Northumbria Research Link

UniversityLibrary

Analyzing the presence of homosexually-themed language amongst association football fans in the United Kingdom

This article is based on the views of 2,663 association football fans, collected via an online survey from March 2020 to April 2020, regarding the presence of homosexually-themed language at men's professional football matches across the United Kingdom. The results indicate that whilst 95% would support a gay player at their club, 41% have heard language they interpret as malicious or toxic, while 37% believe it is not intentionally hostile and ascribe it as playful and humorous banter. The article subsequently addresses what appears to be a paradox: football fans challenge popular accusations that they are homophobic but also recognize the presence of homosexually-themed language that emphasizes heteronormativity, irrespective of how it is interpreted by other fans.

Since its regulation by the English Football Association (FA) in 1863, soccer or association football (hereafter football) has been largely understood as a male institution, with the demonstration of masculine characteristics including strength, power, authority, bravery, and toughness quickly becoming synonymous with the game. As the game developed during industrial working life in the late nineteenth century, these characteristics were subsequently passed through generations of boys and men as part of a masculine rite of passage that also led to overt expressions of sexism and homophobia. As illustrated by Cashmore and Cleland (2014, p. 30):

> For boys and men, football became a 'proving ground' that gave them a social and physical space to construct, express and validate masculine notions of identity and embodiment (particularly over women). Masculinity during this period (and into more modern times) was something to be earned: it had to be achieved through deeds, and physically demanding challenges such as sporting competitions were ideal.

This pattern continued up until the 1980s when increasing academic attention was paid to sexuality in sport, most of which highlighted how male sport was an intimidating and homophobic environment for any gay athlete (Messner & Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). Summarizing male sport and its continued importance of influencing masculine identity, Messner (1992, p. 34) wrote, 'The extent of homophobia in the sport world is staggering. Boys (in sport) learn early that to be gay,

to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one's heterosexual status is not acceptable.'

Of significance to the focus of this article, the extent of homophobia in British football was epitomized by the negative reaction by players, fans, and the media directed towards the coming out of British footballer, Justin Fashanu, in 1990. This occurred during the moral panic surrounding HIV/AIDS; a period of time Anderson (2009, p. 7-8) referred to as consisting of high 'homohysteria' (a term Anderson used to describe conditions in which boys and men feared being considered to be homosexual) that was reflected through three significant variables: (1) a greater awareness of homosexuality as a sexual orientation; (2) widespread cultural disapproval of homosexuality and its association with femininity; and (3) the public presentation by boys and men of their heterosexuality in order to avoid any homosexual suspicion.

These concerns were reflected in some population surveys undertaken in the United Kingdom (UK) at the time, such as the 1987 British Social Attitudes Survey, which highlighted how nearly two-thirds of respondents believed homosexuality was wrong (Clements & Field, 2014). Since this time, however, what is being found is that boys and men are not carrying the same hostility towards homosexuality than previous generations. By way of comparison, in the 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey, the number of respondents disproving of homosexuality had decreased to one-fifth (Clements & Field, 2014). Similar findings were also expressed by Watt and Elliot (2019) in their longitudinal analysis of the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, with one-fifth of respondents viewing same-sex sex as 'always wrong' in 2010, down from 50% in 1990. One of the explanations surrounding this attitudinal shift is the changing nature of masculinity in the twenty-first century, with Pringle and Hickey (2010, p. 115) outlining the presence of a resistance to 'hypermasculine forms of subjection', whilst Thorpe (2010, p. 202)

highlighted how masculinities 'are multiple and dynamic; they differ over space, time, and context, and are rooted in the cultural and social moment.'

