We can question whether this is reflective of fan communities offline rather than just the structured space of the online forum, and in doing so can argue that such debates, while undoubtedly rife throughout offline communities, are perhaps not able to be articulated, debated and considered to the same degree as on mediums such as online forums

- further fuelling the previously raised observation of online interaction often facilitating the potential for richer encounters. In turn, this presents the fan community as being constructed with reference to commodification, commercialisation, historical connections, but ultimately collective futures.

5.6. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have considered the significance of active and passive fandom in relation to constructing fan categories within the community. Online communication has been defined as an ongoing creation, and one that is manifested, challenged and recreated throughout negotiations (Aden, 1999, in Sandvoss, 2005: 18), and this has been apparent through the way in which identities are contested, particularly in relation to degrees of allegiance. It has been questioned as to whether the online community has changed what it is to *be* a fan (Baym, 2000: 25, own italics), and in this respect it appears that media such as forums have greatly enhanced the possibility for fans to debate and contest each others' fandom/s. However, in doing so, preexisting fan ideologies can be seen to be reinvented, and not wholly changed, as was apparent through exploring discourses that had previously been apparent throughout offline communities in relation to fans attending matches or consuming their text through other, arguably secondary, means.

Many media based experiences are still said to be dependent on place (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington, 2007: 125) and this can be seen throughout the previous chapter where, even though fandom is manifested online, it is largely reliant on the actions of 'real' life occurrences, such as the significance of pilgrimage and attending matches as a definer of allegiance. This was a fundamental point to address in relation to active and passive debates where passive fandom and being a plastic is articulated by oppositional discourse to fans who demonstrate their commitment by attending matches. Likewise, there was the continual significance of this division being created and fuelled by the fans themselves, proving how such distinctions and categories of fandom are produced by fans and not just those observing or analysing fan communities.

While considering these points and the myriad discourses that accompany them, there is nonetheless the overriding acknowledgement that football fans as a community can be interpreted as exercising struggle against hegemony, and this was apparent throughout this

chapter when considering the increase in ticket prices. To further our understanding of the complexities concerning football fan identity, we can now develop some of the points raised in both this and the previous chapter in relation to the significance of fan locality, physical positioning and historical connections, to address the relevance of nationalism and national identity; something that frequently formed a proportion of discussion and debate on *Not606*.

CHAPTER 6 - NATIONAL IDENTITY: ISSUES OF NATIONS AND REGIONS

I nearly cried when I heard hymns and arias in the first twenty minutes... it just... hit home

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapters, while relatively distinct in regards to overriding themes, have likewise all at points considered the notion of identity forming throughout football. Football has typically been regarded as a key definer of identity (Bale, 1994), and through exploring some of the concepts surrounding the construction of online football communities, the origins and history of fandom, as well as discussing elements such as new fans, we can see that the overall understanding of identity is immensely complex. While the last chapter looked at some of the emerging themes and arguments surrounding the construction of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ fandom in relation to subsections within communities, it is now necessary to address a theme that was first introduced in the literature review when discussing previous work undertaken in this area, and which has likewise emerged throughout initial observations.

Originating from the theories exploring the role of national identity and nationalism in media reporting of football – particularly football violence (see Poulton, 2005), it can be seen that such themes have resonated throughout work addressing football fan discourses, yet failed to be extensively explored *within* fan groups; rather commanding external analyses of media reports into aspects employed by the UK press (*ibid.*) While the media is pivotal to the interweaving of the everyday reproduction of loyalties to the nation state (Ytterstad, 2012: 231), there are nonetheless limitations when only addressing such issues from one perspective. While this work is undoubtedly relevant, particularly in understanding some of the dominant themes that have emerged throughout media representations and which will be discussed in the final chapter, there is nonetheless the need to look at more ‘everyday’ instances of national identity in relation to the construction of football fan identities, linking previous theorists’ appreciation of the significance in relating national pride to football, with

the significance of online media in constructing communities and creating discourse being a crucial overriding component.

Some of the questions we can hope to answer include addressing the relevance of nationalistic rhetoric throughout specifically regional football fan communities, particularly in relation to constructing the ‘nation’ as a cultural commodity (Carrington, 2005: 71) and how this affects local affiliations. Likewise, whether nationalism – which is purportedly paraded with ‘free abandon’ throughout football reporting (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003) – is similarly constructed to the same degree throughout football communities. We can further address how previous literature has largely concentrated on predominantly large scale sporting events (such as World Cups and Euro competitions), failing to address regular matches and reactions from the fans themselves.

For this chapter’s case study, I have chosen to explore the threads discussing Swansea’s rivalry with Cardiff City in order to illustrate some of the key issues surrounding regionality in relation to nationality and answer the overarching research question of:

What is the role of online football fan groups in constructing national identity?

6.2. Belonging – Heritage and History

Football history has long been embedded in national history. In this respect, there is the belief that football is directly related to the nation and its background, with this being evident through heritage playing a role in fans becoming fans – a factor that was explored in the previous chapter in relation to the background of Swansea City fans. Adding to this is the significance of ‘home’, with this being particularly important when addressing national identity throughout football and the formation of primary attachments, as was identified in the previous chapter where the majority of fans were seen to be either from Swansea originally, or now living there:

For me, an attachment would be if you are from that town or city or live there. Maybe you actually go to games and support them. To say you support a team simply because they are on TV is not a real attachment (01.11.11)

This construction of 'home' and local areas as forming the bases for most fans' attachments, particularly those that are interpreted as 'real', reflect some of the observations arising in previous chapters and also link in with Margalit's argument that this is particularly prevalent for fans of smaller clubs:

In many cases, especially in lower divisions, fandom entails a strong connection to locality, thus strengthening local communities at large. (2008: no page number)

Indeed, ideologies surrounding 'home' and national identity can be seen to be crucial in the self-identification formations of football fans, as fans can be seen to not only *relate* to the national team, but also feel a *part* of one:

Football provides a powerful arena for the construction and representation of national identity by its very obvious identification of the nation with the national team (Perryman, 2006: 119)

However, such statements lead us to question the relevance of local teams in comparison to national teams and whether such identification is as overt as this, or potentially subtler in its nature. Of further relevance here is the role that the internet plays in transcending borders and constructing communities across the globe, while also being said to play a role as a site of social solidarity (Margalit, 2008), leading us to question how this has affected football in relation to issues such as accessibility, localities and class; factors that were introduced earlier in this work. One of the first aspects that we can consider is to build upon one of the sections in the previous chapter where we looked at fans becoming fans, developing these points to look specifically at national identity within this. For some, there is seemingly no local affiliation behind their support:

Why do I support Swansea? I am not Welsh, I've never seen the Swans live (2013, I hope!), born in Scotland and now live in Australia. For some reason always had a thing for the Swans as a wee boy. I remember as a kid all the lads would have a shoot out league and I was always Swansea when everyone else wanted Rangers, Celtic, etc. Sad, isn't it. (09.11.11)

This form of allegiance was addressed by Anthony King in his work *Football Fandom and Post National Identity in the New Europe* (2000) which considered Manchester United fans and their emergence in existing fans' communities:

...moreover, there are many other fans who are not fans by birth or residence, but which are part of this network because they adopt... practices and through supporting the team become part of this network. (2000: 422)

King's work, while exploring one of the most successful football clubs in the UK, nonetheless has factors that are of significance to 'lower' teams, such as Swansea. Indeed, whereas Manchester United's existing community of fans with connections to the city as a whole and not just the football team, could feel potentially threatened by the existence of fans who support the team simply due to their success and fame, there is still the fact that this is potentially not surprising considering the club's global exposure. In contrast, Swansea City's fan base could be seen to be more unique in relation to the club's limited position, particularly in relation to other, better known, teams. In part, it can be acknowledged that Swansea City's recent emergence in the EPL could be attributed to new fans, especially those who have no prior allegiance. In addressing this, we can look specifically at English fans of Swansea City; a group which is said to be discernibly small, with one member stating that they 'must be one of the few (5% or less) English fans of the club' and yet are likewise proud of their selective affiliation, claiming:

I don't get stick in my hometown for supporting the Swans – the opposite, in fact. Most people are respectful, even slightly envious, I sometimes think, of my allegiance. (09.11.11)

We can question why this is important and how the meaning of supporting a minor club, such as Swansea, is something that is unique to the club in question, or also reflective of other smaller teams. For Margalit, it is in lower divisions where fandom entails a strong connection to locality (2008: 221), in turn strengthening local communities, thus positioning fans from other, arguably more dominant, areas as being very much in the minority.

Following on from this are the discourses that surround new fans. Indeed, when exploring some of the discussions about why fans of Swansea start supporting the team, it is interesting to note that there is often a contradiction in relation to how new fans are constructed. Unlike previous chapters where new fans were seen as potentially threatening, or unwelcome, there is seemingly little evidence of these issues arising when exploring concepts of national identity:

I think it's just great when people from afar choose to support our football team, and I regard them as much a fan as those of us who are fortunate enough to go to the Liberty....(09.11.11)

This illustrates how there is the understanding that Swansea's emergence in the Premier League has ultimately resulted in gaining fans, yet can be seen to conflict with previously discussed notions, such as the negative connotations surrounding 'new' fandom. We can consider how this compares to the positioning of 'plastics' and whether there is any distinction between those and new fans who come from afar, with the latter linking to notions of pride in fans being seen to make the effort to discover Swansea, and potentially visit. What is furthermore interesting is the fact that throughout discussions concerning 'plastic' fans, there was no indication as to whether fans were said to be Welsh, or other nationalities. Indeed – in light of some of the previously discussed issues surrounding the role of new fans – we could propose that there is perhaps evidence of new fans being welcomed if they are English, and from a dominant football nation, and then seen to support a Welsh team, while Welsh 'plastics' are othered in relation to the existing community.

However, while it could be seen that national identity plays a role in new fandom, there are likewise the ideologies surrounding all fans being welcomed and how, in certain contexts, the overriding common ground of Swansea City is constructed as the principle defining factor:

It matters not where you were born, or where you live. Religious persuasion, race, creed or colour are irrelevant. The one thing that binds us all is our love for our wonderful football club (09.11.11)

6.3. Wales and Everything Welsh

Contributing to the importance of the *local* team is the significance of the *Welsh* team and how this is constructed throughout the fan community. To look at this, we can firstly explore the relevance of patriotism in relation to being a *Welsh* football fan, and not just a *Swansea* football fan. Previous work in this area has acknowledged the role of English national identity in relation to regional teams, however there is a distinct lack of research that has

specifically addressed Welsh fans. Since 1904, FIFA¹¹ has treated England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as separate nations (Duke and Crolley, 1996), and it is the construction of Wales as separate to other nations that this chapter aims to explore. As Harris stated:

Whilst the relationship between sport and the media has received much attention in recent years, there has been little work on the mediated (re)presentation of sport in Wales. (2006: 4)

The relevance of Wales and 'Welshness' will be further discussed in this section, but to firstly refer back to the concepts surrounding English identity, we can see that there is the widespread understanding of English fans being regarded as having 'less' identifiable identity aspects than smaller countries' fans like the Welsh. As Billy Bragg, author of *The Progressive Patriot* stated:

There's a vacuum where our Englishness should be compared with the Scots and the Welsh. That's why the team becomes important, it provides something to cling to. (2007: 54)

Such statements, while also illustrating how English fans potentially rely on football to create identifiable positions, likewise allows for Wales to be placed in opposition to England in relation to the formation of identity, supporting Whannel's observation that national identities are constructed upon difference and opposition between 'our' qualities and theirs (1998) When adapting this to fans, we can propose that football is not only linked to national identity but that specific, smaller nations arguably have more potential to form stronger allegiances due to being culturally and historically distinct. This was supported by Krovel (2012) who, when discussing Scottish football fans, stated:

The development of Scottish football fans has always been greatly influenced by Scottish nations' relationships to England and the UK as a whole, instead of resulting in a cultural erosion, international football relationships have provided Scotland with a forum for expressing and even increasing the Scottish aspects of its culture¹²

¹¹ The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is the international governing body of association football, futsal and beach soccer. Its membership comprises 209 national associations

¹² See: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2882/3208>

The argument that nations such as Scotland enable its fans to have more cultural expression was furthered by Harris (2006), who claimed that promoting national identity is generally regarded as important to nations that are subservient to dominant ones. When relating this position to Wales, we could argue that Wales' identity, and that of its football fans, is fuelled through specific continued rivalries with England. Indeed, in providing the 'us and them' discourse between Wales and England, it can illustrate how national affiliation is furthered by the 'othering' of specific opposition. Identities are said to always be organised relationally, with one *being* something because there is something else that one is not (own italics) (Hormoen, 2012: 150.) To again refer back Scottish football fans, the perception of the 'tartan army' was explored by O'Donnell in relation to being perceived positively in comparison to England's fans. While this is ultimately dependent on the media and nation in question, there are instances of oppositional identity construction throughout the forum, with threads being dedicated to discussing Wales versus England, neglecting encounters with other teams. An interesting observation is how discussions about national matches regularly referred to regional differences, such as Swansea and Cardiff, while simultaneously acknowledging how these teams reflect the nation as a whole:

Guys, isn't this meant to be an England versus Wales match thread? Not a Cardiff versus Swansea, or even a Swansea versus Swansea thread – we're not covering the Land of Our Fathers in too much glory, eh? (31.08.11)

Rogers and Rookwood (2007) argued that the use of Welsh national identity is central to the culture of Cardiff City FC and has increased the club's potential as a sporting institution, and this is important as it indicates how regional clubs are representative of larger nations, further illustrating how discourses surrounding the national team are regularly at play. When broadening this to look at England versus Wales matches, we can consider the argument that English national identity is not comparable to the strengths of smaller nations, as claimed by (Bragg, 2012.) In exploring this, Perryman claimed that football could be seen to shape a 'new' England, with the sport being constructed as one of the few things that English people have to illustrate their national identity. This was supported by Gibbons (2011) who conducted interviews with English football fans to explore whether they felt represented by the team. The majority of fans said yes, with this being particularly apparent during the World Cup, stressing the importance of large international events in cementing national identity, while also allowing us to link the relevance of oppositional positioning against

nations such as Wales. There is seemingly the argument at play that a cultural repositioning is in place, which allows fans to reinstate previously held formations of relevance and power; factors that are said to have been consistently eroded, through affiliation and the representation of football.

It is important to acknowledge the distinct relationship between Wales and England, all the while understanding the significance of regional teams within this. Firstly, we can look at the historical background of England as constructed rival and how regional differences, such as Swansea and Cardiff, are argued by some to need to be put to rest, with one fan in the lead up to Wales' encounter with England stating:

Well, OUR country had a long awaited great performance and result back last Friday. We are now about to take on our oldest arch enemy where we're really going to be so up against it and all we can do is bicker amongst each other. It's pathetic chaps! For once, we should all stand together. Sadly, it is obviously still not changed from the dark dark days at the Vetch/Ninian in the '70s and '80s with Swans and Bluebirds baiting each other (31.08.11)

This emphasises how regional oppositions, to some, are constructed as essentially redundant in comparison to wider, overriding national narratives. However, while there is the evidence throughout the forum that regional rivalries can potentially influence the overall construction of national identity, there is conversely the understanding that regional teams assist in developing patriotism. In Johnes' (2000) work on Welsh identity and the role of sport, he argued that Cardiff City, as an example of a regional team, helps to 'create, manage and promote' Welsh national identity due to the affiliations that fans can be seen to have. In addressing this, we can explore where loyalty lies between national and regional connections, for example Wales and Swansea City. This was something regularly discussed throughout the forum, with fans debating where their loyalty would lie, with one fan stating that 'egg chasers'¹³ will say Wales, but football fans will say the Swans.' This indicates how there is an apparent divide with rugby fans being portrayed as having more national affiliation, unlike football fans who are more dedicated to specific regions. Such sentiment was explored by Gibbons in relation to English fans, who argued:

¹³ 'Egg chasers' is a predominantly derogatory term used by some to describe both rugby players and rugby fans.

