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# **Sporting celebrity and conspicuous consumption: A case study of professional footballers in England.**

## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been a steady growth in interest in the sociology of consumption, both in the parent discipline and in the sociology of sport. In relation to sport, Thrane (2001: 149) has suggested that there are three primary modes of sports consumption: direct physical involvement in sport (i.e. playing); 'active' forms of sports spectatorship (attending sporting events); and 'passive' forms of spectatorship (e.g. watching sports on television). Direct participation has received the most scholarly attention, with numerous studies finding that participation in sport is stratified along socio-economic and demographic lines (Bourdieu, 1978; Taks, Renson and Vanreusel, 1994; Stempel, 2005; Collins and Kay, 2014). Several scholars have also drawn upon Bourdieu's theoretical framework to examine patterns of spectatorship, with most – though not all – finding that those with high levels of economic and cultural capital have distinctive, and generally higher, levels of spectatorship than those with lower levels of capital (White and Wilson, 1999; Mehus, 2005; Gemar, 2019a, 2019b; Thrane, 2001). This paper is offered as a contribution to the sociology of consumption within the study of sport, but it differs in its focus from the studies cited above, for the focus here is not on the consumption *of* sport, whether directly or indirectly, but on the conspicuous consumption of non-sporting goods by sporting celebrities, in this case, footballers in English professional football. More specifically, the objects of this paper are threefold: (i) to document a frequently observed but rarely analysed form of behaviour among professional footballers; (ii) to explain, by reference to the wider structure of the football industry and footballers' career structures, why this form of behaviour has become an accepted and integral part of the culture of professional football; and (iii) on a theoretical level, to examine and to clarify, *via* this case study, some of the issues and problems associated with what is the best known theory of conspicuous consumption, as set out in Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1925] 2007).

## **Football finances in the age of the Premier League**

Association football is, for top players, an extremely lucrative occupation. The establishment of the Premier League in 1992, and the greatly increased club revenues associated with TV

deals, have been associated with huge increases in the salaries of top players, with some now reportedly earning hundreds of thousands of pounds per week (Atherton 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019; Talksport 8<sup>th</sup> June 2019). According to Deloitte (2019), the 2017-2018 season saw club revenues at the highest ever level for Premier League clubs, while the Premier League wage bill was also at an all-time high of £2.9 billion. However, there are no publicly available reliable data on the salaries of individual players, which remain a popular topic of gossip and speculation.

While pay scales in many jobs are publicly advertised, football salaries are not. Different players within a club might receive significantly different salaries but even the players themselves will not normally know how much their teammates are paid. Although wage disparities are common within all industries, Milkovich and Newman (1996) argue that the disparities are greater in certain professional sports than in other types of employment as sporting contracts are generally short-term and players' perceived value can change quickly.

Although there is a growing academic literature on professional footballers (Kelly & Waddington, 2006; Kelly, 2008; Law & Bloyce, 2019; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2012, 2013; Roderick, Waddington & Parker, 2000) no one has analysed the relationship between high salaries, conspicuous consumption and image management. This is the central focus of this paper, in which we examine how footballers seek to develop, sustain and project their preferred self-image, and the role of conspicuous consumption in this process.

### **Theoretical standpoint**

The growing interest in the sociology of consumption in the last few decades has involved a relative shift of focus away from the relationship between class, status and the world of work and production, and towards a greater focus on the relationship between class, status and consumption. This is, for example, evident in the work of Bourdieu ([1984] 2012), who stresses the centrality of patterns of consumption – especially the presentation of cultural tastes, or aesthetic dispositions – as markers of class. Several other sociologists have also noted that the publicly visible consumption of expensive goods may be used as a means of enhancing one's social status (Duesenberry, 1962; Lerner, 1948, Simmel, [1900] 2011). But it is Thorstein Veblen with whom the concept of conspicuous consumption is most closely linked and on whose work we primarily focus within this paper.

Campbell (1995a: 37-38) has noted that Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption has become a part of everyday language and that his work has had a significant influence in economics, where the term *Veblen effect* has an established place in the theoretical vocabulary, and in history, but that '[S]trangely ... the associated theory is little discussed in sociology'. He adds that the theory 'has not been the object of much serious discussion and debate, let alone the subject of empirical enquiry'. This 'continuing neglect', he suggests, 'is difficult to understand, given the prominence accorded to consumption and consumer behavior in contemporary debates about the "postmodern society" and the "postmodern condition"' (Campbell, 1995a: 37). One object of this paper is to subject the theory to critical examination *via* a detailed empirical case study.

In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* ([1899] 2007) Veblen (2007: 60) argued that in modern societies, the means of communication and the increasing mobility of the population 'expose the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging of his reputability other than the display of goods ... which he is able to make while he is under their direct observation'. As a result, conspicuous consumption has become increasingly important as a means by which wealthy people differentiate themselves from those in the lower social classes. Luxury items of conspicuous consumption thus function as symbols of social status, as markers of social class.

Veblen (2007: 29) noted that: 'In order to gain and to hold ... esteem ... it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence'. Thus, it is the *public display* of wealth that is important; as Veblen (2007: 54) noted, it is of central importance that others, and perhaps especially status rivals, are 'witness to the consumption of that excess of good things'.

