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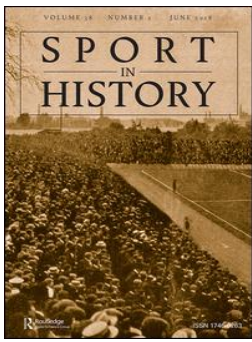
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# From Sportswear to Leisurewear: The Evolution of English Football League Shirt Design in the Replica Kit Era

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# From Sportswear to Leisurewear: The Evolution of English Football League Shirt Design in the Replica Kit Era

Christopher Stride, Jean Williams, David Moor and  
Nick Catley

*The football shirt is of iconic significance, defining a club's visual identity through its role as sporting uniform and fan identifier, providing a canvas for commercial interactions and increasingly acting as the focus of nostalgia and collector culture. In this article we focus on the football shirt's extension from sportswear to a replica product worn as cross-generational leisurewear. We first consider how a replica's authenticity, its principal attribute, exists in objective, constructive and existential contexts. We then demonstrate how the subsequent focus of kit manufacturers and clubs on satisfying these differing interpretations of authenticity has influenced football shirt design. For two decades, replica kits were marketed as sportswear to children, with attempts to enhance the football shirt's authenticity through distinctiveness and exclusivity leading to copyrighted designs, manufacturer's logos and increased patterning. However, as the replica football shirt became adult leisurewear, the changing customer base led to retrospective and recycled shirt designs proclaiming a club's distinct identity through its heritage, fulfilling fans' nostalgic interpretations of a club's authentic kit, and reflecting fans' use of replica shirts to display their authenticity as a genuine fan. These ideals have also inspired a parallel retro-replica industry and, we argue, caused stagnation in the development of the aesthetic elements of contemporary kit design, which had previously demonstrated innovation interspersed with periods of consolidation, but*

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*had taken few retrospective turns. Genuine innovation in football shirt design has increasingly become restricted to technological advances and marketing strategies.*

## **Introduction**

As the most visible totem of a football club's colours, the design of the football kit, in particular the shirt colour and pattern, has historically been a primary means of representing corporate visual identity. The earliest teams, drawn from the lower aristocracy and developed out of public schools, considered uniforms unnecessary, but after the introduction of inter-club competition in the 1870s, football players relied less on their cricket kit and more on specialized lightweight garments designed to enhance their performance.<sup>1</sup> Distinctive colours and designs became emblematic of both amateur and professional football clubs. The visual impact of the football shirt has a long-established legacy, evoking enduring team nicknames such as 'Reds', 'Blues' or, more exotically, 'Tangerines', and providing a palette for merchandise such as scarves and rosettes.

In the first 100 years of codified association football, the football shirt evolved slowly. Innovations in colour, styling and fabrication emerged, influenced by professionalism, the development of a sportswear production and retailing industry, technological advances in fabric production and colouration, the greater weight placed upon the spectator experience, and the increased exposure to playing strip designs from abroad. Such developments were intrinsically linked to the shirt's role as a functional item of sportswear with twin requirements: identifying opposing teams for the benefit of players and spectators, and providing an appropriate garment for playing football in. These fundamental roles still, of course, influence the design of the football shirt today. Indeed, the growth of a global televisual audience places further obligations on the football shirt as a means of recognition where the spectator experience is mediated by technology. The degree of technical specialization that has been achieved to enhance performance is exemplified by Tottenham Hotspur FC's five-year kit deal with American sports clothing manufacturer Under Armour, established in 2011.<sup>2</sup> These shirts send signals about the players' biometrics (heart rate and temperature, for example) to coaching staff, and Under Armour would also like to share this data with broadcasters and fans.

However, from the mid-1970s the football shirt assumed two further commercial functions, each with multiple stakeholders: a canvas for sponsorship, and as replica merchandise. Shirt sponsorship, pioneered by

non-league Kettering Town FC in 1976 and rapidly adopted by the full-time professional game, has had an obvious imprint upon the appearance of the club shirt.<sup>3</sup> Yet an even greater influence – indeed, the predominant one upon contemporary football shirt design – has been the development of a replica kit industry. This industry began by producing replica sportswear for children, but within two decades had transformed the football shirt into an adult leisurewear garment. Whether fans are casual followers of a team or committed supporters, wearing the latest club shirt has become widely used to express support.<sup>4</sup>

The economic importance of sponsorship and merchandising has accelerated since the wider ‘hypercommodification’ of English football that occurred following the formation of the Premier League in 1992.<sup>5</sup> Using geographer John Bale’s concept of the ‘tradium’ rather than football stadium, historian Dil Porter demonstrated how retail has converged with sport and leisure as sectors of the economy, making it difficult to categorize each as distinct activities.<sup>6</sup> Shopping has become an aspect of fan leisure within the stadium and one of many consumer activities encouraged by clubs, alongside eating, drinking, using social media and betting. Deloitte’s 2013 *Annual Review of Football Finance* identified a ‘step-change’ in these trends as new sponsorship deals, including shirt-fronts and kit supply, combined with technological advancements and global popularity for English Premier League football, will see revenues exceed £3 billion combined for the 20 member clubs.<sup>7</sup> Deloitte estimated the combined revenue for Premier League clubs in the 2011/12 season as reliant on broadcast media deals for half of the overall income, with commercial activities, such as replica shirt sales and sponsorship, accounting for 27% and just 23% from match-day takings.<sup>8</sup> Even away from the elite, the sale of replica shirts has become a significant income stream critical to the core brand, and to the extension of related merchandising and accessories into the leisurewear market.<sup>9</sup> Hence the football shirt has not only gained new roles, but through these roles has become an increasingly important asset to football clubs.

The replica shirt’s popularity casts both clubs and kit manufacturers as contemporary leisurewear brands, and professional footballers somewhere between mannequins and models, their exact place determined by personal celebrity and team success: a few have even used this new-found status to create personal leisurewear brands.<sup>10</sup> However, despite the football shirt’s current pivotal position in cultural and economic terms, its long-term iconic significance to club and country, its visible advance in the high street and its potential to act as a multi-coloured litmus test for wider football-specific and societal change, little academic attention has been paid to its historical development or multiple roles as sporting

uniform, means of club representation and fan identification, and as the focus of nostalgia and collector culture. This lacuna is surprising, particularly given the recent attention that historians of sport have paid to other material artefacts and aspects of visual and design culture including stadiums and sport sculpture, and the opportunities offered by athletic wear producers' increasing interest in their company history, indicated by recent developments at Adidas.<sup>11</sup>

An exception is the work of sociologists Gavin Kendall and Nick Osbaldiston, who note the shirt's potential as a medium through which to explore football's rituals and performances, given how it has become 'embedded in narratives of authenticity, sacredness and profaneness'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Claudio Benzecry considers how Argentina's CA Boca Juniors shirt is invested with meanings by players, fans and multinational corporations, and the tensions between these potentially competing stakeholders.<sup>13</sup> The relative paucity of scholarly enquiry is even more pronounced when focusing on football shirt design or the development of the associated replica industry. References to either topic within academic literature are restricted to passing comments within wider investigations into merchandising or fan cultures. From a sociological perspective, articles by Giulianotti, Debaix and King discuss shirt design in relation to national identity, or use the wearing of replica football shirts as an indicator when defining fan types according to attitudes around brand loyalty and consumption.<sup>14</sup> Other studies consider the economic aspects of replica merchandise such as football shirts, be it the contemporary distribution of contracts between different manufacturers and suppliers, supporters' reactions to shirt sponsorship or claims that clubs exploit fans through high pricing and uncompetitive practices.<sup>15</sup> However, the history of football shirt design has remained the preserve of popular books, nostalgic blogs, official brand websites, magazine articles and the re-creations of football 'annuals'.<sup>16</sup> The links between contemporary design, past design, and commercial and cultural antecedents remain largely unexplored.

It would take a much larger study to examine such an extensive and interdisciplinary history involving aspects of innovation, adaptation, adoption and consolidation in its entirety. With this article we hope to contribute to the documenting and explanation of the football shirt's stylistic evolution, and to stimulate further debate into its wider history and spheres of influence. We limit our focus to the relationship between the replica kit industry's development in English professional football, and what we henceforth refer to as the aesthetic aspects of football shirt design – the colours, patterns and styling of the shirt – with two specific aims.

