

## **Macromarketing Insights Ninety Minutes at a Time: A Season with Forest Green Rovers, the World's Greenest Football Club.**

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*“The world of soccer has had its ups and downs in history but there is no doubt of its power to influence billions of people for good. Forest Green Rovers is showing that what few thought could be possible – soccer as a fully sustainable sector increasingly free from climate-warming emissions - is not only a realistic but a desirable future for fans and clubs alike.”*

Forest Green Rovers (2018)

### **Abstract**

Peterson (2016) in his first publication as the editor of the Journal of Macromarketing called for more research into marketing dynamics and practices functioning at a meso / place-based level. This paper responds to this call by embedding its research in the places and spaces of the World's greenest football club, Forest Green Rovers (FGR). Through the application of visual ethnographical participatory research FGR is empirically explored as a place capable of educating, influencing and changing consumption choices to favour sustainability. The study offers a novel macromarketing perspective on the practices of a football club and demonstrates the potential of its 'tangible symbols' to stimulate sustainable consumption. It shows how specific 'in place' symbols of sustainability are perceived as normal and thus lack any real impact, while others such as vegan only food are more significant. It also indicates that the symbols of sustainability functioning at FGR play a role in reaffirming the authenticity and genuine commitment that the football club and its owner have to promote sustainability and veganism. Subsequently, the paper presents both empirical and theoretical

contributions to macromarketing by demonstrating the workings of a meso level place to facilitate sustainable consumption and theorising a football club's commitment to sustainability as a macromarketing phenomenon.

## **Introduction**

Glennie and Thrift's (1992) recognise the importance attributed to understanding consumption practices as everyday situated activities taking place in the urban places and spaces that people occupy and socially construct. Consumer knowledge and consumer choice, they argue is not necessarily informed by advertising, but rather from participation in urban life. Subsequently, the many 'places and spaces' of the urban environment are argued to be capable of playing a significant role in assisting consumer knowledge and consumption choice (Barnett et al. 2011, Amin 2002, Mansvelt 2005). From the personal places of home, the public places of government and private/public organisations to the openly social third places such as parks, public houses and coffee shops (Oldenburg 1999), consumption discourse and choice is part of everyday life (Glennie and Thrift 1992, Harvey 1973). Subsequently, Soja (1989) calls for greater insight into place-based social geographies that encourage distinct social practices such as sustainable consumption.

The Journal of Macromarketing (JMK) has made a valuable contributed to the field of sustainable consumption. It is considered from the perspective of anti-consumption (Chatzidakis and Lee 2013, Hunter and Hoffmann 2013), the transformation of consumer culture (Assadourian 2010), Quality of life (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997), green commodity discourse (Prothero, McDonagh, and Dobscha 2010), environmentally friendly products (Samli 1998), brand narratives (Ourahmoune, Binninger, and Robert 2014),

recycling (Ekstrom and Salomonson 2014), mobilizing slow fashion (Odometer and Atik 2014) and self-interest (Naderi and Strutton 2015).

Despite this significant contribution, Macromarketing scholars have paid limited attention to the agency of everyday places and spaces to influence sustainable consumption. Indeed Peterson (2016) in his first publication as the MKT editor asked macromarketers to address this shortfall, calling for more research dedicated to meso level (place-based) marketing dynamics and the behaviour of crowds/audiences. This paper responds to his call by embedding its research in the novel places and spaces of 'The World's greenest Football Club', FGR (Newsroom 2017, Forest Green Rovers 2018).

This paper explores the application of visual ethnography and participatory research (McCarthy and Muthuri 2016, Pink 2001) conducted through lead author participative ethnography (became part of FGR's 'crowd') and 'crowd' based focus groups. Through data collection consisting of photographs, ethnographical observation and focus group discussions, thematic coding was used to generate novel insights into the significance of FGR's potential to influence sustainable consumption. The paper concludes by theoretically grounding FGR's place-based practices as novel macromarketing.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Macromarketing: Towards a place-based understanding***

Place-based studies in macromarketing are often focused on countrywide or regional development studies. Examples included Layton (2015) use of Coral bay (Western Australia) as a backdrop for his work on formation, growth and adaptive change in marketing systems, Sredi, Schulz II, and Brecil (2017) insights into the creation of communities in post conflict Bosnia, Nguyen, Rahtz, and Schutz II, (2014) suggestion that tourism can be the catalyst for

transforming Ha Long in Vietnam, Guszak, and Grunhagen (2016) work on food deserts in Croatia, Schutz II (2012) and Sandikci, Peterson, and Ekici (2016) application of marketing systems to deliver development goals and Wooliscroft, Gangimair –Wooliscroft, and Noone (2014) hierarchy of ethical consumer behaviour in New Zealand. Recently place-based macromarketing studies have been considered through the lens of ‘alternative economies’ (Campana, Chatzidakis, and Laamanen, 2017) with remote indigenous communities in Australia providing a backdrop to help us understand that money in some places lacks symbolic value (Godinho, Venugopal, and Singh, 2017). While Watson and Ekici ‘s (2017) research conducted on a small farm in Ocakli, Western Turkey found that alternative food networks are dependent upon stakeholders sharing congruent values. Such work suggests an emerging macromarketing interest in understanding the role of meso / place-based marketing dynamics to ‘save the world’ and solve societies ‘wicked problems’. This is also outlined by work from Kemper and Ballantine (2017) who argue that meso level social marketing has a significant role to play in addressing obesity, Samuel and Peattie’s (2015) application of grounded theory to investigate the marketing dynamics of the Fairtrade Towns Movement and Gau, Ramirez and Barua (2014) insights into market orientation through community philosophy. However, despite this contribution, there is still a recognised shortfall in macromarketing studies that have empirically explored meso level marketing systems attempts to influence sustainable consumption (Peterson 2015).