A central characteristic of conspicuous consumption is that it involves the purchase of goods 'beyond the minimum required for subsistence and physical efficiency' both in terms of quantity and quality (Veblen, 2007: 52). The defining characteristic of items of conspicuous consumption is that they have primarily symbolic rather than utilitarian value; their symbolic value in enhancing what Veblen called 'reputability' lies in the public demonstration of this element of wastefulness. In this regard conspicuous consumption has little to do with comfort or subsistence and much to do with evidence of wealth and claims to social status. The central feature of conspicuous consumption is that it allows wealthy people to *display* their

wealth by purchasing expensive non-essential and non-utilitarian items, that is, by a pattern of expenditure that might be considered wasteful.

Veblen particularly noted the importance of clothing as an aspect of conspicuous consumption, arguing that individuals could display wealth through the purchase of many goods, but expenditure on dress has one key advantage over most other methods: 'that our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance' (Veblen, 2007: 111). It is, Veblen emphasised, the highest social class which, by its 'manner of life and its standards of worth' defines the norm of respectability for others. The norm of respectability imposed by the upper class 'extends its coercive influence ... down through the social structure to the lowest strata' (Veblen, 2007: 59). In other words, the dominant class defines what is acceptable and these standards filter down to those in the lower social classes, who seek to imitate those higher up the status hierarchy (Trigg, 2001). However, Veblen (2007: 117) also pointed out that those in the higher social class constantly update their consumption patterns in order to distinguish themselves from aspiring members of the lower social classes, as 'its novelty wears off' as the 'warrant of respectability is transferred'.

Among modern writers, Bagnall (2011: 232) follows Veblen in suggesting that items of conspicuous consumption enable high status groups to mark their 'existence and privilege to other groupings', a process which Veblen (2007: 33) described as the displaying of 'trophies'. Rege (2008) suggests that conspicuous consumption may also be used to signify success within a profession since only someone who has enjoyed professional success could afford to buy such luxury items.

Campbell (2011: 11) notes that there is a general consensus among sociologists that the concept of conspicuous consumption is focused around the idea that this is 'a pattern of conduct undertaken with the specific intention of realizing the goal of maintaining or enhancing an individual's social status through a display of wealth'. However, this raises a number of problems in terms of identifying behaviour as conspicuous consumption. The obvious problem is that, given that conspicuous consumption is 'deeply intentional', it is difficult to deduce intentions from observations of behaviour, though Campbell (2011) notes that this is what is often done, both by lay people and sometimes by sociologists. For example, it may be argued that since a fur coat is generally believed to signify wealth and

luxury, the fact that a person is wearing it is taken to mean that this is the ‘message’ that the wearer *intends* to convey to others. However, ‘such an interpretation is arrived at without any attempt to ascertain precisely what action the individual is engaged in, let alone what reasons governed the crucial decisions ... to buy and then wear the item in question. Just because observers (academic or otherwise) find it relatively easy to ascribe meanings to products it should not be assumed that these correspond to those meanings that inform the action of individuals when making use of these products’ (Campbell, 1996: 94-95).

Thus, identification of a pattern of behaviour as conspicuous consumption must involve understanding the actor’s intentions and the subjective meaning of the act for the actor. But this raises a further problem: how can researchers obtain evidence of conspicuous consumption? Campbell notes that the obvious tactic here would be to ask consumers about their intentions, though this has rarely been done because it is widely assumed that people will not readily admit that their purchases are motivated by personal status considerations. He notes that it is not clear where the evidence is to be found to support this assertion, but it is one that is often made in connection with gathering evidence of conspicuous consumption and he suggests that while ‘there would seem to be scope for a researcher to elicit a frank and honest response from the consumer’, it does seem to be ‘a taken-for-granted assumption that it is difficult to get actors to confess to engaging in this form of conduct, which is presumably why the tactic of asking them is rarely employed’ (Campbell, 2011: 22-23). The project reported here represents an attempt to gather data in this little researched area of consumption. An essential element of the research was to document the subjective voice of the consumer, that is the footballers’ own understanding of ‘what they are doing’ when they purchase expensive luxury consumer items. But although this was a necessary part of the study it could not, on its own, be sufficient, for if it can be shown that footballers do engage in conspicuous consumption then it is necessary to explain how and why this has become a part of the culture of professional football and of the lifestyle of professional footballers; this we seek to do *via* an analysis of the broader structure of professional football and the career structure of professional footballers.

Before we present the methods and findings of the present study, it may be useful to examine some aspects of the work of Bourdieu, whose work bears the most interesting relationship to that of Veblen. Campbell (1995b: 101-102) has described Bourdieu as ‘the most important contemporary theorist of consumption proper’ and he suggests that Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* ([1984] 2010), ‘bears comparison, in character and

importance, with Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class*, while Trigg (2001: 104) has suggested that the work of Bourdieu 'provides a contemporary development of the theory of conspicuous consumption that builds upon some of the more subtle aspects of Veblen's framework'.

