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'We wear the title Yid with pride': personal pronouns and established-outsiders relations in the framing of Tottenham Hotspur as a 'Jewish club'

Bonita Corrie-Lunn ⓘD and Stuart Whigham ⓘD

Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

ABSTRACT

This research demonstrates how Norbert Elias's figurational sociological approach offers an alternative theoretical framework to examine the relationship between sport and religion. Specifically, by investigating the attitudes and opinions of football fans, this study explored the connection between Tottenham Hotspur Football Club and the Jewish faith. A total of 596 Tottenham Hotspur fans were recruited via social media to participate in an online survey, and additional in-depth, unstructured interviews with 10 participants provided qualitative data. Thematic analysis was conducted through an abductive application of figurational concepts such as 'established-outsiders relations' and the 'personal pronoun' model, and consequently generated three main themes: a) 'pride and identity'; b) 'sport as a religion'; and, c) 'community'. Many fans expressed pride in the club's association with the Jewish faith, while others argued that sport and religion are not interconnected. Fans acknowledged similarities between sport fandom and religion, such as the sense of community and belonging experienced among co-religionists or fellow football fans.

Introduction

Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, also known as Spurs or Tottenham, one of North London's largest professional football clubs, has long maintained a distinctive and often challenging relationship with the local Jewish community. Formed in 1882, the club's stadium is situated in an area of North London that became home to many Jewish individuals, including an ultra-orthodox Jewish community (Clavane, 2012; Doherty, 2018). This geographical proximity allowed Jewish fans to walk to the ground on the Sabbath, the Day of Rest, for Saturday afternoon kick-offs before floodlights were introduced, ensuring they did not violate the religious prohibition on using combustion-engine-powered vehicles (Clavane, 2012; Godden, 2014; Nun, 2018).

As a result of this deep historical and geographical connection, Tottenham Hotspur has become recognised internationally as a 'Jewish club' (Efron, 2006; Williams et al., 1984). This unique identity, however, frames the club within the persistent issue of antisemitism in contemporary society and, specifically, in sport. Antisemitism, defined as 'the suspicion, dislike or hatred of Jewish individuals or groups' (Meer, 2014, p. 8), encompasses claims of conspiracy, aggression, and Holocaust denial (Poulton, 2016). Research indicates that antisemitic attitudes remain present in the UK population, with 25% of the British population admitting to holding antisemitic attitudes (May, 2017; Sherwood, 2019). In the context of football, this hostility frequently manifests during matches against Tottenham, as rival fans direct antisemitic abuse at the club and its supporters.

To explore these complex dynamics of identity and prejudice, this research uses a figurational sociological approach, pioneered by the work of Norbert Elias, to provide a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain the relationship between sport and religion. The concept of figurational sociology came

from the notion of 'figurations', which was defined by Elias (1978, p. 261) as 'a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people'. In lieu of traditional concepts such as society, institutions and subcultures, Elias uses the term figurations (Turner, 2012). Elias's theoretical approach is well-suited for researching human communities, such as sport and religion, due to its focus on the interdependency of individuals and the long-term formation of social figurations (Crow & Laidlaw, 2019). Therefore, this theoretical framework will be applied to this research to explore Tottenham Hotspur supporters' connection to the Jewish religion, and the supporters' perceptions of the use of language associating the club with Judaism such as the term 'Yid'. In particular, this paper draws on Elias's work on personal pronouns as markers of identity and othering, together with his conceptualisation of established–outsider relations within and between societal groupings. Past scholarship using these Eliasian concepts in the context of football will be explored in subsequent sections of this article; however, before doing so, some contextualisation of the historical relationship between Tottenham Hotspur and Judaism will be provided to frame the discussion.

Tottenham Hotspur as a 'Jewish club'

Due to its long-standing history, there have been a significant number of stakeholders within the club and numerous changes and developments made, most recently, a new stadium (Masters, 2019). Inevitably, the team has developed group identities which makes members of the Tottenham community easier to recognise. For example, the club's colours (white and navy blue) and the cockerel crest, rooted in the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium location. Although these images are not necessarily associated with Judaism, it is apparent that Spurs have also been associated with the Jewish faith (Buchheister, 2013; Powley & Cloake, 2007; Stratton, 2015). This association is largely constructed by rival fans, sections of the Spurs fanbase, the media and wider public discourse. Although the club has not provided data on the religious affiliations of its fans, it is estimated that roughly 5% identify as Jewish (Cloake & Fisher, 2016). Currently, most supporters do not follow the Jewish religion, raising questions about why Spurs are often regarded as a 'Jewish football club'. Geographical location has had a significant effect on the connection between the club and the Jewish faith, as the collective history of the surrounding neighbourhood, long associated with a substantial Jewish community, continues to shape how this identity is perceived and reproduced. Other likely reasons include the religious identities of current and former shareholders and the use of the term 'Yid', a Jewish ethnonym (Poulton & Durell, 2016). The term operates simultaneously as a self-referential identity marker and as a label that is ascribed by rival supporters as a hostile stereotype.