Work from the broader discipline of marketing and sociology exists in this area, for example, Alexander and Nicholas (2006), Peattie and Samuel (2016) Malpass et al. (2007) and Lyon (2014) have all considered the role of the Fairtrade Towns movement in enacting meso level institutions to improve Fairtrade consumption. These studies add empirical depth to Jackson’s (2006) work on sustainable consumption and McKenzie- Mohr’s (2000) approaches to fostering sustainable behaviour. All these scholars along with others such Seyfang (2005)

directly or indirectly confer that the places and spaces of our everyday life have agency in educating and influencing sustainable consumption.

### ***Promoting Sustainable Consumption***

Agenda 21 of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (UNCED 1992) outlines the importance of better promotion of sustainable products and the need for a better understanding of the consequences of consumption (Jackson 2006, Sayfang 2005). Jackson (2006, p. 4) suggests that the accepted institutional view of sustainable consumption is *'more consumption of more sustainable products'*. Sustainable consumption asks consumers to consider the social, economic and environmental impact their consumption habits support or create (Hobson 2002). Thus consumption can be viewed as an agent of change in a macromarketing system where the connectivity of consumption, production and disposal can be used to stretch and deepen spatiality and social relations (Amin 2002). This process involves consumers and institutions alike factoring the direct and indirect impacts of their consumption choices into their buyer decision-making process (Jackson 2005).

Jackson (2005) suggest that we learn from observing others and often model our behaviour on what they do. As humans, we need to belong, and subsequently, much of our consumption is motivated by a desire for approval and the need to interact with our family, friends and community (Durning 1992). Learning through social engagement is therefore suggested to have a positive impact on sustainable consumption intentions and desires (Jackson 2004). As McKenzie-Mohr & Smith (1999, p.77) confer:

*'Conformity that occurs due to the individuals observing the behaviour of others, to determine how they should behave, can have long-lasting effects'*

Thus place-based marketing functions have the potential to make a significant contribution to engaging people in sustainable consumption. Understanding marketing communications that socially function in the places and spaces we occupy should, therefore, be seen as equally important as mass marketing communications. McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (1999) posit that social marketing is often dependant on media advertising to create public awareness and understanding of issues related to sustainability despite this method often proven to be limited in its ability to foster behavioural change. They further imply that most information campaigns that seek to improve knowledge or changing attitudes have very limited or even no effect upon behaviour at all. Alarminglly Stern et al. (1984) identify that many campaigns seeking to foster more sustainable behaviour have failed as a direct result of paying scant attention to the cultural practices and social interactions that influence human behaviour. For example, Beverland (2014, p. 372) indicates that *'most consumers do not view reduced meat consumption as environmentally relevant'*, suggesting that more research needs to be carried out on the effectiveness of marketing communication that aims to promote *'plan-based diets'*.

The practice of community-based social marketing draws upon the discipline of social psychology, which McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (1999) argue, can be used to develop direct community level contact initiatives to promote behavioural change. Subsequently narratives of community-based social marketing recognises the importance of places and spaces to help develop personal connections, credibility and trust, to influence behavioural change, telling us:

*'The techniques that are used by community-based social marketing are carried out at a community level and frequently involve direct personal contact. Personal contact is emphasised because social science research indicates that we are most likely to change some behaviour in response to direct appeals or social support from others.'*

McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (1999, p.16)

Thus, people and organisations that deliver sustainability messages *'can have a dramatic impact upon how it is received'* (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999, p.89).

The sustainable consumer relies on an array of sources of information about the goods or services they may consume. Past consumer surveys have delineated that the most influential contributor is the recommendations of friends and colleagues (Arnold 2009). In support, Lewis and Bridger (2001) convey that the greater sense of identity consumers have with an individual or group, the more likely they are to *'wear its symbols'*. In support, McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (2006, p. 95) state:

*'Research on persuasion demonstrates that the major influence upon attitudes and behaviour is not the media, but rather our contact with other people.'*

Tallontire, Rentsendorj and Blowfield (2001) and Arnold (2009) agree that ethical consumers often trust, listen, and believe the people they interact with. Subsequently, the role of social acceptance, belonging and relationships (Murphy et al. 2006) to influencing consumers to think and act more sustainably cannot be ignored. As Jackson (2006, p. 120) suggest:

*'Consumers are also employees. As employees, people are immersed daily in certain sets of behaviour, values and logic. In particular, they are exposed to a variety of environmentally important practices. There is evidence to suggest that behaving in certain ways in one context can have a knock-on effect in*