Bourdieu focused more on the consumption of cultural goods, for example, art, literature and certain kinds of music, as expressed in visits to museums, galleries and concerts, rather than the conspicuous consumption of expensive and wasteful luxury items. However, both Bourdieu and Veblen saw consumption, whether of luxury goods or cultural goods, as 'markers of class'. Thus, Bourdieu argued that the presentation of cultural tastes, or aesthetic dispositions, depicts status and simultaneously distances those in higher from those in lower social classes. Class distinction and preferences of taste were, he suggested, 'most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence, such as furniture, clothing, or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and longstanding dispositions' (Bourdieu, 2010: 70).

Although there are differences of emphasis between Veblen and Bourdieu, their work is complementary rather than contradictory. Thus, while Bourdieu played down the significance of material possessions, focusing primarily on the consumption of cultural goods, he did recognise what he called the 'naïve exhibition of "conspicuous consumption", which seeks distinction in the crude display of ill-mastered luxury' (Bourdieu, 2010: 23).

As noted earlier, there is a general consensus among sociologists that an essential element of Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption is that it is a pattern of conduct undertaken with the specific intention of 'maintaining or enhancing an individual's social status through a display of wealth'. Do similar considerations apply in relation to the consumption of sport as, in Bourdieu's terms, a form of distinction, a marker of class? This issue might be briefly explored through an examination of one of Bourdieu's key concepts: habitus.

Habitus is a central concept for Bourdieu, not least because it is offered as a way of understanding 'patterns of individual subjectivities and ... dispositions of practice' (Grenfell, 2015: 67) within the broader patterns of class relationships; it is also important for understanding differential class-based patterns of participation in sport. This raises some interesting questions about the degree to which those who engage in forms of cultural consumption, including the consumption of sport, do so because they recognize it acts as a marker of class, or whether this is a latent function, an unintended consequence (Merton,

1957), or unplanned outcome (Elias, 1978), of actions which were undertaken with other objectives in mind?

As Paulle, van Heerikhuizen and Emirbayer (2012: 71) have noted, for Bourdieu – and indeed for Elias, who used the concept of habitus long before Bourdieu – the concept of habitus or ‘second nature’ serves to emphasize the ‘importance of taken-for-granted ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting’ and that ‘human conduct tends to be orchestrated from “within” by dispositions functioning primarily beneath the level of discursive consciousness’. They add that ‘the responses generated from “within” by the habitus tend not to be the responses of thinking (let alone calculating) subjects standing apart from explicitly conceptualized objects’ (Paulle, et al.: 72). This would suggest a low level of discursive consciousness or deliberate intent. Stempel (2005: 411; italics added) suggests that Bourdieu’s ‘work on sport demonstrated how different classes and class fractions embody (*often unconsciously*) their points of honor and schemes of evaluation in their sporting practices and how the dominant classes *use* sports’. There is a good deal of ambiguity here, for while Stempel suggests that the exercise of taste often operates unconsciously, his description of the dominant classes ‘using’ sports suggests a more deliberate and conscious strategy of social differentiation. Bourdieu (2010: xxx; italics added) suggested that ‘art and cultural consumption are predisposed, *consciously and deliberately or not*, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’. The key element here would seem to be the objective function of taste and distinction as markers of class, whether or not this is recognized and/or intended by those involved in the consumption of cultural goods. If Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption involves the element of deliberate intention to maintain or enhance one’s status, this would not seem to be an essential element of taste and distinction for Bourdieu. In other words, conspicuous consumption, for Veblen, is not so much ‘second nature’ or a behavioural habit, but it is, rather, a conscious, deliberate strategy.

While recognizing the importance of Bourdieu’s work, the present study draws primarily upon the work of Veblen rather than Bourdieu, since it focuses on the forms of conspicuous consumption which were central to Veblen’s work, rather than the consumption of cultural goods which was central for Bourdieu.

## Method

Professional football is a ‘notoriously closed social world’ and gaining access to professional footballers is difficult (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). We employed convenience sampling and



purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used ‘in a strategic way, so that those sampled’ were ‘relevant to the research questions ... being posed’ (Bryman, 2012: 418). Convenience sampling was facilitated by the fact that the lead researcher had himself previously played professional football, which was also an influencing factor on the research process and the construction of the interview guide. This ‘insider’ position was key in guiding the research process (Law, 2019). There is a large amount of literature on whether or not researchers should be “insiders,” meaning members of the population that they are researching (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Being an insider, when conducting research, can allow for a shared identity and language with participants and give the researcher a certain amount of legitimacy for conducting the study (Asselin, 2003). It is also argued that the insider role allows for a quicker and deeper acceptance from participants during the interview process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Dwyer and Buckle (2009, p. 58) suggest that the acceptance and membership of the group being studied automatically gives a level of “trust and openness” which would be unlikely to be gained otherwise. As an ex-professional player, the lead author was able to gain access to certain players, and this also meant they could discuss matters that they thought would be familiar, and thus they were, seemingly, prepared to be more open during the interview.