These national identities have an ongoing confusion as to their relationships to themselves. Where does Englishness stop and Britishness begin? (2011: 4)

Gibbons' work involved interviewing English fans at a series of specific events in order to identify different levels of loyalty, exposing the fundamental problems arising when there is conflict between regional and national affiliation. When relating this back to the forum, there were numerous instances of fans reacting against this division, linking this to ideologies surrounding 'plastic' spectatorship and glory hunting, with statements such as: 'people not watching the Welsh football – so called Welsh men, hold your head in shame,' and:

You don't watch Wales because they're crap, but you managed to come from abroad to watch a crap Swansea team years back. (13.08.11)

In denigrating individuals' regional and national consumption habits, this brings to light debates regarding supporting a Welsh team due to intrinsic loyalty, irrespective of whether the team is failing. Indeed, the argument surrounding a 'good' national team can be seen to play an integral role on the forum, with Welsh victory regularly being discussed:

It's a great weekend to be Welsh... They'll be singing in the valleys and the coast tonight (18.03.12)

There was repeated discussion surrounding the performance of the Welsh team, with this being evidently links to concepts of patriotism and pride. Allison argued that national identity is the most marketable product in sport (2000: 346), and this is apparent throughout the forum with high levels of involvement from numerous members to this effect, further linking with Brookes' argument that the media encourages fans to identify with different nations at different times (2002.) Again linking to Gibbons' work, where Gibbons stated that since some of the reasons behind national identity are concepts of 'passion', 'spirit' and 'pride', these can be seen to be encapsulated in success (2011: 2). However, the discourses on the forum further this to surround identity-forming characteristics irrespective of the team's current performance, with it all seeking to construct a collective formation of Welsh performativity and behaviour. Supporting the relevance of Swansea's team performance, a member stated:

Us Welsh are terrible losers when things are bad, but when things start going our way we are also hapless winners (31.08.11)

This indicates that there are distinctive patterns in relation to fan reactions on behalf of the nation, even when referring to regional teams. This arguably goes against Gibbons' observation that the formation of English identity is not homogenous among fans and is always subjected to individual perspectives (2011) with there sometimes being clear indication of shared reactions among the forum members, or at least the perception of this. Of further relevance here is the argument that national identity, while ubiquitous throughout media reports, should also be understood to contrast with football violence and hooliganism as a previously dominant frame through which to construct football as a whole. While hooliganism can be believed to have prevailed throughout a vast proportion of news media, this inherently connotes negative aspects of the game, whereas the promotion of national allegiances can be understood as, at times, positive. This was acknowledged by Vincent and Hill who looked at *The Sun's* construction and promotion of English national identity during the 2010 World Cup finding that the majority of news coverage encouraged national identity by drawing on favourable aspects of English history (2011) illustrating how, during particular events at least, it is important to construct pride and connections to the national team.

However, despite this, there is the significance of those who can be believed to express emotional involvement through football but this not necessarily being indicative of any actual national affiliation. As Abell, Condor, Lowe, Gibson and Stevenson stated:

English national identity is not an all or nothing affair. People can display immense emotional involvement in the fate of English football without expressing such concerns over the nation as an imagined community (2007: 115)

This emphasises how the construction of national identity can be complex and fluid, and likewise differ between fans in recognition of their own personal relationship with clubs and countries.

Up until this point, we have considered England and Wales in regular opposition; in doing so fuelling the identity forming abilities of the home nation. In truth, such a construction can be seen to be not only relevant in relation to existing theoretical perspectives, but also in

addressing dominant themes on the forum. Statements such as ‘I feel like my heart has been ripped out and fed to the English’ help construct the role that England plays against Wales, regardless of the game in question. This is supported by Duke and Crolley’s work, where they conducted questionnaires with English fans in order to explore feelings of nationality. They discovered that football ‘captures the imagined community perfectly’, arguing that ‘it is easier to imagine to imagine the nation and confirm national identity when eleven players are representing the nation in a match against other nations’, emphasising how, for national identity to play out, it arguably has to act in opposition to another, potentially dominant, identity (Duke and Crolley, 1996.)

To refer back to regionality, we can look at one example on the forum, which considered Gareth Bale as a Welsh player who is, at the time of writing, playing for an club in the EPL (Tottenham Hotspur.) Sentiment surrounding Tottenham’s visit to the Liberty Stadium predominantly concentrated on the reaction from Swansea fans to Bale, with statements from members including:

One thing is a must do tomorrow... and that is that the entire Jack Army must give Bale the most fiercely hostile reception, all game. I don’t care if he is Welsh. Wales are not playing tomorrow, and we need to make it very uncomfortable for him to perform and play, by doing this we will reduce considerably the Spurs threat, if ever our boys need the 12th man it is tomorrow, so please let’s not let Bale settle into his game (30.12.11)

This is significant as it addresses how Bale, although Welsh, is constructed as a rival when playing for an oppositional regional team. This example provides first hand indication of the binary between national and regional identification, with such positions being furthered when considering the issue of regional players getting injured when representing their respective national team. In King’s work exploring English fans, there was clear opinion expressed about the English team in relation to regional players getting injured or tired, with a statement from one of the fans interviewed being:

I’m being perfectly honest – I hope England get sent home after the first round (of the 1998 World Cup) so that our players can get a rest before next season (1997)

This emphasises how fans seemingly withdraw from wider support when regional aspects are jeopardised, which arguably constructs regional affiliations as salient and dependent on the context in which support is at play (*ibid.*) Indeed, this can arguably emphasise how the significance of regional identification and loyalty is dominant, even in relation to wider issues. As Coelho stated:

It is fascinating, although sometimes frightening, how a football team gains a vast and complex social signification and symbolism which over take the simple outcome of a sporting competition. (1998: 159)

This is implying that, for some fans, the significance of regional and national identification often usurps the team's actual success. We can question whether this preoccupation with identity is acknowledged among fans themselves, while likewise addressing how such aspects overriding football outcomes is reflective of the construction of the forum in chapter four, where discussions about management prevailed:

Whether to boo or cheer an opposing player is not something that enters a normal fan's head until they have directly affected their club in some way. Their nationality is irrelevant and it should stay that way. If we put our energy into supporting our team instead of directing it at opposition players we could have much more of an effect on the result (30.12.11)

In discussing such issues, however, we can question whether – similarly to active and passive debates – this is an overly simplistic view of regional and local affiliation, with the truth being far more complex. As King stated:

To insist that this local affiliation is essential and primary to all others and to ignore the other networks in which these individuals are bound is to maintain an anachronistically monolithic concept of social life (2000: no page number)

One example that illustrates how regional and national identities are potentially blurred is when looking at the Gleision Colliery mining disaster in 2011¹⁴. Not only is this one of the few news stories to feature on *Not606* during this time of analysis, but also it is an indication

¹⁴ The Gleision Colliery mining disaster occurred on 15 September 2011 at a Neath Port Talbot drift mine. Four miners lost their lives after an explosion on a narrow coal seam. It remains the worst mining disaster to occur in Wales for three decades. See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-14935428>

of how an event can be seen to erode previously distinct boundaries. One of the main topics surrounding this theme was whether the news of the disaster could be interpreted as affecting the community as a whole:

I hope the club will do a minute's silence and wear black arm bands for all of those who lost their lives. As a community club, I hope they will (16.09.11)

This emphasises the significance of Swansea being constructed as a community club by fans themselves supporting previously raised concepts. Likewise, there was evidence of fans from other teams and areas claiming to relate to the story, and indeed Swansea as a place, through posting their condolences:

Member 1: Just a few words from someone you don't know, but following the tragic news from the mining disaster, I would just like to say that my thoughts are with you for all those that share this tragedy (16.09.11)

Member 2: I think many Sunderland fans will have a special empathy with the Swansea community, many of us are from good mining stock and I watched the story unfold in tears (16.09.11)

This is relevant as it reinforces previously addressed concepts regarding smaller nations potentially having more outlets of national identity and how this can be adapted to specific regions having shared factors of identity, such as heritage and history, reflecting how definers of identity are not limited to specific teams and regions, but rather can transcend physical borders depending on social, cultural and historical factors. Such aspects are further apparent when we address the overarching question of how national identity can be seen to be played out on online forums, particularly in comparison to other mediums. Through accessing a medium that is not physically bound, fans from various places are able to interact and converse, with this changing the way in which fans engage. Crossing such boundaries allows for us to acknowledge how there are limitations at play that at times inhibit fans expressing aspects of shared experiences. While previously discussed points have concentrated on negative interactions and debate, there is likewise the significance of positive activity through fans having specific national, regional and cultural identification. This is particularly apparent

when communities are visited by others - elements that I would argue have been previously neglected in this area of research.

When further addressing the problems that arise concerning regional and national identity, further factors emerge such as the relevance of Swansea City being the only Welsh team in the English Premier League (EPL.) The EPL, by its very name, implies a dominated league. Of the twenty teams competing Swansea is, at the time of writing, the only Welsh team. This has not gone unnoticed, with the importance of a Welsh team in an otherwise English-dominated league being something that warranted a large number of posts on the forum. While the media acknowledged Swansea's emergence in the Premier League, which is discussed in the last chapter of this work, a relatively small amount of coverage was dedicated to discussing the relevance of this event on Welsh fans. When addressing this on *Not606*, it can be seen that there were dominant discourses emerging regarding the positioning of both Swansea and Wales – acknowledging Swansea as representative of not just a city, but a country. There were fans who embraced this development, stating ‘God Save the Queen and Cymru am Byth’, while others were dubious of the emphasis placed on Swansea encompassing a national position, claiming:

...the problem lies with us being a Welsh team playing in an English league. We are seen as an international team, surely this needs to be addressed? (06.08.11)

Despite this, there was the overriding mentality that such novelty would eventually wane, with fans indicating that ‘the fact we’re Welsh and playing in the English league will become less and less of an issue.’ Yet, in the meantime there is the potential for constructing strong national identities in the context of continuous English regional opposition, which was reflected in the manner in which Welsh patriotic sentiment overrode regional discussions on numerous threads. In addressing this, we can again look at the way that Swansea's positioning in the EPL was constructed in continual opposition to nineteen English teams. Fuelled by sentiment from other fans of the opposition, stating: ‘based in Wales but reliant on the English’, we can see how the construction of Wales' positioning defined through representation of difference to other teams (Brookes, 2002) with this being interpreted not just from Welsh fans' perspectives, but dominant ‘others’, too.

In addition to this oppositional positioning is the way that Swansea is portrayed as representative of both the country and the nation, with both the team and fans' conduct seen as playing a role in propelling Welshness. Such aspects are imperative to the way in which discourses are perceived throughout football, and likewise are seen to be interpreted by fans themselves, with statements such as: 'I'm proud of the way we're conducting ourselves in the Premier League', emphasising an element of expectancy towards the way in which Swansea, and its fans', actions are reflecting a nation. However, in constructing this positioning, we can question whether such sentiment is apparent throughout English teams, or if this is something unique to smaller nations. Indeed, while it has been identified previously in this section that there were other regions that had affiliation to Swansea, such as the North East, there is seemingly no stronger identification than the nation itself. Part of this can indeed be attributed to Wales being small, with fans stating:

I am loving life in the Premier League. We played against a team whose substitutes cost more than our whole squad and stadium put together. (04.12.11)

With Swansea's club size presenting notions of inferiority in relation to the 'big boys' of the EPL, as evident through posts such as:

We are Swansea, and we are punching above our weight. Support our lads and cut them a little slack when things don't go our way. (04.12.11)

While others expressed gratitude at the way in which Swansea's success had affected fans themselves, with statements such as 'well done, all of you, for making this happen, I'm so grateful' constructing appreciation of the significance of Swansea being the only Welsh team in the league.

We are obviously the Premier team of Wales and will represent our country in the Premier League with distinction. (04.12.11)

We can consider the significance of a 'small club' in a 'big' league in relation to cultural fears about disembedding local economic and cultural institutions. Winstanley argued that local clubs are potentially threatened due to the alleged effects of homogenous global brands (2009.) To relate this to Swansea, we can see that while there is the general discourse among

some that emergence into the EPL is a positive thing, there is still a degree of fear regarding the impact this could have on hitherto strong local cultural identification, something that is particularly apparent through reading fans' responses for how they will act at away matches, referring to wearing daffodils and leeks with pride, while singing Welsh songs and chants. As Brick argued:

As football becomes increasingly 'glocal' fan culture discourses championing the essentialist centrality of traditional local relationships within English football have proliferated. (2001: 10)

The very essence of a forum means that posts are not limited to those who purport to be fans of a certain team. In truth, presentations of a Welsh team in an otherwise English dominant league are not the subject of discussion by just Swansea fans, but are also discussed by English fans. Reacting to the points regarding Swansea's emergence in the EPL, one fan stated:

Another paranoid Welsh man who thinks that the English give them any time of day. We don't want a Welsh team? Why would you think that unless you're just another obsessed Welshman with a complex? (06.08.11)

This was supported by others who posed questions such as: 'does anyone outside of Wales actually give a fuck about Wales?' which presents an indignant reaction from existing teams' fans to the Welsh 'newcomers', while likewise 'othering' those in opposition to English dominance. We can question whether such a reaction is reflective of the discussions that emerged surrounding new fans, particularly those explored in Chapter 4, and how Swansea's emergence in the EPL evokes issues of entering already existing communities; encapsulating discourses surrounding the new fan previously raised in this work, with the new fan operating, now, as part of a group.

In exploring this, we can further look at the reasons behind such reasons. There is a belief that such reactions are reflective of potential anxieties and, to some, jealousy towards those that are typically believed to be 'lesser' teams. Robinson (in Gibbons, 2011) (2008) stated that England has no distinctive political manifestation, 'no national dress... no national anthem', and that 'even its patron saint is neither English nor uniquely its own' (*ibid.*) This indicates

that the English seemingly have few of the cultural trappings that have come to be associated with the nation as an intrinsic whole (Hill, 1999: 16.) This is further supported by Hill's statement that English identity is the 'least precise' of all the domestic nationalisms (*ibid*), supported other perspectives that position English national identity as being constructed through opposition to other identities. As Hall said:

To be English is to know yourself in relation to the French and the hot blooded Mediterranean, and the passionate, traumatised Russian soul. You go around the entire globe: when you know what everyone else is, then you are what they are not. Identity is always, in that sense, a structured representation which only achieves its positives through the narrow eye of the negative. (1991: 21)

And it is this element of there being little precise identity that allows us to argue that such a reaction, as extracted from posts on the forum by English fans, is testament to the sentiment surrounding dominant nations when attacking other nations' cultural and social standing, as the following post from the forum signifies:

The sad truth - you fuckers from the valleys have the chip on your shoulders. Can't wait for you to be relegated so you'll fuck off back to the Championship and leave us alone (06.08.11)

The latter comment clearly presents the 'us and them' division so apparent through numerous posts, and it is this that can be seen to run far deeper than football encounters, with statements such as:

Personally, I have nothing against the Welsh, but as for a 'warm welcome', I've yet to see one anywhere in Wales for an Englishman (06.08.11)

This reflects Johnes' argument that the 'icons of a later popular national identity were gradually being incorporated into any significant match between Welsh and English clubs' (2002: 56.) But, it is this history of rivalry that fuels further encounters, constructing them as the highlight of many sporting calendars with there being the argument that any display of empathy towards each other potentially acts to jeopardise the individual nation's own cultural and national identity. However, while some theorists propose that English national identity is constructed as weak in comparison to those of smaller nations, I would argue that there are

instances of constructing the Welsh team as retaining relatively little identity in comparison to regional counterparts. One emerging discourse throughout was the significance of Welsh teams being seen as homogenous and to retain identical characteristics, with this seen to potentially erode Welsh cultural identity in the sense of it no longer being regional-specific; aspects that were integral to discussions surrounding Swansea and Cardiff rivalry, for example. Such sentiment was not reflected when discussing English teams. Repeatedly, fans demonstrated their concern that Swansea's time in the EPL would result in unfair comparisons with other Welsh teams, irrespective of their league positioning, referring to teams such as Cardiff as having a dubious track record of disorder:

We only encountered problems at the Championship because Cardiff has played there previously and had been up to their usual tricks. If Cardiff do get promoted then my prediction is for mayhem and chaos and for us to be tarred with the same brush, just because we're Welsh (19.09.11)

What is interesting here is how fans demonstrate concern about being constructed as a collective, particularly when it is with another team whose actions are questionable - in this instance, it is Cardiff's fans that are said to regularly involve themselves in violence and disorder. Despite general positive sentiment about Wales' emergence, there are unavoidable issues that emerge when related to overall perceptions of Wales. In turn, this illustrates how, irrespective of regional affiliations at play, the overriding significance of representing one's country is coming to the fore. Supporting this, other posts on the forum pointed towards the significance of Wales being represented outside of the UK:

Working in Ibiza, I've been astounded by how little people know of Wales. I'd say over 50% of Europeans I've dealt with in three years have, at worst, never heard of it and at best have heard the name but have no idea where we are. They always know Scotland and Ireland, but Wales is a distant relative, clearly (18.09.11)

This constructs football as playing a role in representing countries, nations and people as individuals, but in doing so also furthers perceptions of the country on a potentially global scale. Likewise, in reference to an article in the *New York Times*, one member posted:

Amazing, makes me so proud to see people on the other side of the Atlantic sitting up and taking notice. I even didn't mind them calling it a soccer club (18.09.11)

In turn, then, potential differences are bypassed when considering recognition for the country as a whole. This can be seen to reflect how fans potentially construct identities depending on the context in which this is formed and tested. For example, when related to larger, distant nations, the concept of establishing Welshness is paramount, yet when limited to discussions and the contextualisation of local and 'norm', there is little desire to demonstrate national allegiance, with regional affiliation prevailing:

The Swans are in the Premier League and our national team looks to be on the up after the two recent performances. Even our neighbours are doing well in the Championship and it would be churlish of anyone not to wish them well (18.09.11)

This emphasises the complexities of the nation and how, for fans, there is potentially the fundamental issue concerning whether they are Swansea fans first and foremost, or more loyal to the local region. To further understand this, we can look at specific regional rivalries and discourses surrounding Swansea and Cardiff in order to understand both individual and collective perspectives.