This has drawn parallels in men's football, where there has been a range of studies presenting a changing cultural context with regards to sexuality, masculinity, and homophobia across players, fans, and the media (Adams et al., 2010; Cashmore & Cleland, 2011, 2012, 2014; Cleland, 2014, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Cleland & Magrath, 2019; Cleland et al., 2018; Magrath, 2017, 2018; Magrath & Anderson, 2017; Magrath et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2017). For example, in countering widespread claims labelling football fans as homophobic (BBC Sport, 2010; Harris & Godwin, 2009), Cashmore and Cleland (2012) collected evidence from 3,500 fans and found that 93% would actually support a gay player on their team.

Despite this increasing focus, however, there has been no large-scale study that has examined football fans' views towards the presence of homosexually-themed language inside stadia on a match day. The most relevant piece of research to date has been Magrath's (2018) qualitative study of 30 fans that focused on homosexually-themed chanting at matches using implicit or explicit epithets related to male sexuality. Whilst all his participants claimed to have inclusive views towards the presence of gay male footballers, all but five of them engaged in homosexually-themed chanting if the situation arose to benefit their team in some way (often centering on rivalry and competition with other teams).

Outside of fans on a match day, there is a growing body of research analyzing homosexually-themed language on online platforms utilized by football fans. For example, in his analysis of over 3,000 comments made across 48 football fan message boards, Cleland (2015) found that any posts deemed to contain pernicious homophobic intent were widely contested and challenged by other users of the specific message board. Likewise, in their analysis of over 6,000

online comments made in response to the coming out of Thomas Hitzlsperger in January 2014, Cleland et al. (2018) found that only 2% contained pernicious homophobic intent. Again, when this was present, other online users widely condemned and resisted its presence, instead emphasizing that a player's on-field performance was more important to them as fans than what occurred in their private life.

Underlying the need for a large-scale study into the presence of homosexually-themed language at football matches across the UK, non-academic organizations like Stonewall, Kick It Out, Football v. Homophobia, and the Justin Campaign regularly publicize the prevalence of homophobia in football in the UK. Indeed, in a 2017 report on homophobia in sport by the British government's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, one concern surrounded the continuation of homophobic abuse by football fans at matches. In addressing this, in this article we move away from collective chanting at football matches in the UK to focus on an individual's choice of language by presenting the views of 2,663 fans of football clubs across the UK, collected via an online survey, to two important research questions: (1) to what extent do hegemonic forms of masculinity surrounding male sexuality remain part of the match day practice for fans of clubs in the UK?; and (2) how do fans interpret the presence of homosexually-themed language at football matches in the UK?

What the results highlight is a paradox, with 95% of our participants stating support for an openly gay player on their team, yet 41% have heard homosexually-themed language that they interpret as containing homophobic intent against 37% who instead ascribe it as playful and humorous banter not containing homophobic intent. To explain how attitudes can be so progressive whilst at the same time acknowledging the presence of homosexually-themed language, we draw on some prominent theories of masculinity to try and understand why it remains a feature at men's

professional matches in the UK. Despite expressions of inclusivity that support Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory, we primarily engage with Connell's (1987) hegemonic masculinity theory to illustrate how a small minority of participants express homophobic language with pernicious intent, whilst others display elements of complicit masculinity in their match day practice, exemplified through the continued use of homosexually-themed language irrespective of how it is interpreted by other fans. This, we will argue, highlights a cultural lag between the inclusive attitudes towards sexuality in men's professional football in the UK and the homosexually-themed language being expressed by some of our participants on a match day.

Theoretical Framework

Pfister et al. (2013, p. 860) describe how gender is 'understood as a social arrangement that is constructed by means of dominant discourses, anchored in institutions, negotiated in interactions and integrated into individuals' identities.' In explaining gender power relations, Connell (1987) conceptualized hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight the maintenance of patriarchy as well as the stratification of masculinities within an intra-masculine hierarchical structure. For boys and men to improve their position in this hierarchical structure, Connell believed they aspired to one hegemonic archetype, with greater amounts of social capital acquired by those that closely adhered to the socially normative expectations of masculinity, including the demonstration of authority, heterosexuality, aggression, strength, and power, as well as the subordination, domination and oppression of women and other marginalized groups of men, such as those with a different ethnic and sexual orientation identity.