Initially we consider the replica football shirt's perceived authenticity, outlining how the interpretation of what is authentic (and the desire to encapsulate it) varies across time and between consumer types, and can be considered both in terms of objective accuracy and the degree to which authenticity is subjectively conferred, sensed and projected by the wearer. We then demonstrate how the subsequent focus of kit manufacturers and clubs on satisfying consumer desire for authenticity has influenced shirt design. Acknowledging Benzecry's claim that the interpretation of what makes the football shirt authentic is fluid, we investigate two periods in detail.<sup>17</sup>

First we focus on the replica kit industry's formalization in the 1970s; and second, the modern 'Premier League' era from 1992 to 2013. In the first of these timespans, following the copyrighting (and hence manufacturer ownership) of specific kit designs, the nascent industry's focus on providing authentic replica sportswear for children is reflected in increased detailing, patterning and distinctiveness. By the latter period, the football shirt has become an adult leisurewear product, marketed through an unlikely and sometimes jarring combination of new technology and nostalgia, the latter strategy intertwined with attempting to satisfy multiple consumer interpretations of authenticity related to their status as a fan, a proclamation of their club's distinct identity through its heritage, and a countervailing push against the commercialization of football. These latter ideals have also inspired a parallel retro-replica industry and, we argue, simultaneously caused stagnation in the development of the aesthetic elements of contemporary kit design, which had previously demonstrated innovation interspersed with periods of consolidation, but had taken few retrospective turns. The superficial appearance of the contemporary football shirt now casts it as a 'heritage' product. Genuine innovation has become restricted to technological advances, e.g. the fabric, and to marketing strategies.

When examining change in the football shirt's aesthetic elements we eschewed potentially unrepresentative single-club or small-sample case-study approaches in favour of a wider empirical study. Working from a detailed pictorial database (compiled by the article's third named author) of the home kits of every past and present Football League and English Premier League member club dating back to their foundation, we converted home shirt design into a numerically coded format suitable for data analysis.<sup>18</sup> We focused on the following elements: presence or absence of, and type of, patterning and trim; neck and collar styling; maker's name; club badge and sponsorship – and change in kit from season to season. We restricted our analysis sample to the 92 member clubs of the English Football League and Premier League as of the 2012/13

season, to minimize both the number of clubs with data for just a small number of seasons, and the confounding effect on change in colours and patterns that comparing different clubs across different eras would cause, while retaining a representative sample. Through taking a quantitative analytical approach we hope to open avenues and suggest themes for further research into as yet unexplored periods of shirt design.

### **Replica football shirts and the search for authenticity**

A replica object is formally defined as ‘an exact copy or reproduction, [especially on a smaller scale]’.<sup>19</sup> A replica football shirt is designed to be a reproduction of the shirt worn by a club’s players in competitive action. However, under the strictest application of this formal definition, that is, an ‘exact copy’, the replica football shirt is rarely if ever obtainable. Does the shirt’s material have to be identical? Do elements that would not be visible (such as the manufacturer’s label on the inside of the neck) need perfect replication? Does the shirt itself have to have been worn in a professional match? Practically establishing what constitutes a replica football shirt clearly involves considering replication in terms of an acceptable degree of accuracy, as opposed to an ‘exact or not exact’ dichotomy.

Yet, once we determine replica status through the achievement of such an ‘acceptable degree’, we are moving beyond objective accuracy into the realm of the subjective. Quality of reproduction exists in the eye of the beholder. The purchaser knows that he is buying a replica shirt as opposed to one that has actually been, or will be, worn by his heroes. The extent to which different consumers will diagnose or care about degrees of precision will vary, and has varied over time – as will the importance they place upon the reaction of fellow supporters, who themselves may or may not be able to identify differences between a replica and the real thing.

The relative prioritization of accurate replication is determined by the utility that a consumer places upon different elements of authenticity, a construct which, as an unqualified definition, has become ambiguous given its varied interpretations and targets.<sup>20</sup> Sociologist Ning Wang considers it tripartite, with the three different approaches labelled as objective, constructive and existential.<sup>21</sup> Objective and constructive authenticity are object-related notions. The former, as the name implies, considers authenticity in the sense of absolute and objective criteria regarding an object’s claim to be considered as genuine, real or unique.<sup>22</sup> Constructive authenticity considers an object’s authenticity from the standards of the viewer, and as such is unfixed, negotiable, and subject to variation according to context, ideology and expectation.<sup>23</sup> As Wang

notes, 'what is judged as inauthentic by experts ... may be experienced as authentic and real from an emic perspective'.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, existential authenticity refers to the authenticity of the self, and can be subdivided into the intra-personal (the creation of self-identity), and inter-personal authenticity or 'communitas' (experiencing a sense of being part of an authentic community).<sup>25</sup>

Kendall and Osbaldiston claim that 'authenticity in the football jersey is a social/cultural construct, but one that should be considered as real and with deep meaning for the lives into which it is embedded'.<sup>26</sup> Each of the three types of authenticity defined above may be at play when considering a fan's assessment of a replica football shirt: first, objective authenticity in the sense of whether the shirt is the genuine reproduction that it claims to be; second, constructive authenticity in how the fan rates the shirt's authenticity; and third, existential authenticity in the personal sense of being an authentic fan and part of a distinct fan community that the purchaser experiences and wishes to project to others through wearing the shirt. As sociologist Keith Dixon notes, 'football fans inhabit a culture where authenticity is constantly scrutinised by themselves and others'.<sup>27</sup>

The replica football shirt purchased in the club shop or sports retailer cannot be truly authentic in the sense of actually being what it aims to replicate. However, it will achieve different degrees of objective authenticity according to its progeny and accuracy of replication. In turn, the fan assessing the shirt will confer their own level of constructive authenticity upon it, dependent on their knowledge and tastes. Third, the purchaser's pride in being an authentic supporter of their club, i.e. their existential authenticity as a fan, which is experienced through purchasing and wearing a replica shirt, and the extent to which they wish to project this pride and share it with others, will also depend on their tastes, values and beliefs, and those of the culture they operate in. A fan may hold great personal value in their commitment to a club, and see clothing themselves in the most recent team shirt as affirming their loyalty. Furthermore, both the constructive authenticity applied to the replica shirt and the sense of existential authenticity subsequently experienced when wearing a replica shirt will vary between supporter cultures. To some fellow fans and non-fans, replica merchandise may be unnecessary, irrelevant or even interpreted as signifying a fan who is 'faking it'.

Defining the replica football shirt and its boundaries also requires consideration of the interaction between manufacturer and purchaser intentions. Specifically, the manufacturer is unlikely to be motivated to seek perfect replication for purely aesthetic reasons. Rather, their aim is to provide a level of replication that will attract the consumer. However, the chosen degree of accuracy will be influenced by production costs, retail

margins, technological capabilities and, in some cases, licensing restrictions. In more recent years, when some clubs have opted to produce players' shirts in figure-hugging Lycra, it may even be that the stature of the typical consumer makes exact replication of fabrics worn by professional footballers less desirable.

In this article we shall take an inclusive standpoint, defining the replica football shirt as one that has been created, operating within copyright laws, with the intent to appear to be a past or present design worn by the team whose match-day clothing it is attempting to replicate, and is available for members of the public to purchase. The breadth and lack of specificity of this definition motivates a further outlining of specific subtypes of replica shirt that correspond to different consumer ideals, degrees of accuracy, and target markets, and are associated with different eras of football shirt design. We term these the 'child-replica', the 'official replica' and the 'retro-replica' respectively.

We define child-replica shirts as the replica versions of a team's current shirt at the time of manufacture, that were created for the primary purpose of selling to children, prior to the manufacture of replica shirts designed for adult customers. The development of child-replica shirts, which were typically sold as part of a full replica kit, launched the replica football shirt industry, and preceded increased commodification in the mid-1970s through the copyrighting of designs and the licensing of production. Once established, this industry extended production of contemporary team kits, especially shirts, into adult sizes, becoming the official 'all-ages' replica shirt industry that exists today. Thus the child-replica is era-specific, superseded by the (all-ages) official replica shirt, though this succession was less a sudden, formal process, and more a gradual coalescence of customer demand, market and supplier extension and greater attention to detail regarding the accuracy of replication. Parallel to the establishment of the replica shirt as a product for adults, a new replica kit industry emerged, creating and selling football shirts designed to replicate *previous*, as opposed to current, shirt designs. These 'retro-replica' shirts form a second arm to the contemporary replica kit industry.

Under the definitions and criteria outlined above, with particular reference to the intent to create a replica product, identifying the roots of the replica shirt and the industry based around it becomes feasible. We now consider the birth and subsequent development of this industry, focusing on the importance of offering authenticity when marketing the product, the changing reference points for proclaiming authenticity, and the way that kit design was subsequently influenced.

### The child-replica football kit

It can only be claimed that replica football shirts existed prior to the late 1950s if you ignore the lack of evident manufacturer intent to produce the shirt to be sold as a replica. The sports outfitting industry, which, for the purposes of the supply of football kit to English professional clubs, was dominated by Bukta (established in 1879, and supplying its first elite football client, Nottingham Forest FC, in 1884) and Umbro (established in 1924 by the Humphrey brothers, Harold and Wallace), with a small number of competitors, would produce and sell a limited number of designs with basic colour schemes and patterns.<sup>28</sup> For example, Figure 1 shows London manufacturer Jacques's advert from the early twentieth century for its range of football jerseys in three styles. Professional, amateur and youth football clubs either purchased kit direct from manufacturers via catalogues, from a specialist sports equipment distributor or from a more conventional retail outlet catering for the general public's demand for sports equipment. Badges and numbers were then sewn on to the garment if required. An amateur or junior team who wished to wear the same kit as their professional heroes could do so by purchasing football shirts of the same design and colour.