6.4. You may now resume hostilities - Swansea vs. Cardiff

Derbies are an integral part of the football calendar. The anticipated encounters between Manchester United and Manchester City, Liverpool and Everton, Tottenham and Arsenal have all helped shape some of the most significant matches in the Premier League's history. The background to local rivalries can be seen to connote historical allegiance, with local teams competing for not only football success, but regional dominance. Perhaps understandably, every fan of a renowned 'derby' team believes that theirs is the most notorious of encounters, and there is none more indicative of that than the South Wales derby between Swansea and Cardiff.

Part of the construction of Swansea as a dominant football team can be said to be in opposition to specific rival clubs, satisfying Bairner and Shirlow's observation that 'supporting particular soccer teams allows fans to express their opposition to rival identities,

whilst celebrating their own' (1999: 162.) And this, in part, can be seen to be apparent through means such as banter, with it not always being interpreted as said lightheartedly, as argued previously in this work, however in other contexts it assists with the positioning of interactions between fan sets:

Guys, I find this all very sad. There is some fantastic banter between both sets of fans. Yes there are some wums¹⁵ but on both boards. Between most there is mutual respect, if sometimes a little loathing or may I say bitter rivalry (20.09.11)

The significance of this can be seen to be the construction of respect as part of the main charter at play throughout the forum, even when related to the most ardent of rival. To develop this, we can look at Theodopoulou's (2007) construction of *anti fandom*; defined as an 'active dislike of something'. We can question how this operates in the context of duelling opposition, with this meaning not only having a dislike of one text, but having a dislike of a particular *subtext* within the overriding fan text. As Gray stated:

The anti fan is the person who hates the fan object of another fan for the simply reason that this object is in direct, straightforward or historical competition with her/his own object of admiration. The anti fan is always a fan (2003: 318)

To some, irrespective of retaining elements of respect for oppositional fans, there are still deep rooted rivalries:

I respect the views of nearly all C**diff members and most of their posts are made with intelligence and an honest belief in what they say, but this one particular person is just here to insult and spoil all topics that are being genuinely debated. (20.09.11)

This highlights the bearing of certain Cardiff fans being perceived as individuals and not representative of the whole community, and this was a repeated element throughout the forum whereby numerous fans claimed to understand that deviant behaviour was not reflective of the club and its fans on the whole, going against some of the discourses surrounding homogeneity that were at play in relation to constructing Wales, and its fans, as a

¹⁵ WUM is an often-used slang term and acronym that refers to 'wind-up merchants.' It is typically used on internet forums and social media in response to posters/members that seemingly intentionally seek to create debate.

whole. Despite this, however, there were clear portrayals produced in relation to stereotypes of Cardiff fans, where Swansea fans can be seen to denigrate and delegitimise the object of their anti fandom, reflecting previous discussed media approaches:

So far, Cardiff's average attendances have been numerically higher due to their larger capacity but their highest attendance of 23,013 is still over 3,000 under capacity and you are running at an average of 83.6% In other words, we are filling our ground. You aren't (20.09.11)

This illustrates how rivalries go beyond match days to look at elements of dedication and competition and, in doing so, further promote such issues as being the core element of fan commitment and affiliation. Such factors subsequently construct the identity not just of the oppositional fan, but also, conversely, the Swansea fan. If Cardiff fans are not filling their ground, Swansea fans are, and this ties in to the role of football in defining, promoting, challenging and resisting public expressions of national identity and pride (e.g. Boyle and Haynes, 1996; Homes, 1994; Maguire et al, 1999) with filling stadiums being an indicator of mass dedication in addition to forming the bases for debates about active and passive support.

When acknowledging previous research into this area, it's apparent that there is little work dedicated to the complex construction of regional identities, little more to potential conflict that arises. Furthermore, previous research has been predominantly speculative, relying on largely secondary analyses through media reports to provide opinion on specific identities. However, by witnessing fans interact and engage between and among themselves, we can see exactly what is happening. What is apparent when considering such interactions are the complexities arising throughout discussions surrounding regional patriotism. As Theodoropoulou (2007) argued, the anti fan often holds aspects of respect, and while this is apparent throughout some of the sentiment towards Cardiff fans, this changes when adapted to overriding constructions of the nation. As one member stated:

A club that's sold its soul (crew) to foreigners and whose players proudly display the name of another country on their shirt fronts. Yet they criticise the Jacks for being unpatriotic despite Swansea being 75% Welsh owned (20.09.11)

Such statements raise questions concerning who are more Welsh, despite evidence of this being sidelined in previous discussions in favour of regional identity. We can hence question

whether this is mutually exclusive, as previous points would have implied, or if there in fact are complexities and blurred boundaries in relation to where being 'Swansea' ends and being Welsh begins. The relevance here is how Wales is essentially sidelined in favour of constructing regional identities, and then likewise referred to when fuelling local affiliation as being subjected to the overriding dominance of the nation. Gray (2003: 7) stated that anti fans must find cause for their dislike in something, yet what was apparent throughout analysing the forum, was that there was often little specific reason provided for Swansea fans dislike of Cardiff, rather it just being constructed as a historical rivalry that should continue, similar, in effect, to the discourses surrounding why fans should support their local team, constructing a form of 'just because' (anti)fandom. Swansea's construction as a club is furthermore fuelled by the significance of being better than Cardiff:

It's like the old joke where two blokes are being followed by a lion. One guy takes his shoes off. The other guy asks why he's doing it. The first guy says it's so he can run faster. The second guy says he'll never outrun a lion. The first guy says 'I don't need to outrun the lion, I've just got to outrun you (10.09.11)

It is interesting to see how, while some sentiment portrays regional differences, there is the overriding importance of Wales throughout. Statements such as: 'your club is a joke and a disgrace to the Welsh nation', are evidence of the nation producing different allegiance and sentiment among fans, with national identities being constructed as inherently unstable (Roche, 2000). Furthering this is the significance of specific identification with regional teams being dependent on the fan's individual background. When relating this to Cardiff's future success, a member said: 'I hope Cardiff get promoted next year... different for me, I'm not Welsh', which assists in constructing an oppositional positioning whereby being Welsh would imply having an affiliation to either Swansea or Cardiff; something that is not apparent to other fans and reflective of Bisset's (2013) work as previously mentioned. In questioning whether national identities can ever be seen to supplement each other, we can look at the following statement that:

If national identity related to the feeling of belonging to a nation, then the feeling we get of belonging to a team is far greater ¹⁶

¹⁶ Author unknown, cited on: <http://aplaceinthestand.blogspot.co.uk/>
Last accessed September 29, 2013

With the implication here being that team allegiance dominates any national affiliation. I would argue against this as, despite clear constructions in relation to regional discourses, there is still the overriding relationship to Wales as a nation apparent throughout. Posts such as 'let's not fight among ourselves, they'll love that... really love it' show how, when constructing regional identity, there is still the significance of such teams representing Welsh fans in opposition to, and being interpreted by, English. There is, then, a twofold responsibility, whereby fans are expected to display regional allegiance, while also understanding the overriding national duty. In turn, this goes against some of the previous work that has exposed regional identity as being far greater than that of a nation, whereas I would argue that the two are not mutually exclusive; rather they contain numerous complexities in relation to that area or nation's positioning, and are also dependent on the context in which affiliation is demonstrated or contested:

Well, Cardiff fans wouldn't piss on us if we were on fire, would they? They are absolutely gutted that we got there before them, good job we did as we're giving Wales a better reputation than their animal fans ever would (03.01.12)

In addressing the significance of regional opposition, fan identity can be seen to be socially and culturally constructed in the sense that fan identity is defined in relation to his/her anti fan (Gray, 2003: 321.) The discourses around Cardiff fans, such as them being hostile, 'not pissing on us if we were on fire' further develops the clear opposition of us and them (Woodward, 1997: 30.) However, for Swansea, this oppositional construction goes beyond one particular team to incorporate a nation, reflecting national affiliation, which is then caught up in a web of complexities relating to the overall positioning of fans throughout these wider discourses. Often the importance is stressed not so much on what fans are, but rather what they are not (*ibid*) with orchestrated tactics such as belittling the opposition being seen as an identity boost.

One of the main ways this is achieved is by attacking fans' knowledge of the club, with history being indicative of fan status. Similar to arguments earlier in the chapter regarding the relevance of heritage and background are how constructions of anti-fandom are furthered by 'true' fans being expected to go against Cardiff due to historical instances, fuelling knowledge of Swansea's past. As one member posted:

If you were a true fan and had been a regular down the Vetch, you would've witnessed the swim away¹⁷ - hordes of their supporters running riot down Oxford Street... you'd then understand (03.01.12)

The notion of 'understanding' creates a division between the ignorance of new fans in relation to Swansea's history, and those who have long term knowledge of the club and previous encounters, furthering the construction of history and heritage as playing a significant role in fan positioning. A community of fans is said to have:

Its own culture, rites and rituals. It has a shared history and a sought after common future. (Margalit, 2008: 221)

However, when Swansea fans are positioned against Cardiff, there is arguably a lack of shared history, seen in the way that certain fans are portrayed as having no experience of some of the events that have shaped subsequent understanding. For Sandvoss (2003), cultural practices, such as football, cannot be examined in isolation from historical contexts, however there are fundamental limitations when attempting to understand such contextualisation through mediums such as forums, where experiences can only be conveyed through the text provided.

Such a division is not without its complications, however, for there also exist long-term fans that are not against Cardiff as a team, nor its fans. This was evident from certain posts, including those from Cardiff fans:

Well, I'm a bluebird, but I must say your style of football has been a breath of fresh air over the last few seasons, and not only are you winning the plaudits of everyone who knows anything about football... Keep this to yourselves, though; I don't want to be accused of being a defector! You may now resume hostilities... (01.02.12)

What was apparent is that any sentiment toward Swansea from Cardiff fans was not constructed in relation to national identification, but rather was done through respect; a factor

¹⁷ After Swansea and Cardiff's encounter in September 1988 at The Vetch, Swansea, numerous Swansea fans chased Cardiff fans into the sea opposite the ground after disorder in the City Centre. It has since been referred to as the 'swim away'.

previously raised in this chapter. Duke and Crolley (1996) argued that regional identification vastly reduced the effectiveness of national teams to act as vehicles for national sentiment (De Biasi and Lan Franchi, 1997) however this is not essentially apparent on *Not606*, with posts from fans such as:

Cardiff fan wishing you all the best... will be supporting you against the English (04.06.11)

With this indicating how regional teams, while retaining long-term rivalries, are nonetheless constructed as allies in the face of national opposition, albeit that which is manifested in the form of another regional team. As such, regional teams can be seen to assist with the construction of national identity, but all the while are subject to the underlying positions of individual fans in acting representative. Fans themselves often acknowledged this, with posts such as:

The problem is complete wind up merchants like you help to fragment and split the online footballing community and everyone ends up with incorrect blanket views of what most fans of a certain team 'are like' (23.08.11)

This indicates the significance of self-reflexivity in relation to individual and group identities. While it has been identified that there is importance placed on fans not being constructed as a homogenous collective, there too is the fundamental significance of the community and individual fans playing a part in this. Questions are hence raised about how rivalries are constructed as part of both overriding national discourse, and the community at hand. Evidence from the forum points towards distinct, repeated sentiment towards Cardiff and its fans, however there is often Welsh solidarity, particularly when faced with English opposition. When addressing these complexities, we can refer to the way in which such rivalry is often masked with fans citing 'banter' when contesting team positions. Statements such as 'I know we pretend to hate each other' seeks to invalidate claims of genuine rivalry, along with 'I think the banter is brilliant. I work with a couple of Cardiff fans so we all have a good laugh winding each other up.' This points towards the significance of rivalries being constructed as history-dependent, reflective of fans' positions, but likewise devalued, or sidelined, when questioned.

To some, when compared to Swansea emerging in the EPL, rivalries with Cardiff are seen as potentially insignificant, with members stating:

We're in the Premier League now, forget about Cardiff. We have bigger things going on. There's more to life than being better than Cardiff (09.07.11)

This demonstrates the importance of other factors taking precedence over any opposition with Cardiff, so that any rivalry should be constructed as potentially fluid and subject to change. In keeping with this, there was one incident that resulted in fans putting aside their differences, throughout the forum at least, and that was the news of Welsh manager Gary Speed's death¹⁸. Upon hearing of Speed's passing, numerous members posted their shock, with examples such as:

Member 1: I'm just so shocked. He was turning Welsh football in the right direction (27.11.11)

Member 2: RIP to the man who helped put Wales on the footballing map (27.11.11)

Member 3: I know that cross site threads are discouraged but I am sure the many teams that has played for would be happy to share their respects. A common brotherhood between football fans in this tragic time is not a bad thing. You may want to edit your original thread to include the other boards. Your call (27.11.11)

Member 4: Couldn't care less about football today (27.11.11)

As can be seen from the extracts above, there were numerous perspectives apparent; most of which point towards the significance of such an event and the manner in which other fans could be invited to post condolences on the Swansea board. In doing so, the community can be seen to have developed to consider those outside of it in relation to collective mourning, while likewise overriding any local rivalries that had previously played out. Seemingly, it can be perceived that rivalries are deemed significant and all-consuming to many fans, until tested by overriding incidents. In acknowledging the passing of Gary Speed and the enormity

¹⁸ Gary Speed - the former Wales manager - committed suicide on 27 November 2011 on the day of Swansea City's match with Aston Villa

of such an event on football in general, in particular Welsh football, regional differences are temporarily ignored.

5.5. Owners, Flags and Investment – This is Football, not Warfare

While we have explored some of the main points regarding national and regional affiliation, it is necessary to look in more detail at the wider issues that can be seen to impact on national identity, such as club ownership, moderation and control, with one of the subsections within this being the significance of waving flags as a means of fan activity at stadiums. Part of this section arose from the following post on the forum:

The Jacks are called unpatriotic because they fly the Union Jack at games, not the flag of their supposed country, but then I guess pikeys never had a flag so it would be hard to fly that (21.08.11)

The post can be seen to relate to discussions regarding the importance of the stadium, and this can be explored to explain how exactly the match arena retains significance, particularly in regards to fans embodying projections of allegiance. Stadiums have been referred to as 'micrographic representations of society' (Xyolia, 2012), implying that performance reflects day-to-day fan productions and, so far, we have considered the relevance of national identity playing out through discussions on the forums, so it is now necessary to develop this to consider offline performativity. When addressing some of the discussions at play, there is evidence of the actions of fans in the stadiums being regularly referred to as indicating overall allegiance, linking in with Harris' claim that:

Sport is a ritualistic arena in which notions of culture are embodied and (re)presented by the players who become symbols – metonyms of cultural ideas – particularly in a sport deemed so important to the nation. (2006: 3)

We can, however, look beyond the significance of players and the game at hand to consider how fans behave and how this relates to constructing online identities. One of the main ways this was attained was through acknowledging the role of flags as iconographical representations of the self's position and affiliation. We can perceive how one of the most effective ways for many football supporters to articulate elements of their identity is through

behaviour at matches. This is said to be due to the fact that not only are similar individuals brought together in the same setting, but the ‘other’ (i.e. oppositional supporters) are also present in close proximity (Burdsey and Chappell, 2003.) This constructs the stadium as holding huge significance in relation to fans’ presentations of allegiance, and one way this is further demonstrated is through waving particular flags.