As the empirical data indicate, some Tottenham Hotspur supporters use 'Yids', 'The Yid Army', or 'The Yiddos' as forms of in-group identification that express solidarity and pride. Conversely, the term Yid is used by rival supporters as a derogatory epithet. This dual usage is central to the controversy; the meaning of the term shifts depending on whether it is being reclaimed by fans themselves or applied by others in a hostile context. The term 'Yid' has long functioned as a non-derogatory term within Ashkenazi Jewish communities, where it was used as a familiar expression meaning 'Jew' (Poulton, 2013), whilst different social groupings have at times sought to impose more negative interpretations of the term. For example, the Nazi regime in Germany began to abbreviate the word 'Yiddish' to Yid using it in a derogatory way (Poulton, 2016) and over time, it has become a term of opprobrium, for some groups, equivalent to words like 'N*****' and 'P***' (Clavane, 2012). Nevertheless, many non-Jewish fans have little idea of the etymology of the Y-word.

With a Jewish following representing a 5% proportion, a figure significantly higher than the 0.5% of the general population, opposing fans, particularly from clubs in neighbouring areas such as West Ham, Chelsea and Arsenal, used the club as a target for antisemitic hate and started to use the term repeatedly in a pejorative way (Penn, 2016). For a long time, Spurs fans have been subjected to antisemitic hate from opposing fans, using the term 'Yid' as a form of racial abuse; alongside references to Hitler, The Holocaust and imitations of the gas chambers (Dart & Long, 2021; Kessel, 2007; Poulton & Durell, 2016). Therefore, Spurs originally used the term to reclaim it from rival fans and as self-referent, as an attempt to deflect the antisemitic abuse they were receiving (Poulton & Durell, 2016). Interestingly, as Spurs' supporters are mostly not Jewish, they adopt this image and link it to the neighbourhood's

collective history, as Spurs fans have also embedded the term into their own songs and chants (Verhoeven, 2015).

However, more recently, it has been suggested by the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish Leadership Council that Spurs should no longer be using the term Yid, due to the antisemitic connotation it now bears (Lunn, 2023; Weich, 2019). Likewise, it has been pointed out by Wardrop (2011) that the 'Yid Army' chants allow racist fans to respond with distasteful songs like: 'Spurs are on their way to Auschwitz'. Although the term 'Yid' and its usage, by both Spurs supporters and supporters of other clubs, at football matches has been discussed plenty within the media, discussion amongst academics is relatively limited (Lunn, 2023; Poulton, 2013, 2016; Poulton & Durell, 2016; Wilczyńska, 2022). This therefore underlines the importance of further empirical investigation of the interconnection between religious discrimination, antisemitism and the status of 'Jewish clubs' in football, such as Tottenham Hotspur.

Football fandom and religion

Despite being two different concepts, sport and religion may at times generate overlapping forms of collective identity, even if they emerge from distinct social and historical contexts. Sporting fans wear merchandise with the badge of their chosen team, and they are immediately associated with the club on their shirt. Members of some religious communities likewise use recognisable forms of dress such as hijabs or kippot to signal affiliation or commitment, although the histories and functions of these items differ considerably (Edwards, 1973). It is also recognised that fans and religious followers are committed to attending regular meetings in either religious buildings or sport stadiums; while these gatherings share the feature of regular collective attendance, the meanings and purposes of these spaces are distinct. Some spectators and religious followers worship a being and their achievements, whether that is an athlete or a deity. Vocabulary used by religious followers and sport fans are similar; words include language associated with worship, dedication, sacrifice, commitment and suffering (Wann et al., 2001). These parallels highlight similarities in affective engagement rather than imply historical or functional equivalence. Fans express their passion through chanting words; similarly, religious followers sing hymns and prayers.

Sport fandom provides a setting for developing identities; some identities are shared with others and some highlight differences and diversity (Malcolm & Mansfield, 2012). Most importantly, sport provides individuals with a sense of belonging (Murphy et al., 2000); whether as a spectator or as a player, sport is argued to be an important source of entertainment and community, which can increase an individual's sense of safety, attachment and social integration (Warner & Dixon, 2011). Religion is not solely based on a set of beliefs; a significant aspect of religion is the sense of community built by like-minded individuals (Fletcher, 2004). Like sport, religion can provide support, social integration and shared meaning (Stark, 1999). Moore (2010) discussed that choices made by individuals are not made by themselves; in fact, they are interwoven and shaped by the choices made by others within the social grouping.

With regards to football, Marsh (2015, p.1) highlights that 'football fandom is a major activity today: people's passions become major commitments'. Football fandom has been defined by Davis (2015, p. 423) as a form of leisure, whereby 'a person can pursue activities to gain feelings of joyfulness and belonging". The football club that the fan belongs to thus becomes a fundamental part of the supporter's individual and social identity (Kossakowski, 2017; Maussier, 2017). Fans who support a contrasting football club consequently have different collective identities (Benkwitz & Molnar, 2012). Fans may also transfer aspects of their social, political or religious identities onto their chosen clubs, sometimes creating tension or conflict. For example, the 'Yid' identity among Tottenham Hotspur supporters illustrates how a symbol of cultural and historical Jewish identity can be adopted and reinterpreted within fan culture. While the term carries specific historical and religious significance for Jewish communities, Spurs fans use it primarily as a marker of collective identity and pride within the football context (Poulton, 2013).