The same possibility theoretically existed for individuals, but no such formalized market existed prior to 1959. Manufacturers and secondary



**Figure 1** Jacques' Football Jerseys catalogue advert, 1905  
 Source: Image courtesy of the National Football Museum

retailers considered a football shirt as a constituent of a complete kit, i.e. the apparel worn for playing the sport, which would be assumed to be a team activity. Manufacturers sometimes referred to their design templates as resembling those of major teams (in Figure 1 above, Jacques labels one design 'Aston Villa style') but the customers were assumed to be team managers buying a full set of shirts. Likewise, though manufacturers advertised supplying major clubs, they were using brand association to boost the sale of their range of sporting goods as opposed to the specific football club's kit depicted: for instance an Umbro advert (Figure 2) that

The choice of both teams  
in the Wembley Final  
1935

CAPTAIN  
NOT BORN  
ALBION

CAPTAIN  
SHEFFIELD  
WEDNESDAY

UMBRO REGD

JERSEYS, SHIRTS, KNICKERS & HOSE

Telephone 225

**ACTON & CO.**  
Sports and Athletic Outfitters  
The Arcade, Aldershot

Telephone  
ACTON, ARCADE, ALDERSHOT ESTABLISHED 1892

F.A. CUP

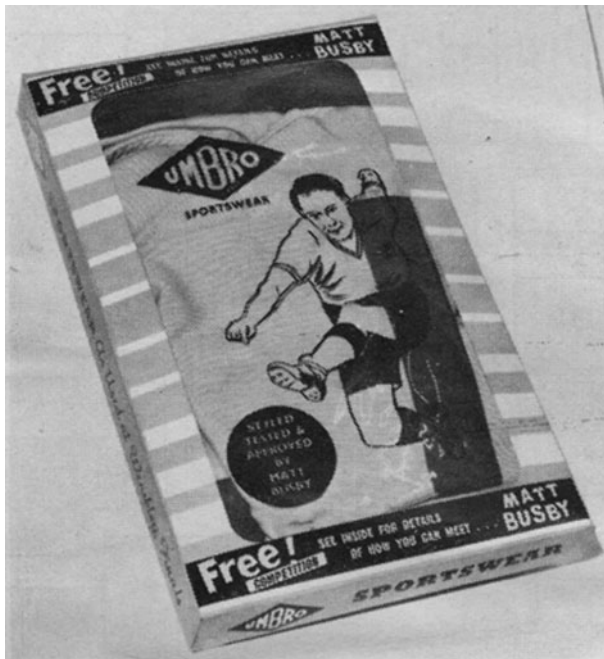
COPYRIGHT AND PUBLISHED BY UMBRO HOUSE WILMSLOW

Figure 2 Umbro advert, 1935  
Source: Image courtesy of Umbro, ©Umbro Ltd.

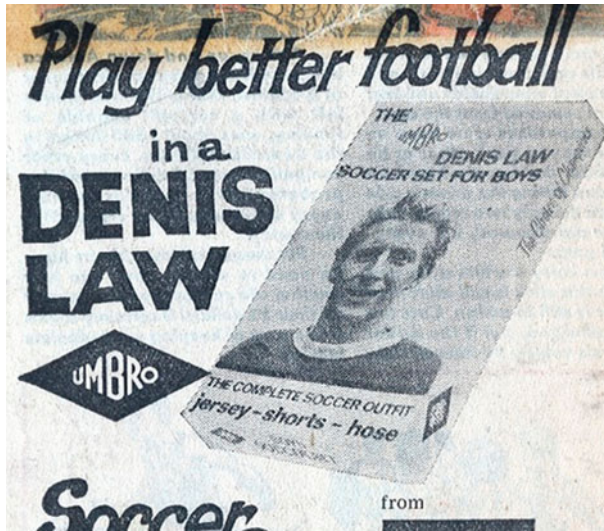
promoted its kitting out of both finalists in the 1935 FA Cup Final.<sup>29</sup> The list of stakeholders with any potential influence on kit design related to purchasing intention was limited to consumers for sports purposes: that is football clubs, be they professional, amateur or junior or schools.

The child-replica industry was a manufacturer-led innovation. In 1959 Umbro began to market child-sized kits specifically to individual customers (as opposed to youth teams). The kits were sold in an illustrated presentation box, later branded as an Umbroset. Football clubs themselves were not a primary, nor even an especially proactive part of the marketing process of these kits, though some, such as Manchester City FC, did stock replicas in their club shops and promote sales through their match programme.<sup>30</sup> The best claim of objective authenticity available to manufacturers and consumers at the time was to link child-replica kits to a prominent manager or footballer.

Accordingly, early Umbrosets were endorsed by Manchester United FC manager Matt Busby, but by 1964 he had been replaced on the packaging by his young striker Denis Law (Figures 3a and 3b).<sup>31</sup> This rapid



**Figure 3a** Umbroset endorsed by Matt Busby, 1959  
Source: Image courtesy of Umbro, ©Umbro Ltd.



**Figure 3b** Umbroset endorsed by Denis Law, 1964  
 Source: Image courtesy of Umbro, ©Umbro Ltd.

transition in brand endorsement strategy mirrored wider societal changes of the period, encapsulating the teenage rejection of or loss of respect for authority figures, and a corresponding idolization of glamorous young stars of popular music and sport (though it should be noted that Umbro subsequently used England manager Alf Ramsey to promote its apparel, and that famous footballers had endorsed products as diverse as football boots and cigarettes in the 1950s).<sup>32</sup> By wearing the kit, the young tyro was encouraged to believe that he – images and text within adverts were limited to boys – could imitate the appearance of his footballing heroes while attempting to copy their tricks, flicks and goal celebrations in the fantasy stadia of the back garden, park and playing field.

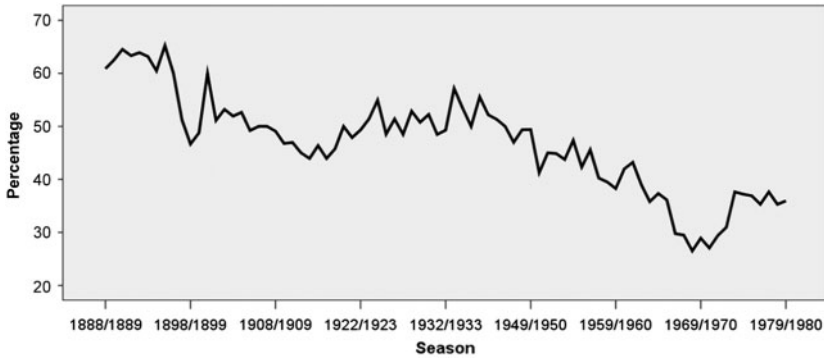
The development of this ‘wear the shirt, play like your hero’ marketing strategy can be seen in a 1968/69 season ‘Umbrochure’ catalogue advert for their Denis Law Umbrosets. Law endorses the full range of child replica kits, which included not only those of Law’s Manchester United and Scotland, but also eight other leading English clubs, three Scottish clubs and the international kit of England. The advert featured an image of Law performing his trademark acrobatic overhead kick while fellow Manchester United FC star George Best looked on, with the text beneath promising that:

Any young boy keen on soccer will be thrilled to receive the wonderful Denis Law Umbroset. A complete soccer outfit consisting of matching jersey, shorts and hose, available in the more popular League club colours.

Packed in a completely new, eye-catching pack, Denis Law Umbrosets make a wonderful gift for any youngster aged around 5 to 12. And they'll find the coaching tips from the famous Manchester United and Scotland international in helping them to improve their game.

This advert text is notable for describing the kit solely as an item of sportswear, and the absence of any claim of club identity – the offer is of kits in the 'club colours of', rather than an official replica. So while the ability to claim objective authenticity is marketed, this is through the association with an admired professional player (i.e. the type of kit worn by Denis Law), not a club. Kit manufacturers were hampered by this inability to claim that their products possessed uniqueness or exclusivity. Neither manufacturers nor football clubs had yet copyrighted kit designs or club badges; hence there was nothing to stop multiple companies producing and selling the same club's kit. For example, at the start of the 1973/74 season both Umbro, and Admiral Sportswear of Leicester (who in 1972 had begun to manufacture similar child-size replicas) produced child-size replica kits that matched the Manchester United FC strip (in reality, simply an unbadged red shirt with a white infill collar and cuffs, matched with white shorts and black socks).

