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Media, Popularity, Entertainment Industry and Football Hooliganism

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Abstract:

England has had the biggest and longest problem with hooliganism and it still continues as a problem for them. “It has been a problem in Britain since the creation of the game, and despite the steps and significant progress that has been made to tackle the situation, in all likelihood it will still be a problem for the remainder of time”(48). Hooliganism is the term broadly used to describe disorderly, aggressive and violent acts taken up by the viewers at sports and other events. Media has been present at every football game to gather information on hooliganism and behaviour of the fans present since 1960’s. The entertainment industry also experienced a boom in the 21st century when it started to show sort related films like Green Street and Cass which showed hooliganism as a romanticized version of violence and many social evils like racism and ethnic marginalization. Football as a sport can be used to resolve conflicts, but the ethnic, regional and the political rivalries between clubs makes the process of peace making. It is almost like a curse that comes at the cost of popularity. This research will show that hooliganism is a sensation which is an equal product of media and fans, whereas the entertainment industry portrays the same but also has a counter argument in its representations.

Keywords: Hooliganism, Media, Entertainment Industry, Conflict, Green Street, Cass.

Introduction

Sport is a space which has always been the face of both conflicts and peacemaking efforts when it comes to social relations. The ability of sport, football in particular to create or provide multiple identities for people is a quality that no other sub culture has managed to sustain. Following a sport or a particular team can be regarded as a subculture in itself because it involves standing against the dominant class, having same set of ideals that match with their language and outfits, and a universal understanding that revolves around the phenomenon that is a team or a sport (Hebdige 3). To strengthen the concept of group identity, football also provides room for conflict within its own structure to augment enmity in the form of different teams (Labaein 79). Football fandom, unfortunately provides these identities which are not only formed around the idea of supporting a club, but also hating the other clubs which can be related to the age old concept of territorial conflict (Mancunian rivalry in England), ethnic conflict (Ghati-Bangal conflict in India), religious conflict (Celtic and Rangers rivalry in Scotland) and political conflict (Madrid and Catalan rivalry in Spain). The level of intensity and hatred is seen on the pitch as the players battle it out for 90 minutes with their sweat and sometimes even with blood.

The rivalry between the fans of these clubs is shown by the media as an all out verbal war which eventually results in violence.

Representations of these fan rivalries in media have taken forefront in the news sections while the actual event or the game takes a back seat. The SIRC report shows that after 1960s reporters were actually sent to record the hooligan incidents rather than the actual game. British tabloid press has always been scrutinized for sensationalizing ordinary news which should not be given a headline space. Sensationalist headlines like *Mindless Morons (Daily Mirror)* and *Smash these Thugs (The Sun)* show that tabloid newspapers prey on these incidents for their own purpose. Media critics have also been critical of the media sensationalizing these reports which actually benefit these hooligan firms to gain popularity among other firms.

The entertainment industry on the other hand romanticizes these hooligan firms by portraying them as violent people but only because it is about supporting your club, not taking a s**t from the rival fans and making sure that you have your friends back (*Green Street* 2005). While it does sound like a problem for a certain sect of people, it is not really as bad as the media and entertainment industry construct it to be. Overhyping hooliganism as a social disorder not only creates divide among neighbouring fans, but also washes away hope of resolving conflict issues which are prevalent throughout the world. This paper aims to show that hooliganism is a two way traffic which involves both media and the fans in perpetrating its popularity. The significance of this research is based on the theory that 'England as the brand leader for football hooliganism is a two way traffic which involves the fanatics, the media and the entertainment industry which sensationalize the issue to an extreme level'.

This research paper looks at football violence as being overhyped by the media and entertainment industry by looking at films like *Green Street* (2005) and *Cass* (2008). Textual analysis of these films allows to look understand the language, the morality and the role of media which form the impetus of this research. A discourse analysis provides room to understand the fans and their style of fan following as portrayed in these films.