In this light, it can be recognised that many football fans transfer both their political and religious identities onto their teams which has caused and still does cause issues at matches (Cronin, 2000). For example, the organisation of sport reflects and reinforces religious differences which are seen within Northern Ireland (Bairner & Shirlow, 2000). Due to political and religious differences in Northern Ireland, continuous and dangerous rioting, caused Derry City to resign from the Northern Ireland Irish League in

1972; as the majority of clubs were and are still associated with the Protestant community, the Catholic club, Derry City, are made to feel unwelcome and, sometimes, fans at matches resort to violence (Bairner & Shirlow, 2000).

Likewise, ethnoreligious sectarianism can be seen as a key factor in the historic rivalry between two football clubs, Celtic FC and Rangers FC, situated in Glasgow, Scotland (Bairner, 2001; Bairner & Whigham, 2025; Bradley, 2013; Flint & Kelly, 2013; Kelly, 2011). Their rivalry has been infused by a series of complex disputes, revolving around religion, national identity, and politics, given Celtic's identification as a Catholic football club, whereas Rangers as being a Protestant club (Bairner & Whigham, 2025; Kelly, 2011). These tribal associations within football mirror broader societal divisions in Scotland, highlighting how sport can both reflect and reinforce social divides. Overall, football in Northern Ireland and Scotland demonstrates the intertwined political and religious dimensions of sport, illustrating that while sport is a site of community and identity formation, these identities are mediated by historical and social context.

Figurational sociology, sport and religion

Figurational sociology begins with an individual or a group and investigates the surrounding figurations to which they belong (Roberts, 2009). Unique identities thus emerge within these figurations, emphasising the importance of viewing humans as part of groups or networks rather than as singular entities (Van Krieken, 1998). Societies are distinct because they are shaped by the personalities and traits of their members (Little, 2010). These figurations are patterns of social bonding that are constantly changing and transforming (Murphy et al., 2000).

Elias's figurational theory encompasses several core concepts. With specific regards to the current analysis of the interconnection between football and religion, Elias and Scotson's (1994) theory of established-outsider figurations and Elias's personal pronoun model (Elias, 1991) have particular analytical utility. A central aspect of Elias's work is the analysis of everyday language, specifically the use of personal pronouns (Elias, 1991). Elias (1991) conceptualised the 'personal pronoun model' to analyse how individuals are bonded to one another. Pronouns like I, you, he, she, they, and us represent societal positions and are used within social settings to articulate the interconnectedness of social life. They help recognise an individual's interdependencies and relationships with their groups (Moore, 2010). The pronoun 'I' is used for self-reference, while 'we' signifies a connection between people, indicating belonging through the use of 'we-images' to reflect a shared identity through such pronoun usage (Elias, 1991). These pronouns are in a constant state of flux and transformation, reflecting interweaving processes of change (Quilley & Loyal, 2004, p. 5).

Literature by Percy and Taylor (1997, p. 39) highlights that for some individuals and groups football works like a faith and, in some sense, is a metaphor for religion. They stated that:

> Football is like a religion to its devotees. It binds and divides, shapes and delimits, providing a critical identity for a given group and individuals. The scarf, the ground, the songs and the ritual activity have a sacred quality about them; football is at least like a secular religion here.

Likewise, Wann et al. (2001, p. 198) said that 'similarities between sport fandom and organised religion are striking'. Individuals can be recognised by characteristics associated with their social grouping, which Elias referred to as 'we-images' as noted above. We-images allow individuals to make differentiations between groupings (Rosenthal, 2016), with 'we-images' used to signify those who belong to a given grouping in contrast to 'they-images' which are used to exclude and differentiate non-members. Rooted in the area's collective history, the term Yid has been simultaneously embraced by some Spurs supporters as a prideful we-image and used by rival fans as a pejorative they-image. They are developed within established groupings (Roseneil & Seymour, 1999), and generate feelings of inclusion and exclusion, enabling recognition of the 'established' and the 'outsiders' (Elias & Scotson, 1994).

In this light, Elias and Scotson's concept of 'the established and the outsiders' examines shifting power relations within groupings and the social habitus of group members (Mennell, 1994). Figurational sociologists use this concept to explore power asymmetries between various groups (Velija, 2012). Elias's theoretical approach focuses on how societies are characterised by power relationships among established and outsider groups (Elias & Scotson, 1994). Members of dominant groups often perceive themselves as

superior, while those in subordinate groups are socially constructed as 'inferior' by the dominant group, rather than being inherently so (Elias & Scotson, 1994). The established groups, with strong internal cohesion and social networks, contrast with the outsiders, who lack unifying norms and solidarity (Elias & Scotson, 1994).

Overall, it can therefore be recognised that, although sport and religion are categorised as two separate entities, there are notable similarities, making their resemblance difficult to ignore (Barber, 2009). Similar to religion, sport fandom is time-consuming, life-changing, revitalising and for many provides a social network. It provides a structure that helps people find friends, a sense of belonging and a system of values, beliefs or symbols to abide by. Elias's figurational approach became a well-established and prominent theoretical approach used within the field of sport sociology (Liston, 2011), exploring many topics, including: the development of modern sport (Dunning & Rojek, 1992), sport and drugs (Waddington, 2000), and sport and gender (Dunning, 1999). Nevertheless, as highlighted by Liston (2011), there is little literature which uses figurational sociology to explore sport and religion.