A further impediment to the replica kit industry was that multiple clubs shared the same kit design. This reduced the appeal of the kit to the consumer as an identifier of allegiance with a particular club. For example, in Admiral's 1973 advert for their replica range, a kit comprised of white shirts and navy shorts is referred to as representing 'Spurs/Derby/England'.<sup>33</sup> This homogeneity was in part due to the minimalist aesthetic that had come to dominate kit design in the late 1960s. Distinguishing club-specific features were removed, with a widespread absence of trim and badges enhancing the similarity of many shirt, short and sock combinations. By the end of the 1968/69 season, over three-quarters of English Football League clubs played in plain shirts, a historical low for patterning (see Figure 4). Traditional multi-coloured arrangements were not sacrosanct: Arsenal and Huddersfield Town, both of whom had (and have) an established custom of dual-colour shirts, adopted plain shirts during this period.<sup>34</sup> The lack of detail meant that there was not only little or no difference between different clubs' shirts, but also little potential for distinction between a genuine kit and an inaccurate replica (though, given the relative lack of media images of players, the accuracy of a child-replica



**Figure 4** Presence of any patterning on home shirt of clubs in sample, 1888/89 to 1979/80

*Note:* Graph excludes wartime ‘seasons’ in which Football League was not contested: 1914/15 to 1918/19 and 1939/40 to 1945/46 inclusive

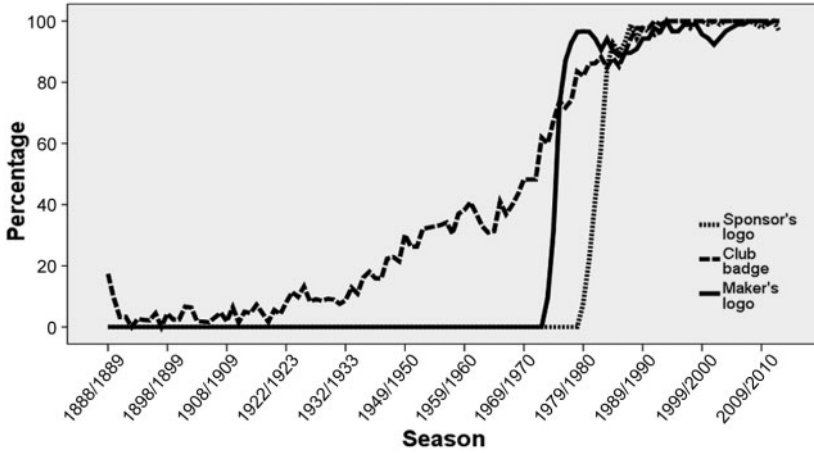
kit of the mid-to-late-1960s is less likely to have been subject to detailed expert scrutiny).

Recognizing the potential for growing the replica kit market if the product could also claim a greater degree of objective authenticity through official club endorsement and uniqueness of design and manufacturer, and the resulting profitability of being the exclusive supplier of a major club’s replica kit, Admiral was the first company to link up with a football club to become the sole producer of a copyrighted kit. Utilizing the 1968 Copyright Act, it established a licensing arrangement with Leeds United FC, then one of the dominant forces in English football, in 1973.<sup>35</sup> The specifics of the deal were that Admiral redesigned the kit and copyrighted that design, becoming the sole legal supplier to retail outlets. In return it paid the club a fee for this exclusivity: Bert Patrick, Admiral’s owner, recalls that his company paid Leeds an initial fee of £10,000, offset against a 5% royalty on sales of the club’s Admiral clothing and leisurewear.<sup>36</sup> The immediate success of this partnership was reflected by almost all English Football League clubs signing similar contracts within the following half-decade, and other kit manufacturers joining Admiral in the scramble for contracts. These included not just established kit suppliers such as Bukta and Umbro, who had previously enjoyed a near monopoly, but also overseas entrants to the market (such as Germany’s Adidas and France’s Le Coq Sportif), and new UK-based manufacturers, for example HOBOTT (House of Barrington Official Teamster Top) at Sheffield United FC.<sup>37</sup>

Promoting these replicas among children was aided by developments within both televisual and print media. In the late 1960s football coverage emerged from grainy monochrome into a world of colour and clarity. Though daily newspaper images remained as black and white newsprint, in 1969 both BBC1 and ITV began colour television broadcasts, including their flagship weekly football highlights packages *Match of the Day* and *The Big Match*.<sup>38</sup> Admiral actively targeted clubs involved in televised big matches to launch its revolutionary designs. For example, Southampton unveiled a new away kit in the 1976 FA Cup Final, and West Ham United first wore their claret and blue chevron home shirt in the 1976 European Cup-Winners' Cup Final.<sup>39</sup>

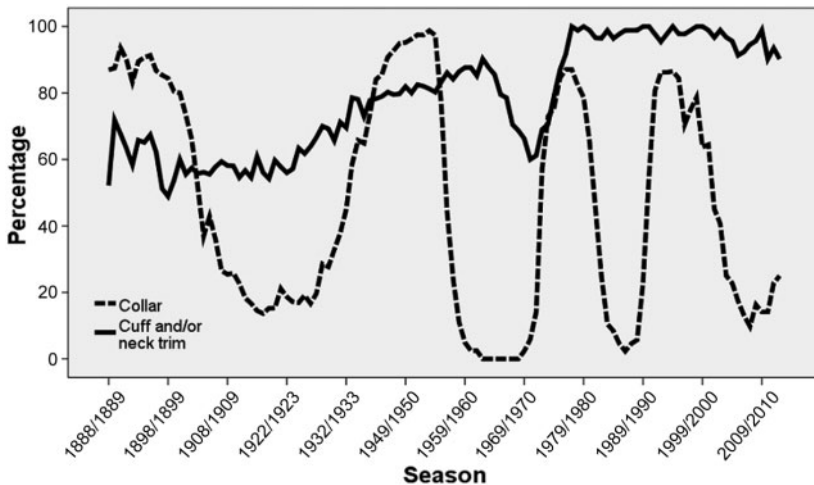
Nonetheless, it took until 1976 for colour television licences to even outnumber black-and-white ones.<sup>40</sup> The launches of *Shoot!* magazine (1969) and *Goal* magazine (1968, merged with *Shoot!* in 1974) are likely to have played an equally important role in developing a customer base for replica football kits.<sup>41</sup> Both included large glossy colour photos and pull-out centrefolds of match action shots and team groups, enabling young fans to affix images of their team's latest kit to their bedroom walls, displaying its visual attractiveness and link to specific footballing heroes. The long-established *Charles Buchan's Football Monthly*, later just *Football Monthly*, had featured a colour cover since its inception in 1951, and had been used by Umbro to advertise its sports apparel.<sup>42</sup> However, *Shoot!* and to a lesser extent *Goal*, provided news, articles and interviews in a more informal style that appealed to a younger readership. At its launch *Shoot!* billed itself as the 'Terrific new football paper for boys'; the portfolio of advertisers suggests an age range stretching to the mid-teens.<sup>43</sup> The content, style and readership profile offered manufacturers the perfect forum to advertise their replica kits adjacent to photos of the real thing, an opportunity that was regularly utilized.<sup>44</sup> Admiral even produced its own book in the style of these popular magazines' annuals, unsurprisingly containing multiple colour photos of Admiral-kitted teams in action.<sup>45</sup>

Copyrighting kit designs had substantial implications for the aesthetic elements of shirt design. In the short to medium term, three principal changes occurred. First, to be copyrighted and provide the authenticity that their young customers sought, shirts had to be clearly identifiable as being from a specific club. This requirement drove design innovations. Examples include the addition of club badges (presence up from 60% to 82% between the 1974/75 and 1979/80 seasons – see [Figure 5a](#)), and the addition of trim ([Figure 5b](#)). Collars became ubiquitous, and the presence of shirt collar and cuff trim was almost universal. There was a minor



**Figure 5a** Presence of club badge, sponsor’s logo and kit maker/supplier logo on home shirt of clubs in sample, 1888/89 to 2012/13  
*Note:* Graph excludes wartime ‘seasons’ in which Football League was not contested: 1914/15 to 1918/19 and 1939/40 to 1945/46 inclusive

revival of macro patterning in place of single colour shirts (see Figure 4). The latter included returning traditions, such as Huddersfield Town FC’s stripes, and new forms of patterning (e.g. Leicester City FC’s shirts with



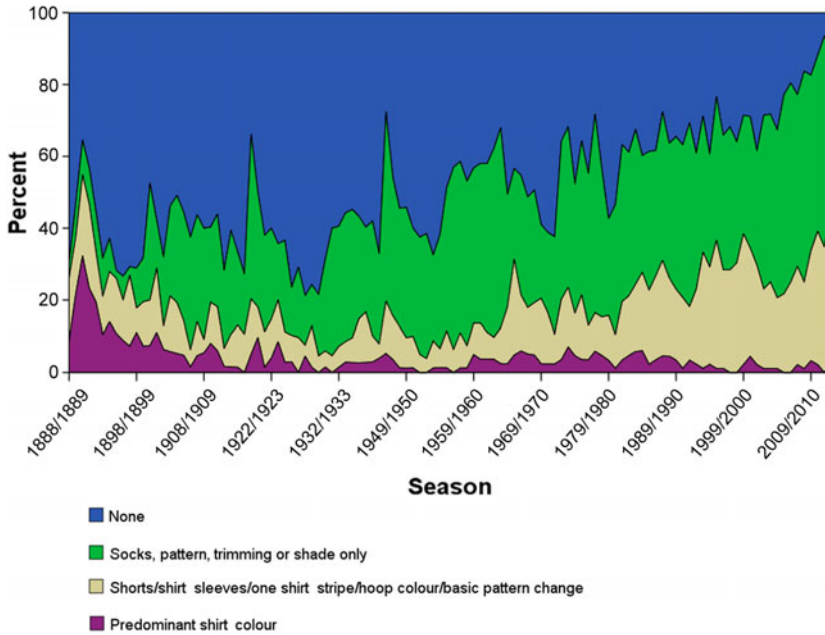
**Figure 5b** Presence of trim on neck and cuffs, and presence of collar on home shirt of clubs in sample, 1888/89 to 2012/13  
*Note:* Graph excludes wartime ‘seasons’ in which Football League was not contested: 1914/15 to 1918/19 and 1939/40 to 1945/46 inclusive

shoulder 'epaulettes' featuring Admiral logos).<sup>46</sup> With substantial income now being derived from the child-replica kit market, kit styling also began to be influenced by the perceived tastes of that market as opposed to simply catering for football teams. Designers incorporated bright colours that appealed to a youthful demographic and also offered space for further conspicuous supplier-brand incorporation.