*another context. If I'm encouraged to recycle at work, it is more likely that I will attempt to recycle at home.'*

## **Research Context**

### ***Operationalising Sustainability: Forest Green Rovers changing the rules of the game.***

Since 1889 FGR has been an integral part of the small Cotswolds town, Nailsworth and in 2017 for the first time in the club's history, it won promotion to Division Two of the English Football League. Since then it has attracted an onslaught of media interest that ironically and disappointingly for some has had nothing to do with its footballing prowess. Mainstream media has awoken to the fact that FGR is following triple bottom line sustainability practices in every facet of its day to day operations as a professional football club. This season, their actions have become big-ticket news in the British mainstream media, with the BBC, The Guardian and The Times all reporting on the club's unique 'sustainable' practices. For example, The Times (2017) ran the headline '*Forest Green Rovers- the club where meat is off the menu, and the pitch is fed seaweed*'.

FGR's holistic approach to sustainability is evident for all to witness from their organic pitch, solar panel floodlights, recycled water system, underground heating, charging points for electric cars, solar-powered robot mowers, eco-meadow and eco trail to the more novel practices of all staff and visitors only being served vegan food (FGR Sustainability Report 2017). Reinforcing this commitment the club has achieved Eco-Management and Audit Schemes (EMAS) accreditation (FGR Sustainability Report 2017) and in October 2015 they became the world's first accredited vegan football club (Forest Green Rovers 2018). Recently FIFA the sport governing body labelled FGR as 'the worlds greenest football club' (Newsroom 2017).



*“FIFA recently described us as the greenest football club in the world. That’s quite an accolade, and it shows how we’ve been able to bring together football and environmental consciousness at the highest levels of the game.*

*No other football club in the world has put the environment at the heart of what it does, embedded it into its DNA. We’re the only club in the world to have EMAS accreditation – the gold standard of environmental management – and we’re the first and only vegan football club in the world.”*

Forest Green Rovers (2017)

How FGRs sustainability practices are communicated/reinforced to its stakeholders are of paramount interest to the football club as FGR’s Owner / Chairman Dale Vince stated in an interview with The Guardian (2017),

*“I thought it was an opportunity to take our message to a new audience,” he says.*

*"The world of football doesn't get spoken to on environmental issues. I thought we could use it as a new channel, and quite an unexpected one, to talk about sustainability."*

FGR Sustainability Report (2017) also states;

*“An important outcome of this policy is, we hope, long-term behavioural change, within the club of course, but also from our supporters and the rest of the sporting world.”*

Therefore this paper seeks to use macromarketing as a lens to help empirically explore the possibility of FGRs place to change stakeholder behaviour to favour sustainable consumption.

## Methodology

This studies theoretical perspective is informed by a desire to engage and generate meaning from ‘those involved’ with FGR football club. Through the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism data was derived from the social interactions and interrelationships experienced by FGR’s crowd (Blumer 1969). From collecting visual representation, and observing, what is happening in the ‘*natural setting*’ of FGR on match day the research captures visual representations (photos), perceptions, attitudes and actions directly from ethnographical engagement as one of FGR’s crowd. The data collected specifically sort to understand visitors’ interactions with the symbols ‘in play’ at FGR (Starks and Trinidad 2007, Dey 2007). As Goulding (2002, p.39) explains:

*‘Symbolic interactionism is both a theory of human behaviour and an approach to an enquiry about human conduct and group behaviour.’*

The study starts from the position of recognising FGR as marketing system consisting of many interdependent ‘*abstract objects*’ (Blumer 1969, p.10) seeking to discover ‘*from within*’ how participants see, describe and act towards the symbols of sustainability while attending a football match at FGR. To capture this data and in line with the central doctrines of symbolic interactionism the researcher put himself in the place of those studied (Crotty 1998). This paper is therefore based upon capturing a rich mosaic of data that tells us how FGR symbolically interact with their crowd to promote sustainable education and consumption. Following the lead of Blumer (1969 p. 39) the study’s approach aimed to ‘*lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one proposes to study*’ by getting as close as possible to the lived experience of those involved. Data collection took a pluralistic approach through:

- Visual ethnographical participation (Pink 2013) from attending matches home and away ‘as one of the crowd’ and becoming a supporter of FGR during the 2017/18 season.
- Engaging other participants (football supporters) to share their experiences through pictorial representation (Pink 2013) and participating in post-match focus groups to ‘*see things from the perspective of others*’ (Crotty 1998, p. 76). Two focus groups consisting of football supporters (see Table 1: *Focus group participants*) were conducted. Each focus group was taken to a game at FGR and asked to engage in visual participatory research by making, sharing and commenting upon photographs that captured their imagination and thoughts before, during and after the football match (Pink 2013). These photos were further reflected upon in post-match focus group discussions.

