

Colour my falafel blue

Football branding in Swedish food industry – an ethnographic approach

Introduction

This article discusses how chips and sausages are used for magical and sacrificial rites in a football environment. It concentrates on the consumer end and analyzes eating practices tied to the supporter identity of a Swedish club called Malmö FF (abbreviated MFF). Restricted to its geographical location, this club collaborates with several suppliers to create edible goods with its logo on. The very act of consumption makes supporters' emotional attachment visible and recognizable, providing means to create an identity based on material culture (after Du Gay, 1995). However, the straightforward pattern of consumerism does not follow. Supporters, even through their shopping practices, seek to establish a connection with the club based on equality and partnership. Their consumer choices allow them to forge yet another link with MFF, but they are not reduced to passive customers. Far from that, the fans claim power over the institution.

The research material presented here was collected using ethnographic methods, mainly interviews, observations and internet ethnography. Although the edible range presented by MFF is quite small, the sky-blue packages (MFF official colour) exemplify complicated social relations connected to globalized food market, experience economy, and gender issues. I argue that the entangled attitudes towards food point to the possible interpretation of local football through two phenomena: magic and sacrifice. This article will discuss these aspects as understood and presented by Marcel Mauss (1972) and Daniel Miller (1998). The actual act of consumption presented here should be regarded as means to the desired end, and not the end in itself.

How does sausage in blue plastic connect to magic? At the first glance this could be seen as just another way to milk money out of football fans, but the MFF labels are highlighted examples of consumer practices in a specific environment. As Liz McFall remarks, 'economic practices are culturally defined whilst cultural meanings are shared and disseminated through economic activities in any recorded society' (2002, 153). Fans do not passively absorb football but actively create it (Herd, 2013). The rather simple consumer choice between a blue or green packaging becomes a possibility to execute power over the club. Fans consume their creation while simultaneously helping to preserve it – a remarkable achievement possible through the usage of sacrifice and magic.

First, this article will briefly discuss football's adventure within the phenomenon of experience economy. Then issues of global market and gender will be introduced, followed by the intended interpretation through sacrificial rites of shopping and consumption.

Experiencing economy of football

The football experience has been tamed and marketed globally to the masses as a fun leisure activity, an alternative to theatre or bowling. Officials constantly work to minimize football's connections with darker phenomena of hooliganism and violence. Several scholars, among others Jacco van Uden (2005), Kennedy and Kennedy (2010, 2012), and Richard Giulianotti (2012) discuss commercialization and commodification of modern clubs and the impact those processes have had on supporters. Football world embraced new economic realities but found it difficult to be run strictly as business, often requiring a lot of money and being constantly in debt (see for example Kuper and Szymanski, 2009).

Malmö FF is a top Swedish club from Skåne region, and it follows the development pattern observed in other European leagues, where football organizations attract sponsors and explore their commercial potential. MFF, like other clubs in Europe, tries to develop a marketable brand around the event of football matches. A brand is basically ‘a commercially developed symbol; a symbol is anything that carries a shared meaning in a culture’ (Guptill et al 2013, 88). Their branding practices include a wide range of items in MFF’s official colours, sky-blue and white. Most of the products, like baby clothes or Christmas decorations, are durable and designed to be on display in one way or another. However, MFF also introduced a range of foods: candy through a global company Candy People, MFF cakes, MFF chips and sausages. There is also MFF Support beer, which is practically connected to the official organization of the supporters, and not directly to the club. The colouring and association with football is thus concentrated on the packaging and marzipan frosting.

As a football club, MFF builds its image on long history, family values and connections to the city, its local character, and masculinity. The food offered by the club stretches the idea of consumer loyalty, not only in the context of football, but also the community. One of the members of MFF’s marketing department assessed those co-operations as successful and explained that the chosen suppliers are serious local businesses willing to support their football club. While choosing the range, MFF concentrated on families as their target group. The approach was simply stated: ‘if all MFF fans cannot come to Swedbank Stadion – we must come to them!’ (fieldwork, 2014).