Methods

The aim of this research was to gain in-depth qualitative data, informed by an initial mixed-methods survey that included both quantitative and qualitative responses, to explore the attitudes and opinions of Tottenham Hotspur fans, regarding their club's publicised connection to the Jewish faith. In particular, key concepts associated with Elias's figurational theoretical approach, such as the personal pronoun and established-outsiders concepts, were used to investigate and develop a deeper understanding of how Tottenham Hotspur fans' identities are shaped (or not) due to the club's association with the Jewish faith.

This research followed a mixed-methods research design that used two methods of data collection to allow for an in-depth exploration. The primary data source of this mixed-methods project was surveys; following institutional ethical clearance from the University of Winchester[1] (approval number: HWB_REC_19_02_LUNN), an online service, JISC, was used to build and create a survey. Prior to completing any questions, all participants were provided with detailed information and an ethics statement. Written informed consent was obtained electronically by participants, indicating their agreement and proceeding to the first question of the survey. It is important to note that data collection began in March 2019, whereby the data reflects fan attitudes and opinions prior to the significant global increase in antisemitism and heightened sociopolitical tensions of recent years.

Participants were recruited via social media, most specifically Twitter/X, Facebook, and LinkedIn. To reduce sampling bias, recruitment posts were shared across multiple platforms and within a range of Tottenham Hotspur related communities, including fan pages, supporter forums and posts shared by well-known Spurs podcast hosts to extend reach beyond the authors' immediate networks. While social-media recruitment cannot fully guarantee representativeness, these strategies were implemented to broaden the pool of potential participants and enhance diversity in the sample. Due to the quick uptake in responses, the online survey was open for only two weeks. Participants had to support Tottenham Hotspur Football Club to some degree and be over 16 years old. 596 participants answered sixteen questions, with a combination of both open and closed questions.

Participants who undertook the questionnaire were invited to partake in a follow-up interview. Ten unstructured follow-up interviews took place in April 2019. Purposeful sampling was used to obtain participants who were selected based on their answers given in the previous survey. Specifically, they had indicated survey responses reflecting their views or experiences on language use, the club's connection to Judaism and the intensity of sport fandom. Purposeful sampling for the interviews adopted a 'maximum variation' approach, selecting ten participants based on specific survey criteria: religious affiliations (Jewish and non-Jewish), diverse attitudes on sport-religion interconnection, and variations in age. This 'maximum variation sampling' approach was adopted in order to reflect 'the full range of experiences, demographics and so on to capture the full range of the subject being explored' (Jones, 2022, p. 131). Participants were either Jewish (n=5), Christian (n=1) or not religious (n=4). All participants were male, but varied in terms of age. Finally, participants differed in their attitudes towards the use of the term Yid; they were either against it (n=4), for it (n=5) or undecided (n=1).

To make sure participants felt as comfortable as possible, they chose how the interview would be conducted. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via telephone, and all interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interview guide consisted of three open-ended questions, which were formulated based on the survey results. The three questions were:

1. There has been much discussion on the use of the term Yid - could you talk to me about your attitudes and opinions on this?
2. Could you talk to me about the club's connection to the Jewish faith?
3. Some fans mentioned that supporting Spurs was like a faith/religion to them. Do you see similarities between sport fandom and religion?

It is important to note, that all participants were already familiar with the term 'Yid' prior to the interview, which is important given the first question asked directly about their attitudes toward its use. Once the data collection process was complete, data from the surveys was analysed, followed by the interview transcriptions. All interview transcripts were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality. Most of the data which emerged from both the surveys and interviews was of a qualitative nature; therefore, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019) was employed. This six-step process, familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, guided the systematic development of codes and themes. A figurational approach was used to provide interpretative depth by combining inductive coding with deductive abstraction through the application of theoretical concepts associated with figurational sociology. Initial codes were derived by closely reading the data and identifying recurring patterns, which were then refined and grouped into broader themes. Abductive reasoning also informed the process, as unexpected patterns prompted a return to theory for further interpretation. Three overarching themes were generated. These themes were named a) *'pride and identity'*; b) *'sport as a religion'*; and c) *'community'.*

Results and discussion

Pride and identity

As outlined above, the first theme identified through the thematic analysis process of the questionnaire data was 'pride', with responses within this theme capturing the perceptions of respondents regarding the importance of their pride in being a fan of Tottenham Hotspur. The 'word cloud' representing the most commonly-used terms to describe being a Tottenham supporter in Figure 1 highlights that fans used the phrase 'proud' most frequently within their self-description, and was thus identified as a focal area for the subsequent interviews for further interrogation of the relative importance of the factors underpinning 'pride' in relation to the construction of supporter identities.

Throughout the survey, a broad consensus emerged whereby many respondents expressed pride in the club's history, heritage, and the club's 'true values', with most emphasising their pride in being associated with the team itself. In relation to the current focus on the links between club support and religious identities, a substantial proportion of questionnaire participants also highlighted Tottenham's longstanding connection with the Jewish community. For example, a participant (Daniel) stated that he was 'proud of the club's Jewish heritage', while another respondent (Adam), described it as 'an important part of Tottenham's legacy', a sentiment shared by a large portion of respondents. Others noted that they appreciated the club's recognition of this identity and that it 'embraces people from all walks of life' (Reuben). In contemporary society, there has been a notable rise in antisemitic sentiment; those who are members of the Jewish faith may be made to feel unwelcome and receive abuse for their religious beliefs (Sherwood, 2019).