<b>Focus Group One Participants</b>	<b>Focus Group Two Participants</b>
<b>Match attended:</b> FGR V Swansea	<b>Match attended:</b> FGR V Morecambe
<b>Date:</b> 31/10/2017	<b>Date:</b> 28/10/2017
<b>Score:</b> FGR 0 V Swansea 2	<b>Score:</b> FGR 2 V Morecambe 0
<b>Post-match focus group:</b> FGR, Carol Embrey Suite	<b>Post-match focus group</b> – The Egyptian Mill, Nailsworth
Male age 40-50 Swansea City supporter	Female age 40-50 Cardiff City supporter
Male age 18-20 Wigan Athletic supporter	Female age 30-40 Swansea City supporter
Male age 18-20	Male age 70-75

FGR supporter	FGR supporter
Female age 40-50	Male age 40-50
Swansea City supporter	Liverpool supporter
Male 25-30	Male age 18-20
Wolverhampton Wanderers supporter	Manchester City supporter
Female 25-30	
Wolverhampton Wanderers supporter	

**Table one:** *Focus group participants*

### ***Data Capture and Processing***

Via the application of visual participation, rich data was collected through the process of all participants taking, sharing and commenting upon photographs of significant symbols functioning on a match day at FGR (Pink 2013). In support of this approach Pink (2013, p. 1) argues that;

*'Images are indeed part of how we experience, learn and know as well as how we communicate and represent knowledge.'*

Datasets (visual and commentary) from ethnographic participation and focus groups were processed through thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to help,

- build a pictorial mosaic of the significant symbols of sustainability at FGR
- determine the possibility of the key symbols in FGRs marketing system to educate and incrementally influence sustainable behaviour/consumption practices.

This studies application of thematic analysis helped examine both sets of data to conceptualise the meanings and experiences of all participants (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis of datasets for this study followed Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis as outlined in Table 2: Thematic Analysis at FGR.

Phase	Description of the process
1 Familiarising yourself with the data:	Photographic data was processed for initial ideas and concepts to emerge.
2 Generating initial codes:	Photographic data was systematically coded for outlining features in the data. Photographs were subsequently coded and reviewed for relevance to each other and the emerging codes.
3 Searching for themes:	Codes were collated into potential themes, by merging all data (photographs, focus group discussions and ethnographic participation journal notes) relevant to each potential theme.
4 Reviewing themes:	<p>Themes were examined to consider their validity and relevance using the entire data set, from this process a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis was produced. At this stage, the process facilitated the emergence of three key themes upon which the findings of this paper are presented:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clean energy</li> <li>2. Interpretative geography</li> <li>3. Vegan Plus</li> </ol>
5 Defining and naming themes:	Data analysis was further refined to the specifics of each theme, uniting the data into an overall integrated story.
6 Producing the report:	The last review of a selection of vivid, compelling extract examples was analysed again and related back to the research question.

**Table 2: Thematic Analysis at FGR**

## Findings

Findings are presented through the three key themes that emerged from the research process.

### *Theme 1: Clean Energy*

First introductions to FGR's football stadium is dominated by two significant and novel (at a football ground) symbols of sustainability, the electric car charging ports and solar panels at the entrance to the stadium (see Image 1: Solar Panels). The solar panels were noteworthy enough for several participants to photograph them. However, their significance was limited. While it was uncommon to see these symbols at football grounds their presence in our urban landscape is now commonplace and perhaps one of the most accepted symbols of clean/sustainable energy consumption we come across. Subsequently, solar panels were considered to be a visible symbol of *'the very least of what they should be doing'* in the name of sustainability.



**Image 1: Solar Panels**

More significant was the sight of electric car charging ports available in FGR's carpark. Participants showed a high level of interest in these symbols, capturing numerous photographs of them both in and out of use (see Image 2: *Electric Car Ports*). Before all games attended informal groups of fans could be observed congregating around them, deep in conversation and intrigue regarding their application and cost. These discussions were also captured during the focus group, all participants expressed a desire to learn more about electric cars but were concerned that their 'newness'. They additionally expressed a fear of the lack of a supporting infrastructure for electric cars indicating it was a little off-putting to commit to purchasing one. This was despite some participants recalling previous observation of seeing Ecotricity car charging ports at service stations on the M5 motorway network that some used to get to the game.



**Image 2: Electric Car Ports**

However, the novelty of seeing a Tesla car hooked up to a car charging port proved to be a shared symbol captured and commented upon (see Image 3: *Tesla*) by many. The cars desirability and potential as a symbol of conspicuous consumption unquestionably captured the imagination of lots of football fans going to the game. This included research participants who indicated it to be a desirable symbol of sustainable transport that '*if affordable*' had the potential to dissolve the previous concerns of adopting electric cars.