Being an insider does have some potential problems (Adler, 1990). Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that being an insider can hamper the research process as participants may make assumptions about the researcher’s knowledge that can lead to them not fully explaining their personal experiences. An “insider” status can also lead to the researcher’s perceptions becoming clouded by their own personal experiences, which can make separating their own experiences from that of the participants difficult (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Despite these views, it is argued within this study, and with the experiences of others (Kelly, 2010; Law & Bloyce, 2019; Roderick, 2006), that without having ‘insider’ status, gaining access to professional football players for qualitative research is almost impossible. This is demonstrated as an attempt to develop the sample further was made by sending over 100 letters to past and current players with an outline of what the study was about, along with the participant information sheet. The response rate for this participant recruitment process was zero, highlighting the difficulty in the “cold-calling” recruitment of footballers to partake in academic research. The response rate, along with the nature of the football environment, indicated that convenience sampling was the only realistic approach to take.

Prior to the interviews taking place, we gained ethical approval through the authors' relevant university ethics committee. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 former and current male professional football players, all of whom had played after the establishment of the Premier League in 1992 and had played at least two seasons in one of the top four English divisions. In terms of the highest level played, 14 had played in the Premiership, eight in the Championship, four in League One and three in League Two. This allowed us to probe issues regarding what impact, if any, playing at different levels had on players' self-image and how this impacted on relationships both inside and outside of football. From the 'insider' experiences already highlighted, we were aware that considerable secrecy surrounds players' wages, even within the dressing room. Therefore, interviewees were not asked directly about their salary, as this might have been seen as intrusive and put at risk their continued participation or willingness to speak openly. Drawing on this knowledge and the theoretical concept of conspicuous consumption, the interview guide was structured to identify whether, and if so in what ways, players sought to advertize their wealth without discussing their salary. We sought to ask the players about their own and others' luxury purchases, why they bought them and if purchases were made at certain times of the season, or during certain stages of a career. This was done with the aim of getting the players' subjective understanding of their behaviours and their aims associated with the purchase of luxury items. The interview guide aligned with key concepts from Veblen's work, such as emulation, first impressions and social status and allowed us to examine if, like Veblen suggests, the dominant classes, in this instance higher level footballers, influence players in the lower divisions. Prior to and during the interview, participants were given a guarantee relating to anonymity, and any data which might possibly enable individuals to be identified, such as clubs played for, or specific years spent in each division, have not been included in this paper.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim with Nvivo software to aid data analysis. Themes for analysis were identified through theoretical thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 84), which is driven by the researcher's theoretical interest in the area and provides a less descriptive account of the data overall and a more detailed analysis of the data (Boyatzis, 1998). For example, during the coding process, rather than coding data under the overarching theme of 'conspicuous consumption', data were coded much more specifically and then built up to the overarching theme of conspicuous consumption. Thus, points of the data were

coded as individual products that the participants mentioned such as ‘washbag’, ‘headphones’, ‘designer watch’, while others were coded as certain leisure activities, for example ‘horseracing’, ‘holiday’, ‘VIP night out’. These were then built up and grouped in relation to the context of the statement, for example where the action was taking place and what was the intention behind the action. The analysis was thus developed by creating specific themes and linking them with literature and key concepts to develop subcategories that fit under the overarching theme of conspicuous consumption.

### **Impression management: first impressions**

Within professional football, turnover of labour is high as most players do not sign long term deals, and therefore sign for several clubs during their career (Roderick, 2006a). Creating a good first impression at a new club was seen as important for players and many considered a public display of expensive products as a good way to do this. A former Premiership player stated:

First impressions mean everything in a club, straight away your standing is determined. Some people do it through being a joker, some through smashing someone on the training ground, but the common one is splashing the cash on designer clothes, watches and cars. It says, ‘I have got cash, I have value’.

‘Splashing the cash’ is an important part of image management, or the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). As Goffman noted, the aim of this presentation of self is to convey the desired image to others through a carefully conducted performance. A player who has played in all four professional leagues explained how the display of luxury goods can signal the ability of a player:

I think it’s important when you first sign for a club to make that first impression that you are a good player. An easy way to do that is your clothes, car and stuff like that because if you have decent gear then you have made a bit of money.

By the conspicuous display of expensive goods players coming to a new club seek to convey an image of themselves as successful players enjoying high earnings. As Frijters and Leigh (2008) have noted, people who are new to an area – in this case a new club – may try to

advertize their financial status through conspicuous consumption, as it makes an immediate impact with the desired impression.

Some players also linked the importance of these first impressions to the fact that there was no open discussion of wages within the club. A former League 1 player stated: ‘You would only hear rumours and you can’t believe them, that’s why there is so much [emphasis] put on gear [clothes]. It acts as a symbol of what you earn, even if it’s false’. Image management is thus central to creating a good first impression and signifying wealth and value in an environment where discussion of wages is taboo. A former Premiership player, when discussing salaries, explained: ‘Nobody talks about it, as it’s the unknown if you like, because I reckon 90% of the players are earning different amounts, so you don’t want people knowing in case you are earning less, because you can become devalued’. Within this situation, conspicuous displays of wealth within the dressing room serve to indicate two important and closely related ideas: firstly, being a high earner and, secondly, therefore, being a high-status player within the club.

### **Status competition and impression-management in the changing room**

A current Premiership player and former international, who had also played in League 1 and League 2, discussed the differences between patterns of conspicuous consumption and status competition within the dressing room at international and club level and suggested that competition was actually greater at lower level clubs:

It’s worse at club level than international. I mean everybody has the money and doesn’t need to flash it when you are away on [international] duty. Like at the club it’s the statement pieces, new watches and cars. I got my Bentley just to make a statement when I came back from international duty. But at lower levels the competition is worse because the money is less and the differences have a bigger impact on the players.