Nevertheless, one interviewee Jack (non-Jewish supporter) highlights that 'although there seems to be a rise in abuse, there are clubs and places where ethnic minorities feel safe, embraced and welcome and Spurs is one of those places'. Previously, Moore (2010) stated that those 'outsiders' whose behaviours and personality traits resemble those in the 'established' group were more likely to be accepted and

Figure 1. Word cloud in response to 'What are 3 words to describe being a Tottenham supporter?' (Larger words represent the most frequently used words.).

recognised. By applying Elias's 'established'-'outsiders' model to the case of Tottenham fans, the Jewish community and other ethnic minorities who would normally be positioned as 'outsiders' in British society have been accepted into a group whereby they feel welcome and acknowledged, and thus integrated as part of the 'established' identity grouping of Spurs supporters. It could be argued that they may be more likely to be accepted due to their association with the club.

When referring to the Jewish community, some fans used the term 'minority'. When participants were asked about the use of the term Yid, quotes included: 'it is solidarity with our minority, which is why we use the term' and 'I feel it is our duty as non-Jewish fans to support the minority. We are all a family'. Both quotes highlight that, although they are considered as a minority in society, Jewish individuals are part of a belonging at Spurs and have been integrated to become part of the established group. The supporting quote below highlights that the club unites with the Jewish faith to diminish any racial abuse they receive.

> We consider all Spurs fans as our brothers and sisters so when this tiny minority were being singled out for abuse, we chose to stick up for them by owning the word. Making the bullies aware that any Jewish fans did not stand alone.

One respondent mentioned that they were 'very proud to identify with a victimised group within our society'. In addition, one interviewee, Bill (non-Jewish supporter) said when at Spurs:

> …you feel a kind of bond, and affinity to a race or a group that is persecuted and it feels really nice to stand up with them.

Bill (non-Jewish supporter) stated that they celebrate the Jewish element of their fan base and hope that through unity they can eradicate persecution and reject antisemitism. Fans hope to diminish the abuse by using the term Yid, which one interviewee Jack (non-Jewish supporter), says is 'a statement of support for our fans that do happen to be part of the Jewish faith'. Poulton (2016) found that fans who used the term Yid felt that it gave them a sense of pride and endearment. This research supports Poulton(2016) findings, as one respondent argued that with regards to the phrase Yid, fans 'see it as a term that Tottenham celebrate and are proud of'. Will (Jewish supporter) said:

> I love the fact we have turned a derogatory term into a celebration of our heritage, we wear the title Yid with pride.

Although the term has caused much controversy, it has been highlighted by fans that they are honoured to use the term, as it highlights their affiliation with the Jewish religion, which is something Tottenham fans are proud of. Indeed, the fact that Will as a Jewish supporter reflected positively on the collective pride reflected in the reclamation of the term 'Yid' by both Jewish and non-Jewish Spurs fans demonstrates that this was not only a phenomenon which non-Jewish fans embraced.

Data from this research suggests that fans have embraced the affiliation, as Jack (non-Jewish supporter) states that 'fans of other faiths embrace the Jewish identity' and they have flown the Star of David at the ground to reinforce the club's affinity with Judaism. This is supported by statements made within the survey that, although they are not Jewish, they feel a strong connection with the faith, exemplified in the following questionnaire response:

> I'm proud of that and, given the current climate, I identify with it today, despite having no connection other than friendship to the Jewish faith.

Likewise, another respondent stated 'I proudly embrace the Jewish identity, but I am not nor do I believe in a religion of any faith'. Finally, one fan stated, 'being Jewish should not be regarded as an insult, why not adopt it with pride?'.

In summary, these responses highlight that the religious beliefs of supporters do not impact the relationships built within the club and that through their commonality of being Spurs fans, they unite together as a community identity, which they are proud of. The responses highlight how fans have come together to tackle antisemitic abuse and, by doing this, the Jews who were once classified as the 'outsiders' have found a sense of belonging in the club, making them part of the 'established', aligning with Elias and Scotson's (1994) theoretical approach. This case also reflects Back et al.'s (2001) findings on how diverse fan cultures resist exclusion, and parallels Burdsey's (2011) work, where minority fans claim cultural space within football communities. Together, this illustrates how football fandom at Spurs has become a space for solidarity, identity, and resistance, and thus illustrates how the power dynamics regarding who is deemed to be 'established' and 'outsiders' within the context of football support evolves through the long-term processual changes outlined within the figurational sociological approach.

Sport as a religion

When posed the question 'Do you associate Tottenham Hotspur with the Jewish faith?' 56% agreed with this association, whilst 44% disagreed, demonstrating a degree of ambiguity and disagreement in this regard for the respondents. Participants were asked to elaborate upon their rationale for their response to this question, and the contrasting arguments presented are displayed in Table 1 below.