**Image 3:** *Tesla*

Having taken the initial steps into FGR's 'place' observations natural turn to the dominance of FGR's official sponsor and holding company Ecotricity. Avoiding symbolic interaction with the Ecotricity brand was deemed near impossible, given billboards adorn the pitch (see Image 4, Ecotricity) supported by the ubiquitous use of Ecotricity green as colour schemes throughout the ground. This includes the team's official kit and the Union Jack being transformed to embrace Ecotricity's unique shade of green, while also brazened on the front of every player's chest during the game is the Ecotricity logo. Even the crowd of FGR supporters often sing '*Who Are We! Green Army!*'





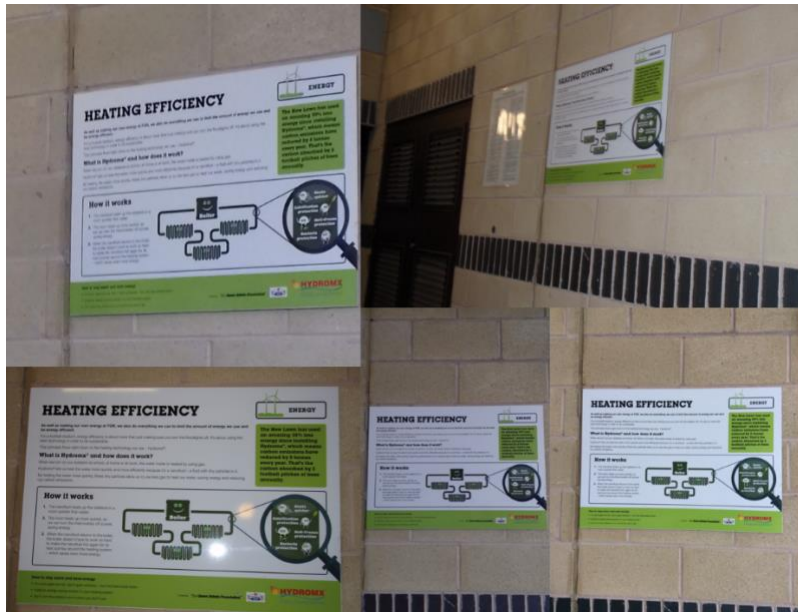
**Image 4:** Ecotricity

The data collected suggest that the Ecotricity brand and the subtle nuances that support its communication amount to several symbols that ensure it is ubiquitously transmitted to everyone who watches the game (see Image 5: *Everything is Green.*) Following symbolic exposure to the Ecotricity brand, it was a natural progression for some to carry out post-match internet research into the company's consumer proposition to transfer energy supplies to the 'greener and cleaner Ecotricity'. However, the onslaught of Ecotricity symbols at FGR for some was a little distasteful and a reminder of the '*crass commercialisation of the game, that many a 'true supporter of football' find distasteful*'. More positively for others, its dominance was seen as a reminder that clean domestic energy is now '*easily available*' and '*worth consideration if the price was right*'. This attitude was followed up by some participants suggesting they would consider visiting the Ecotricity website for more details.



**Image 5:** *Everything is Green*

Finally, the Hydremx underground heating system although identified by a limited number (see Image 6: *Hydremax Heating*) was the least photographed and considered clean energy venture promoted by FGR. Arguably this is because the '*innovation is not on view*' and is only represented by interpretation boards outside several turnstile entrances. The time necessary to read and digest this interpretation board was described as '*off-putting*', and the information on it was suggested to be '*not very relevant*' to peoples normal lives.



**Image 6:** *Hydrex Heating*

## ***Theme 2: Interpretative Geography***

It is somewhat novel as a football fan to be exposed to interpretation boards at a football ground that move beyond the tourist gaze of documenting a club's history and past players. However, at FGR interpretation boards communicate the benefits of both organisations and individuals embracing sustainable behaviours. It is hard to escape the main interpretation board on view at the entrance to FGR's ground. This proudly invites visitors to take the FGR 'eco trail' (see Image 7: FGR Eco Trail) and uncover ten points of interest in around the ground that explain FGR's commitment to sustainability.