Reflecting on the social expectation of men in sport, Connell (1990, p. 83) stated how hegemonic masculinity was the ideal form of moral character as it connected 'masculinity to

toughness and competitiveness', whilst Polley (1998, p. 109) outlined how it was important for the male sporting body to present itself as an 'idealised, orthodox, heterosexual sign'. With some pertinence to football fandom in the UK, Connell (1995) explained that even though not all men would engage in activities that accorded with the hegemonic model, the function of society was likely to motivate heterosexual men to honor, desire and support the hegemonic order in society and to position themselves in a way that they could gain an advantage from being broadly complicit with its key characteristics.

Theoretical debates concerning masculinity were advanced further when Anderson (2009) introduced Inclusive Masculinity Theory to counter what he saw as the failure of hegemonic masculinity theory to adequately address cultures where homophobia was decreasing because of changing social and cultural attitudes that rejected the stigmatization of homophobia, compulsory heterosexism, and sexism. Anderson argued that instead of the ideal form of masculinity being at the apex of an intra-masculine hierarchical structure, multiple masculinities can co-exist with equal cultural appeal without any hierarchical arrangement. Even though some men would still subscribe to traditional forms of orthodox masculinity to retain masculine capital, including compulsory heterosexuality and hypermasculinity, others could engage in behaviors that no longer created homosexual suspicion, such as hugging and kissing. Thus, gendered power was more evenly distributed irrespective of sexuality. Indeed, even Connell (2012) illustrated how traditional heteronormativity is now contrasted with newer forms of 'modern' masculinity that are more expressive, egalitarian, and peaceable than was previously the case (by heteronormativity we mean the conception that encourages the acceptance of heterosexuality as normal). To help explain this broader shift, Anderson (2011) attributed some of the influential cultural changes to the growth and widespread consumption of the internet; the influence of the expanding range of media

sources; the rise and success of feminism; the increasing prominence of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement; and the influence of out gay men and women.

One of the key tenets of Inclusive Masculinity Theory and hegemonic masculinity theory surrounds the use of language. At a time where hegemonic forms of masculinity were more prominent, sporting cultures were found to regulate the gendered behaviors of boys and men (Messner, 1992), but Anderson (2009) has found this is no longer such an inhibiting factor. Recognizing the multifaceted nature of language in the twenty-first century, McCormack and Anderson (2010) emphasized the centralization of context in the meaning and effect of the language being used, with previous discussions often concentrating on whether a particular phrase or word was homophobic or not. In contextualizing expressions of homosexually-themed language, McCormack (2011, p. 673–675) devised a four-stage model that located the specific setting (i.e. low or high homohysteria, to use Anderson's terms once more) in which the language was being used, its interpretation by others and its social effects: *homophobic language* (comprising pernicious intent and a negative social effect that aims to degrade or marginalize a person or behavior through an association with homosexuality); *fag discourse* (comprising a wide range of intent but it has less of a negative social effect); *gay discourse* (comprising no intent either way but still privileging heterosexuality); and *pro-gay language* (comprising a positive social effect and is more inclusive towards homosexuality). In later work, McCormack et al. (2016) developed an intent-content-effect (ICE) matrix, situated within shared cultural norms between the speaker and the recipient, to understand the process of interpreting whether homosexually-themed language was homophobic or not. Thus, in high homohysteric environments, Thurlow (2001) outlines how 'intensifiers' will be used that regulate gendered behavior using homophobic

language (i.e., additional words to a phrase intended to degrade or wound an individual or group, such as 'you fucking queer').