Second, a club's kit rapidly became intrinsically connected to its supplier's as well as its own brand identity. Prior to the 1973/74 season the shirt-front had been the preserve of the club badge or left without logo or insignia. In August 1973 Umbro introduced its logo onto the front of Leeds United FC's and Liverpool FC's shirts.<sup>47</sup> Upon agreeing their ground-breaking deal with Leeds and hence superseding Umbro, Admiral immediately introduced its logo onto Leeds's kit.<sup>48</sup> The success of this enterprise is reflected in the speed of its diffusion: as illustrated in [Figure 5a](#), between the 1974/75 and 1977/78 seasons, manufacturers' or suppliers' logos made their debut on over 90% of English Football League club home shirts (the adoption of shirt sponsorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s was similarly rapid and universal). Change strips and tracksuits were similarly adorned, with the former becoming an 'away' strip, i.e. being worn even when home and away team colours did not clash, in order to promote and popularize it among potential replica consumers. The maker's logo appeared on the opposite breast to the club badge, and at the same height – a prominent placement that conferred equal importance to the supplier's and club's identities. Additional sleeve trim featuring the maker's logo, an embellishment introduced by Admiral in 1976, was rapidly copied by Bukta and Umbro. Thus the maker's brand became an integral part of the overall design and not merely a visible trademark.

Third and finally, the frequency of change in kit design increased ([Figure 6](#)). In the preceding century, the rate of kit design change had shown a very gentle increase with peaks after the world wars. Between the 1964/65 and 1973/74 seasons, an average of 50% of the 92 league clubs changed their kit in any one season; for the period 1974/75 to 1979/80, the equivalent figure rose to over 60%, and continued to rise thereafter. This increase was mostly due to changes in styling, trim and minor patterning, as opposed to major patterning or primary colours. Clubs and manufacturers exploited the customer's desire to own an authentic replica by changing what constituted the accurate reproduction of the current strip, thereby creating a new market.

As a result, the aesthetic elements of kit designs morphed in an attempt to enhance the customer's perception of the authenticity of the shirt with




**Figure 6** Percentage of clubs in sample showing change in their home playing kit from the previous season: 1889/90 to 2012/13

*Note:* Graph excludes wartime ‘seasons’ in which Football League was not contested: 1914/15 to 1918/19 and 1939/40 to 1945/46 inclusive


respect to its role as child-replica sportswear. However, following this revolution, the marketing of replica kits began to evolve in a way that hinted at a further, yet equally fundamental, change. Advertising for child-sized replica football apparel, placed within catalogues or football magazines, had previously depicted either famous players or children dressed in the full football kit in a sporting scenario, be it playing the game or within a team photo. In 1978, an Admiral advert (Figure 7), which featured in a mid-1978 issue of *Shoot!* magazine, instead pictured children in an urban setting, some of whom were wearing their replica shirts in combination with denim jeans.<sup>49</sup> Through these juxtapositions of sportswear with streetwear, and by accompanying the advert with the caption ‘Whether you support a top soccer club or national team, or you are just interested in looking great...’, Admiral was positing its replica shirts, and therefore football shirts, as leisurewear products.

In signalling a shift in the primary focus of replica kit marketing, both from the full strip to the shirt alone and in the role of that shirt transmuting to leisurewear, this advert marked the beginning of the end

## Our kit is just up your street



Whether you support a top soccer club or national team, or you are just interested in looking great, —Admiral is the kit to be seen in! Just go up the street to your local sports shop and take a look at the range of fantastic Admiral clothing and footwear. Now! **If it's Admiral-it's professional.**



**Figure 7** Admiral advert, 1978 (Image courtesy of Admiral Sportswear, copyright Admiral Sportswear Ltd.)

of the child-replica era. These adaptations would be accompanied by the primary customer base for replica kit changing from children to adults over the course of the following ten to fifteen years. A comparison of photos of fans walking up Wembley Way and inside the stadium for the FA Cup finals of 1980 and 1990 illustrates how the replica football shirt was gradually embraced as adult leisurewear in this period. None of more than 100 fans whose clothing is pictured clearly in photos taken outside and inside the stadium at the 1980 final are wearing a replica shirt. In a photo taken inside the stadium at the 1990 final, the majority of supporters are dressed in replica shirts.<sup>50</sup> Alongside this change in customer age profile came a gradual improvement in the quality of replication. Plastic badges that peeled off after a handful of wash cycles were superseded by embroidered versions. Sponsors' logos were initially

excluded or only available at extra printing cost to the customer, but were soon included automatically on all replica shirts.

Though considering the minutiae of this transformation in customer base is beyond the scope of this article, it can be linked to wider societal changes of the period. Specific potential antecedents or correlates include a trend towards wearing sportswear as streetwear fashion. Ironically, it was the soccer casuals hooligan subculture of the early to mid-1980s that sociologist Richard Giulianotti cites as 'cultural intermediaries' in this process.<sup>51</sup> The casuals did not adopt replica shirts themselves. However, their wearing of designer sportswear in public spaces, and their popularization of this style within youth subcultures immediately preceded the late 1980s adoption of both high- and low-end brand sportswear as leisurewear by the wider populace.<sup>52</sup> The 1980s also witnessed a fitness and exercise boom, which in turn spawned the 'lifestyle adopter' of sportswear – a consumer who may not have exercised very much at all but wished to buy into the now fashionable sporting lifestyle via his clothing choices.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, distinctions between youth and adult dress codes were becoming increasingly blurred, an artefact of the phenomenon of 'kidulthood' or 'middle youth', in which, as Bill Osgerby describes, youth cultures and markets have 'expanded way beyond their generational base to embrace consumer groups in their ... thirties and older'.<sup>54</sup>

A combination of one or more of these 'push' factors is likely to have combined with inertia in the leisurewear choices of customers who grew up with a replica shirt in their wardrobe, to make the football shirt acceptable apparel for the post-teen. Alongside, and no doubt acting reciprocally with these broader societal themes, there was increasingly proactive marketing of shirts by manufacturers and the retail trade; and, in the early 1990s, a change in the image and public perception of football itself, such that leading clubs themselves became desirable brands proactively seeking to extend their reach.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the precise bookending and tipping points of this metamorphosis, the relative weights of the various sociocultural and economic mechanisms lying behind it, and the extent to which a change in child use preceded and mediated adult adoption, are all worthy of further detailed investigation.

While this transformation of the football shirt customer base was occurring, aesthetic design trends represented a continuation of the broad themes developed in the 1970s. Sponsorship logos became universal, changes in kits became increasingly frequent, and shirts (and kit design generally) continued to become more colourful and intricate. This was achieved by the further addition of trim, flashes, a second or third 'accent' colour and, most noticeably, micro-patterned materials made possible by