As we noted earlier, Veblen pointed out that it is the dominant status group which defines what is acceptable and these standards then filter down to those of lower status, who seek to imitate those above them in the status hierarchy. There was abundant evidence from our interviewees that this process is commonplace in football. Many lower level players sought to create an impression of wealth and social status by trying to imitate or emulate those playing at the higher levels. As one player who had played in all top four divisions stated:

When I was at [League 2 club] lads would really graft to look a top player, you know, it was high competition. Lads would try to drive cars and wear clothes that would fit with that Prem' player image. In the Prem', when I was there, yes there was competition but not like when I was playing lower. I suppose, if someone [in the Premier League] wanted it they could buy it anyway.

From these comments it is clear that the purchase and display of items of conspicuous consumption is not confined to Premier League players but that this pattern of behaviour has also trickled down to players in the lower divisions. One Championship player, who was also an international, felt that players had to wear designer clothes to convey the image of high status, high earners and if not, then players may not be fully accepted within the changing room and might become targets of ridicule from other players:

When I first moved to [championship club] I was getting hammered for my clothes. Every day it was happening because I wasn't wearing Gucci or Hugo Boss, you know designer gear. Then they say stuff like 'Can't you afford it?', you know. So you end up changing your shopping habits. I know I did just to get them off my back. It is daft but it makes your life easier.

Another Championship player explained that as the football club environment is competitive in every aspect, players attempted to display that they had the best in all areas, and clothes and accessories were critical in this regard: 'It's all a competition, best player, best car, best boots, best sponsor, best clothes. Ultimately the more you have the best of, you develop the "rep" you want: being the best'. This was something that, he explained, was important in developing a 'reputation' of being a 'key' player.

However, creating the desired image may not always involve the purchase of expensive items. One player, a former international, stated that buying 'fake' designer products was quite common among the top players. He explained that there was not always a need to spend large amounts of money on a genuine product when people, both inside the football club and the fans and public beyond, would not question the product's authenticity:

I mean I have one really expensive watch, but a lot of us ... have fake ones as well because nobody thinks they would be fake because of how much we earn. Same with the wives, they have a lot of fake handbags. Nobody outside would question it. When

I played lower or even went on loan it had to be real or you got battered. But again because where I was coming from nobody asked if my watch was real.

Thus 'looking the part' may not always involve the purchase of authentic expensive items since it may be possible, under some circumstances, to convey the desired image with fake designer goods. Ironically, it seems that this strategy may be more widely used by Premier League players, who can actually afford to 'look the part', than by those in the lower divisions, the authenticity of whose luxury items is more likely to be questioned.

With the growth in media coverage not just of the game but also of players' celebrity lifestyles, image presentation has also become important away from the pitch. In this regard, the public display of items of conspicuous consumption may be seen as an indication of success and a claim to status, not just in the dressing room, but in the world outside. It is to this that we now turn.

### **Impression management outside the changing room: "Being a footballer"**

Several players indicated that they tried to convey the impression to people outside the game that they enjoyed the lifestyle associated with successful Premier League players, even if they themselves played in a lower division and, in this regard, expensive luxury goods were important as claims to status not just within, but also outside, the club. One player, who played the majority of his career in the lower divisions, said 'I think you look at the top players and then think "well that's how they dress and that's what they wear". I know I can't do it on that level, but I try to present that image of being a footballer'. Another player who spent his entire career at the lower levels pointed to the importance of the media in shaping the public perception of what a footballer looks like and how it impacts on the way he dresses: 'people see the big boys [star players] on the TV and in papers and then that's what they think a footballer looks like. So, it does influence you because people [outside of football] think you must be crap if you look like you can't afford anything'. Creating such an impression even meant that some players purchased items they could not really afford. For example, one player stated: 'There is a Mercedes and a BMW parked out there on my drive which I can't afford, but I like people knowing I'm a footballer'.

The use of conspicuous consumption as a claim to, and demonstration of, status was clearly important to players not just within, but also outside the club. Some players, for example, discussed how they engaged in 'showing off' away from the football club, whilst still

advertising their perceived wealth to their fellow teammates. For example, a former international explained that ‘I think that’s quite prominent on nights out, you know buying rounds or buying bottles of wine or champagne. I think a lot do that ... I suppose it’s that competition again with the other lads, you know’. A former Premiership player pointed out that the development of social media has allowed players to advertise their wealth to people outside of football:

We had a guy at [names club] who came in to sell watches ... A couple of lads bought these watches. Now, they paid thousands and straight away it was on Instagram, bang, look at my new watch with the price on it, and it’s purely to make people think outside the club we are wedged [have lots of money].

In this example, the players’ use of social media allows them to display their purchase of luxury items to a wider audience outside the club. Van Krieken (2018: 3) refers to this as ‘attention capital’ which ‘operates just like money’; he argues that attention earns interest which in turn generates more attention, which can create the impression of wealth and increased status.