Fans can now literally consume their club by unwrapping sky-blue plastic. MFF have chosen products associated not as much with health and sport, but with fun, leisure and partying. They are treats rather than real food, which take us back to presenting modern football as an option for leisure time. Roland Barthes remarked that food has become a system of communication and certain products are associated with relaxation or work (2008, 25). Sausages, chips, candy and cakes are often understood as party food. It is conscious-free nutrition, guilty pleasure full of sodium, cholesterol and sugar. An MFF fan remarked that beer and sausage is perhaps what supporters are interested in while having good time (fieldwork, 2014).

While being a sport organization, and at least in theory promoting physical activities, MFF feeds its fans with stereotypical comfort snacks associated with globalized consumption. In an article analyzing involvement in sport events of healthy and unhealthy food sponsors in New Zealand, Carter et al notice that there is almost equal distribution of both, with sport organizations valuing financial income as the main benefit. Nevertheless, the article points out that some organizations were concerned with being associated with unhealthy eating habits (2013, 1-8). In the context of MFF, by associating football with fun and leisure, food offered by the club instantly loses its ‘healthy’ tag and becomes a treat. Although the content of MFF-branded goods seems rather generic and common, it provides an insight into the complex supporters-club relationship.

Localized globalism and food practices

The MFF food range is supplied mostly by local companies, restricted geographically to Skåne region. Physical location plays an important role and underlines the sense of tribalism associated with football. Fans often express a notion of local patriotism and many see MFF as a general symbol for the entire region of Skåne (see Andersson, 2011, Herd 2013). The club’s crest on products highlights the nostalgia of locality as opposed to the forces of globalism.

Football supporters often feel that too much is required from them, as Giulianotti comments: ‘First, some fans point to evidence of hypocrisy among clubs by, on one hand, defining supporters as customers while, on the other hand, taking these customers for granted in terms of public relations. Second, the most serious

and sustained criticism by supporters occurs through the rejection of their categorization as customers' (Giulianotti, 2012, 396). Most of the interviewed fans were concerned with football being only for sale and with economy issues taking over loyalty. Global trends, especially associated with globalized market, tend to be presented as an enemy of the real football. Nevertheless, the offered food brings some consolation. The producers are carefully chosen and well-established in the local community, and the coloring of the packages reinforces the feeling that these companies support MFF as well.

The companies cooperating with MFF highlight their regional character in their advertisements. The products, however, are not that easy to purchase. Cakes and beer have to be ordered, and chips, produced by a small company called Bjärred, seem to travel around Malmö in search for available shelves in local supermarkets. Same applies to sausages. The chips, flavored with sour cream and onion, have even their Facebook page, and from time to time the news feed announces in which shop they can be bought at that particular time.

Fans are aware that all the products with MFF's logo on are not unusual, remarking that 'there is no difference in taste, it's just the label' (fieldwork, 2014). Nevertheless, this label is enough to make people buy a blue bag of chips rather than green one, although they contain exactly the same fried slices of potatoes. What is different is the customer- supplier attitude. The club's crest makes shoppers aware of their position in the rite of creating local football. Fans want to support the club and see it as their duty to buy MFF food.

One interviewed supporter mentioned that he coloured food himself, for example making caviar blue to make an MFF theme for a party. Blue falafel was also mentioned, as an example of creative food that could be a commercial success and a clear link with the Malmö identity (fieldwork, 2014). Although not strictly Swedish, falafel has become a big part of food culture in Malmö, mainly because of the high immigration rates and cheap ethnic restaurants. In a way, it is also regarded as local cuisine, developed together with changing demographics of the city.

Fans regard themselves as co-creators of football and the more they can participate the better it feels. Not surprisingly, their response to MFF food is positive since it marks their responsibility. It is not a passive consumption. Their spending on the club makes sure that it is provided with some extra income, which in turn allows them to be more involved.