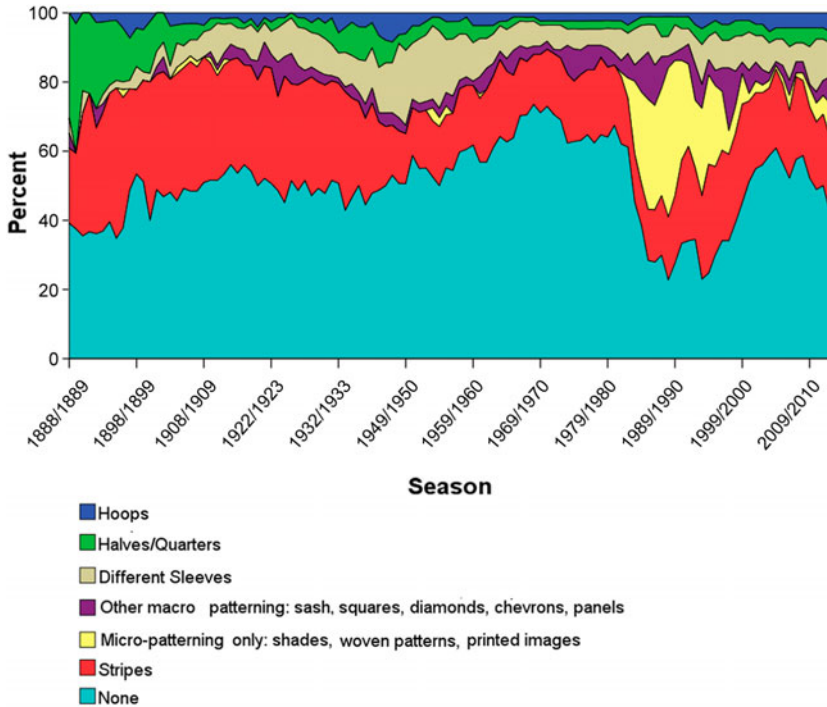
new fabric technologies, specifically the switch from natural fibres to polyester.<sup>56</sup> Micro-patterning began with the shadow stripe, a mixture of matt and shiny finishes of the same colour, and reached its apogee with the garish multi-coloured shirts that were fashionable in the early 1990s. Notable home shirt examples from 1992 include Hull City FC's tiger skin print and Birmingham City FC's blue with multi-coloured dots design.<sup>57</sup> Manufacturers and clubs were still aiming to satisfy the shirt-buying supporter's desire for authenticity via distinctiveness and originality.

### **A retrospective turn: kit design in the Premier League era**

However, once the football shirt was established as a primarily adult product, the decade and a half from the mid-1990s to 2010 witnessed a move away from complex, colourful shirt designs. Traditional colours and styles became the norm, with the multi-coloured micro-patterned materials popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s largely dying out. By the mid-2000s, plain shirts, with no adornment other than collar and cuff trim, piping or minor flashes, had returned to their historical levels of between 45% and 55% (Figure 8).

Though redesigns have become ever more frequent – at the start of the 2012/13 season, over 90% of teams changed their home shirt compared to the previous season (Figure 6 above) – a club's variations in design from season to season have typically become less dramatic, usually restricted to minor rearrangements of collar and cuff trim, collar and neck styles, and small flashes or piping. Changes of principal colours, though never common, are now extremely rare, and can provoke serious discontent among supporters. When Cardiff City's owner Vincent Tan chose to dress his recent acquisition in red rather than their traditional blue from the start of the 2012/13 season, there was vocal protest among fans.<sup>58</sup> Where macro patterning has been retained or reintroduced into designs, this has taken the form of minor revivals of stylistic features of the past, such as round 'crew' necks, lace-up collars, and chevrons, with a corresponding absence of new, innovative aesthetic design elements.

Taking this retrospective turn in contemporary shirt design to its logical conclusion, many clubs have begun to openly state that a specific kit design is based upon a previous season, often a successful one. For example, Coventry City FC described its new kit for the 2012/13 season as a re-creation of that worn while rising from third to first division between 1962 and 1967.<sup>59</sup> Other retrospective references have been more subtle, such as Everton FC re-adopting the white infill collar which formed part of their home shirt worn between 1983 and 1985 by their Football League



**Figure 8** Percentage of clubs in sample with each type of primary home shirt pattern, 1888/89 to 2012/13

*Note:* Graph excludes wartime 'seasons' in which Football League was not contested: 1914/15 to 1918/19 and 1939/40 to 1945/46 inclusive

and FA Cup winning teams.<sup>60</sup> Retrospective shirt designs have been connected to club anniversaries or significant historical events, such as Arsenal FC marking its final season at Highbury Stadium (2005/06) by wearing a home shirt purportedly based upon that of the first season at its hallowed venue 92 years earlier (further research revealed that the supposed plum-coloured shirt of 1913 was more likely to have been the traditional Arsenal Garibaldi red).<sup>61</sup> In 2014 Watford FC launched a new away kit, a replica of its home strip worn in the 1913/14 season, with a video clip promoting the design as commemorating 100 years since the start of the First World War, and in particular the Watford players who fought in the conflict.<sup>62</sup>

This stagnation in contemporary kit design was preceded, and most likely influenced, by the emergence of a parallel, though niche, 'retro-replica' football shirt industry, launched in 1990 when start-up companies TOFFS (The Old Fashioned Football Shirt Company) and Arkwright

Sportswear began to produce and market replica versions of club and international shirts from previous eras.<sup>63</sup> Retro-replica manufacturers have concentrated on reproducing shirt designs from between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, alongside a handful of older designs. By May 2014, TOFFS offered almost 1,000 shirts from 400 different club or international teams for sale via their website, and had been joined by several competitors, most notably Retake and Retro World Football Shirts.<sup>64</sup> Admiral has also reinvented itself as a heritage brand, reproducing a selection of its 1970s and early 1980s kit designs, and many football clubs have added retro-replica shirts to their branded leisurewear ranges.<sup>65</sup>

This revolution in football shirt design aesthetics since the mid-1990s reflects the change in customer profile that occurred in the previous decade. The new, primarily adult customer base also seeks an authentic shirt, but their interpretation of constructive and existential authenticity is likely to be very different and more heterogeneous than that of the child and youth customers who previously predominated. Clubs, sportswear manufacturers, and the founders of the retro-replica industry have recognized this. Whereas the need to offer authenticity through distinctiveness to youthful replica kit customers drove contemporary shirt design in the 1970s, both the retro-replica industry and subsequent retro-influenced contemporary kit design aesthetics attempt to evoke nostalgia, satisfy the wearer's demand for constructive authenticity and boost their existential authenticity. This nexus of authenticity and nostalgia – the latter defined as 'a preference towards objects (people, places or things) that were more common when one was younger', possibly tinged with disappointment about the present, and wistful feelings of loss – can be classified into personal, club-specific and wider socio-political dimensions, each of which is fulfilled by retrospective designs.<sup>66</sup>

First, for adults, the shirt of their favourite team is a badge that proclaims them to be an authentic fan. This will in part operate in the same way as it did for the children of the 1970s, who would delight in showing off their support by sporting the latest replica kit while kicking a ball around the local park. However, for adults, both their existential authenticity as fans and the shirt that proclaims it are likely to represent their past as well as their present, a past that previous shirt designs, possibly matching or resembling the child-replicas they purchased in the 1970s, can evoke. Such nostalgic feelings will not just be focused upon players or matches, but can also be childhood and family memories for which football provided the setting as opposed to the focus. These may include collective as well as personal memories, for instance the trademark styles of individual footballers.<sup>67</sup> Echoing the player endorsement

marketing strategy of early Umbroset child-replicas, TOFFS' website similarly organizes ranges of shirts under the heading 'football heroes', linking the 'as worn by' epithet to a selection of great players, almost all from the 1960s to the 1980s.<sup>68</sup> Nostalgia may also be communicated down through generations via archive footage, books, match programme articles and oral histories, such that even those without personal memories of a heroic player, a cup-winning, league-conquering team or a giant-killing performance may begin to experience nostalgia for them.<sup>69</sup>

The exploitation of nostalgia in product creation and marketing has deep roots and is widely acknowledged.<sup>70</sup> Nostalgia is a positive influence on fan attachment and allegiance to a favourite sports team, and more widely, consumer spending.<sup>71</sup> English football clubs appear to be increasingly aware of how the nostalgia and authenticity offered by their heritage can be effective elements of brand establishment and delineation and have accordingly begun to capitalize upon this. Specifically, a football club's heritage, both tangible and intangible, offers an especially cogent antidote to the increasingly 'McDonaldized' and 'Disneyized' modern stadium. The former construct, defined by George Ritzer, refers to environments designed to be efficient, predictable and controlled; the latter term was coined by sociologist Alan Bryman in reference to settings configured for increased thematic branding and merchandising.<sup>72</sup> In his analysis of changes in English football during the 1990s and 2000s, Roger Titford laments that modern stadia can sometimes only be distinguished by the colour of their seats.<sup>73</sup> Ramshaw and Gammon define sport heritage as having multiple components: English football clubs have focused upon 'tangible movable' objects and experiences, and 'goods and services'.<sup>74</sup> Utilizing the former encompasses 'retrofication' or 'museumification' tactics such as developing halls of fame, erecting the statues now bristling outside many stadia and commissioning murals celebrating past heroes.<sup>75</sup> Similar strategies have previously been employed widely by US sport franchises, for example, through retro-styled stadium design and decoration, and in events such as old-timers' days, where players and even stewards dress in playing kits and uniforms from the past.<sup>76</sup> Heritage goods and services include products for fan consumption such as DVDs of past triumphs. The marketing of retro-replica shirts by clubs and manufacturers, and the redesign of contemporary English football club kits to feature retrospective elements, form a natural continuation of this trend.<sup>77</sup>

However, the marketing of the retro-replica shirt (and, to a lesser extent, retro-influenced contemporary designs) is not contingent on nostalgia. Sociologist Sarah Thornton, drawing on the work of Pierre

Bourdieu, describes the acquisition of 'subcultural capital' through authenticity claims.<sup>78</sup> A football shirt that acknowledges the past also projects a fan's status, by conveying the wearer's existential authenticity as a fan. Through wearing the history of the club, they display loyalty and knowledge. Giulianotti notes the particular distinction acquired by fans who did not emerge during 'the post-1990 boom in the sport's fashionability'.<sup>79</sup> More broadly, among a group of football fans interviewed by Dixon, achieving subcultural capital as a true fan 'was based largely on longevity'.<sup>80</sup> Acquiring such subcultural capital is an obvious appeal of retro-replica shirts. In fact younger fans with what Giulianotti defines as 'hot traditional' tendencies, whose youthful features mark them down as arriviste or 'nouveau' supporters attracted by the celebrity and saturation coverage of the English Premier League as opposed to any real commitment, may feel a greater incentive to overtly display their authenticity.