The public display of wealth outside of the confines of the club was also used as a way to enhance one’s sexual attractiveness. One lower league player stated: ‘I think when you are younger, you can impress, or think you can impress, people by saying you are a footballer and part of that is about how you look. I bought clothes knowing it would draw attention, get talking to girls on a night out’. A former Championship player also spoke about public displays of wealth being used to enhance sexual attractiveness: ‘Before I met my wife I definitely played the footballer card. I would make sure I was “designed up” [wearing designer clothes] and buy expensive drinks. It gets you noticed and then girls get talking to you, they ask “are you a footballer?” Everyone thinks you have money and you live up to it’. Wider research has suggested that some women are attracted to high status men (Colarelli and Dettmann, 2003; Kenrick, Sadalla, Groth, and Trost, 1990), while Sundie, Kenrick, Griskevicius, Tybur, Vohs, and Beal (2011) suggest that males who are interested in short-term relationships are likely to engage in conspicuous consumption to enhance their sexual attractiveness.

### **One-upmanship**

Some players were able to use their celebrity status to negotiate substantial reductions in the prices of luxury goods, as some retailers and/or manufacturers felt it was advantageous for marketing purposes to have their products associated with famous footballers. These negotiations constitute another aspect of status competition within the dressing room as the more successful players seek to display their status by publicly revealing the ‘special deals’ that they or their agents negotiated. There is, of course, an element of irony here for, in this regard, a player’s status was reflected not by how much, but by how *little*, was paid for the luxury items. As a former Premiership and Championship player explained:

It became a point about how little you paid for your car is better than how much you paid for your car! So, the fact that two people have got the same car, it became a point of ‘Well I got it for whatever, which is seven grand less’. That’s the one-upmanship.

In a similar way, a former international suggested that receiving free clothes from designer companies was a symbol of one’s status as a player:

It got more competitive when we started to get free gear. It became a thing about who was getting the most designer clothes. That got you a reputation that you were a good player, and that only happened when I was at [names Premiership club]. Trust me, I never got sent an Armani suit when I was in the Championship [laughs].

In other words, the less it was required to pay for expensive items – or better still if they were received for free – the greater the claim to status within the changing room.

Such deals might also be available to players outside of the Premier League, especially for those who had represented their countries. For example, a Championship player discussed the deal he was offered after playing at international level:

Through the PFA [Professional Footballers Association] I managed to get my fiancée a Mercedes 4X4 ML, they did a very good deal. I think it was something between 20 and 25 per cent off ... And with Audi as well through their VIP system I got myself 16 percent off the car I currently drive and being an international also helped in getting that amount off ... . So that’s something that comes with being an international footballer.

He went on to explain that these companies want professional footballers to drive their cars as a form of celebrity endorsement. Even players in the bottom two divisions of the English



Football League, who might only be celebrities within their local community, indicated that they were able to take advantage of deals offered by the PFA, and that this could create the impression that they too were on high salaries. As a former international, who was playing in League Two, put it:

As a footballer you get so many deals presented to you like the PFA lease deals and stuff like that. I mean for instance I was driving a Mercedes SLK and the fans were going ‘Jesus Christ, we are paying him too much money!’ But what they didn’t realise was I was only paying £120 a month through the PFA. So why would you not take advantage of those sort of deals?

A League Two player also pointed out that it was not just cars that were available at a discounted rate: ‘You get cheap holidays to places you could never afford without the PFA, it’s great. I mean my mates [outside of football] always say you must be earning some to go there, but the deals are class’. The availability of PFA deals from top-range car manufacturers and ‘exclusive’ travel agents thus offers an additional opportunity for a public display of apparent wealth as evidence of one’s status and success.

### **Sanctioning nonconformity**

Many players indicated that nonconformity to the expected norms of attire in the changing room may be negatively sanctioned. A former Premiership player recalled that, as a young player, choosing what to wear was not easy: ‘The decision on what to wear to training was awful. I’d stand in front of my wardrobe and think “what will I get away with”? It was the biggest and hardest decision of the day!’ A former League One player described examples of what happened to people who turned up in clothes that were considered unacceptable: ‘Clothes would get hung up or soaked in the shower. I have heard at other clubs they get burnt but the worst we did was tape it up outside!’ One player described his experience at a Championship club:

The banter is just horrendous [laughs]. Yeah, clothes, it was my birthday at [club] and I came in and I had bought some new shoes, some Maharishi jeans, new shirt. Bowled into training, feeling good, came back after training and they had been shredded, I mean shredded right up to the waistband... Basically I had been called out for going big time. I knew it was flashy for training, and I got hammered for it.

The above examples illustrate how products worn to training had to be seen as meeting the standard set within the changing room. However, clearly players could also be penalised for 'going overboard', for being too 'flash'. In the pursuit of 'conspicuous consumption', there is, ironically, a perception that players, perhaps particularly the younger players who are just breaking into first team football, can 'spend too much', or, at least, buy products that are considered inappropriate and make them stand out too much in comparison to the accepted norms within the club. This might even occur at the top level as one Premier League player pointed out:

There was this one lad [laughs], rocked up in gear that was 'out there' [laughs]. It was blatantly expensive but, like, it was catwalk stuff, you know, just massively 'out there'. He got hammered, one of the boys wore it into the shower, you know fully soaped it up. The lad was gutted; he must have known he wouldn't get away with it. Safe to say he didn't wear it again.

