

## **Affective hyper-consumption and immaterial labors of love: Theorizing sport fandom in the age of new media**

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### **Abstract:**

What is it that fans do? Do they consume? Do they produce? And when they are in the process of being fans how do we characterize that activity? Is it passive and determined? Is it active and resistant? And are these the only categories we have to work with when discussing fan activity? This discussion is a step towards exploring what new terms and theories can be used to elucidate contemporary fan practices, specifically sport fan practices, beyond these more traditional binaries. Particularly, this discussion is an attempt to grapple with what the current state of capitalism makes possible or impossible for sports fans.

**Keywords:** sports fandom, immaterial labour, (hyper)consumption, fan capital, economies of value and attention

**Andrew McKinney:** A general perusal of fan studies, especially sport fan studies, evinces a tendency amongst a significant chunk of scholars to see the behavior of fans as resistant or transgressive. It's the purpose of this conversation to openly interrogate that tendency and pose the question: just how resistant or transgressive a sport fan can be in the contemporary mediatized and commodified sport world? My specific challenge to the resistant/transgressive model is centered around my research focus on new media enabled sport fan practices. For example: the proliferation of sports bloggers in the past 5 to 10 years has significantly upset the traditional role of professional journalists and columnists to shape the lens through which fans understand sport. While it is certainly true that sports fan blogs create new narratives and their ubiquity causes new viewpoints to be given legitimacy, it is too much to characterize this expansion of the acceptable narratives of sport as a real resistance or transgression. Although it might be a resistance to an 'official'

narrative, it does little to actually affect the sport itself and in fact I think it can be argued that it does more to increase interest and participation in the mediatized and commodified sport world.

**Damion Sturm:** Indeed, you are right as, for on the one hand, while it pleasing to see that most accounts of sports fandom have moved away from passive, pathological or duped models (although some traces still unfortunately remain), on the other hand, the over-assertions of transgression and resistance take fandom too far as a defiant act. The sports that I research and follow are heavily mediated and commodified whereby fans simply must act as, behave like or conform to fans-as-consumers. Within Australia and New Zealand, rugby league is reliant on broadcast and new forms of mediation, while merchandise proliferates. Indeed, National Rugby League (NRL) club shorts are popular and to some degree ubiquitous as ‘fashion’, street/casual wear and on sporting fields (the popular summer game of ‘Touch’ affords a discernible site for NRL club displays). On a larger scale, Formula One motor-racing is the most expensive global sport, funded by transnational corporations whose branded logos are emblazoned across cars, drivers and an array of merchandise. Fans are reliant not only on mediations to follow this sport around the globe, but their F1 purchases operate as forms of fan capital and cultural literacy. Hence, rather than merely duped consumers or walking billboards for large corporations, the detail is in their reflexive and strategic purchases and displays.

**Andrew:** I would certainly agree the contemporary situation is one that could be characterized as saturated with commodities. I don’t know if I would use the term ‘fan capital’ but I also agree with your wish to place the emphasis on the collections of knowledges and objects that fans cobble together from this saturated environment. Where my particular interest lies, however, is in what is made of these collections of knowledge specifically. Obviously, there is knowledge (standing in here for what you’ve called fan capital) and cultural literacy that is born of the consumption of both material products but also the knowledge about the games themselves. So we are not only saturated with advertisements and products, but knowledge about the games and players that we follow. And this knowledge is not static, but constantly growing. Not just because sports continue, but because fans are constantly producing new knowledge and data, as well. Blogs, Youtube video, new statistical models, fantasy sports leagues are all examples. So, saturation comes not just from the top, but from below as well. Who can monetize this situation, of course, is another story.

**Damion:** Well one trap we clearly don’t want to fall into is presupposing that sports fandom is itself a unified and static field, so I think we need to signpost from the outset that the nuances of the sport and its forms of fandom are important to recognize. This equally applies for the access to or ability to ‘create’ the forms of sports knowledge (inclusive of chatter, rants, trivia and banalities incidentally) that you are referring to through new and

productive media. Although I may be regressing by tying us to a seemingly inanimate object that certainly has less interactive functionality for fan meaning-making than you will rightfully direct us to in your sections (e.g., fan labor, knowledge production and distribution across larger scales), 'consuming', not just producing, has a significant place in contemporary sport fandom.

Sports fandom is fluid, and fluctuates in its affective investments, intensities, energies and performances across daily life, while the very notion of consumption operates differently in and across diverse sports. For example, commodification and mediation have had a limited impact on the game of Touch itself, even though it is often a site for other displays of sports fandom/consumption.

Returning to an explicit focus on Formula One fandom, 'fan capital' (in terms of status, prestige, authority, value, skills, tastes and knowledge) informs and encapsulates the fan's positioning within this field. As with most sports, much of the minutiae and detail of Formula One is encoded and encased within the 'official' branded merchandise. The uses of F1 gear create not only membership and identities within Formula One fan communities, but also discernible hierarchies or layerings (forms of symbolic capital). At the live event, merchandise operates as symbolic and performative markers, the logos buttressing the specific fan display (as a fan of a star driver and/or team from a particular year) and filter the encoded knowledge. Hence, the elevated 'Formula One insider status' reflects those fans who procure and display 'authentic' team gear inscribed with the 'correct' team and/or driver logos, and who are culturally literate in their readings, discussions and demonstrations of Formula One's forms of cultural capital. Their consumption demonstrates literacy of the sporting field, a cultivated eye accepting the worth of the 'game' (and the merchandise to support this) and the acquisition of advanced knowledge in the minutiae and details (race strategies, driver statistics, team information) for further dissemination. This differs to the casual, new or naïve fan whose purchases and particularly displays are often not so carefully considered; being illiterate in sporting or product knowledge and the subtle differences in what representations may mean.