Review of literature

England has been producing hooligan firms from 1970's like Manchester United's Red Army, West Ham United's Inter City Firm, Millwall's Bushwhackers Chelsea's Headhunters to name a few. Firearms, knives, bats have created a new culture of violence in football hooliganism. "Since the redevelopment of football grounds, CCTV and higher levels of policing at football matches in the UK, the number of arrests have fallen and most games pass without incident. But football hooliganism is alive and well, in many countries, especially in places of high unemployment" (Dunning 34).

Irrespective of the result they produce England has always had the strongest set of supporters in the world. The national side which includes big names like Wayne Rooney, Harry Kane and players from different clubs, regularly take more than a hundred thousand fans to major

tournaments both European and international competitions. “England has a fierce reputation for violence with an extraordinary number of incidents spanning three decades” (Kerr, John 45). But what really is the need for acts of vandalism and violence, is it being a fan that is part of this craziness or is it in somewhere getting to be a part of community that loves and lives football? “Football as a game has formed communities among people from different parts of the world” (Brown *et al* 243). For example the Arsenal fans across the world call themselves as the Gooners, Manchester United fans call themselves the Red Devils. The word “community” is fascinating because a football club has a large number of fans not just from a particular city but from across the world. Crabbe uses the term “identity” which implies that football fandom gives the fan an identity within the huge society of football and also football is the reason that gives rise to communities in a general understanding by making them a “cloakroom community”, where people dress to a match in identical kits/uniforms to show their support and their unity (244). Identical clothing and accessorizing was started by the supporters of Liverpool Football Club in late 1970’s (247). “Liverpool travelled to Europe and a number of fans started to pick things up on their travels. Before long, expensive sportswear and designer labels found on the continent were soon also finding their way onto the terraces” (Brimson, Dougie 67). “Sergio Tacchini, Fila and Lacoste tennis shirts were quite popular around this time”. It might be implied that as time passed on everybody started wearing these brands, with each individual firm showing preference to particular brands (Brimson, Dougie 22).

Spectator control at football matches has been a major issue since the *Hillsborough disaster 1989*. A stadium disaster involving Liverpool fans occurred at Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield. In the most disappointing events of Football history a total of 96 Liverpool fans were crushed, suffocated and strangled to death on 15 April 1989 on the terraces of Sheffield Wednesday’s stadium which hosted the semi-final between Liverpool and Nottingham Forrest (Lewis, Jerry 417).

“Hooliganism usually comes out of the way in which the traditional forms of watching football encounter the professionalization of the game and making it spectacular” (Moorhouse 265). As time evolved the relationship between the game and the audience was subjected to many changes. The audiences have taken up pitch invasion as a weapon to show their dissatisfaction regarding the result of a match or a decision by the referee. The fans, usually in a high tensed game take up some pretty hasty measures which include street brawls to get their so called revenge by attacking the opposition or invading the pitch.

Analysis

As a global sport football is the main source of entertainment around the world. Even though the appeal is different for every continent, the consumption of the sport manages to remain constant to fans throughout the globe. As a game it has two types of supporters, the normal fans and the ‘fanatics’. The idea of fandom for normal fans is restricted to supporting the club or country passionately without participating in any sort of violence or fanaticism after or before the game.

The fanatics operate on a different tangent to the normal fans. Their idea of fandom is not only restricted to supporting the club, but also making sure that the fans of other clubs do not overpower their level of commitment. These fanatics are referred to as “hooligans”, a term that was popularised by the British media. Dunning says that “hooliganism” is unruly behaviour that is associated with football fans. It is believed that hooliganism emerged in England with the football fans being associated with the term “hooligan” since 1960s, and media makes it a point to present these incidents to the public by devoting columns and headlines (2002).