In emphasising the importance and role of flags, it was contested on the forum as to whether or not the Union Jack should be displayed at Swansea matches, not just due to the regional and national divisions so apparent in previous discussions, but also due to its construction of Swansea as being a British club, deviating away from Welsh national discourses. In reference to Cardiff City fans waving Malaysian flags in recognition of the club's new owners, one member posted:

Now I don't really care if they feel the need to wave flags of a foreign country at their games, I honestly don't, it's actually quite amusing, but I hope they think twice before they have a pop at us over Union Jacks, it reeks of hypocrisy (21.08.11)

And, through analysing the forum it became apparent that the issue of flags being waved at games was something that was regularly discussed and debated with a large number of posts being dedicated to contesting this. Indeed, one of the principle ways through which discourses surrounding regional and national affiliation can be seen to play out on the forum is through the discussions of flags. This leads us to consider the significance of fans being able to present an iconographical representation of their affiliation that is otherwise only apparent through discussions. Referring to displaying the Union Jack, one fan stated that they were 'Swansea, Welsh, British and proud', indicating how, in some cases, the fan can inhabit myriad national positions and is not limited to one perspective. To others, however, there is the issue of what the Union Jack can be seen to connote, with this tying in to overriding discourses of national affiliation and historical elements:

The union flag is the crown of England, now these people have treated our people with disdain over hundreds of years, they burned our books and tried to take our language and you ***¹⁹s display their flags? (20.02.12)

¹⁹ As explained in Chapter 3, where asterisks are included this is done so as apparent on the forum and written by the member in question

Such posts further reflect previously acknowledged sentiment concerning how - amid the discussions and debates around national identity - is the overriding significance of history and backgrounds. While reflecting some of the previously raised points about fans' backgrounds to supporting Swansea, this can be seen to go beyond this and instead present indication of national history *per se*, not that which is limited to football fandom. There is further relevance in such displays not only reflecting history, but also being able to link to sociopolitical factors. Butterworth and Moskal, whose work explored displaying flags as a means of expressing support for US troops during American football matches, considered this. They argued that there was a 'troubling integration' of commercial sport and American culture of militarism (2009: 411), indicating how sport can be used as a vehicle to express other aspects of identity. This supports Allison's argument that sport is a companion phenomenon to culture itself (2000), with the relevance of this being the way in which such nationalism is largely accepted, and indeed expected, at football, with Xypolia stating that football provides one of the few opportunities to demonstrate one's national allegiance, arguing:

Nationalistic emotions are permissible when a football team is playing, primarily because they are impermissible at other times (2012: no page)

In response to the previous comment deriding the Union Jack, another fan posted:

While I respect your passionate viewpoint, I think we have to live in the world as it is now, and whatever has gone on in the past, there is no doubt that Wales is part of Britain and that many feel as British as they do Welsh. I don't think anyone loses their cultural or national identity by waving a union flag. Equally, waving the national flag of the country of your owners or star player is a welcoming thing to do. At the end of the day, this is football and not warfare – if the Army was flying a flag of the enemy, the argument would be more appropriated (20.02.12)

Of importance here is the way in which flags are openly constructed as presenting national and cultural identity, while also mirroring some of the issues discussed previously in relation to any potential erosion of identity through the club's evolution. Flags are perceived as a symbolic aspect of identification and positioning, while linking together discourses of commercialisation and globalisation, as one fan posted:

At the end of the day, football is a global sport and a club will have fans everywhere, do they get frowned upon because they're Chinese yet they fly an English flag because they support a team from England (26.02.12)

And this can be furthered to promote the relevance of the stadium in facilitating the performance of national identification in addition to wider factors, such as club ownership. While Billig argued that there were elements of 'banal' nationalism which largely went unnoticed, it can be further argued that, at times, such nationalism is particularly overt, and becomes apparent through analysing the discourses on the forum that play out in relation to offline physical fan performances. As Xypolia argued, for ninety minutes fans are focused on a nation, believing to be part of it (2012), and we can consider how such connections are manifested in both offline and online demonstrations.

We can again witness the debates surrounding argument over whether the Swans are representing the country or just the city, as while there is evidence of strong regional identity in part, this is ultimately dependent on the individual fan in question. Indeed, we also need to acknowledge the relevance of players and the clubs, and not just fans in being able to represent Wales, with this further referring to issues of ownership and the globalisation of football as a whole:

Maybe the powers that be should bring rules in to prevent majority foreign ownership in the Premiership. Personally, I'd have mixed feelings if a wealthy foreign owner took over the Swans (26.02.12)

And it is through acknowledging such 'backstage' issues that further constructions of fan knowledge and commitment come to the fore, with statements such as:

Fans like yourself don't know anything. There's a lot of us too that take a greater interest in the club than just being a normal fan... (26.02.12)

Indicating that, to some, nationalism goes beyond the significance of just the team in question representing your local or national area, and instead incorporates myriad other factors, such as ownership, commercialisation and globalisation that seek to construct the team as an extension of individual and collective identity. There is nonetheless the argument that

national identity is not versus globalisation, but rather than globalisation both reinforces national identity and undermines (Brookes, 2002: 85.)

What was evident throughout all of the discourse dedicated to discussing flags at football matches was how nationalism does not just infiltrate media reports and representations of football, but is rather rife among fan communities too. However, despite this, it would be naive to assume that every football fan is concerned with ideologies of regional and national affiliation. As author Bea Campbell argued:

By aligning football with national identity, you are ignoring the fact that some people don't like football, and forgetting that football has been connected with some of the worst things in English history (2006)

Indeed, it cannot be disputed that throughout the majority of observations made on the forum, the overriding consensus has pointed towards football reflecting instances of positive national identity characteristics, with references to previous sporting successes, for example, being rife throughout the forum. However, as considered by Butterworth and Moskal, football fans too can be seen to adopt national sentiment that reflects arguably more controversial aspects of political and cultural environments. Despite this, there is the argument that even though some elements of news representation can, and have, been criticised for their reliance on national identity (see Poulton, 2005; Bishop and Jaworski, 2003; Crabbe, 1999, for example), some claim there is a need to be *more* nationalist. Ytterstad explored football nationalism throughout Norwegian blogs and argued that, in some instances, there is a call from fans for fans to be more nationalist (2012: 241.) As such, it could be argued that this is called upon as a means to fuel cultural identification, witnessed not just through physical presence, but also through online means. In turn, we can acknowledge that debates such as those concerning flags and the relevance of this, allow us to understand how such nationalistic positions are something not only seen at stadiums, as was previously the case, but rather have migrated onto forums where fans can contest their identities in ways that were perhaps not previously possible. As Margalit stated:

Originally, clubs and supporters adopted identities deemed to belong to bounded places and their histories (2008)

Illustrating how it is not just the globalisation and development of football that has allowed for fans to evolve in relation to the object of fandom, but likewise the medium through which this can be demonstrated, defended and debated.

5.6. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, we have exposed some of the critical debates and topics relating to national identity, particularly in understanding the significance of regional and local affiliation and how there exist complexities when attempting to understand where individual and collective identities reside. I have demonstrated how nationalism plays a significant role in football, with this not being limited to press representations, but instead being rife throughout fan communities. Furthermore, it has been discussed how such fan communities allow us to understand individual perspectives, developing some of the discussion points in the previous chapters.

In developing work such as Johnes' (2000) who addressed the significance of local Welsh areas in constructing identity through sports such as rugby, we were able to consider how the spectacle of football is constructed as a primary way through which nations and national identities - and indeed regional identities - are contested, developed and (re)imagined (*ibid*), all the while interpreting football as being 'more than just a game' (Xypolia, 2012), and instead reflecting myriad sociopolitical and cultural ideologies.

It has been addressed how national identity both emerges and maintains itself in a range of ways - irrespective of the physical or online outlet - with this being apparent through discourses played out on online forums concerning 'offline' fan performance, such as flags and demonstrating particular affiliation. In turn, this raised questions concerning how fans can display and contest their identity, and as such it can be argued that the concept of nationalism is far more complex than media representation implies. I argue that throughout media coverage identity is reduced in accordance to collective fans having shared histories and desires, failing to account for the interwoven intricacies that are part of being both a regional and national fan. National identity, therefore, is complex, subjective, fluid and context dependent, with this reflecting the significance of the online forum in facilitating such discussions and subsequent analysis.

Likewise, when considering the limitations of previous work, as illustrated in the opening section of this chapter, I argue that 'Englishness' and the ideologies of 'Ingerland' (Perryman, 2006) are concepts that have preoccupied existing research, despite a vast proportion of literature making comparisons with smaller nations when demonstrating England's retained position as a dominant sporting nation. Indeed, in addressing this we can consider how this arguably reflects dominant media representations, leading us to question how Wales' positioning in the EPL is discussed throughout online forums, and also how this is constructed throughout the national press. From this, we can address the paramount significance of media coverage of fans and the numerous elements within this, understanding these from a fan's perspective in relation to the various issues already presented.

CHAPTER 7 - FOOTBALL FANS: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS

This is dedicated to the 95% of us who never fight at football -

Nick Hornby, 1992

7.1. Introduction

So far, we have considered some of the dominant themes and topics that have emerged through exploring the forum, with the central issue being established that *Not606* is a prime example of an arena that facilitates fan engagement around a multitude of varied topics. The research has explored how the forum is controlled and managed, prior to exposing numerous complexities apparent throughout. Whether this relates to fans contesting their own national and regional affiliations, or the construction of the forum in connection to its continued survival and existence - there are numerous issues that have emerged which have been important to address in relation to how football fan discourse plays out through a specific medium, and to what extent this influences our understanding of football fan communities.

Taking this into account, this chapter seeks to explore the specific importance of fan interactions with media representation, and understand whether the prevailing negative constructions of football fans by the mass media is something that is limited to analytical perspectives, or constructed and replicated among fan communities themselves. Indeed, while we can understand that media representation of football fans has been a significant focus throughout the accompanying literature, there is little exploration of how this is constructed among fans themselves. Football is regarded as one of the most mediatised sports, with this relating not just to sporting events, but also the activities of supporters (Radmann, 2012). However, as media discourse is both socially constructed and constitutive (Harris, 2006), it is necessary to understand how this relates to discourses *produced* by fans, rather than speculative accounts or observations of fan activity that is often largely limited to stadiums and matches.

While previous chapters have all considered factors predominantly within fan communities, the final chapter of this work both expands these in relation to observations and arguments acknowledged in the literature. It furthermore argues that we should look beyond this to consider media representations in comparison to the constructions of fans within specific

communities. In doing so, fans are seen to react to their own representation(s) and discuss these accordingly, with dominant media framing often contrasting significantly to the football fan's perception of the self.

To further explore this, I opted to include one specific example of a relatively recent event in order to briefly analyse its representation in the mass media and compare this to the discourses produced throughout the fan community. The aim was to explore the relationship between fan communities and the mainstream media, all the while referencing dominant theoretical arguments in order to understand how football fans react to representations of themselves and the potential consequences of this.

For this chapter's case study, I chose to focus on the issue of Mike Dye²⁰, reflecting firstly on a proportion of media reports surrounding the event, before considering the approach of 'anti-fandom' (Gray, 2003) in constructing oppositional subjects within an overriding text, addressing how a widely reported event was received among a fan group in order to answer the final sub research question:

How does online football fan discourse compare to dominant media representations of football fandom?

7.2. Representations – Hooligans and Hillsborough

When exploring dominant representations of football fans, we can firstly consider one of the principle aspects raised in the literature review in order to understand how dominant representations of football fans, such as the fan-as-hooligan discourse, are received and interpreted throughout fan communities. The concept of 'representation' is said to require a large degree of attention, particularly in the context of sport (Blain and O'Donnell, 1993), with the assumption that football, politics and culture are continuous and deeply interlocked. Football cultures can be understood to exist not just within their own locations, but also as complex interrelationships with other cultural sites (Radmann, 2012: 174.) As such, we can

²⁰ Michael 'Mike' Dye was a Cardiff City fan who died in September 2011 following an incident before the Wales versus England match at Wembley. Subsequent media reports exposed Mike as a renowned hooligan, purported to have been involved in numerous previous incidents (see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-14815693>), constructing the incident as the result of Swansea Cardiff rivalry.

acknowledge the significance of football cultures being associated with particular issues, such as violence. Indeed, while this is something that has been the subject of previous theoretical analyses (see, for example, Hall, 1978; Poulton, 2005) it is now necessary to look at the dominant construction of hooliganism in relation to definitions provided by the media and comparisons with fan communities themselves in order to move beyond the points discussed in the literature review to contribute, develop and potentially contest already existing knowledge.

There is the argument that there is no general agreement on what a hooligan is (Radmann, 2012), and we can extend this claim to propose a similar construction among fan groups themselves. For example, as was established in the Chapter 6 where national identity was found to be largely context-dependent in relation to constructing regional and national affiliations, there too are similar divisions when dealing with football violence. This is particularly apparent when considering the sentiment expressed when discussing Swansea and Cardiff rivalries, with there often being examples of fans using particular language and approaches, such as ‘scum’, ‘filth’ and other pejorative terms utilised regularly throughout general conversations. As such, there can be seen to be a fine line between the ‘intense involvement and imagined personal relationships’ (Hognestad, 2012: 25) and the evidence of the fan’s perspective of the potential violence which may follow.

While Hillsborough was briefly mentioned in Chapter 2 in relation to its framing within a football violence narrative throughout the news media, it is now necessary to develop this in connection to the recent developments. This is particularly relevant when considering whether such dominant perspectives can be seen to have changed throughout media approaches. On 12 July 2013, it was revealed that the IPCC (Independent Police Complaints Commission) found that following the incident 164 police statements were altered, with a further 55 police officers discovered to have changed their statements (see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-24064118>). This proved the gross manner in which the incident was initially mis-reported by a vast proportion of the UK press, where the Hillsborough Disaster was said to have been the result of misconduct among the Liverpool fans with none of the authorities responsible for controlling the crowd being questioned. In addressing the manner in which Hillsborough was reported, we can question how sports journalism, and indeed the various events and incidents surrounding match days, are typically presented in the press. In truth, it is hard to dispel the argument that sports

events are often treated as trivial in comparison to politics (Brookes, 2002: 19.) And, while incidents such as Hillsborough mobilised local communities and audiences into boycotting certain sections of the mainstream media, such as *The Sun* newspaper - as discussed previously in the work - this is largely insignificant in comparison to the magnitude of the news media's national and global reach.

Over the past two decades there has been an arguable change in the positioning of Hillsborough throughout the mainstream media, where the dominant hooliganism framework has altered to encompass nationwide feelings of justice and grief. Due to the relatively recent emergence of the IPCC's report, there has been little academic inquiry into its relevance, particularly in relation to the reception among football fan communities. What has been apparent however - since the report became public - is the arguable change in the perception of football fans throughout the news media. News reports can be seen to have deviated from football violence as a prevailing discourse and rather fans are portrayed as, at times, deserving of justice, sympathy and understanding. One particularly stirring example of this is *The Sun's* front page following the IPCC's report, where it carried the headline 'The Real Truth'. The accompanying report contained an apology to its readers, explaining that *The Sun* accepted the role it played in the general misrepresentation of Hillsborough (see Appendix 5.)

While there is evidence of a change in media positioning in the context of the Hillsborough Disaster, we can further explore if there has been a widespread transformation in the approach of news media when covering particular football events. In doing so, we can develop this to understand the significance that both past and present media representation can be seen to have on fan communities themselves. As Boyle and Haynes stated:

We would argue that the media can become one part of a complex relationship that helps link an individual to a larger collective grouping. At certain moments the media are important in legitimising and giving a profile to groups of supporters, such as in the coverage of a successful Cup Final victory or in the aftermath of a tragedy such as Hillsborough (Boyle and Haynes, 2004: 82)

Journalists and broadcasters have been typically regarded as mediating between sport as a cultural form and its fans (Boyle, 2009: 45). In doing so, the media plays a critical role for its audiences and, particularly, those that it seeks to represent. It has been further argued that

journalism affects narratives and subsequent understanding, and this can be seen to be apparent in the aftermath of Hillsborough where discourses changed as did arguably interpretations. With such framing narratives apparent, there is the argument that selective aspects of a perceived reality are connected together to promote a particular interpretation (Entman, 2010: 391), and this can be seen to be apparent in the sense that journalism operates in relation to overriding news values (Allan, 2002), with this being evident throughout the majority of football reporting. To this effect, we can question whether the social function of journalism has changed within the context of football reporting, or whether the most recent reports on Hillsborough are isolated. We can also further explore the influence this can be seen to have on fan communities in particular.

Franklin (1997) argued that journalism typically *interests the public* instead of acting in the *public interest*, and we can examine how this translates to football and furthermore how this is received among fan communities. Indeed, in cases like Hillsborough where there has been a change in the dominant construction of football fans, this points towards there being public interest at play where news audiences can be seen to have been mobilised in their quest for justice, rejecting original representations of the events in order to have the right story told. This idea of certain audiences discarding dominant representations is not unique to contemporary environments, however it is plausible to propose that a large degree of audience and community involvement can stem from the continuing developments of new media technologies - technologies that allow audiences to 'have their say' in an ever growing capacity. Football fans can now communicate and react to news events and reports in more ways than ever before, enabling fans to produce discourses that not only concern the events on the field, but also fans' opinions and reactions to the subsequent news media reports and, in turn, how they are being represented.