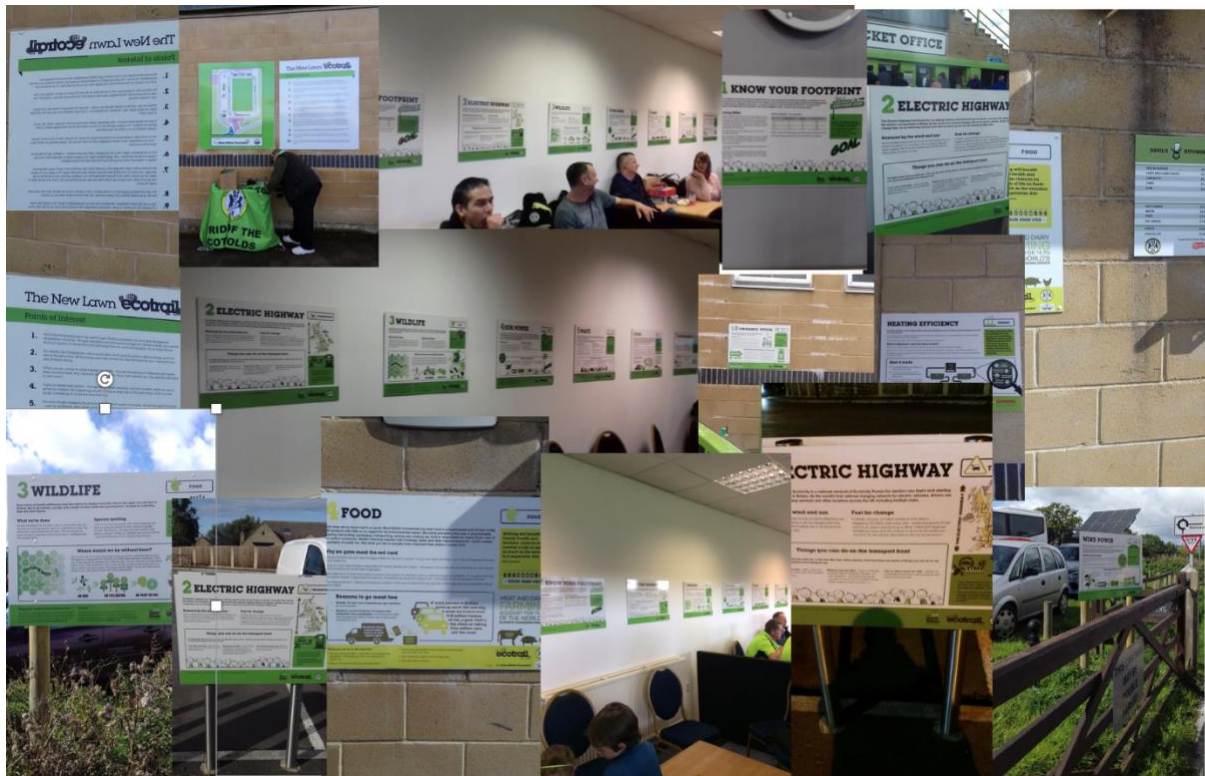
**Image 7: FGR Eco Trail**

The novelty of such an approach can be observed on match day as people can often be observed stopping to read FGR's sustainability commitments. Observations made and focus group participants' views suggest that the initial impact of seeing FGR's multiple commitments to sustainability helps ease sceptical worries of FGR possibly '*over-egging their commitment*' and engaging in the well-known process of greenwashing. Positive comments were expressed for FGR's '*holistic*' approach to sustainability, and '*the extent the club has taken it*'. Each of the ten sustainability commitments on FGR 'Eco Trail' is signposted around the ground via the strategic placement of interpretation boards at specific points of reference, helping FGR's sustainability commitments to be easily recognised. Having all ten of the interpretation boards on display in the members' bar is possibly a key symbol of FGR '*taking sustainability seriously*'.

The most significant interpretation board observed, photographed and commented upon was FGR's commitment to veganism and other sustainable food sources such as Fairtrade (discussed in Theme 3: Veganism Plus). However, a variety of different interpretation boards



were also photographed and considered with the 'electric highway' and the 'organic pitch' being of interest. Although many positive interactions with the interpretation boards were discussed questions were raised about the 'real value' of FGR's wildlife interpretation board given the amount of actual ground that was dedicated to it near the stadium. Image 8: Interpretation Boards, demonstrates the most common images capture of interpretation boards.