The media pays special interest in broadcasting and covering these incidents. Cluster of cameras and television broadcasters sometimes focus less on the game and more on the hooligan conflicts. A more recent recording of such an incident was when England played Russia in the Euro 2016 where hooligans of England and Russia were involved in an all out brawl (*The Sun*). The reasons were unknown, but it is not surprising that these incidents turned a lot of heads away from the actual event. Meril Melnick points out that “The mass media in general and the national press in particular take major responsibility for the public's view of the soccer hooligan as a cross between the Neanderthal Man and *Conan the Barbarian*” (3). The media coverage functions as a boasting factor for these hooligans. Gary Armstrong suggests that sometimes the hooligans cherish the media coverage they receive, and also make it look positive. This might be due to the competition with other hooligans firms to compete for columns and mentions in headlines (1998).

Hooliganism and its representations in Entertainment industry

The Hooligans usually function in gangs which they like to call “firms” (Kerr 1994). And the representation of these firms in entertainment media glamorizes the act of hooliganism. Films such as *Green Street* (2005) and *Cass* (2008) represent fictionalized version of West-Ham United’s GSE and the actual Inter-City firm respectively. These films not only glamorize the hooligan firms, but they also show these firms as offering individuals an identity which provides escapism from their daily and mundane lives. Subjects like racism, regional conflicts and hatred to the neighbouring teams have vivid representations in *Green Street* and *Cass*. *Green Street* shows GSE getting into fights with the fans of Tottenham Hotspur which is the other club based in London. The conflict between these clubs is not shown by the competition on the pitch but off it. The pride of being the best club in London is shown from the perspective of a hooligan firm which is solely based on destroying the other firm’s reputation. The GSE is able to resurrect its status as the best firm by thrashing the Spurs fans and causing public damage, which gives them media footage and increases their reputation among other firms (2005).

The entertainment industry focuses on another evil of hooliganism that England started and continues with even today, racism. It has been the topic of scrutiny since the day the ball was kicked. We see players getting abused racially by gestures such as the monkey gesture and pelting bananas are a few examples. “The perspectives on racism change from place to place, from a house to the ground, from terraces to the boardrooms” (Crabbe *et al* 242). One such

example is Cass Pennant, who is the most well known figure to evolve from West Ham's firm. Cass Pennant has written many books and is the subject of his own movie in the film *Cass*(2008). His story is remarkable given the level of racism that was prevalent during the 1970's and 80's in Britain. He was a man of black ethnicity who rose to the top and became the general of the Inter-City Firm. Cass Pennant being the leader of the ICF during times of high levels of racism shows how much influence violence has on football. He became the main leader of the firm and was well known and respected around the country because of his reputation (*Cass 2008*).

Romanticizing the Hooligan in film

Films like *Green Street* and *Football Factory* show the hooligan as a romanticized version of the working class supporter. He is the defender of football's traditional working class communist against the growing materialistic classes of the game (Crabbe *et al* 247). In the film *Green Street* the *Green Street Elite* is a football firm which supports West Ham United and is ready to jump into violence to defend not only the club's honour, but the firm's honour as well. The hooligans in the film are ordinary people who have normal jobs like a school teacher, a pilot and a call centre employee and a student who is kicked out from Harvard. The film shows that hooliganism is not restricted to any particular qualification or that all hooligans are unemployed. It shows that these hooligans come from different backgrounds. They share an equal amount of love for the club and their firm acts as a family that cares, protects and provides them an identity of a community, whereas the bourgeois society treats them as violent people who are not to be mingled with (Crabbe *et al* 243).

Hooliganism in *Green Street* is shown as a form of social interaction and banter is portrayed as harmless while still subjecting to racial stereotypes. The character Matt in the film hails from New York and is referred to as "Yank" by the GSE members who stereotype him as a follower of the baseball club New York Yankees only due to his regional affiliation. The black community of Birmingham fans are stereotyped as the 'Zulus c**ts' due to their colour and ethnicity. These backgrounds help in creating identities which eventually help in forming the hooligan firms. These firms are also completely formed on the stereotypes and as the film progresses the characters are seen battling against their 'given' identity to embrace their hooligan identity with pride.