As Cleland argued, despite traditional sources remaining an important part of modern football, it should be noted that one of the clear reasons behind the rapidly changing media-fan relationship is a result of the internet (2011), with new media forms acting as a voice for fans to create and, just as importantly, to react. In doing so, this has resulted in maintaining football's position at the forefront of popular culture. For instance, the development of 'new' media has created a proliferation of internal and external sources for [active] supporters not only to gather news and information, but also to become involved in discussing clubs (*ibid*)

and, just as significantly, how they are represented both as individuals and collectives through dominant media means.

In exploring how fans consider representations of themselves, both as individuals and as collectives, we can firstly look at one particular example that commanded a high level of media attention, and that is Swansea's promotion to the Premier League, prior to considering the case study of Mike Dye.

7.3. Swansea in the Premier League - *All promoted teams are equal, but some are more equal than others...*

Similar to aspects discussed previously in Chapter 6 in relation to fan discourses of national identity and the significance of a Welsh team in an otherwise English-dominated league is the way in which media coverage of Swansea in the EPL was received and discussed throughout the forum. The UK press has often been criticised for its treatment of Welsh sports, with Brookes stating that:

Much of London-based British media also plays a role through continuing to ignore, patronise, insult or stereotype Wales or Welsh people. (Brookes, 2002: 104)

In exploring some of the discourses that played out, we can aim to understand how fans discuss and examine their own representation(s), along with establishing the significance of Swansea City's coverage throughout the media. Through analysing the discussions playing out, it was apparent that three main categories of fans emerged. Firstly, there were fans that regarded the media coverage of Swansea City's promotion as negative. Secondly, there were fans that perceived it to be largely positive, and thirdly there were fans that were indifferent. One dominant theme was the way in which Swansea was typically constructed as a 'small town' in comparison to other teams, even those deemed to be of a similar sized local area. This links to Johnes' observation that media reporting is largely structured as English-driven (2008); sentiment that was reflected by fans themselves who interpreted the media reports as constructing Swansea as a potential threat towards the existing clubs' communities. As one fan commented:

We've gatecrashed their party... and they don't like it. (13.08.11)

The relevance of this is twofold. Firstly, this links back to the observations concerning national identity, where there is a clear division created between Swansea entering a prospectively hostile arena dominated by larger nations. Secondly, there is the significance of Swansea being a new team, which can be seen to reflect some of the issues emerging previously in the work regarding new fans. As such, it can be acknowledged that there are discourses that transcend fan interaction and can potentially reflect overriding stances of the club as a whole, and not just individual fans.

When referring back to national identity, we can further consider the way in which the media is purported to 'bring the nation together' during sporting events (Gibbons, 2011). When addressing Swansea's emergence in the EPL, there were said to be very few instances of encouraged unification throughout the news media - something that was noted by fans on the forum:

You watch, as we're now in the EPL there'll be an increase in our media coverage nationally. Normally they don't give a shit (13.08.11)

This illustrates how there is allegedly little attention given towards Swansea, particularly in relation to other teams of similar stature throughout the UK, with fans saying that 'all they ever see is England', and that England makes the headlines 'because the press love to crap on our national teams'. As such, there is the emergence between the significance of national identity in relation to small teams being constructed as potentially having more cultural indicators (Gibbons, 2011), and simultaneously receiving the least amount of attention from the press. While England is said to have little in the way of national identity (*ibid*), there is still the preoccupation with England as the dominant football nation throughout UK media coverage. Fans regularly deliberated this, providing their perceptions of the reasons behind such attention:

Member 1: Sky and Talkshite will always pander to England because that is where most of their punters are (13.08.11)

Member 2: Talk Sport are mainly a mouth piece for everything English but mainly the England football team, that's just the way it is (13.08.11)

What is of interest here is the manner in which, even though the subject is warranting discussion among the fan community, there is almost a resignation towards the dominant approaches of the media. Statements such as 'that's just the way it is' reflect previous examples of fans being indifferent, or accepting, in relation to discourses concerning Swansea and Wales as a whole.

Throughout the discussions regarding the media's coverage of Swansea in the EPL, there were repeated references to regional aspects, particularly when addressing Swansea getting promoted while Cardiff remained in the Championship. Of significance here is the manner in which the dominant reporting approaches of the media in relation to a preoccupation with England fans can be seen to develop to encompass more local media having a similar preoccupation with more dominant local teams. In the case of Swansea, there were fans who believed that local media outlets were typically constructed as Cardiff-centered, with the success of Swansea bringing to light ingrained local rivalries:

Member 1: ...the local Beeb are spewing that we're there instead of Cardiff (24.11.11)

Member 2: but no, they couldn't let it lie. Whilst buying up the Swans through the commentary, of all the clips to show of Swansea's tenure, they chose to show Scott's miss on the weekend. I am sure the Cardiff editor was pissing himself at that (24.11.11)

Member 3: I'm just sick of all the lazy journalism and punditry (24.11.11)

Such sentiment reflects active and passive debates regarding fandom, with the media itself embodying the discussions that permeate the community, particularly in the case of references to 'laziness'. Indeed, while previous points indicated that there was a degree of unfairness in relation to the coverage dedicated to England in comparison to Wales, there are also issues that go beyond this to consider Swansea's positioning against teams such as Cardiff and how this is constructed by local media such as BBC Wales. However, despite this, there are likewise instances of positive framing in relation to the exposure received:

Member 1: I think the press have been more than kind to us recently and we're certainly making news for all the right reasons (24.11.11)

Member 2: This kind of exposure can help us on the pitch (24.11.11)

The media is therefore seen to act as an extension of the football community – involving not just fans, but also players and the club as a whole. In constructing media exposure as being able to play a part on the pitch, it demonstrates the significance throughout football in general. As such, football is seen to retain myriad dimensions in relation to individuals that make up the collective community with each, in part, believed to play a role in ensuring the team's success. The media, then, is portrayed as playing a role that goes beyond match day reports and instead potentially influences future outcomes and how fan communities are represented and understood.

The final category to acknowledge were fans that claimed not to care about how Swansea is represented with posts on the forum including:

Member 1: Who gives a shit about what anyone in the media says about us? (24.11.11)

Member 2: Who gives a flying fuck? Let them write what they want (24.11.11)

This is significant as it allows us to acknowledge that the forum is complex and retains numerous perspectives. While the media can be understood as inhabiting a significant position in relation to the construction of fans and representation, this is seemingly nonetheless dependent on the subjective position of the fan in question. This furthermore enables us to understand varying positions in the context of relatively mundane conversation, emphasising how approaches can concentrate on the everyday and not just the extraordinary (Crawford, 2004.)

Following on from addressing the dominant positions concerning how Swansea's emergence into the EPL was covered in the mass media, we can now consider how fans engage to discuss perceptions of other fans, particularly those that have received a high degree of attention from the press and explore whether the discussions apparent throughout fan communities reflect the way in which the media can be seen to approach particular events.

7.4. Case Study. Part 1: Media Representation – Mike Dye

One specific incident that warranted a high level of discussion on the forum was the events surrounding Cardiff City football fan Mike Dye's death in September 2011. To understand the significance of fan reactions to a particular form of media representation, it is firstly necessary to briefly consider the manner in which the majority of the press covered the story. While it is not possible to fully dissect every article, there is nonetheless the relevance of addressing a sample of such in order to consider the subsequent fan reactions and perceptions.

The events surrounding Mike Dye's death were covered by the vast majority of the UK press, and through looking at some examples of media reports in the days following, it was apparent that there were clearly dominant discourses apparent. The principle way in which the story unfolded was through a hooliganism/football violence narrative, whereby Dye was constructed as partaking in violent activity, albeit subsequently being a victim of such. The BBC report *Wales fan dies after incident at Wembley England Game* on September 7 2011 was keen to stress that 'no England fans were involved', establishing the significance of Dye being a Welsh fan and having a fight with other Welsh fans. Dye was defined as a 'Wales and Cardiff City supporter' with the report failing to consider eyewitness accounts or verified sources, instead preferring to construct the event as being caused by rival fans, presumably Cardiff and Swansea supporters. Indeed, little information was confirmed and instead other news outlets constructed similar perspectives with *The Telegraph* on September 10 2011 stating that there was a 'moment of brutal violence with catastrophic consequences', again failing to take into account testimonies from credible sources, instead preferring to frame the events as being the result of fights between rival Welsh teams.

Perhaps the most brazen examples of news reports concerning Mike Dye's death were those from the tabloid media with *The Sun*, *Mirror*, *Daily Mail* and *Metro* all seeking to construct a resounding perspective of the events in relation to hooligan activity. *The Mirror's* coverage on September 7 2011 described Dye in its opening line as a 'fanatical' Cardiff City supporter and spoke of his alleged previous involvement with hooligan activity, including being banned from certain stadiums in the 1980s. Of importance here is the way in which *The Mirror's* coverage defined Dye as a 'true fan', which can be seen to suggest indication of Dye being

representative of others with similar allegiances and who, according to certain sections of the news media at least, are constructed as hooligans with questionable pasts. Similar to the labeling techniques employed by *The Mirror*, *The Metro*, on September 7 2011, claimed that Dye had bragged about being a hooligan on online football forums, referring to examples where Dye spoke of altercations with the police, with this being repeated throughout the *Daily Mail*'s coverage on September 10 2011.

Indeed, from briefly exploring some of the news media's reactions to this event, we can see that the majority of the press constructed a dominant framework which saw the incident as being wholly related to football violence, reflective of previous football fan behaviour, connoting indications of hooliganism, and potentially indicative of other fans. This illustrates how, similar to the themes discussed in the literature review, fans can be constructed as a homogenous collective (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003) with football violence prevailing as a primary narrative. When considering this, it can be seen that when questioning whether there are still elements of hooliganism apparent in more contemporary football reporting, there is evidence of certain degrees of labeling, construction and framing that are repeated throughout different news media.

Within 24 hours of the event, the Metropolitan Police had confirmed that there was no evidence of interclub rivalry (John, 2011), and on September 9 – two days after the event – it was further confirmed that none of the fans were from Swansea (*ibid.*) Despite this, there were few examples of news reports that addressed this; instead focusing on the construction of Swansea Cardiff rivalry along with further hooligan elements. Of the few news reports to follow up the story with its developments, it was apparent that only one – an article on *Wales Online* on December 21 2011 – dedicated a significant proportion of coverage to the prosecution of Ian Mytton – a football fan from Redditch, England.

Throughout the vast proportion of news media, the circumstances surrounding Mike Dye's death were presented in dominant ways, positioning the events as being the result of local rivalry conflict, individual previous involvement with hooligan activities, and something that is - in this respect at least - limited to Welsh fans with no involvement from other nationalities. Despite the argument that there is a change in news media approaches as deviating away from hooliganism as a prevailing discourse, examples such as this present reflections of previously held ideologies and approaches, with elements of deviancy, national

identity and character assassination of individual fans with collective implications flooding the press. By referring to Dye's previous involvement with hooliganism and how this allegedly came to light by accessing Dye's posts on football forums, it in turn can be believed to construct negative perspectives of forum participants, particularly if such mediums can be construed to facilitate and potentially encourage deviant behaviour. Following the coverage, Cardiff City complained to the PCC regarding it as insensitive and unfounded, all the while 'drawing tenuous connections between Swansea and Cardiff'²¹, with this reaction being picked up by the BBC and *Wales Online* but not evident on other news outlets.

While we have briefly addressed some of the media reports following Mike Dye's death, we can further develop this to consider how the events and subsequent media coverage was interpreted among fans on *Not606*. This enables us to not simply just compare and contrast representations of one particular event, but rather provide an exploration of the discourses surrounding fans' representations of themselves and others.

7.5. Case Study. Part 2 - Fans, Anti Fandom and 'Others' - Mike Dye

Following the news of Mike Dye's death, there was unsurprisingly a range of threads and posts dedicated to discussing what happened. It was apparent that some fans initially constructed the occurrences as retaining elements of hooliganism, which could be in part potentially instigated by the press reports. Despite no specific evidence of fans referring to exact media reports, there were nonetheless examples of fans deviating from acknowledging the loss of life and instead focusing on the dominant violence discourses overriding this. One fan posted:

Tragic when this happens time and time again with sport being used as an excuse for violence. I hope those responsible are quickly brought to justice (06.09.11)

The significance of this allows us to see how fans discuss and contest football violence, and subsequently how this contrasts with dominant representations presented throughout the media that, while preoccupied with football violence as a prevailing discourse (Poulton, 2005), likewise fails to accord individual perspectives in relation to fans' *reactions* to football

²¹ BBC News "Michael Dye Coverage 'Insensitive' say Cardiff City: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-14861204> September 9 2011

hooliganism. Instead, there is the construction of homogeneity (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003), in relation to fans' perspectives and opinions, as was seen through the indication of Dye being a 'true' fan by the *Daily Mirror*, with us only being able to fully understand fan reactions to particular events and circumstances through observing their own interpersonal interactions. What is furthermore interesting is that throughout a proportion of comments posted on the forum, there was the perspective that football violence is something that fans themselves seek to actively remove from the game:

There is just no need for it. It's football; people need to get a grip. I genuinely thought we'd come so far (06.09.11)

As can be seen from the member stating: 'I genuinely thought we'd come so far', there is clearly evidence of the community continuing to act together in regards to attaining a common aim, allowing us to interpret such sentiment as going beyond the boundaries of the forum; implying actions and futures for football fan communities in general.

While there may be evidence of a popular construction throughout media reports of football fans acting as a homogenous collective – either in relation to committing violent acts, or being indifferent as to their effects – there was no evidence of this throughout the forum whatsoever. Indeed, while previously raised points have provided affirmation of conflict or disagreement, such as when fans contested regional and national identity and rivalries, there is little indication of such in relation to Mike Dye. There were fans that constructed the incident as hooligan activity, with even those who considered Dye to be a victim being nonetheless aware of the connections with football violence that so often plagues the game. This is significant as it allows us to understand dominant fan perceptions and consider how this relates to prevailing media reports. We can establish fans as being coherent individual members of communities, able to actively articulate and debate other fans' positions in relation to both their own and the future of football as a whole, constructing football fans as individuals and not, as is so often seen to be the case throughout media reports, retaining wholly collective positions.

When further analysing this, we can consider the significance of anti-fandom in relation to fans constructing their interpretation of the individuals and events surrounding Mike Dye's death. Theodoropoulou (2007: 316) defined the anti-fan as 'people with clear dislikes' and,

through exploring two of the most famously rival popular football clubs in Greece, Theodoropoulou developed oppositional discourses in relation to each other's followers. The emotional investment in anti-fandom is significant to the construction of fan identity (*ibid*), with Gray (2003) being one of the first scholars to categorise actively *disliking* something. In truth, the anti-fan is always a fan, with the anti-fan object being arguably constructed through fandom for an oppositional text. We can further this perspective to consider how we can go beyond oppositional *texts* to look specifically at fans themselves in oppositional *contexts*, to explore how anti-fandom can be constructed of positions that are inhabited within particular communities.

To elaborate, Mike Dye can be seen to retain an oppositional identity in comparison to who, or what, most football fans aspire to be. In turn, this operates in contrast to the typical perception of the anti-fan as having an intense dislike for a particular *text*, and rather the anti-fan is opposed to a particular type of *consumer* of the same text. Indeed, when exploring some of the discussions regarding Mike Dye, it was evident that even when sentiment was expressed regarding the tragic passing of a fellow football fan, there was no mention of the football community that was so prevalent throughout previous themes. Rather, some of the sentiment reflected the governing media reports in relation to Dye being construed as a hooligan and 'othered' in connection with the fan community. I would argue, then, that this goes beyond anti-fandom to be intra text anti-fandom, with even those opposed to the dominant discourses throughout the media portraying Dye as a hooligan, simultaneously acknowledging the need to eradicate such positions throughout football.