The quotes in the left column of Table 1 highlight that the Jewish faith is an important part of the club's heritage and history for many Tottenham supporters. Likewise, some stated that the Jewish faith has been embedded into the identity of the club. On the other hand, those who disagreed stated that Spurs is a football club which has nothing to do with faith or religion. Some comments in Table 1 reinforce that fans do not think religion and sport are interconnected, and that Tottenham Hotspur is just a football club. During the interviews, both Bill (non-Jewish supporter) and Tim (non-Jewish supporter) mentioned that there is no official position from the football club regarding its Jewish heritage, commenting that there is 'no official confirmation that Tottenham is connected to the Jewish faith' (Bill, non-Jewish supporter), but, however, there is a 'publicised perception that Tottenham is a Jewish Club' (Tim, non-Jewish supporter). Both still acknowledged that the club is associated to some extent with the religion due to factors including proximity, chairmen and their nickname, Yid.

When fans were asked if they associated the term Yid with the Jewish faith, the majority, 65% of the fans, did. One respondent stated that 'Yid, Jews, Spurs, the three are always mentioned together' and others mentioned that the term Yid has two different meanings, it 'applies to both the faith and the club'. On this note, Rosenthal (2016) highlights that 'we-images' are used to make differentiations between groupings, with the use of 'we-image' personal pronouns such as 'we' and 'our' evident in the responses

Table 1. Open-text response to 'Do you associate Tottenham with the Jewish faith?'.

Respondents who associate Spurs with the Jewish faith	Respondents who do not associate Spurs with the Jewish faith
'Our heritage and history provide a direct line to the Jewish community'.	'Religion has little to nothing to do with our supporters' culture'.
'Tottenham's heritage and association with the Jewish culture'.	'Football isn't about religion'
'It's historically been a Jewish club, part of the club's identity'	'I don't really associate Spurs with any religion'
'It's something else that identifies our club and we have embraced what other fans used as a term of hate'	'It's not something that I feel is relevant to me watching football'
'It's a huge part of our identity and history'	'It's football, it's just not religion'
'English football clubs have unique identities that are intrinsically connected to their surrounding neighbourhoods, and the Jewish history of this area of North London is an important part of Tottenham's heritage and legacy'.	'Football clubs have a faith?'
'It's now in the DNA of our club'	'How can you relate a club to a faith?'
'It is part of our heritage'	'They are a football club'
'I see the Jewish community as part of the club, and we stand together'	'It's a football club, religion has no place there'

Table 2. Categorised responses to 'What does Tottenham Hotspur mean to you?'.

Family	Collective	Tribal
'We are all family'.	'I am part of something'.	'Part of an identifiable group, tribe'.
'My second family'.	'We are part of a collective'.	'It's tribal'.
'The Tottenham family'.	'I think being a football fan is a collective thing'.	'A tribal group situation'.
'The Spurs family'.	'We are a collective mindset'.	'It's a tribal thing'.
'It's part of my family'.	'My roots, my family, my sense of belonging'	'The tribal nature of sport'.
'I love being a part of one big family'.	'Belonging'.	'It's just tribal'.
'I love them, like a member of the family'.	'Part of being something special'.	'We are a tribe'.
'It's a family'.	'Part of a community'.	'Supporting a club is like joining a gang/tribe'.
'Extended family'.	'I feel a part of something special'.	'Tribalism exists in football'.
'It means family'.	'I feel safe at Spurs'.	'Very tribal'.
'Part of this family of supporters'.	'A sense of belonging to a collective'.	'My own little piece of tribalism'.
'It feels like a massive footballing family'.	'I feel like part of something'.	'My little bit of tribemanship'.
'Tottenham mean family'.	'It connects me to the world; I am part of something bigger'.	'Almost tribal term'.
'Like a member of the family, you will always love them'.	'Togetherness'.	'We belong to a tribe'.
'We are a large dysfunctional worldwide family'.	'It's just a community, Spurs is a community'.	'It feels like a tribe to me'.

outlined in Table 1 above. The term Yid is used in a derogatory way to refer to those who belong to the Jewish community; likewise, fans who support Tottenham may also be associated with the term, as they adopted the word to deflect antisemitic abuse (Jacobs, 2019). However, as highlighted by respondents, the term can have two different meanings:

Yid = Jew, Yid = Spurs fan

It is used in a positive way with Tottenham Hotspur, rather than the negative connotations it is used towards Jews.

Furthermore, 64% of participants associated the term Yid with both the club and the religion. Essentially, the term Yid is a characteristic associated with both social groupings, either Judaism and/or Tottenham Hotspur, suggesting they have a similar we-images. In this sense, Wann et al. (2001) recognise the similarities between sport fandom and religion. On multiple occasions, it was highlighted by participants that supporting Spurs 'is like a religion itself' or, for some that were not religious, Spurs is the closest thing they have to one:

I do not identify as religious and do not maintain a faith, but I feel that being a Tottenham fan is as close as I'll get.

It's a religion in its own (sic), I follow and worship Tottenham like somebody worships their religion.

With fans stating that supporting Spurs was similar to following a faith or religion, it stimulated a question asked within the interview. Interview respondents acknowledged that there are many similarities between sport fandom and religion, highlighting various 'we-images' that are present in both sport fandom and religion. These included: places of worship (stadiums/churches), worshipping a being (players

and team/God and religion), and a sense of pride. Interviewees also suggested that within both sports fandom and religion, individuals follow journeys and routines according to their chosen club or religion.