Based on affective investments and allegiances, viewing fandom as performative consumption suggests that such acts are highly strategic, reflexive and affectively charged (so the 'cobbling together' is more active and intensive than implied). Indeed, in Formula One, the difficulty in obtaining items and the primacy on acquiring the precise object makes the display matter and is read and understood by other 'insider' fans more profoundly. Nevertheless, reading this as fan resistance or transgression is highly problematic. The act is clearly consumeristic and based on consumption so it cannot escape, resist or transgress such delimitations no matter the performative dimension. However, reflexively, the fan already knows this; deploying a fatal strategy and plunging into 'hyperconsumption' or excessive consumeristic displays to revel in the object, the performance and an awareness of fandom itself as continually performed. Thus, the fan can be easily read as duped and dismissed as a 'sellout' on a primary level (of course she/he is) but with the reflexive and

ironic knowingness that this is also a strategic display of fandom discernible to other highly knowledge fans who see value in the game.

However, it is probably timely to steer away from performative (hyper) consumption to the emerging productive capacity of fandom that you see taking place.

**Andrew:** That's a very important point about remembering that sport fandom is not a unified field. And consumption is still a primary manner through which fans interact with their chosen sport of interest. Merchandise sales only continue to increase. The historical moment in which sport fans reside is still one that is just as saturated with material objects as it is immaterial ones. Staying focused on the consumption practices of sports fans highlights issues of access that often get lost when we think about Internet fan behavior, as if anyone can access the knowledge embedded in the networks of fans, teams, and corporate entities that make up the sports-centered Web. In reality, access to both material and immaterial goods is stratified and therefore the agency that the use of either provides in fan communities is equally stratified. Those with more capital, whether that be in the form of monetary capital or knowledge itself, always have more access. Agency only for those who can afford it, one might say. This is still capitalism, of course.

And yet, this is still capitalism, which means that new relationships to the spectacles of everyday life are bound to form and new ways to make money off those relations are equally bound to form. A consumption based economy, it has been argued in many different places, is tied to a system of planned industrial production, a form of capitalism that while still quite a robust part of the global economy is thought to be in the process of being usurped by flexible production and an information based economy. In a consumer economy, there are goods produced and then consumed. Once all those goods are bought up, more must be made. In the context of this conversation, we could say: when we attend a sporting event or buy a piece of merchandise. We buy tickets, t-shirts, hats, posters, etc. But however many items can be proliferated, these transactions can only occur once in the life of a product (unless they are resold later, but then money is not made for the team). However, what the Internet offers is limitless interaction with the event, interaction that each time is profitable simply for being seen and clicked through, the interaction that sets advertising rates on the Internet. All the blogs being read, highlight videos being watched, fantasy sports leagues being competed in are building value for someone. All these new points of contact are built off the originally productive moments of the sporting events themselves, but they far outlast those moments. And the value being built from these points of contacts is being done almost entirely for free by fans and their profitable eyeballs.

Take, for example, fantasy sports: There is something particularly of the contemporary capitalist moment about it. Millions of 'managers' manipulating their available stock of assets, human achievement boiled down to the raw efficacy of certain metrics, constant access and constant attention (or alternately, better predictive statistical models) carrying the promise of success. And that very activity, the very process that so resembles the work process of a modern office is itself profitable because of the time spent,

the interest expressed through the activity. No products are necessarily produced; no products are necessarily consumed (at least in that money is exchanged for a commodity). But links are being clicked through and advertising rates are skyrocketing. Some would call this the financialization of fandom others just an information fan economy. Whatever you call it, I think it is important to situate Internet based sport fandom in the contemporary context of a shifting and morphing global information capital.

**Damion:** Right, so while sports fandom is clearly ‘consumptive’, its contemporary multi-mediated and multifaceted dynamics blur traditional approaches. Your illustration of the productive and immaterial ‘values’ infused in such practices (sometimes seemingly consumeristic) challenges monolithic models of the consumer society. Indeed, you make a very relevant leap to the other ‘economies’ that now pervade and circulate within fan cultures. The economies of attention, of knowledge, of labor, of performance/performativity, of affect and of the immaterial seemingly compel fans to see and exchange the ‘value’ in certain sports and their associated fan practices. Thus, sport fans meaningful (inter)connect, create and consume in different ways, their ‘agency’ constrained but also redeployed productively or strategically (e.g., immateriality, ‘hyperconsumption’ and/or as fantasy). Fascinatingly, we have identified that it is, in non-capitalist terms, the oscillating forms of labor, economy and capital that galvanize and actuate contemporary sports fandom, not as transgressive or resistant, but as an everyday occurrence.

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion has traced some of the contemporary themes percolating within sports fandom, while challenging some of the established assumptions and associations underpinning explorations of this phenomenon. For example, although supportive of the recent proliferation in sports fans studies, we have questioned the tendency toward resistant/transgressive models to characterize and explain this stratified field. Moreover, we have sought to query the notion that new media fan practices are always only productive or immaterial forms of labour by re-emphasizing the mediatized, commercialized and materialistic dynamics that still underpin this field. Conversely, remaining mired in simplistic productive-consumptive binaries does not take us very far either, as this ignores the blurred, contradictory and shifting landscape now shaping sports fandom. Hence we have posited some new ways for conceptualizing traditional notions of fan consumption, while intimating the non-capitalist and everyday economies, values and investments prevalent in contemporary sports fandom.

## **Bibliographic Notes:**

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