In addition to damage to clothing, banter and jokes about clothing are commonplace in the changing room but, as Roderick (2006c: 86-87) has noted in relation to banter and jokes about injuries, each joke contains a 'serious implicit but generally understood meaning'. Collinson (1998) notes that banter is used as a way to encourage and constrain people to conform to certain practices – in this case the wearing of clothes that were seen as acceptable in the changing room.

### **Conspicuous consumption and football culture**

Our data suggest that conspicuous consumption has come to be an integral part of the culture of modern professional football. Indeed, there are probably few occupations in which it has come to be so widely accepted and established as part of the occupational culture. In the interviews, the players themselves drew attention to two features of the structure of their careers which are important for understanding the significance of conspicuous consumption within their lives: frequent transfers between clubs and the high level of individual competition within clubs. These two features feed into and underpin a more general characteristic of football careers: instability and unpredictability.

We noted earlier that Veblen suggested that conspicuous consumption has become important in modern societies because of the increasing fluidity and mobility which characterize those societies; as Veblen (2007: 60) put it, this mobility exposes ‘the individual to the observation of many persons who have no other means of judging of his reputability other than the display of goods ... which he is able to make while he is under their direct observation’. In other words, conspicuous consumption functions as a means of signalling and claiming status in highly fluid and competitive situations in which the status hierarchy, and one’s place within it, are unclear and status constantly has to be reasserted, reaffirmed and renegotiated with others. Professional football exhibits all these characteristics to a high degree.

Roderick (2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2012, 2013; Roderick and Schumacker, 2017) has drawn attention to the fluidity, the individual competitiveness and the lack of stability in the careers of professional footballers, pointing to the high levels of risk, mobility and, above all, uncertainty in footballers’ careers. Central to this uncertainty have been some relatively recent, and radical, changes in the structure of the football industry. The establishment of the Premier League not only led to greatly increased salaries and status for top players but also to greatly increased inequality, in terms of income and status, between players, both within and between clubs (Roderick and Schumacker, 2017: 167). In addition, a distinctive feature of the modern game is the relatively (and increasingly) high rate of labour mobility. Roderick (2012: 321) notes that ‘it is not unusual for players post-1990s to be contracted to more than 10 clubs before retirement’. For professional footballers (and their families), simultaneous job and geographical mobility is commonplace.

Roderick (2006b: 246) suggests that, within this context, players’ career trajectories ‘develop in unplanned or “disorderly” ways as they experience contingencies such as success, rejection, long-term injury, managerial change and ageing’ and he adds that ‘careers in the professional game are in-built with insecurity’. Within this situation, career trajectories can change radically and suddenly. All players face the ever present possibility of a career-ending injury but, more frequently, an established player on a lucrative contract may find his first team place – and the associated income and status – threatened by long term injury, loss of form, the arrival of a new manager or a newly signed player, or the process of ageing and the associated ‘fear that someone younger, cheaper, fitter and who is perceived to be hungrier for success, may replace them’ (Roderick, 2006b). Roderick suggests that these recurring threats mean that players are involved in the presentation of self as an ongoing – that is a career-long

– process which leads them to become increasingly skilled manipulators of self and workplace reputation in the eyes of critical audiences.

We suggest that conspicuous consumption is one aspect of this process of the manipulation and presentation of self in a highly fluid and competitive situation in which players have continuously to reassert and renegotiate their status with others. In other words, conspicuous consumption is a form of behaviour which may help to project an image of professional success and high status to others and, perhaps no less importantly, may also help players to sustain a more stable and positive self-image of success in a world in which competition for first team places means that the self-image of a successful footballer is constantly under threat.

## **Conclusion**

Our data indicate that professional footballers in England regularly engage in forms of behaviour which can be described in terms of Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption. In this regard, we have seen not only that the lifestyle of successful players involves the purchase and display of expensive luxury items, such as designer clothes, watches and cars, but we have also sought to go beyond behavioural evidence of status seeking and to understand such action from the perspective of the players themselves, that is, we have sought to analyse the players' own understanding of 'what they are doing'. From the interview data it is clear that the players readily acknowledge that the intention behind such behaviour is to display their wealth and status both within and outside the club; indeed, players spoke very clearly – and in terms which mirrored very closely Veblen's description – about their use of conspicuous consumption in relation to their status concerns within what they saw as a highly competitive situation.

In this conclusion, we seek to draw out some of the more general implications of our data in relation to two key issues: (i) some of the complexities, subtleties and problematic aspects of the presentation of self through the display of items of conspicuous consumption and (ii) some of the implications of our data for Veblen's theory.

In relation to the first issue, it will be recalled that conveying the desired image of wealth does not always involve the display of authentic expensive items since players may, on occasions, purchase fake or cheap replica copies of expensive designer goods such as watches. This practice is not uncommon among top players and, significantly, the

authenticity of such items is unlikely to be challenged since it is taken for granted that the players concerned can afford to purchase such expensive items; by contrast, the authenticity of such items is more likely to be challenged when they are displayed by less successful players playing in the lower divisions. This serves as a useful reminder that the process of image management, or presentation of self, insofar as it involves conspicuous consumption, is a rather more complex process than the simple purchase and display of expensive luxury items. In this regard it should be borne in mind that a claim to status is precisely that: a claim which may be accepted or rejected by others as part of a complex bargaining process in which the presentation of a specific item, such as a designer watch, as a basis of a claim to status will be evaluated by others in a wider context of taken-for-granted knowledge and expectations. This explains how the presentation of an apparently expensive, but in reality, fake, watch by a successful player may be uncritically accepted as evidence of wealth and success while the presentation of an authentic expensive watch by a less successful player may be regarded with suspicion.