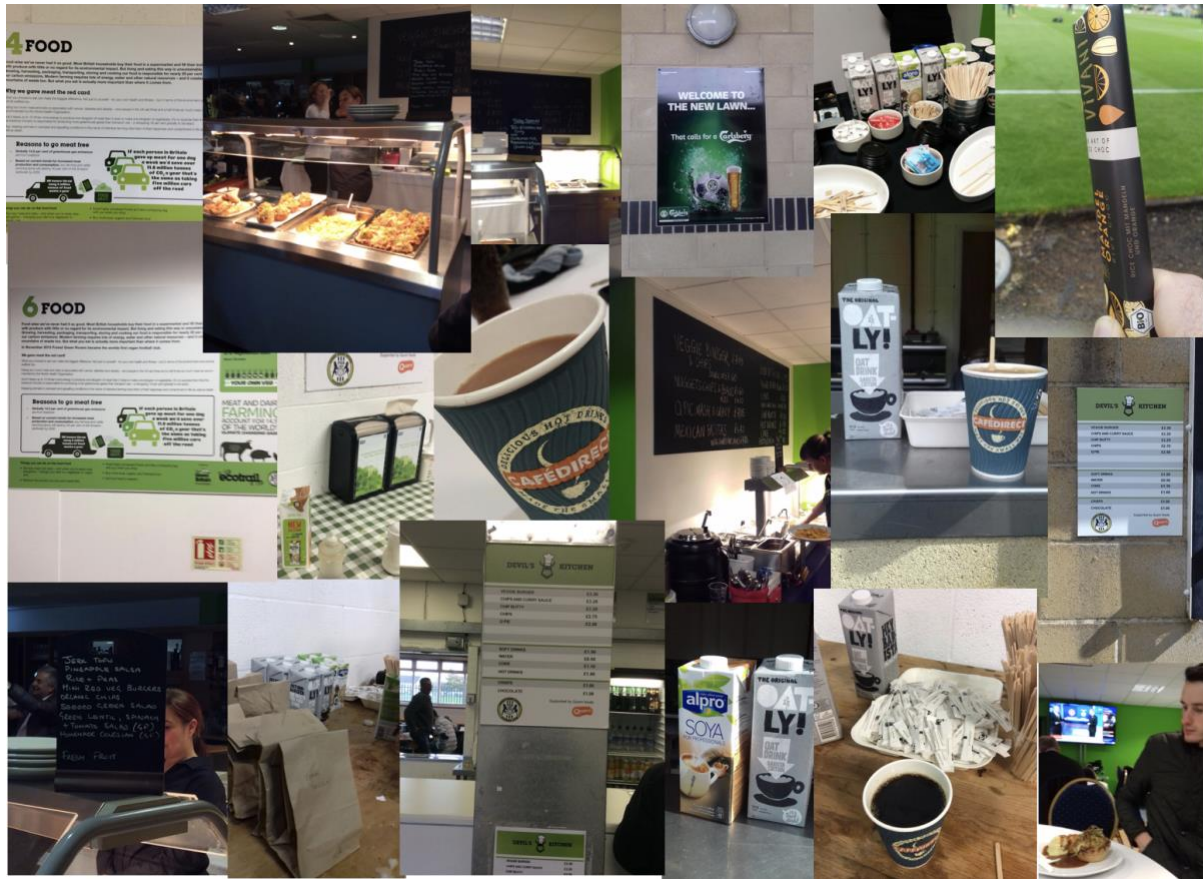
**Image 8:** *Interpretation Boards*

The eco trail and its interpretation boards that are strategically placed around the ground help endorse FGR's commitment to sustainability as 'authentic'. However, while the interpretation boards were recognised for their novelty and strategic positioning, they arguably carry a lot of information that only the 'very interested' or 'board while I was in the queue for food' will read. Subsequently, the findings posit that their role goes little beyond legitimising the actions of the club. They suggest that interpretation boards at the ground

struggle to keep peoples interest long enough to matter because they have '*better things to do*' and more '*important things*' (meaning the game) *to think about*' when at a match.

### ***Theme 3: Veganism Plus***

As Image 9: Food Interpretation, demonstrates, the very notion that a football club can be '*entirely vegan*' proved to be intriguing even before visiting FGR. Picking up on FGR's recent publicity as the only football club in the world to carry the endorsement of the Vegan Society observing how FGR has enacted policies and procedures to adopt this was of prime interest for both the ethnographer and the focus group. Subsequently, it comes as no surprise that all participants noted the interpretation boards dedicated to food consumption on display wherever food and drink were available in the ground. However, despite the strategic placement of these interpretation boards resulting in prominent recognition little value was attributed to them beyond reinforcing a belief that FGRs commitment to veganism and socially responsible food consumption was sincere. Much more recognition and novelty was attributed to the actual food and drink available, both to buy and sample (for example a free Vegan based bag of food samples was distributed at the Morecambe game on October 28<sup>th</sup> 2017) while at FGR. Recognition of a vegan only menu with a limited offering, biodegradable containers and food packaging, Fairtrade tea, coffee and cola were all captured in Image 10, and they all provoked a variety of reactions.



**Image 9: Food Interpretation**

Highly significant was the possibility of trying different vegan brands through the offer of free samples (see image 10: free samples) and the removal of so called '*normal food and drink*' options such as cows' milk, meat-based food and big brands like Coca-Cola and Cadbury from FGR food outlets. Thus trying '*new and different things such as soya milk in my tea*' became the norm, and was actually '*not that bad*'. Many people who visit FGR will quite possibly indulge in new sustainable food consumption experience and consumer learning that only happened as a consequence of a visit to FGR to watch a football match. Image 9 and 10 capture the critical symbols of food supporters interact with while watching a football match at FGR.





**Image 10: Samples**

Personal experience, significant observations and experiences monitored suggest that reactions to the food and drink captured in image 9 and 10 manifests itself through six different conceptualisations of visitor reactions to FGR's vegan only menu.

1. **The Admirer** who is thoroughly committed to what FGR are attempting to do with food and drink at the ground. They are likely to be vegans or vegetarians or on a lesser scale understanding of the impact of their consumption habits and thus interested in making as many changes as possible to become more sustainable.
2. **The Supporter** who like what FGR are doing and despite having a lot of food based knowledge is keen to learn more about the food they eat and the impact of their consumption behaviour, thus mirroring previous conceptualisations of ethical/sustainable consumers. While at FGR they warm to experimentation (trying food samples etc) with their food and are likely to experiment with vegan, vegetarian and ethically sourced food. This group is also supportive of FGRs commitment to