What is further interesting is the manner in which the dominant media reports of the issue, which were subsequently berated by Cardiff City to the PCC, were to focus on a hooligan element, yet this direction was largely similar to the way in which fans on the forum perceived the news. Despite posts portraying that fans 'can't all be tarred with the same brush' and referring to the events as 'mindless things that exist in every country across the world', there were nonetheless repeated constructions among a number of fans that positioned the event as hooligan activity; something very much against the club's ethos, with one example being:

He was a very active member of the soul crew²², who encourage and take part in hooliganism and have done for many many years. If you were a little older, like me, you would know how rife hooliganism was years ago (06.09.11)

This likewise links to previous issues and times throughout Swansea's history; factors that played a significant role in the last chapters in relation to individual and collective positioning. A further factor was the observation of the enormity of such incidents in comparison to general support:

I'm no lover of Cardiff, little fonder of Swansea and if I'm being blunt there are few clubs I like less at this moment in time, but none of this matters. However passionate I am in support of my club, it all pales into insignificance compared to the life of a fellow football supporter. Fans have paid (06.09.11)

This seeks to construct a complex web in relation to the individual fan being a victim, part of a football community, yet likewise a perpetrator of acts that jeopardise the fan object's positioning in the public sphere. The disdain towards football violence can be seen to go beyond fans' interpretations of the media as inhabiting an area of exaggeration and mistrust, and instead is channeled towards certain subsections of the fans themselves:

Member 1: I will not support hooliganism in any form (06.09.11)

Member 2: All are scumbags (06.09.11)

And this can be seen to be a critical aspect within the construction of the online community, whereby not only is fan activity of other teams berated, but so too are the actions of Swansea's fans, contrasting significantly with the majority of media reports regarding the incident, which constructed it as purely the result of local team rivalries, as demonstrated by one member's post:

Everybody has brain dead fans - I heard some of *our* fans at the Arsenal game sing a song about Mikey Dye - it was horrible (06.09.11)

²² The 'Soul Crew' are a football hooligan firm associated with Cardiff City FC. The term originated in the 1970s and is still often used when referring to Cardiff City

This demonstrates how, to some, questionable action is prevalent throughout football as a whole, and is not simply unique to any other particular oppositional team(s). However, in light of this there is nonetheless the recognition that such actions are representative of a small minority:

Member 1: There's no place in football for BRAINDEAD SHITS like them (06.09.11)

Member 2: Let's be fair here, it was a minority, but the ones in the minority are of course plain scum and a disgrace not just to their club but football as well (06.09.11)

This is significant as we can consider how this relates to representations throughout the media, which have all been instrumental in establishing short hand and simplified (Poulton, 2005) accounts, all the while constructing football violence as a dominating discourse and something that is, arguably, reflective of the majority of fans. Rather, fans can be constructed as retaining a spectrum of identities and perceptions, both of themselves – as illustrated in previous chapters – and of the incidents and events that inhabit the game. All the while this seeks to emphasise how such factors play an integral role in the formation of football fandom and the subsequent reception and representation of such. As Sugden and Tomlinson stated:

Sport is at once both trivial and serious, inconsequential, yet of symbolic significance... Sport in many cases informs and refuels the popular memory of collective identification and community expression for those who follow teams and individuals. (1994: 3)

This illustrates how sport is regularly constructed in contrasting manners throughout the media, yet continually has an ultimate effect on the communities and individuals that are involved with this.

When further exploring the discourses surrounding the construction of hooligan activity, there is the argument emerging regarding regional and national differences in relation to Mike Dye's death. Reflecting some of the points discussed in the previous chapter, there were posts from members in relation to positioning Dye as both Welsh and a Cardiff City fan:

A fight between Swansea and Cardiff fans apparently. Embarrassing our country (06.09.11)

In turn, this constructs discourses of regional and national representation, with Mike Dye perceived as representing Wales irrespective of supporting Cardiff. This reflects Bromberger's argument that football offers an expressive support, not just for the affirmation of collective identity, but also local, regional and national antagonisms (1993: 91.) Furthermore, there is evidence of deviant behaviour being formed as both the result of individuals and one-of-many (Porter, 2004: 161), with this being apparent through Dye's construction as being in the minority and not representative of the whole community among fans themselves, but nonetheless competing with dominant representations throughout media reports. In keeping with the significance of regional identity is the way in which the events were said to overshadow any rivalries, with both Swansea and Cardiff coming together:

Member 1: A sad day for Cardiff City and for Wales as a whole (06.09.11)

Member 2: I hope that Cardiff and Swansea and the FAW²³ can temporarily put their differences aside to maintain a united front on this matter (06.09.11)

Member 3: We're all football fans (06.09.11)

Member 4: Cardiff and Swansea, together in grief (06.09.11)

What is further relevant is how such issues can be seen to go beyond football and reflect previous sentiment raised that sidelines matches and support, concentrating instead on particular events, such was the case with Gary Speed's death:

Member 1: This is exactly the sort of thing that puts football and life into perspective. Another life lost in an act of shameful, mindless and ignorant violence (06.09.11)

Member 2: We all live for football, nobody should die for it (06.09.11)

Through exploring some of the discussions taking place on the forum, there is further evidence of the apparent destabilising influences of media reports, as fans were initially seen to discuss how the events stemmed from football violence, prior to actual occurrences being

²³ FAW: Football Association of Wales

revealed. While some fans constructed the events as hooligan-related activity, there was nonetheless the prevailing perspective of these actions not being representative of all fans, unlike the dominant position held by the news media. There were further observations in regards to how such an event should be dealt with throughout the football community, despite the recognition that certain events should be deemed more significant than football in general. This resulted in discussion and debate concerning whether there should be a minute's silence in remembrance of Mike Dye, with this raising further issues relating to commemorations at matches:

Member 1: Does anyone know if there is to be a minute silence at the Arsenal game? After all, Mikey Dye was a Welsh football fan and followed his country with pride around Europe. We are representing WALES in the Premiership, so it should only be fitting to have a minute's silence (06.09.11)

Member 2: I will not stand there respecting a minute's silence for a known hooligan who took pleasure in bragging about how he and his cronies took pleasure going to away matches to cause trouble (06.09.11)

The first extract can be seen to evoke issues regarding regional and national identity, with the overriding significance of Welsh identity prevailing in this context. Indeed, what is further relevant to acknowledge is how fans could be seen to articulate the significance of commemorating a fan irrespective of their regional identification. While Cardiff and Swansea's rivalries have been previously explored and constructed as retaining historical differences that permeate contemporary discourse, this is suspended when faced with tragedy. Such observations contrast significantly with the dominant media representations, whereby the prevailing discourse presenting Swansea and Cardiff rivalries as ultimately resulting in football violence, with this being a repeated element throughout the news reports considered, with references to 'notorious' rivalries and the assumption of ensuing rival fan violence, irrespective of the actual events that occurred. In truth, fans could be seen to put aside any regional differences when faced with the enormity of another fan losing their life, irrespective of what team they support(ed). In discussing and debating these issues, fan conversation could be seen to develop to retain elements of almost philosophical debate, contrasting significantly with the simplified manner in which fans are constructed throughout the media as potentially having little consideration for others aside from the dominating desire to

engage in violence. Rather, fans can be seen to discuss how the issue should be acknowledged, berating the manner in which the media predominantly covers football, with posts such as:

All clubs have hooligans, including ours unfortunately, but football is no longer in the '80s and the press needs to realise this (06.09.11)

This illustrates how, while there is hooliganism throughout football, it is not as rife as the media conveys. Fans likewise can be seen to question aspects such as how to commemorate fans that have lost their lives and who exactly warrants this. This further constructs dominant perspectives of respect that were so apparent in Chapter 4, where we considered how the forum was constructed in relation to normative, accepted and indeed *expected* fan behaviour.

Foster and Woodthorpe (2012) explored public debate about what constitutes appropriate public remembrance, first raised by theorists such as Doss (2008); Santino (2005); Walter (1999, 2001) relating these positions to the argument that social cohesion is fostered through shared commemorative activity (Barron, Davies and Wiggins, 2008; Simpson, 2006.) There have been instances of exploration into what exactly comprises a tragedy and warrants remembrance (Doke, 2003), but this can be furthered to consider *who* should be remembered. To Foster and Woodthorpe, a minute's silence (and/or applause) is used to the same affect - to consolidate and (re)confirm a community's identity and fictive kinship associated with a football club (2012), and the concept of how to commemorate at football games is just as complex as who to commemorate. In the past, a minute's silence was typically reserved for someone who had died that was directly involved with the football club in question. In recent years, however, this has changed, with an example being the silence held at Chelsea in 2008 in remembrance of Frank Lampard's mother, Pat, who had died of pneumonia. With these developments come accompanying debates, and when referring to whether Mike Dye should be acknowledged with commemorative silence, some fans explained why they thought it was not appropriate:

I don't think we should have a minute's silence for this guy, he was not a fan of our club and we do not represent Wales in the Premier League, we are a Welsh club playing there but we represent Swansea City, and that is all (06.09.11)

And this can be seen to connect with previous theory regarding whether supporting regional or national clubs was of relevance (Gibbons, 2011), while also illustrating how death has the potential to unify or fragment (Walter, 1991.) In the case of Mike Dye, there were disputes concerning how Dye was not representative of football fans, but nonetheless deserving of remembrance; again bringing to light ideologies of respect as a prevailing discourse. This allows us to further question the positions that are inhabited throughout football fandom and how this is subsequently received by others. Such divisions manifest themselves in debate, and the issues arising concerning public remembrance can be seen to encapsulate a range of performance and behaviour. When considering who is deserving of a minute's silence, we can question who it is that the public condolence is for, and how this can be seen to potentially link with the understanding of fans by those who witness this behaviour, aspects that are reflective of the forum content in general.

Indeed, the significance of respecting silences at football matches continually played out to themes of respect and acknowledgement, with a further example being when fans discussed an alleged incident at the Liberty Stadium where West Bromwich Albion fans were accused of not acknowledging a minute's silence, held for both (manager at the time) Brendan Rogers' father, and in remembrance for the Gleision miners. Despite a number of posts initially criticising West Bromwich's fans for being disruptive, there was then a deviation to consider how the incident had been grossly exaggerated with Swansea fans condemning their own club and fan behaviour:

Member 1: Maybe our stewards were at fault for not telling the fans as they went through the turnstiles (17.09.11)

Member 2: Let's all look at the bigger picture here. When we are in a large group entering a stadium, do we or do we not make a lot of noise? I do believe we do (17.09.11)

This demonstrates how fans are able to critically consider potentially deviant behaviour in relation to their own performances; factors that seem far removed from the dominant representations of fans as acting as a homogenous collective while unquestionably denigrating fans from other teams irrespective of their own behaviour.

This sentiment was repeated throughout discussions into other fan behaviour, illustrating how fans themselves are able to collectively consider the actions of fans as not wholly constituting divisions between teams, but rather dependent on individuals in question. This is something that, I argue, wholly contrasts with dominant media reports. Indeed, the overriding construction of football fans throughout the media has already been established as simplistic (Poulton, 2005) and often interpreting all as part of a homogenous collective (Bishop and Jaworski, 2003.) However, we can now further this to consider evidence of how fan behaviour and responses to events such as Mike Dye significantly contrast to the media's presentation of such occurrences. This is particularly apparent when observing the manner in which to firstly interpret the events, secondly deal with the construction of fans in accordance to dominant constructions of hooliganism, and thirdly, how to respectfully commemorate a fan whose position is interpreted in conflicting ways dependent on fans' personal opinions.

Despite evidence on the forum of conflicting opinions throughout the fan community, there was nonetheless continual indication of fans demonstrating an articulate understanding of their own position(s) within football fan culture. One of the main ways this was constructed was through an acute awareness of dominant media representations, all the while relating this to their own perspectives. Largely this was shown to contrast significantly with both individual and collective positions and, when we relate this to the case study of Mike Dye, it is further apparent that fans were able to contest and debate their own opinions about the events, but simultaneously recognise that media coverage as a whole is often grossly misrepresentative. This was seen through posts such as:

We are tarring a whole fanbase with the same stick and it isn't fair, not in the slightest
(17.09.11)

It is apparent that fans can challenge and question individuals' behaviour, but still acknowledge the fundamental influence of media representations. To refer back to the definition of discourse provided by Galasinski (2001) where discourse refers to how social realities are 'articulated and shaped' (in Bishop and Jaworski, 2003: 246), we can address how media representation exactly influences fans' perspectives. Indeed, while fans on the forum were seen to contest the media's coverage of Mike Dye, we cannot ignore the fact that the principle manner through which fans obtained their information about the events was through the media reports that followed.

Indeed, while fans can be constructed as questioning and debating the significance of aspects such as football hooliganism throughout the game as a whole, we must not understand fans to be operating as separate entities to the rest of the general public. This is significant as it positions fans as being ultimately dependent on the mass media for information about particular events and occurrences with there being few other ways through which to find out what has happened and construct subsequent interpretations. In the case of Mike Dye, therefore, with the majority of news media positioning the event as being the result of Swansea Cardiff rivalry and limited to Welsh football fans, there is undoubtedly a dominant perspective portrayed that influences potential audiences. Despite this, however, through analysing the discussions on the forum, we can interpret fans as challenging and questioning general constructions of football fans in line with their own experiences. In doing so, fans can be seen to potentially fulfil a function that the mass media should otherwise be doing, by questioning, articulating and considering facts around incidents, as opposed to speculating – or even mis-reporting – events.

7.6. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have aimed to link the observations and information obtained from the forum to the specific example of the events surrounding Mike Dye's death. This was done in order to firstly understand the dominant way through which the event was reported, illustrating the approach that various news media undertook; reflecting previously discussed concepts in relation to media representation. Secondly, we looked at the discussions that were present on the forum in relation to Mike Dye - identifying the manner in which fans received and reacted to representations and how the discourses apparent within these discussions differed or related to those prevalent throughout the media reports. By including one example, it meant that I was able to consider a succinct amount of information, along with dissecting the way in which the media reported one particular recent event, connecting this with what fans themselves said about it, which could be seen to be potentially indicative of the way in which media reports encircle myriad other topics and discourses. In doing so, this can be seen to further the previous chapters and the themes throughout these by connecting with some of the first theoretical approaches considered in the literature review in order to highlight how fan discourse is further relevant when compared to fan representations.

The concept of anti-fandom (Gray, 2003) was introduced in order to consider a theoretical perspective in which fan communities operate towards other fans, and indeed other elements permeating the game, considering how this potentially contrasts with dominant media reports. Indeed, the significance of football cultures in contributing to personal, cultural and social identity is arguably always underpinned by the social structure and relations of society (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000: 186 in Roche, 2000) of the environment through which such discourses play out. As such, it is imperative to address this in order to further understand previously considered issues.

In further addressing fans' constructions of media reports, we can also see the apparent reflections on how the media often depends on fan discourse to fuel dominant perspectives. This was evident through one fan's post saying:

the more we post about hooliganism on here, the more we make a big deal out of it though
(06.09.11)

This emphasises the relationship between what fans say being constructed as relevant and potentially furthering interest in specific issues. Indeed, this was apparent previously in the chapter where it was evident that the press scoured forums for information about Mike Dye's alleged previous involvement with hooligan-related incidents, leading us to question whether this approach would have unveiled positive fan discourses that contrast with the apparent news media's agendas.

This chapter has further sought to consider how fans are often mobilised to react to dominant representations, allowing us to refer to some of the dominant themes in order to consider how these relate to actual discourses provided by fans. In turn this has presented the forum as a primary source through which to gauge fan perceptions of both the individual self and collective others, all the while acknowledging the significance of other, commanding media forms in contributing to dominant narratives of football fan behaviour.

Chapter 8 - CONCLUSION

'We, the crowd, are Swansea's 12th man'

8.1. Overview

The main aim of this thesis was to explore and analyse football fan discourse as a means to understanding football fan cultures, examining what fans *do* in their everyday online encounters. To guide this analysis, an online forum was chosen and defended as a medium through which to observe fan interactions - a means that, I argue, has been previously underrepresented in work in this area. The thesis identified a discernible gap in existing research, which formed three main observations: firstly, that there is a general lack of acknowledgement towards 'everyday' football fan practices (Crawford, 2004), preferring to focus on the extraordinary encounters; secondly, that there is a preoccupation throughout theoretical approaches that focuses on football violence as a prevailing form, even when critically assessing the media coverage of such; and, thirdly, that there is a concentration on England and its football teams as a means through which to explore fan behaviour, potentially neglecting fans of other, smaller, but arguably just as significant teams. These acknowledgements formed the foundations of the work's approach, where I opted to explore the interactions, participation and potential communities of football fans online, in turn leading me to consider an appropriate methodology from which to explore such encounters in order to answer the overarching research question:

What is the role of online forums in football fandom?

The research question was subsequently developed into four 'sub' questions in order to explore further issues in this area, with this being justified and further explained later in this chapter.

The final part of this work is split into five sections. It will firstly consider the approach and achievements of this work, all the while considering the findings and theoretical positions that helped shape it. Following this, I reflect on the methodologies that were used, prior to considering the determining significance of what has been found, while also understanding

any apparent limitations of the research. The last section then considers the potential implications of this thesis, positioning it in relation to not only existing academic approaches, but also the overriding treatment (Hall, 1978) of football in the mainstream media in order to understand its overall significance in contemporary society.