Unity among these members is also a romanticizing factor. The firm never leaves your back and will make sure that you are not alone when you hit and you get hit (*Green Street*). In one particular instance, the character Matt is given a 'Chelsea grin' which is a cut on the lips, the GSE witnesses Matt being harassed and beat up the travelling fans from London. The GSE not only beat them up, but hurl racial abuses at them which are also the products of hooliganism in England.

Hooliganism like conflict, is also inherent

Stepping aside from the entertainment industry, documentary and news pieces are also important when it comes to representing the hooligan conflicts in England. BBC has a reputation of making documentaries which show the core of hooliganism. It is usually said that, “you are criticized by the ones who love you the most”. In case of the hooligans, the criticism is a little extreme. If and when a player is responsible for a team’s failure, the hooligans make it a point to make the player’s life a living hell.

England has seen two incidents when players were on the receiving ends of the hooligan violence. David Beckham was given a red card and sent off for retaliating against a tackle by Diego Simeone of Argentina, which resulted in England losing the match and eventually being knocked out of the World Cup 1998. Beckham faced many problems after this incident. His effigy was hanged on the London Bridge, David Beckham was even quoted saying “I have been delivered bullets in my mailbox, which had no address in them which meant they were hand delivered” (*Class of '92, 2013*). Another incident involved Portugal’s Cristiano Ronaldo and England’s Wayne Rooney. Cristiano Ronaldo was the reason for Wayne Rooney being sent off in the World Cup of 2006, where Portugal eventually beat England on penalties. At that time Ronaldo was a player under contract of Manchester United which even Wayne Rooney was a part of. Subsequently Ronaldo was scared for himself and his family’s safety after receiving many life threats. Eventually he bought a house thirty miles away from Manchester (*Cristiano Ronaldo – The boy who had a dream, 2007*).

Reportage stigmatizing fandom

Broadcasters like newspapers, radios and recently television have naturally perceived that this chaos is caused by hooligans who only go to away games to inflict pain on the opposition. But it is the importance and popularity of English football that makes England a hot spot to reporters. It is almost like a curse that comes at the cost of popularity. The reports following ‘Heysel incident’ of 1985 and the ‘Hillsborough disaster’ of 1989 were an inkblot on the otherwise perfect term of Britain’s iron lady and then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The incidents were reported so frequently that it led her to admit and release a statement that said “hooliganism is one of the most famous export goods, Britain cannot be proud of” (*The Sun*). The idea of fandom itself becomes stigmatized due to these incidents which are given more media coverage than the football game itself. Rivalries and conflicts in football are given the status by fans. These rivalries transcend the game and sometimes end up being more popular than the game itself. The influence of the media in promoting these incidents is so high that even a European Parliament made a report on football hooliganism; the report recommended that instead of sensationalizing these incidents media has to promote fair-play and sporting values (2011).

Conclusion

“Football Hooliganism is a well conceived, presented subject that discusses a great deal on the subject of anti-social behaviour, which is a problem that seems to get larger and larger in organized societies like England” (23). Much like organized crime, hooliganism also functions in an orderly fashion and has rarely an outsider intruding the space. As seen in the film *Green Street* being a fan depends on spirit and being a fanatic requires a sense of devotion to the club which is not only restricted to loving the club but also hating other clubs. Representation of hooligans in film shows not only the issues of social outrage, violence and fanaticism, but it also romanticizes the idea of being a hooligan which is more than just causing public outrage. The films also show that an individual should know when to be completely involved and when to walk away from a conflict (*Green Street*). Media on the other hand sensationalises the hooligan firms and provides them extra motivation to be more notorious and gain popularity among the hooligan firms.

Hooliganism is a phenomenon started by the fans and upgraded by the media. Watching or playing football does not make a fan hooligan or violent. Football and any other sport for that matter are used as a peace building tools that fighting against social evils like racism, regional conflicts and international disputes. Evils like hooliganism should not be sensationalized by the media. These sensational reports sometimes also become the reason for international relations taking a hit. The hooligan firms instead of being popularized should be commodified into the society by treating hooliganism as a subculture and if possible restrict it to only few fanatics who are hard to break mentally.

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