Although it is evident that there are most definitely similarities between sport and religion, both Joseph (Jewish supporter) and Will (Jewish supporter) saw the similarities but did not think they were synonymous. Joseph (Jewish supporter) believed that there is a big difference:

> Your football club isn't telling you how you should behave, whereas there are rules, guidance and a moral compass that each religion tries to dictate to its followers, saying this is how you should behave.

Will (Jewish supporter) thought Spurs had a different connection and impact on him compared to his faith, stating his faith is more 'deep rooted'; however, at both Spurs and synagogue, he felt part of a community. Likewise, this quote from Jack (non-Jewish supporter) highlights the sense of belonging that an individual feels when connected to a religion or club:

> [At Spurs] there is a sense of belonging, in the same way that religion gives people a sense of belonging… you are a collective and that is the same as religion because of the tribal nature of it.

These arguments encapsulated a common pattern in the response which emphasises that by being part of a fan base and/or religion means you are accepted into a community and develop a sense of belonging, highlighting similarities between the two. There also appeared to be a strong sense of agreement across both Jewish and non-Jewish Spurs supporters about the positive impact of supporting the club in terms of fostering this sense of belonging, suggesting that this element of the cultural associations of the club helped develop a sense of identity for both Jewish and non-Jewish supporters. This research supports the findings of both Murphy et al. (2000) and Fletcher (2004) who suggested that both religion and sport give individuals a sense of belonging, making them feel part of a community.

Community

As explored above, supporting Tottenham felt like a religion to many Jewish and non-Jewish respondents, as both religion and being a football fan provides an individual with a sense of belonging and community. In this light, Elias's figurational theoretical approach has been used to understand communities within society, and in this current study was used to theoretically examine the community that is Tottenham Hotspur.

Results from the survey highlighted that Spurs fans felt like part of a community, most specifically part of a 'family', 'collective' or 'tribe', as highlighted in Table 2:

Within the survey, 19% of fans used the term 'family' when describing what Spurs means to them. Furthermore, the word cloud presented in Figure 1 highlights that 'family' was used frequently by fans when asked to describe 3 words for being a Tottenham fan. Additionally, fans frequently referred to Spurs as a 'tribe', and discussed the tribal nature of football. Both words, 'family' and 'tribe', highlight a sense of community, collectiveness, and belonging, with Spurs fans interconnected by their love of Tottenham Hotspur. Other fans used less emotive phrases than 'family' or 'tribe' within their survey responses, but emphasised that they viewed their and others' participation in fandom of Tottenham as being part of a 'collective', thus highlighting again that Spurs supporters perceived themselves as a community, regardless of religion or any other demographic differences. It therefore appears that Jewish fans, who are regarded as a minority in both the supporter base and wider society, had been equally integrated into a community that fostered a sense of belonging.

A strong sense of community and collective identity was a recurring theme within the interview data. This sense of belonging to a specific group was mentioned by Guy (non-Jewish supporter), who, when reflecting on the historical connection, stated:

> For those kids who have a choice and say I'm going to support this club, I think I have seen a lot of Jewish kids gravitate towards Tottenham because of the publicised perception that Tottenham is a Jewish club, fostering a sense of safety in numbers and belonging within that community.

The idea of the club fostering an inclusive environment and a sense of collectiveness was also conveyed by Richard (non-Jewish supporter), who noted 'I think Tottenham is a very inclusive club anyway,

it's a very multicultural area and there are people from lots of different religions, creeds, colours and everything, they all go to the game and all live in the area', implicitly forming a tribe of supporters with a shared belonging.

In this light, Elias's (1991) 'personal pronoun' model provides a useful lens through which to examine sport fandom and religion. The interconnectedness between an individual and the club is expressed with language, through the use of personal pronouns including 'we' and 'us'. Many fans used the term 'we', as represented within Table 2, to highlight their collective identity with the club, expressing that they are a group and are a collective. By using the term 'us', sports fans are representing their club, becoming highly involved with the team and building a stronger sense of collectiveness. Crow and Laidlaw (2019) state the importance of having communities, such as sports clubs, in an individual's everyday life, suggesting that a 'we' identity may be more powerful than a person's individual image. This highlights the importance of viewing humans as part of groups or networks, rather than a singular being, which scholars who have used a figurational approach do themselves (Van Krieken, 1998).

Mike's (Jewish supporter) comments during the interview offer a clear example of Elias's (1991) personal pronoun model in practice, particularly in the way personal pronouns are used to express collective identity and symbolic ownership. When discussing the club's association with the Jewish community, Mike (Jewish supporter) repeatedly uses the pronouns 'we' and 'us', stating:

> "So, I think it came more from the fans and the antisemites, more than us inwardly saying 'yes, we have a lot of Jewish supporters'" and "we are a London club, you know, if you look at any minority, they live in a big city…"

As Elias suggests, the use of 'we' and 'us' indicates a sense of belonging and emotional investment, suggesting that Mike (Jewish supporter) sees himself not just as an observer, but as an embedded part of the club's identity and history.