8.2. Approach and Empirical Achievements

8.2.1. Approach

When approaching this topic, it was essential to understand exactly what had been undertaken previously in this area in order to firstly identify the dominant theoretical approaches, and subsequently position the research. I decided to split the literature review into two sections, as this allowed me to understand some of the work that has been conducted into fan studies in general, before narrowing this down to look at football fandom in particular. The literature review enabled dominant theories to emerge, specifically the conception of fan performativity (Hills, 2002), allowing us to consider the significance of fan behaviour and performances in constructing fan identities. 'Cult' fandom was addressed as an approach, considering Jenkins' exploration of fans as a 'scandalous category' (1992: 15) in relation to our understanding of how football fans are potentially positioned and defined.

Perhaps one of the most significant factors discussed in the literature review was the existence of fan communities, particularly when they contribute to offering identity (Lewis, 1992.) This led me to recognise some of the work that has explored the structure of fan communities, identifying recent research such as Bennett's (2013), which addressed the role of 'normativity' and ideal standards of practice throughout online communities in relation to individual members. My work was largely driven by Anderson's (1991) conception of the 'imagined community' as I considered the significance of communities that are not bound by geographical means but instead exist in myriad spaces and forms. In exploring these concepts, I was able to subsequently construct the approach of this work. Indeed, football fandom is undoubtedly an incredibly vast area to analyse and, as such, it was necessary to contemplate some of the pivotal pieces of work that could be deemed relevant and potentially influential.

In exploring these broad theoretical approaches, it was apparent that there were two main governing areas that would play a role in the forthcoming research. These were: the

significance of fan identity - in particular the manner in which fans can be believed to inhabit a complex spectrum of identities (Hills, 2002); and the purpose of communities, both off and online, in relation to fan hierarchies (*ibid*), linking in notions of cultural distinction as explored by Bourdieu (1984.) Such perspectives not only formed the successive approach to the research, but also can be seen to thread throughout the chapters, forming a bases from which I then introduce, develop and explore specific objectives and themes.

The second section of Chapter 2's literature review identified themes throughout existing work into football fandom. 'Hooliganism' and football violence were both introduced and explored as a dominant position, with this having warranted a wealth of research throughout media and cultural studies, arguably instigated by the Leicester School's work undertaken by theorists such as Dunning (1988) into football violence. Developing this, I considered more recent work, such as that conducted by Poulton (2005) into more contemporary mainstream media representation of football violence, arguing that - while work such as Poulton's has invariably contributed immensely to the understanding of the press' 'treatment' (Hall, 1978) of football violence - it nonetheless demonstrates a simultaneous preoccupation throughout the academic field into this particular area.

Following this, nationalism and national identity emerged as elements that were of primary significance to the work at hand, particularly research such as Bishop and Jaworski's (2002), who examined discourses of homogeneity throughout the press, along with theorists such as Crabbe's (1999) analyses of dominant media narratives during large international events. While these allow us to understand the significance of national identity throughout football fan literature, there are likewise limitations apparent throughout existing theoretical approaches. In addressing work that had been undertaken into national identity, there was evidence of a concentration either on large international sporting events, failing to address more 'everyday' (Crawford, 2004) ordinary encounters and behaviour, or the work was preoccupied with England as a dominant nation, such as Perryman's (2006) work into discourses surrounding 'Ingerland'. Where Welsh fans were considered, this appeared to be largely limited to either exploring rugby fans (Johnes, 2008), or continually pitting Wales in opposition to other dominant football nations, such as England. This led me to question if such dominant approaches are played out in both the mainstream media and subsequent academic enquiry, then how does this translate to football fan interactions and discussions.

Adding to the consideration of fan communities, performances and the construction of nationalism and national identity were previous approaches that had illustrated the significance of exploring fan behaviour in relation to 'active' and 'passive' consumption (Crawford, 2004.) This prompted me to question whether there is evidence of such a binary throughout football fandom or if it is more complex than that, a notion first raised in this thesis' introduction chapter.

The final discussion chapter of this thesis considered mainstream media representation of football fans, and how this could be believed to either support or conflict with evidence obtained from fan discussions. Indeed, when considering the significance of the mainstream media throughout both past work governing this field and likewise our everyday understanding of football fans, it would have been naive to ignore a comparative approach with findings obtained throughout this work, as media representation has played a continual role throughout both past literature and contemporary football. The chapter provided a two-fold case study in order to firstly produce a brief analysis of how a relatively recent event was covered by a proportion of the news media, and secondly relate these to the discourses that played out on the forum, all the while considering previously raised arguments and observations.

Leading on from the overall structure and approach of the thesis, it is now relevant to consider the empirical achievements of the work, allowing us to position the findings in broader contexts, before then reflecting on the methodological approaches.

8.2.2. Empirical Achievements

The fundamental aim of this work was to explore examples of 'everyday' football fan discourses in order to identify the means through which fans engage and interact, establishing what this says about football fans that has not previously been discovered. Considering the expanse of this topic, it was necessary to tackle it accordingly, and it is due to this that the particular structure was decided on. In firstly 'constructing' the online community in Chapter 4, I was able to identify themes emerging that shaped the reader's understanding of how the forum is managed, exploring the roles that members and moderators play in order to set the scene for the following chapters. It was apparent that the forum was complex and, at times, conflicting in the sense that members could be seen to inhabit varying positions in

accordance to the context of the topics discussed. One example of this was the role of 'new' members and how, not only was this something not addressed in previous work, but that this allowed us to witness how new fans are initially welcomed to the forum with fans discussing this in relation to ensuring the forum's survival and growth. However, simultaneously, new fans were frequently denigrated in reference to their knowledge, history and personal relationship to Swansea City and delegitimised in contrast to fans that had longer connections. Radmann argued that the quest for identity and meaning is the main driving force behind individual interaction on the internet (2012), and this was something that was wholly apparent throughout Chapter 4, where fans regularly constructed their positions in relation to others, while also, at times, being self reflective in their own use of the forum - considering why they visit and for what purpose.

The chapter exposed rich findings, some of which contrasted with previous discourses and media representation that have positioned the football fan as 'fanatical' (Brown, 2002) and devoid of reasoning. In addressing the construction of identities, it emerged that part of the relevance of this is a dependency on collective identities. Goffman (1959) proposed that social interaction is comparable to a theatrical performance, in which actors perform one of the many roles available to them depending on the situation in which they find themselves, and this was apparent throughout the chapter where there was the emphasis on fans' individual and personal connections to Swansea City, but with this further being constructed in opposition to others. This led me to consider active and passive fandom, with one of the main findings of Chapter 4 being the significant role that hierarchies play throughout the forum, particularly when considering issues of authenticity and legitimacy, relating these to the tangible construction of forum management.

The subsequent chapter, Chapter 5, found that there were far more complexities throughout football fandom than initially apparent. Indeed, the binary between active and passive can be seen to be incredibly limited when faced with the multifaceted roles, positions and performances that fans inhabit and undertake. Despite fans regularly contesting, debating and comparing affiliation and individual connections to the team, there were nonetheless conflicting elements, such as membership of the forum not only being available to those with privileged access. Likewise, we can see that fan positions were ultimately dependent on the context through which particular interactions and performances played out. When elements of disagreement did arise, there was always the overriding stress placed on how such

discourses are controlled, while relating these encounters to the emphasis of ensuring the future of the club and, likewise, the survival of the forum itself.

This allowed me to identify how the football fan does not inhabit any particular category, supporting the initial argument proposed that previous theoretical approaches had been simplified in their approaches, failing to address the complexities at play. I was further able to question the construction of the active and passive binary, instead demonstrating that football fans were incredibly hard to categorise in relation to their consumption habits, with these being fluid and ever subject to change.

When considering the roles and positions that fans inhabit, it was evident that there was frequent sentiment expressed that referred to the significance of Swansea as a local area, and Wales as a nation and this was explored in Chapter 6. This approach ultimately linked in with some of the points discussed in the literature review, but also allowed me to further these to develop an understanding of the exact role of smaller teams and nations. Ultimately, there was the aim to strike a balance between what was hypothesised or anticipated, what had been previously found, and what the dominant intentions of the research were. In doing this, I proposed that due to the topic and team at hand there were likely to be issues arising concerning the significance of Swansea and Wales, with the construction of local and regional differences being a factor that has not previously warranted in depth analysis. I found that there were myriad emerging discourses, particularly considering the complexities of regional rivalries in comparison to feelings of national responsibility and expectancy.

In Chapter 7, I considered media representation, with the aim to almost come full circle in order to consider dominant approaches throughout the mainstream media, comparing and contrasting this with instances of fan discourse. The chapter found that there were occasions where fans presented perspectives that reflected news media narratives, but, more significantly, fans were found to critically contest other fans positions throughout football - demonstrating considerations and, at times, apparent analyses into how others inhabit the field. This allowed me to identify how regular discourses between fans contrast significantly with how a proportion of the news media constructs fan stereotypes, particularly in the context of football violence.

When considering football violence, it could be seen that such issues still play a significant role throughout media coverage, despite evidence of the news media at times adopting alternative approaches, such as the case in the recent coverage of the Hillsborough inquiry. In addressing the relevance of mainstream media representation, the significance of this was furthermore due to the way in which we could observe fans debating their relationship to others, particularly those who are believed to be deviant and detracting from the main ethos of being a fan. The chapter allowed for us to understand how fans are ultimately dependent on the media to provide them with information from which to form opinions, but likewise are largely able to contest this while accepting the need to be objective and respectful; factors that, I argue, are largely redundant throughout a vast proportion of news media coverage. In considering the construction of anti-fandom (Gray, 2003), I demonstrated that this can go beyond a preoccupation with anti-fandom *texts* and instead relate to fan/fan texts (Williams, 2011) and relationships, all in accordance with the overriding context of media representation. This allowed for us to understand that fans are able to articulately demonstrate their own positions, along with, at times, critically assessing their own fans' actions. Arguably, then, this differs to some of the subjective hypotheses initially constructed that supposed fans would potentially inhabit communities that are blinkered in their construction of others, satisfying perspectives throughout the mainstream media that positions fans as inarticulate, irrational fanatics (Brown, 1998.) Indeed, even when fans were found to express a certain degree of interest in the commodification of football, this was primarily positioned as a means through which to supplement strong personal identification and was not constructed as primary habit.

Perhaps one of the most significant achievements of this work has been the way in which it has proven football fans to be intelligible, expressive, self-governing and self-reflective. Indeed, the prevailing themes permeating the research often not only deviated from the dominant narratives employed by the mainstream media, but also constructed the fan as retaining individual perspectives and not acting as part of a homogenous collective.

When I started researching the forum, one of the main observations that struck me was how the majority of posts were dedicated to discussing the correct way in which to maintain their community, identifying elements of protection and retention, all of which was discussed in almost philosophical, yet ultimately literal, ways. As discussed previously in the thesis, football was almost a byproduct at times, with there being evidence of fans striving to

exercise respect and understanding, while all acting towards a common objective. It soon became evident that there were two main fundamental discourses apparent that underpinned all discussions. The first was being respectful, irrespective of the heated discussions and debates at play, and the second was for fans to understand the role that they play in relation to Swansea City Football Club.

It is this perspective of fans acting as an extension of the team that reflects a potential symbiotic relationship. While fans frequently claim ownership over teams (Winstanley, 2013) there likewise is the way in which teams act as representative of communities. Relating this to positive affiliation (Whiteman, 2009), we can construct both the fans and team as having one primary aim at hand that supercedes any intra text conflict, interruption, or events, and that is the future of ensuring the football club, while simultaneously protecting, reinforcing and developing the identities of individual fans and collective communities.

8.3. Methodological Reflections

The desire to analyse fan discourses as played out within fan communities led me to choose the online forum as a means through which to observe fan interaction and activity over a discernible period of time, with both the team and forum in question being justified in relation to the overarching objectives of the research. The decision to concentrate on online forums instead of social media was illustrated in the literature review, with the prevailing argument being that forums allowed for a rich arena of consistent conversation and interaction that could be explored in accordance to the overarching aims and objectives.

When undertaking the research, I decided to inhabit the position of cyberethnographical 'lurker' (Hine, 2000), whereby I was never a registered member of the forum, nor did I partake in any conversations. This was of fundamental importance to the research, as I believe that it was imperative to observe fan discourse as it occurs, without any form of researcher intervention. This is fully explored and justified throughout the methodology and I argue that, on the whole, undertaking this approach resulted in me obtaining findings that would otherwise have potentially been limited, had I directed the threads in a particular way, for example. Rather, my work demonstrated that forums are complex and multifaceted, with them being seen to retain myriad characteristics in relation to their construction and continual management and evolution. I illustrated that there were democratic procedures at play,

positioning the forum as being the result of communal involvement and not, as may be assumed, devoid of control or rationale. In exploring the forum, I have shown that such mediums warrant study, yet arguably risk being replaced by a concentration on other forms of 'new media' (Nayar, 2010), such as social media.

All user-generated content (UGC) is said to build value for someone, with this far outlasting sporting events (Sturm and McKinney, 2013), and we can propose that the forum is a prime example of this in facilitating numerous topics and discussion points to be played out and returned to by fans and other audiences over time. The multifaceted dynamics of online forums allow us to further question where else fans would be able to interact with each other outside of offline encounters. This positioned the forum as an arena where fans congregated and conversed; something that was reflected in the interviews conducted where fans referred to online encounters as supplementing and furthering the fan consumption and participation achieved offline. Indeed, we can understand the forum as being where the liveliest mediated discussions unfold, with the continuous ongoing discussions and debates of what it *means* to be a fan contributing to the marks of a club and supporter identity (Mellor, 2004: 284.)

To further support this, the forum can be seen to retain certain methods of control that are more consistent than other mediums, with this being apparent through Chapter 4, where I considered the management in place and how this operates throughout. These are factors that, I believe, allow us to interpret the football fan as electively contributing and participating to an online community that specifically constructs and manages its output in relation to the overall significance of maintaining respect *within* communities, and also managing perceptions of fans from *outside* communities. Indeed, throughout the work it was apparent that the forum was constructed as having clear ties with physical locations, yet also operating as a unique site of social solidarity, where fans offer support and debate, with this being openly discussed in relation to how fans are understood by others.

However, while forums are certainly enriching and revealing in some aspects, they likewise potentially mask in others. For example, issues of class, social identity and gender were factors that formed a substantial portion of the literature review, with gender in particular warranting research from theorists such as Gosling (2007), Crolley (2008) and Hynes (2012). In considering this, we can acknowledge that, as communication can potentially allow for anonymity of members, this ultimately affects what can be explored. Indeed, notions of fan

class and gender, for instance, were barely raised on the forum, at least not to the degree that such issues have warranted previous examination. Upon reflection, while it was relevant to discuss these factors in the literature review, they nonetheless may appear detached from the subsequent findings due to them not being exposed as a primary theme. Nonetheless, it was apparent that I had to be selective in what was included, particularly due to the large area being researched, however such aspects clearly play a significant part in football fan studies and could be further considered in relation to the potential development of the work at hand. It was also relevant to consider that, in being selective of what was explored, this should not simply replicate previous theory and observations; rather it should seek to consider these in relation to emerging issues and themes, understanding the significance of what is omitted, so much as what is included.

When considering the online forum as a site of research, it is relevant to address how the very construction of this invariably fundamentally determines what discourses play out. While I would argue that this work has provided a rich example of a space that fans inhabit and perform throughout, we have to consider the fact that the content is ultimately dependent on the management of the medium. To elaborate, as identified in Chapter 4, the forum can be seen to operate as an example of a controlled and managed arena of discussion and debate. When addressing the methodological approaches utilised throughout this study, they are then essentially reliant on the management implemented on the forum, which decides what discussions and debates are enabled. This is particularly relevant when addressing the significance of 'banning' certain members, or deleting threads, with this permanently affecting the content that is available to the researcher.

One final point to acknowledge prior to looking at the role that online interviews played is the significance of the case studies included in each chapter. For each chapter, I chose to construct a case study that detailed a specific example relevant to the arguments and themes considered. By including a case study, I was able to provide a first hand example that illustrated some of the key observations and thematic approaches throughout the findings, with each study either relating to a particular thread, or area of discussion/debate on the forum. Not only did this assist with each chapter's structure, but I feel it enabled some of the theoretical considerations to be demonstrated, hopefully allowing the reader to engage with the particular discourses at play on the forum, something that I believe was imperative in order to further understand the fan community. Moreover, I felt this was further supported by

developing the overarching research question into four 'sub' questions. This enabled the thesis to be coherently structured, with each chapter clearly referring to the question relating to it in its introduction.