Male sport – male food

As a predominantly male football club, MFF creates and sustains an image of masculinity, not only through the players but also through the fans. The demographic structure of supporters is quite varied, but its key elements are expressed through masculinity. As the marketing representative remarked, the club wants to reach families, which inevitably means children. It comes as no surprise that kids are drawn to the 'forbidden pleasures' and when given free choice they 'most typically buy sweets, salty snacks, soft drinks and fast food' (Guptil et al, 2013, 98). The range of foods with MFF's logo balances on the understanding of fun rather than serious nutrition. Chips, sweets, and cakes are not ingredients of a healthy diet and in Sweden a concept of the 'Saturday candy' (lördagsgodis) was introduced some decades ago in order to limit the consumption of sweets. Lördagsgodis means that children are not allowed to eat sweets on weekdays but weekends only. Interestingly enough, some betting businesses, closely associated with sports and football, advertise their Saturday betting possibilities as 'lördagsgodis', and literally sugar-coating the phenomenon of gambling.

These products represent something extraordinary, not associated with boring every-day shopping. Because they belong to this category, they are more likely to be purchased by men. Miller (1998) showed many examples how men in general use specific shopping practices to distance themselves from it, as it is perceived as a female activity. One such strategy is 'special' shopping, treats and indulgence products, like sugary food and alcohol. Obviously, the attitudes are changing all the time, yet still a male supporter is perceived as buying beer and sausage rather than humus. Guptil et al point out that in some spheres of social life femininity is seen as threatening the value of men, and so masculinity is reinforced through, for example, eating practices. As they state: 'gender nonconformity is more threatening for men because it represents the loss of a valued and powerful social status' (2013, 32). In other words, traditional and commonly recognized range of fatty, sugary snacks would be perceived as 'neutral' in an event of football, which still carries strong masculine connotations.

MFF Support, driven directly by fans, offers special beer with a blue-white logo. It is a Czech beer, imported and distributed by a local Swedish brewery. On their website, MFF Support writes that they work to promote the club, and that they fight for football fandom without racism and violence. In their own description, while one enjoys the beer, he/she can at the same time support their team (fieldwork, 2014). Sausages are the only food in MFF's range that is advertised using a player from the team, featuring him on the pitch, with his back facing the consumer. Those sausages are described as a 'classic product', and the real novelty is the white-blue plastic. However, an important personal element was added by having a player on the official ad. The meaty food is clearly associated with the masculine character of the club. In their research about portraying men in food advertising, Packwood-Freeman and Merskin (2008) point out that the connection between masculinity and products like beer and meat remains unchallenged and it is still driven on crude stereotypes, which results in men being active campaigners/eaters and women becoming an objectified part of their meal.

This is not a surprise, as meat is still regarded as male food and even used to restore or sustain archetypical masculinity, whereas vegetables remain typically associated with women (after Packwood-Freeman, Merskin, 2008, 280). Perhaps because MFF is gender-restricted as a club, advertising to men through men seems the most logical thing to do. The same applies to the range of food products. Nevertheless, fans present a wide variety of characters, including for example vegetarians and women. Most likely, their every-day choices are not associated with typical football fandom, and they are not yet clearly addressed in advertising or economic practices of the club.

The brief analysis presented so far points out that the edible goods are rather generic and stereotypical, aimed at finding profit for the club from yet another source of merchandise. However, supporters de-construct and re-construct their role in modern football through consumption. Love and devotion to the club is manifested through their shopping practices and allows them further strengthen their identity-building capacity, not as much through the white-blue logos, but their own assessment of the process.

Love and sacrifice – the essence of football

Despite the strong economic factors, fans are reluctant to describe their purchases as simple acts of consumption. One gets a feeling it is a sort of barter (Appadurai, 1986, 9-11). Fans exchange their tokens of love and emotions in this commercialized form chosen by the club. They do not control this form, yet still it is a sort of fair trade, where the club comes up with generally approved products that could be exchanged with the sense of loyalty and duty expressed by the supporters. Also, it is not a mere charity when the fans just donate money, as there is a sense of equality between the bartering parties, which fans repeatedly mention when evaluating their position (Herd, 2013).