Additionally, by exploring the personal pronouns used amongst Tottenham fans, the survey results found that fans took symbolic ownership of the club. Many stated it was their club through the use of the word 'my', a possessive adjective. Although 'my' is not a personal pronoun, we can still apply Elias's (1991) personal pronoun as it relates to the pronoun 'I'. Both words are used as a reference to a person's individual identity and their sense of belonging within their community. The word 'my' was used alongside the words 'club', 'team' or 'football team' by 11% of participants. Furthermore, fans referred to the players as 'my friends', 'my boys' or 'my kids', once again taking ownership of the players. The term 'my' thus shows an individual's belonging to something. Therefore, when fans used the words 'my', 'we' and 'us', they were expressing that they belonged to the club and were part of a collective. As mentioned by Kossakowski (2017), belonging to a football club is an important part of an individual's identity. Through the use of the personal pronoun model, exploring both the words 'us' and 'my' has highlighted that for most fans, their football club is an important part of the fans' identities.

Conclusion

To conclude, by using Elias's figurational theoretical approach, this research has investigated the relationship between sport and religion through the case of Tottenham Hotspur and the perceptions of the club's fans regarding the club's association with the Jewish faith. By using two of the key components of Elias's figurational theoretical approach, the 'personal pronoun model' and 'the established and the outsiders' relations, this research found that some fans were proud of their association with the Jewish faith, as they believed it was part of the club's heritage and identity. Furthermore, they expressed pride that Jewish fans, who are regarded as a minority in both the supporter base and wider society, had been welcomed into a community that fostered a sense of belonging. Some fans mentioned that sport and religion were not interconnected; on the other hand, some felt that their football club was like a religion itself. To this end, it can be argued that the association between Spurs and Judaism is more complex than being simply a matter of the nexus between sport and religion; instead, it can be argued that this association broadens out to a shared identity fostered on historical and socio-cultural relations which are embedded in culture, place and time.

Nonetheless, many fans highlighted similar 'we-images' that both football fandom and religion have acknowledged their likenesses. Furthermore, fans acknowledged that belonging to a football club provided them with a sense of community in a similar way that religion has historically played a role in human societies. Finally, they suggested that they belonged to part of a family or tribe, regardless of religion, highlighting the importance of the club and its supporters. This project has therefore generated original findings on the nuanced relationship between Spurs' historical association with Jewish culture in the UK context within a contemporary socio-political context where antisemitism is on the increase, allowing for a critical examination of how both Jewish and non-Jewish supporters negotiate this particular identity marker.

As mentioned previously by Liston (2011), there has previously been a lack of literature which has used a figurational sociological approach to mutually examine both religion and sport. Therefore, this research has added to scholarly debates on this issue by sport and religion through a figurational the-oretical approach, thus demonstrating the ongoing utility of Eliasian theoretical concepts for under-standing the importance of religious identity markers for football supporters through the original empirical evidence generated in this project. This research has provided an initial investigation into examining sport and religion, which could be expanded upon in the future. The use of the 'established and outsiders' framework has been a valuable tool to explore the Jewish identity within the Tottenham Hotspur fanbase, highlighting that Jewish fans are part of the 'established' group within the club's sup-port, and that the use of the phrase 'Yid' as a form of reclamation to tackle its pejorative use by others has been argued to be part of that process. Future studies could develop this work further by applying the established-outsiders framework to other clubs or fan communities to assess whether similar pat-terns of identity formation emerge regarding the use of personal pronouns and 'we-images'. Research might also compare how figurational processes operate in different cultural or national contexts, par-ticularly where religious identities intersect differently with sport. Overall, the field of the sociology of sport could benefit from utilising a figurational approach to further explore the link between sport and religion, whether in isolation or through synthesis with contrasting theoretical approaches.

Finally, there remain issues surrounding Spurs and the Jewish faith, which could benefit from further investigation. Although the research conducted by Poulton and Durell (2016) explored the use of the term Yid by Spurs fans, there is still a large scope of research which could be conducted surrounding this term, particularly given the current rise in antisemitic sentiment in the UK and global context. Likewise, many opposing football teams associate Tottenham Hotspur with the Jewish faith given the club's historical and geographical context, and as a result of this, they use antisemitic language, including the use of the term 'Yid', to verbally abuse Tottenham fans; in Eliasian terms, this can be construed as an attempt to use pejorative 'they-images' to further marginalise Jews within British society. Therefore, future research could examine why opposing fans use this language and their intentions. Most impor-tantly, further research could aim to explore ways in which this antisemitic abuse and other forms of discrimination could be tackled at sporting arenas, most importantly at football matches, where it is most prevalent. Such research can help to understand the dualistic role which football can play in both the confident expression of collective identities, including religious identities, whilst also remaining a domain in which problematic discriminatory behaviours remain endemic.

Note

1. Although the authors are currently affiliated with Oxford Brookes University, the research was conducted while the lead author was completing a Masters degree at the University of Winchester; ethical approval was there-fore obtained through the University of Winchester.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Bonita Corrie-Lunn**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Stuart Whigham**: Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

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ORCID

Bonita Corrie-Lunn http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1071-3026
Stuart Whigham http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1123-2248

Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research, due to ethical restrictions, supporting data is not available.

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