When evaluating the second methodological approach implemented, I would argue that this was an approach only ever intended to supplement the primary method, and was justified as such throughout the thesis. I decided to include interviews as a secondary method due to them acting to contribute to any observations, particularly those that involved fans' use of the forum - themes that may not have been as apparent throughout conversations at play. However, when undertaking the research, it was apparent that the interviews did not perform a significant part, which was primarily due to the wealth of material that was available through observing the discourses on the forum. Indeed, when first broaching the topic, I was unsure as to the amount of information that would be accessible, not least due to the very fundamentals of the medium meaning the researcher has to rely on topics and discussions arising of their own accord. It is to the benefit of this work that such rich topics, themes and emerged, however I would further defend the use of online interviews as a means through which to obtain answers that ultimately did enhance the overall findings, such as reasons behind football fans starting to support Swansea City, for example.

Of further significance here is the manner in which I retained the researcher position of 'lurker' (Hine, 2000.) During the analysis, I did not intervene or direct any posts or threads throughout the forum. While this resulted in me obtaining a wealth of legitimate and - I would argue - true discourses apparent through which to construct the work, it is necessary to accept that such positions are ultimately dependent on the provision of information by fans themselves. Indeed, it may have been the case that certain themes or topics did not arise, which would have had potentially irreparable consequences for the direction of the research. As such, I would argue that 'lurking', while producing rich and varied findings in certain contexts, is ultimately dependent on the reliance of such discourses emerging.

Before addressing the limitations and significance of the work in general, it is relevant to consider the restrictions of the forum as a medium. Firstly, we need to consider the fact that many fans choose not to go online (Hills, 2002), instead integrating their digital practices into offline behaviour (Booth and Kelly, 2013) - factors that are inherently not visible to online fan researchers. Furthermore, there is the assumption that forums are typically inhabited by

young fans, particularly in relation to the concept of the digital divide (Norris, 2003), potentially alienating sub groups of fans. However, in acknowledging this, I would argue that any methodological approach is not without its limitations. Such restrictions were considered in depth prior to undertaking this research, and considered throughout Chapter 3. I would further propose that, in comparison to other methodological approaches, observation of the online forum has been defended throughout both this work and others' as to it facilitating a wealth of available research material. Despite this, it is nonetheless appropriate to consider any arguable limitations to the research as a whole, and this will be considered in the following section.

8.4. Limitations

While this thesis has sought to construct significant, rich and unique research into an area that, I argue, has previously been under represented, there are nonetheless limitations that became apparent after the research had been conducted. Such considerations are imperative to address as it enables us to acknowledge both how future research could be potentially influenced, and secondly how there have nonetheless been limitations throughout both the methodology adopted, and the work as a whole.

Firstly, we can develop some of the points raised in the previous section to consider the limitations with working with online forums and, in particular, the manner in which this research approached this. While forums are enriching in certain aspects, they likewise can be seen to mask other indicators. As briefly mentioned previously in this section, aspects such as class, social identity and gender were arguably not observable, leading us to addressing whether this is due to the fundamental limitations of the approach used, or simply reflective of topics not arising. As such, forums can be seen to be enriching in certain aspects, but neglecting to provide a clear way through which to assess others. Despite this, I would argue that what *isn't* talked about on forums is just as important as what *is* talked about, with the apparent lack of discussion of certain aspects potentially reflecting the way in which football fandom could be seen to have developed since some of the dominating theory in this area was produced. I would further argue, that previously inhabited positions that have constructed minority fans as 'othered' and 'clumped together throughout dominant enclaves' (Carrington, 2008) has in certain contexts been replaced with the threat of the 'new' fans; an observation

that links to the growing commodification of football that has allowed fans to engage in multiple ways.

Another factor that is crucial to consider is the recognition of what happens when fan communities cease to exist. This was something addressed by Whiteman and Metivier (2013) who examined the closure of online fan communities, leading me to acknowledge the overriding significance of how all fan forum content is subject to not just the management and construction of mediums, but fundamentally their continual existence. This is particularly significant to this work as *Not606* originally stemmed from the closure of the BBC's 606 forum. As such, it highlights the potential fragility of forums as a medium, linking to Krovel's argument that communities are almost always subject to influence and change (2012.)

8.5. Significance and Implications

This work was largely instigated by my desire to explore an area that, not only do I believe has been underrepresented, but which I feel has been dominated by discourses of violence and simplified speculative accounts of football fans, factors that - I further argue - provide a distorted perspective of the football fan throughout society. It was always my aim to produce work that was accessible and relevant not just from an academic perspective, but which is furthermore socially and culturally applicable. In a similar way to the news media being believed to underpin the discourses and interpretations constructed by football fans throughout this work, so too does the news media affect our day to day understanding of fans, with academic perspectives often being situated outside this domain. I believe that this work has presented fans as inhabiting complex individual and collective identities; factors that influence not just academic fields but hopefully wider sociocultural environments.

In considering relevant theoretical approaches throughout, this allowed the objectives and findings to be situated in relation to pre-existing perspectives, yet likewise facilitated critical engagement in relation to, what I believe, are limitations throughout previous approaches. One of the critical observations throughout this study has been the manner in which football fans are constructed as complex individuals as part of complex communities. In establishing this, it can be further argued that any forthcoming work should take into account the rich encounters that play out in 'ordinary', 'everyday' fandom, as opposed to simply reflecting the

news media's preoccupation with football violence as a dominant perspective through which to understand fan activity.

I believe that this work has scope for further developments. Throughout the chapters, it was continually apparent that issues and themes were being raised that would warrant additional research. One thing that immediately springs to mind is the overall quantity and regularity with which individual fans post on the forum. While the concept of 'just in time' fandom (Hills, 2002) and the immediacy of fan interaction was considered in relation to fans' posts after matches, for example, this is something that could be further explored in relation to the active production of fans potentially relating to individual and collective positions on the forum.

It would also be worth exploring whether online forums reflect other kinds of fan groups. As Brookes argued, it is necessary to be cautious about the extent to which fans who use the internet are likely to be representative of fans as a whole (2002: 19.) However, I would argue that this is the case with any specific area of research, and is certainly not a factor unique to football fandom. Indeed, one of the advantages of using online forums was due to the debates arising that emphasised the various demographics of fans that engaged online in relation to the interaction and points raised. Despite this, I would propose that one way in which these findings could be further developed would be to provide a comparative approach with fans who inhabit other communities, both on and offline, in order to progress the research to consider other groups, establishing any similarities or differences. This would link with Castell's (1998) argument that symbolic communication signifies that identities are constructed according to organisational principles in the interplay between the internet and the self, and, as such, it is necessary to consider to what extent some of the findings were dependent on the particular forum and community in question. Indeed, I would argue that everything is contextually relative depending on the team, fans and mediums in question. While the investigation of Swansea City fans provided continual considerations of regional and national loyalties and rivalries, for example, such issues may not be apparent with fans of other teams, or indeed other communities.

8.6. Final Notes

This thesis has sought to construct an exploration and analysis of football fans in a way that, I argue, has not previously been undertaken, particularly not in relation to the specific themes and objectives that have governed this work. In analysing the online community, there was evidence of an array of issues playing out, all of which can at times be related to fandom's construction as a form of hegemonic struggle over interpretation and evaluation through fan, text, producer and audience relationships (Johnson, 2007: 286.) And it is the construction of fan 'struggles' that leads me to my final point. Irrespective of the various issues and topics discussed and debated, there was always the overriding significance of the mainstream media in relation to fans' positions of the self and the communities that are inhabited, played out through fan discourses of respect and the issue of how their own behaviour and actions can be interpreted by others. The media was accused of fuelling rivalries, encouraging false perceptions, and overwhelmingly constructing a dominant narrative that positions the fan as inarticulate and part of a homogenous collective. The significance of the media throughout football fan studies has been considered for many years, with Hall (1978) even proposing the argument of an 'amplification spiral' in relation to the media's potential to contribute to the possibility of deviant behaviour. While it could be argued to be not as applicable in contemporary football studies, with the emergence of - at times - a shift in narrative, as was the case with the Hillsborough inquiry, there still are instances of shorthand (Poulton, 2005), simplifying and inflammatory responses to football-related incidents, as seen in the case study of Mike Dye. Whether this can have any ultimate effect on football fan communities can be contested, however I would propose that this study has identified that fans can, irrespective of rivalries, intelligently construct their own (and others') positions throughout football and the overriding social and cultural implications of such; demonstrating at times investigative discussions that are largely lacking in the majority of mainstream media approaches. Arguably, the principle reason for fans' engagement online was construed as a means through which to act as an extension of the team (Bisset, 2013) acting as representatives of football in general, all the while inhabiting the position of the 'twelfth man' in the (cyber) stands.

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APPENDICES.

APPENDIX 1.

The Sun: 'The Truth' April 19 1989



APPENDIX 2.

Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a fan of Swansea City for?
2. Why did you become a fan?
3. Do you support/follow any other teams?
4. How would you define a football fan?
5. Do you go to matches?
6. Do you go online regularly and participate in football discussions? If so, why?
7. Why did you join *Not606*?
8. Do you think there is a big divide between those that attend football matches and those that watch at home/in the pub/online?
9. Do you think that hooliganism is as big an issue as the media makes out?
10. What do you think, generally, about the media coverage of football fans?
11. What do you think about the media coverage of Swansea City FC in particular, and why?
12. Do you think you will always support Swansea City FC?
13. Do you think 'new media' has altered the dimensions of football fandom? If so, why/why not?

APPENDIX 3.

Member Profile on *Not606.com*

USERNAME



Join Date

Location

Posts

Points

Level

Rep Power

APPENDIX 4.

Not606.com Swansea City Board Rules

SWANSEA CITY BOARD GROUND RULES

Basic Standards

The site appoints moderators for those boards considered sufficiently active.

The site's Super Moderator, brb, posted an introduction in which he set out the site's ideas about basic standards amongst other things.

Whilst the site's policy appears to be to avoid too many rules for obvious reasons, it does ask that each board agrees a set of 'house rules' with its members.

Basic standards for us has to involve levels of respect for others and the need to avoid personal insults with particular regard to our human differences on gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation; and religious and/or political beliefs.

Whilst this is not an exhaustive list, that's about it really.

Anything more than this will usually have to be put to us by you as members as a request for moderation.

What follows below are a few general pointers and a set of guidelines on moderating the board, disciplinary procedures and related sanctions.

Private Messages (PMs)

In order to communicate with each other without posting on public threads, the site has an internal message system.

The Private Messages button is situated at the top left of every page, immediately below the not606 logo.

As moderators, we tend to use PMs to communicate between ourselves and at times with individual members to explain our concerns or actions.

Caution: the system only allows you to store fifty PMs in total. Once you've reached your limit you will need to delete stored PMs to write or receive more.

Banter and Wums (Wind Up Merchants)

General (non-personalised) banter is fine but 'wumming' and/or trading insults is not.

Threads or posts that appear to moderators on the Swansea board to have been intended to antagonise and/or provoke an overreaction from users whether Jacks or otherwise; or threads that descend into insulting posts may be closed / deleted as soon as they are noticed and the offenders duly sanctioned.

Reporting Offences

Members who wish to report house rule or general offences are asked to PM the moderators, with details of the thread and posts at issue.

Dealing with 'Offenders'

Please see 'Guidelines' below.

Posting Threads

Two things.

Check Your Posts Before Sending: in other words self-moderate. If you fail to do this you could find yourself in contravention of our rules and guidelines and duly sanctioned.

Repeated Topics: make sure a similar thread to your's hasn't already been posted. Moderators reserve the right to merge threads dealing with the same topics.

Inserting Pictures

We are generally happy for members to include pictures, DVD clips etc. on to the board providing they are not of a crude or offensive nature.

Links to potentially offensive sites etc. must include a warning from the poster relating to the type of content they can expect to see.

Members failing to comply with these standards can expect information to be closed / deleted and a PM from the moderators.

GUIDELINES

Guidelines for Moderating 'Outsiders' (Non-Swansea Fans)

Visitors to the Swansea board are expected to show respect. Light-hearted banter between fans is normally considered acceptable. Direct abuse is not.

Posters causing outrage, conflict or similar are likely to be banned from the Swansea board for either one week or permanently dependent upon severity of offence.

Guidelines for Moderating 'Insiders' (Swansea Fans / Regular Board Users)

Swansea board members are expected to self-moderate (edit out disrespectful / abusive comments) before posting. 'Red mist', whilst occasionally understandable, will not be considered a defence against the failure to self-moderate.

Infighting has become a joke recently, and if you can't self moderate, there will be consequences, addressed in the disciplinary section below.

Can I also ask that we respect other boards rules. If you don't, I will not back you up should I receive complaints and find you in the wrong.

Self-Moderation, Disciplinary Procedure and Sanctions

The failure to self-moderate will invariably lead to an offence being committed. Where this is picked-up by the mods, the disciplinary procedure and related sanctions set-out below will be followed.

Dependent upon the severity / number of offences involved, the mods will, at their discretion, decide at which point of the procedure to commence an action against an offender.

It should be noted that club board mods do not have the power to ban posters. They can only recommend bans to the site's Super-Mod, who then decides whether to go with recommendations or not.

Standard Sanctions

1. Informal Words of Advice (normally first offence against rules on due respect)
2. Formal Warning (normally second offence)
3. 24 hour site ban recommended (normally third offence)
4. One week site ban recommended (normally fourth offence)
5. Two week site ban recommended (normally fifth offence)
6. Permanent site ban recommended (normally sixth offence)

General (Board Level) Consultations and Notifications

Mods are not obliged to consult with or notify board members on matters relating to decisions. However, in order to maintain board harmony, mods may consider general consultations and/or notifications helpful in certain cases.

Where general notifications are issued, they will normally comprise a closed thread with a single original post (OP) containing the relevant information.

Communications / Notifications to Offenders

Except in the cases of words of advice and formal warnings, mods are not obliged to communicate with or notify offenders of decisions or actions against them.

Where mods choose to communicate with offenders, open posting on appropriate threads and/or PMs are both acceptable as the only means available.

How to Challenge / Get Rid of a Mod

Any such challenge is legitimate provided the originator uses language, in both making and maintaining their case, that is respectful and free from abuse.

1. PM the Mod

PM the mod(s) in question (copying in the other mod(s)) starting your concerns and asking for their acknowledgement and agreement to improve on their performance

relating to your expressed concerns.

2. Notify and Poll the Members

If such agreement fails to materialise or you are simply not satisfied with the response received or lack of it, open a thread entitled, 'No Confidence' stating your concerns and opening or calling for a Poll asking the following questions:

For the reasons given in my thread, I propose that [mod name(s) here] should resign as mod(s) with immediate effect.

- a) Agree?
- b) Disagree?
- c) Don't care?

3. Outcome

Where poll suggests a mod has lost the confidence of a perceived 66% of the board (approx 20 posters by 2012 /13 standards), the mod will agree to stand down and the remaining mod(s) will select a replacement they believe will have the confidence of the board.

'Don't care' votes will be counted as 'disagree' since they do not offer an opinion to sack the mod(s) in question.

Where all existing mods appear to have lost the confidence of the board, the OP of the original thread will invite/ nominate mod candidates (including him/herself if interested) and arrange for a further poll to confirm new mods on a first past the post system.

Unfair / Disrespectful Treatment of Mods

Any disrespectful / abusive threads or posts aimed at one or more existing mods, may be treated as an offence against the rules and dealt with according to the numbered procedure as set-out above.

Please PM all current Swansea moderators to bring any concerns or issues arising to their attention.

APPENDIX 5.

The Sun: 'The Real Truth' September 13 2012

THE Sun BRITAIN'S MOST POPULAR PAPER
 Thursday, September 13, 2012 40p thesun.co.uk

WILLS:
 Two kids with Kate would be great **SEE PAGE 7**

23 YEARS AFTER HILLSBOROUGH..

THE REAL TRUTH

By RICHARD MORIARTY
 THE real truth behind the Hillsborough disaster was finally revealed yesterday — 23 years after the tragedy claimed 96 innocent lives. An independent report showed police tried to cover up catastrophic failings by disgracefully smearing Liverpool football fans, pivoting the blame on them and falsifying reports. It also disclosed FORTY-ONE victims of the 1989 FA Cup semi-final horror could have been saved if emergency services had acted faster. The Sun last night said the paper was "deeply ashamed and profoundly sorry" for our notorious front page headline The Truth — published in the aftermath of the tragedy above a story reporting the police's version of events. Furious families of the dead called for criminal charges to be brought against cops involved in the "depraved" deception. *Full Story — Pages 2, 3, 4 and 5*

- Cops smeared Liverpool fans to deflect blame
- 41 lives could have been saved, says new probe
- **The Sun**: We are profoundly sorry for false reports
- Families of 96 victims call for prosecutions

Horror... fan cries at match