This situation points out to the possible interpretation of shopping as an expression of love and sacrifice, as presented by Daniel Miller. In his analysis, he highlights features like obligation and responsibility that form an essence of love. As he states, 'shopping (...) is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced' (Miller, 1998, 18). This leads him to a general notion of care and devotion that a shopper has for those he/she shops for. Going further, Miller links this love visible in shopping to consumption and points out that it can be interpreted as a magical rite of sacrifice. He states: 'Sacrifice is always an act of consumption, a form of expenditure through which something or someone is consumed' (Miller, 1998, 82).

Miller's analysis provides an interesting link with football supporters, who actively use various magical rites to sustain their power position in the football environment (see Herd, 2013). Supporters' attitudes and evaluation of their position could be analyzed through Marcel Mauss' notion of magic and magical rites. Football is a clear example how magic can be utilized in a modern society. Mauss (1972) explains magic in terms of collective phenomena similar in this aspect to religion. Magic, however, may be distinguished from religion in that its rituals are pragmatic and do not express worship as such, which means that it does not contain a notion of the sacred, but means to a desired end. Any use of gods, demons, and religious icons within magic serves usually a technical objective.

Supporters in general present a pragmatic view on football and their relationship with it, rather than the romantic worship of the club. The introduction of edible goods decorated with MFF's logo illustrates another dimension of pragmatism expressed by both the club and the supporters. By the rite of sacrifice, supporters are allowed to claim power over the club. With food, the sacrificial act comes at its fullest as 'in sacrifice an object is destroyed or consumed' (Miller, 1998, 75). While paying for the products, which means exchanging tokens of loyalty, the fans can literally consume every-day products that are magically transformed by sky-blue elements into pieces of football reality.

This sacrifice helps the club financially, but also establishes another bond between the institution and the supporters. This act of food consumption brings us to another dimension. As Miller expresses it, 'all sacrifices are based on the same process of creating a relationship with the divine' (Miller, 1998, 77). This causes the inevitable objectification of the club. Football can be literally consumed and measured in calories.

Conclusion

Rather than victims of aggressive advertisement, supporters reinterpret their understanding of their role in the club and claim a very active position. In that context, 'consumption is eminently social, relational, and active rather than private, atomic, or passive' (Appadurai, 1986, 31), and it illustrates how complex the relationship between supplier and customer can become. As Kennedy and Kennedy notice, 'clubs hover between this ontological uncertainty: between being businesses and being community assets' (2012, 332). This ambiguity contributes to the spectators making a firm stand in their position, and regarding activities around the club as, at least partly, performed by them.

Although the image of an average supporter presented through MFF's food choices is consistent with the old-fashioned, traditional masculinity, there is plenty of diversity beneath the surface. The growing public awareness about healthy eating and environmental impact are not the most important issues in the club's brand developing scheme, but nevertheless the local character of the majority of products suppliers for MFF is highly regarded and respected. Supporters clearly state their sense of duty, as well as express creativity and innovation in constructing their relationship with the club. It should be pointed out that their eating practices stand somewhat in contrast with the stereotypical cultural picture of a fan having fun. Nevertheless, they seem to understand cultural background behind 'fun snacks' and accept the effort that the club makes.

As Miller writes, ‘the point of smoke rising up to the deity is that it confirms that there exists a deity who wishes to be fed in this manner’ (Miller, 1998, 148). While buying commercial edible goods, supporters manage to establish a specific relationship with the club. They are not just passive receivers of the MFF-marked food. They form a sort of agreement where they express their duty and obligation by purchasing the items, and thus further strengthen their sense of ownership and club’s dependence on their willingness to participate. It is this ‘giving up of resources to the divine’ (Miller, 1998, 99) that further highlights supporters’ position as magicians, as the gods of football are then used by them for their own purposes, according to a very pragmatic approach (Herd, 2013).

There is a certain dose of immunity to globalized consumption, and the local character of food companies helps to preserve one’s image. Although consuming generic, stereotypical food, supporters still reclaim their vital position in the process. This football example shows that food consumption can trigger unexpected connections in the community. Purchasing candy, sausages or chips reveals a complex relationship far from a straightforward supplier-consumer situation. Fans are able to claim an active part in supplying the club with money, but also with their loyalty, and in return they receive edible goods and tokens of identity-building quality. The mutual dependence comes to play, highlighting the complex social structure of a local football club.

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