Such fans, eager to authenticate their support and expertise in their club's history, may favour a shirt replicating that of an era before their birth or even, in a manifestation of proclaiming loyalty through 'basking in reflected failure' (BIRFing), from a season in which their club was not particularly successful.<sup>81</sup> Taking this approach to an extreme, a small minority of fans wear retro-replica shirts of a defunct or non-league club that they may not have a personal attachment to, thus projecting their status both as football experts and as people who reject the modern game by supporting a team not even within popular consciousness, let alone one that receives populist casual support.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, hot traditional fans may choose to reject a replica of the current team shirt due to its association with what Dixon terms 'fake fandom'.<sup>83</sup> Considering cultural capital and consumption among football fans, marketing scholars Brendan Richardson and Darach Turley state that while the wider fan community, particularly those less committed followers, new fans and sports tourists that they class as 'daytrippers', 'consume official branded football merchandise in order to experience the sacred', the 'inner circle of traditional fans view the market as a de-sacralising influence'. Therefore retro-influenced designs of contemporary team kits, which connect glossy fabric to the club's heritage and authenticity, are an attempt by clubs to resolve this conflict and thus make a club's current shirt appeal to all fans.<sup>84</sup>

The retro-replica shirt also supplements its offer of existential authenticity by appealing to generational tastes in clothing. In the early 1990s the cleaner, less cluttered look of the retro-replica offered a distinctive fashion choice compared to the current kit, especially to the middle-aged

consumer who may have considered contemporary shirt design too 'flashy', and, at a time when widespread adult consumption of replica shirts was still in its relative infancy, as something inherently childlike. Contemporary shirt designers rapidly followed the lead of the retro-replica industry, and opted for simple, plain designs that the increasingly middle-aged (and middle-class) fan base would feel comfortable wearing on a match day and away from the stadium.

Second, a fan referencing the past through wearing a retro-replica or retro-tinged contemporary design proclaims the authenticity of *their club*: that is, the fan is showing not only that their personal support has a history, but that their club does too. Supporters wish for their club to be distinctive, and have a clear identity. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the combination of bold and innovative kit design fashions of this era and season-upon-season change in design meant that the home shirts of many clubs looked very different to what would be considered their traditional attire. The understanding of what was traditional may have become blurred. As Benzecry notes in his study of Boca Juniors' shirt, 'Being misidentified or misinterpreted dilutes the powers and prowess of the jersey in the eyes of all those involved'.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, sponsorship logos, which often change from season to season, league logos attached to shirt sleeves and the introduction of players' names on the back of the shirt from 1993 have conspired in a general 'corporatization' of the football shirt, which diminishes its 'aura'.<sup>86</sup>

Returning to and sticking with more retrospectively influenced and therefore traditional designs is a logical marketing strategy for clubs aiming to project a coherent visual identity and placate fans. However, in order to maximize income through regular changes in shirt design, minor adjustments have to be made. This explains the ubiquitous use of collar and cuff trim or flashes on contemporary football shirts in the replica kit era (see [Figure 5b](#)), and also a recent fashion for adding stars above the badge to represent the number of trophies won: these are minor aesthetic design elements that can be added, removed or altered without making much impression upon the basic appearance (badge stars also add to the authenticity projected by the shirt through imparting a sense of history and tradition). Similarly, the success of the retro-replica industry is based in part upon supporters wishing to display what they see as their club's true identity.

Third, the birth and success of retro-replica shirts in the early 1990s reflects the desire of a section of football fans to project a socio-political message that goes beyond club loyalty, and is one of critical appraisal as opposed to unquestioning compliance. The Premier League's formation in

1992 and the accompanying boom in broadcasting revenues, allied to the sanitization of the spectator experience brought about by the implementation of the Taylor Report's recommendation of all-seater stadia, wrought seismic changes to the football landscape, particularly the match-day experience.<sup>87</sup> At Premier League level, English football clubs became commercial global brands, a status which, while opening income streams that benefit their clubs, is also deleterious to the authentic and distinct experience that many fans crave.<sup>88</sup> Author Gary Imlach, returning to watch top-flight English football in the late 1990s after almost a decade abroad, notes that he felt 'like a stranger to his own game'.<sup>89</sup> Many long-term fans would have felt such a sense of dislocation, particularly those defined by Giulianotti as hot traditional.<sup>90</sup> Fans of this type are characterized by a strong allegiance to their club that is not founded purely upon, nor is dependent upon, playing success, and by their strong topophilic attachment to their club's stadium.<sup>91</sup>

The inception and initial success of the retro-replica shirt industry not only aligns with the era of hypercommodification, but also with a countervailing push against it. Politicized fan activism, which had its roots in the football fanzine culture of the mid-1980s, rapidly grew into independent supporters' associations and single-issue campaigns, such as those opposing the introduction of ID cards, proposed mergers or unpopular ground redevelopments.<sup>92</sup> The retro-replica shirt offers the 'hot traditional' fan both a practical and metaphorical rejection of the commercialism of the modern football industry, and an opportunity to state a preference for what he or she sees as a more authentic football culture.

As an already outdated object, wearing a retro-replica shirt may, for some fans, represent an opting-out from the commercial cycle inherent in purchasing the current kit. The aesthetic purity of the plain colour scheme or simple pattern of typical pre-mid-1970s shirt designs, coupled with the matt appearance of the heavy cotton fabric that retro-replicas are usually produced in, chimes with the moral purity conferred by the absence of advertising or maker's name. Even re-issues of shirts from the late 1980s may, through the identity of the sponsor itself, which was often a local or regional manufacturer, offer a local and located counterpoint to the globalized contemporary football landscape of 2014, where sponsors at the highest level are frequently multinational concerns or online casinos.<sup>93</sup> As Kendall and Osbaldiston observe, retro-replica shirts are 'an example of a modern secular battleground to recapture the sacred essence of a collective identity – notably a collective identity that doesn't involve interactions with external commercial organisations'.<sup>94</sup> This is naturally allied with the 'restorative nostalgia' that sociologist Neil Ewen identifies as prevalent

among older fans.<sup>95</sup> A totemic object from the better past can be purchased and displayed in direct opposition to the derided present equivalent, an attitude summed up in the increasingly visible grassroots campaigning movements that brand themselves 'Against Modern Football'.<sup>96</sup>

The smattering of fans wearing retro-replica shirts at Premier League matches suggests that for some supporters this apparel operates as a reverse discourse. By wearing the football shirt as an item of superficial protest, the fan can justify still gracing the highly commercialized spectacle before him with his presence. Yet a retro-replica shirt, as clothing with time-sensitive appeal designed and produced to sell for profit, is also part of the fashion system, and is an example of how the fashion industry absorbs counter-cultural trends to exploit them. As Uché Okonkwo states, 'The relationship between consumers and a strong brand is a type of bond or pact that starts with a psychological process in the mind of the consumer and is manifested through product purchases.'<sup>97</sup> Though a fan might aspire to the moral purity that the retro-replica confers, fulfilling this involves the very commodification he opposes. Football clubs, through styling their contemporary football shirt designs around retrospective influences, have in turn exploited the fashion, and burgeoning market, for retro-replicas. As such, the use of the retrospective designs to project personal ideals opposing the commodification of football and fandom is deeply ambiguous.

## **Conclusion**

Football shirts originally fulfilled a singular role as sportswear, but the development of a replica kit industry has changed their principal economic function. From our analysis, we conclude that fundamental changes have occurred in the aesthetic elements of kit design to match this new *raison d'être*. Design has become centred on fulfilling the customer's requirement of an authentic product. However, the customer base's demographic profile has been fluid, changing from a child and youth market to one dominated by adults, a timeline and process that offers much scope for further research. Because of this change, the typical interpretation of the shirt's authenticity has also evolved. This in turn has led to aesthetic elements of contemporary football shirt design becoming increasingly retrospective, and to a new industry supplying retro-replica shirts.