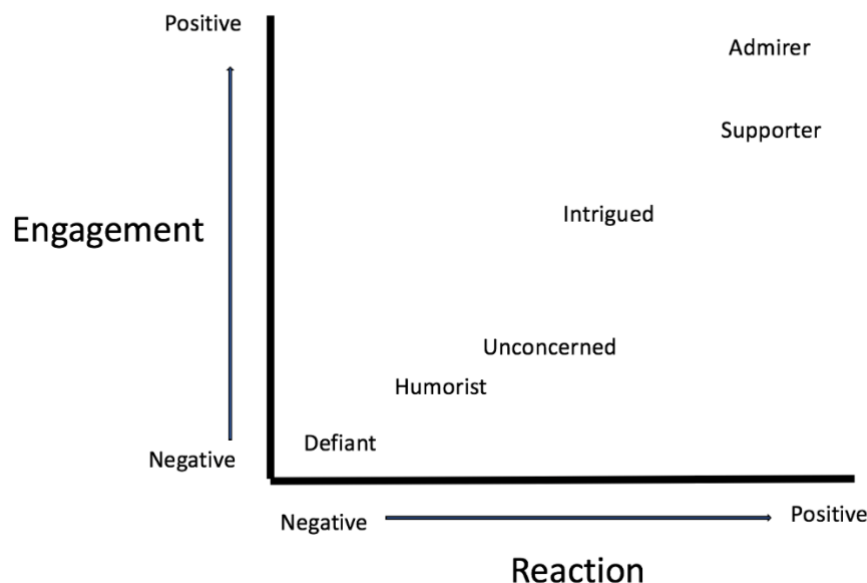


veganism, believing it gives the club and its supporters a '*different identity to all the other football clubs around.*'

3. **The Intrigued** are often amongst FGR's 'new visitors' and demonstrate a certain level of intrigue, wishing to find out more about vegan food. The availability of samples and the possibility of '*trying something different for the day*' is novel. This group of visitors seek out more education on veganism and subsequently attempt to experiment with their food choices in a safe place.
  
4. **The Humourist** is most often found amongst travelling away fans who on occasion burst into comic chanting mocking FGR's status as a vegan football club. It is not uncommon to here away fans taunt the clubs food policy. Songs such as '*feed the vegans let them know it's Christmas time*', '*where's your burger van, where's your burger van*' and other more profane are often sung by opposition fans. The humourist is suggested to engage in a vegan diet for the duration of time they spend in and around the FGR on match day. On leaving FGR they are very likely to swiftly move back to their usual consumption habits without a second thought.
  
5. **The Unconcerned** believe that FGRs commitment to veganism has '*nothing to do with football*' and is an unnecessary distraction to the game. They only consume the food on offer because their preferred options of meat-based products and branded snacks have been edited out. This group has no interest in the education on offer or to change their consumption habits as they '*only come for the football*'.

6. **The Defiant** resents the vegan stance made by FGR and refuse to consume any of the vegan based products on offer, preferring to bring their own tea/ coffee and snack to the ground. Much like the unconcerned they also view veganism at FGR as an unwanted distraction from the football and will often attempt to subvert the policy by publicly denouncing their support.

A topography of FGR visitors' symbolic interaction with veganism is mapped in Figure 1: A Typography of FGR Visitors. This helped further understand FGR's place's ability to educate and change visitors consumption practices. Each of the six conceptualisations is mapped to build a topography of the different attitudes, behaviour and levels of engagement demonstrated when in a particular place IE FGR's football ground 'The New Lawn'.



**Figure 1:** *A Typography of FGR Visitors*

**Conclusion: Towards a Macromarketing Theory of FGR**

The findings of this paper add empirical depth to Glennie and Thrift's (1992), Barnett et al. (2011) and Mansvelt's (2005) suggestion that physical places are capable of assisting consumers in knowledge and choice. It demonstrates how a place is interpreted through the symbols it displays. The study offers a novel macromarketing perspective on the practices of a football club illustrating the potential of critical symbols to stimulate interest and behavioural change to favour sustainability. It shows how specific symbols are perceived as usual and thus lack any real impact while others such as vegan only food can cause much more significant more emotive reactions that will vary from visitor to visitor as figure 1 demonstrates. Importantly it also indicates that the many symbols of sustainability functioning in FGRs place play a role in reaffirming the authenticity and genuine commitment of the club towards sustainability and veganism.

FGR's holistic meso level application of sustainability is complementary to each of Hunt's (1981) core dimensions of macromarketing. The football club represents a novel marketing system that seeks to bestow influence and change its visitor's behaviours by applying a 'place-based' meso level marketing dynamic dedicated to sustainability. As FGRs Footprint Report (2015, p.1) states:

*"Forest Green Rovers (FGR) is dedicated to becoming a truly sustainable football club, a world first. We aim to make it a place where we can demonstrate eco-thinking and technology to a new audience, football fans. Indeed, we believe that we have the opportunity to introduce sustainability to the wider world of sport, not just football."*

*Forest Green Rovers (2018)*

FGR is an entire production and consumption system where their core product 'football' and all its associated operations and augmented services are positioned and practised based on the

principles of social and ecological sustainability. Their actions demonstrate (all be it via a case study) the potential impact and consequence a meso level marketing systems can have on changing societal outlooks and behaviour. Along with their focus on changing consumer attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (particularly regarding the deep promotion of a vegan diet) FGR also ensure every facet of their stadium operations is ecologically and socially sustainable. FGR is, therefore, more than a football club! This paper argues FGR's novel approach to 'sustainability in sport' afford the football club the status of a meso level marketing dynamic that has direct and indirect social and ecological macro consequences. Thus, this study demonstrates how a football club understands its impact by proactively responding to increasing societal concerns for ecological sustainability and consumer interest in healthy and ethical lifestyles. The strength of these linkages means that FGR's meso level conduct and operations are inherently macromarketing in nature.

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