A second, not entirely dissimilar finding, concerns the ability of players to negotiate substantial reductions in the price of goods such as luxury cars. These negotiations constitute one aspect of status competition within the dressing room, or 'one-upmanship', as the more successful players seek to confirm their status by revealing the 'special deals' they have been able to negotiate. As we noted earlier, there is an element of irony here for, in this context, a player's status is reflected not by how *much*, but by how *little*, he paid for these luxury items. This raises an interesting theoretical question. The data on 'special deals' suggest that any specific item of conspicuous consumption, such as a luxury car, may be presented in different ways to different audiences in order to convey an image of wealth, status and success. Thus, outside the football club, the claim to status is based on assumptions by those in the wider community about how much such a luxury car will have cost, while within the club – that is, among those 'in the know' – the claim to status is based on how little the player paid for the car. This point reinforces the earlier suggestion that image management involves more than the purchase and display of luxury goods in a simple, mechanistic manner, for conspicuous goods may be presented in different ways to different audiences who will draw upon different background knowledge, assumptions and expectations to attribute significance to those luxury items.

Finally, in this context, we would draw attention to what might be considered a particularly problematic aspect of the pattern of conspicuous consumption within professional football. We have seen that footballers have little choice but to conform to the established patterns of conspicuous consumption within the club, and those who do not do so are likely to face sanctions of a variety of kinds. In respect to the expected norms of attire, for example, players who wear what is judged to be inappropriate attire may return from training to find their clothes have been damaged or destroyed by their teammates, while players may also be the target of banter which may appear superficially to be playful and harmless but which, as Roderick (2006c) has noted, has a serious and generally understood meaning. For those who are able to use it successfully as a claim to, and a display of, status, conspicuous consumption may be seen as a positive strategy. However, it is not difficult to imagine that, within an occupation characterised by a high level of risk and uncertainty and in which one's self-image is constantly under threat, these forms of behaviour may, for those on the receiving end, have very negative consequences. In almost every other industry, deliberately damaging or destroying a workmate's clothing would almost certainly be considered as a disciplinary offence, and one which might well result in dismissal, while both the destruction of clothing and targeting a person for critical banter would, in most workplaces, be considered as forms of workplace bullying. In this regard, one might suggest that aspects of this behaviour might be considered as a form of what Bourdieu (2002) has called institutionalised 'symbolic violence' as part of the highly individualistic competition between players. It might be suggested that this would be a useful area to examine in future research.

In relation to the second key issue – the implications of our data for Veblen's theory – we would suggest that our data are in one respect more persuasive than those presented by Veblen himself in support of his general theory. Campbell (1995: 42) notes that as examples of conspicuous consumption, Veblen included patterns of 'treating', in which one's wealth is spent not on oneself, but on others, so that 'the relationship between consumer and audience is confused with that between the treater and the treated'. In the current study, in almost all the behaviours documented – the one exception being the purchase of drinks on nights out – no-one other than the player himself (and perhaps his family) benefits from the conspicuous consumption of designer clothes, watches and cars, and these examples are not therefore confused by 'treating'. Our data also indicate that, as Veblen suggested, the standards of what is considered acceptable in terms of patterns of consumption and associated lifestyles are defined by the dominant group – in this situation, the most successful players at Premier

League and international level – and that these standards filter down to, and influence the purchases of, players at lower levels.

These data are, we suggest, important for any evaluation of the usefulness of Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption. Campbell (2011: 11-12) has noted that sociologists 'tend to be shy about providing contemporary examples of conspicuous consumption ... if indeed they provide any examples at all'. He notes that, because conspicuous consumption involves a conscious attempt to maintain or enhance one's status, it has been widely assumed that people will not be prepared to 'confess' to engaging in this form of conduct, adding '[u]nfortunately it is almost impossible to obtain evidence to show whether people are behaving in this fashion' (Campbell, 2011: 2). He adds that 'in the absence of confessional data from consumers themselves, it is exceptionally difficult to prove that conspicuous consumption is a real and widespread phenomenon ... This is not to say, however, that the sociologists' judgement of conspicuous consumption as an "outmoded theory of limited usefulness in explaining consumer behaviour" is therefore correct. For such a conclusion would only be warranted if research had been undertaken which actually showed that consumers did not behave in the manner predicted by the theory, something that has not only yet to be attempted, but would appear to be just as difficult as demonstrating that they do' (Campbell, 2011: 28).

Notwithstanding the assumed methodological difficulties to which Campbell alluded, this study indicates that it is indeed possible for researchers 'to elicit a frank and honest response from the consumer' (Campbell, 2011: 22). Given this situation, it is perhaps time that sociologists began, like their colleagues in economics and history, to look more carefully at Veblen's work.

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