This raises the question of future kit design. One interpretation is that the football shirt has completed a journey from sportswear to leisurewear, becoming an acceptable item of casual clothing to be worn away from the ground on non-match-days. As a sportswear item, be it professional's

match clothing or child-replica, a distinctive, brightly coloured shirt might confer an advantage in distinguishability and perceived fashionability. However, in its guise as adult leisurewear, a garish football shirt is likely to prove unattractive to many potential consumers. If this is the case, the modern football shirt will continue to be styled as multipurpose street apparel that offers a blank canvas prepared simultaneously for the incorporation of, and possible subjugation to, the brand aesthetics of multiple commercial partners.

Specifically, the contemporary football shirt is being designed not to interrupt the array of brand insignia that now appears on it, from the sponsor and league patches to the player's name (the increasing use of players' first names or nicknames itself suggesting the power that players perceive in their own brand image, and their resultant desire to control it).<sup>98</sup> This mirrors wider fashion trends, in which streetwear has become distinguishable more by brand logos than by styles of clothing. However, in one sense football shirts have not yet become truly entwined with the leisurewear industry. Manufacture and supply of football shirts is still dominated by historic or new sportswear brands. There has not yet been an instance of an established popular middlebrow or high-end streetwear brand entering the football shirt industry, despite the deeply aspirational celebrity culture surrounding successful professional footballers. This lacuna, and the broader interaction between football shirts, football culture and popular fashion, presents an inviting avenue for future research, especially since expensive designer clothing does have a presence within modern football subcultures, providing the match-day outfit of choice for the latest wave of football 'casuals'.<sup>99</sup>

An alternative explanation is that the football shirt has become a heritage product and as such, future 'innovations' in the aesthetics of kit design will consist of the recycling of old ideas. Gregory Ashworth defines heritage as 'a process and an outcome' as much as an object or location.<sup>100</sup> Cultural geographer Gregory Ramshaw, expanding upon this while considering sport as heritage, notes that this process is 'a product of the present, driven by the needs, tastes, and values of that present, which takes materials of the past, whether they are relics, history or memory, and constructs them for the requirements of an imagined future'.<sup>101</sup> Under these definitions both the retro-replica football shirt and the contemporary football shirt are heritage, and shirt design, at least in its aesthetic aspects, has become a quasi-heritage industry. In his polemic against the British heritage industry boom of the 1980s, historian Robert Hewison warns that the national focus upon heritage has become 'entropic', that is 'as the past solidifies around us, all creative energy has become lost', and

that the associated feverish levels of nostalgia 'point to a ... stifling of the culture of the present'.<sup>102</sup>

Our analysis of football shirts indicates that shirt design, at least in its aesthetic elements, is similarly afflicted. UK societal changes identified by Hewison are reflected by the nation's national sport. If this is true, we would soon expect to see a revival of the garish designs of the late 1980s and early 1990s as these eras enter the window of nostalgic reminiscence. Shirts from this era have already become sought-after items for shirt collectors on online auction websites. In fact there is already evidence from 2011 onwards of a small revival in the use of micro-patterned fabrics in contemporary shirts (see [Figure 8](#)). For example, in 2012 Notts County introduced a home shirt based upon the design worn in their successful 1993/94 season, featuring barcode-style stripes of different widths.

The recycling of designs less than two decades old also hints at fans experiencing an accelerated or compressed nostalgia effect. Such compressed nostalgia is related to wider societal trends towards rapid and sometimes designed obsolescence of products and even personalities, inextricably bound to hegemonic cultures of consumerism and disposable celebrity, which have rendered impermanence as permanent. Both the rapid obsolescence typified by the almost annual redesign and replacement of football team kit – and, within football's wider orbit, the rapid and revolutionary changes in what was previously a slowly evolving culture (e.g. new stadia, league restructuring and rebranding) – are likely to make a shirt of 10 years before feel older and of more nostalgic value than it would have done in the less disposable, more stable past. Though nostalgia has been substantially researched across multiple disciplines, sports fans' perceptions of exactly what comprises nostalgic content, and which periods of their life are most likely to evoke nostalgic feelings, remain relatively unexplored.<sup>103</sup>

Whether the football shirt's aesthetic design elements have exhausted possibilities or become corralled within the strictures of the heritage process, contemporary football shirt design in its fullness is not short on innovation. The use of a squad number for each player (instead of the previous system of numbering from 1 to 11), the introduction of the player's name above this number, and sleeve patches displaying a league logo can all be seen as attempts by football clubs, the football authorities and sportswear manufacturers to satisfy the section of fans who still interpret football shirt authenticity in the objective or constructive sense of looking like (and aspiring to play like) their heroes. However, innovation is now mostly found beyond superficial appearance, and has concentrated on technical innovation and marketing strategies. Technical

fabric developments continue apace, each claiming to bring an advantage to the player in terms of weight, breathability or cut. Such innovations are touted as improving playing performance, yet there is no evidence that clubs are choosing specific suppliers for this reason. The history of technological innovation in the football kit has been largely ignored, and offers much scope for scholars.

Allying technological innovation or improvement to a tiered pricing strategy, manufacturers have begun to market replica shirts with varying degrees of accuracy of reproduction, with price-tags to match. In 2013 Adidas introduced 'Authentic' and 'Replica' shirts, with the former commanding a \$35 premium, to the North American market, where it enjoys a monopoly on Major League Soccer replica shirts, and where other major sports employ similar multiple price-pointing strategies for replica sportswear. Though sharing identical styling and patterning, the 'Replica' shirts are constructed in a different fabric from those worn by the players, whereas the 'Authentic' represents a more accurate (re)creation with extra appeal. Nike copied this strategy when launching its 2014 England shirt: for adults 'Match' Editions cost £90, 'Stadium' versions £60. However, the negative publicity generated by the high prices may delay this strategy being implemented by club sides.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, by differentiating between levels of quality of reproduction, manufacturers are openly admitting that their still highly priced 'Stadium' shirts are not in fact objectively authentic, and are thus potentially diminishing the product in the eyes of fans. In an additional dimension of product (and market) extension that trades objective authenticity for streetwear fashion, hence recognizing that among the adult customer base this may not be the primary concern, a small number of football clubs have begun to offer replica kits with a slightly different cut and shaping tailored specifically for female fans.<sup>105</sup> Such active extension to encompass an ever wider range of customers exemplifies the acceleration in growth of the wider sports goods industry, particularly sports clothing, as global businesses.<sup>106</sup>

A final strand in the contemporary football-shirt marketplace is the flourishing online trade in players' match-issue and match-worn shirts that has emerged, sometimes via auctions organized by football clubs but more often facilitated through independent dealers, to satisfy fans who demand objective authenticity and have the finances to achieve it.<sup>107</sup> Such shirts are, of course, not replicas but the real thing, and as such are sold at a premium, typically retailing with an attached 'certificate of authenticity' for between a few hundred and a few thousand pounds depending on the importance of the match and the player who wore the shirt. Shirts from extremely high profile matches can trade for many times more.<sup>108</sup>

As an item sold on the premise of authenticity, the football shirt aims to satisfy fans who seek this through purity and tradition, and others who seek it through distinctiveness that may be achieved by radical design. For some fans sponsorship is an anathema, one that devalues the existential authenticity they find in the football shirt, but for others, once sponsorship has been added, it adds distinctiveness and becomes part of the club's visual image; hence under their constructive assessment of authenticity, a replica would be inauthentic without it. For some it represents a better past, and for others the greatness of the present. The design of the football shirt is, and will remain, an attempt to reconcile multiple competing ideals.

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104. Sam Cunningham, 'England World Cup kit (that costs up to £90) slammed as Barton and Collymore weigh in', Daily Mail Online, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-2593369/Prices-new-England-World-Cup-kit-slammed-Barton-Collymore-weigh-in.html>, accessed May 20, 2014.
105. For example, Chelsea FC offer a women's version of their 2014/15 home shirt. See: Chelsea FC, 'Chelsea Home Shirt 2014/15 – Womens', [chelseamegastore.com](http://www.chelseamegastore.com/stores/chelsea/products/kit_selector.aspx?pid=142772&portal=&cmp=), [http://www.chelseamegastore.com/stores/chelsea/products/kit\\_selector.aspx?pid=142772&portal=&cmp=](http://www.chelseamegastore.com/stores/chelsea/products/kit_selector.aspx?pid=142772&portal=&cmp=), accessed September 10, 2014.
106. Vanessa Ratten and Hamish Ratten, 'International Sport Marketing: Practical and Future Research Implications', *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing* 26, no. 8 (2011): 614–20.
107. As the moniker suggests, match worn shirts have been worn in a match by a professional player. Match issue shirts are defined as shirts produced for match wear by professionals, and issued to the team, but never worn: most likely because they were held as spares in case of a blood injury, or for matches played in very hot conditions.
108. Examples of such online retailers include Vintage Football Shirts (<http://www.vintagefootballshirts.com/match-worn-shirts/?teamid=&pricerange=&sort=Price+-+high+to+low>, accessed September 6, 2014) and Football Match Shirts (<http://footballmatchshirts.co.uk/>, accessed September 6, 2014).