In the case of the language being expressed at football matches, fans have a strong attachment to the team they support and often see themselves as active contributors in helping gain any advantage over rival teams, fans, and players. In the context of the use of homosexually-themed language at the end of the twentieth century, Giulianotti (1999, p. 155) outlines how fans engaged with 'idioms of masculine identity through an uncomplicated public emasculation or feminisation of the 'others' (such as opposing players, supporters, match officials). Supporters aim epithets such as 'poofter', 'fanny' and 'nonce' at the allegedly weak masculinity of players and officials.' With regards to the continued presence of homosexually-themed songs and chants in the twenty-first century, Magrath (2018) categorizes them into three broad narratives: (1) supporting, celebrating, and encouraging their team to win; (2) confirming collective identities as 'fans' of a particular club, often by denigrating another club and their fans; (3) vilifying match officials or opposition players and coaches for wanting to defeat *their* team (often based on rivalry and competition). Often, this is defended as 'banter' or what Hein and O'Donohoe (2014, p. 1299) refer to as the 'playful exchange of teasing remarks'. As outlined by Lawless and Magrath (2020), 'banter' is a feature of sport amongst players, coaches, and fans, and can contain multiple meanings and ways in which it is interpreted, such as seeking to be dominant yet humorous through the communication taking place.

Method

The focus of this article was part of a larger study examining fans' views towards sexuality in both men's and women's football. To gain as wide a range of views from fans as possible, we constructed an online survey and promoted it on over 150 fans forums across the UK, where the

lead author has previously acquired the permission from the respective moderators to use their platforms to conduct academic research. At the outset of the study, ethical approval was granted from the university ethics committee at one of the authors institutions and in the survey itself we closely adhered to the guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning privacy, harm, informed consent, and deception when engaging with participants.

Our approach when promoting the study on the fans forums was to provide a short overview of its scope that included a link to the survey that took potential participants to an information sheet containing a more detailed overview of the aim of the study, their role as a participant, the level of confidentiality afforded to them (for example, no personal details were recorded outside of age and sex), the storage of their data, and the contact details of the lead researcher and the university ethics committee that had approved the study. It also reminded participants that by continuing to the survey questions that they had understood their role as a participant and by submitting their response they had provided informed consent for their data to be used to advance academic research. As the survey was self-selecting, fans could just ignore the initial post made on the fans forums or decide to not proceed with the survey once they had read the participant information sheet. For those participants who did complete the survey, at the end they were again reminded that 'by clicking finish, you are giving your consent for your views to be used as part of this research project'.

We base the focus of this article on the responses to questions that asked participants their thoughts on the presence of homosexually-themed language at men's professional matches across the UK. In addressing our two research questions raised earlier, we asked the participants a mix of closed and open-ended questions that included multiple-choice responses on their perception of homosexually-themed language (following the four-stage model proposed by McCormack (2011),

this ranged from malicious with homophobic intent to never having heard homophobic language) at football matches as well as the opportunity to expand on this in an open-text box should they wish to elaborate further. We also asked the participants to reflect on whether homophobic language had become more widespread or less prevalent in recent years.

The survey was conducted from March 2020 to April 2020. Of the 2,663 fans who submitted a response, 95% self-identified as male and 5% female. 6 people identified as non-binary, a figure which equated to less than 0.5%, despite the survey also giving participants the option to include their own self-identification. With regards to the age of the participants, for this study we asked them to just state their specific age rather than their broader age range. This and the club they supported will be listed alongside those illustrative quotes we utilize in the analysis section of this article to explain the recurring themes emerging from the data.

All the authors are aware that online surveys like ours adopt non-probability sampling methods through participants self-selecting whether to take part or not, but given the study's overall focus and our intention to capture a wide range of views from fans of football clubs across the UK, we felt this was the right approach. One of the advantages of online surveys is that they allow the participant to complete it in their own time and avoid the potential bias of social desirability that can occur on a subject like this with face-to-face research (Cleland et al., 2020). No prizes or monetary reward was given for participation; instead, our aim was for participants to complete it as honestly as they could. Of course, we are aware that some participants would seek to try and distort the findings, hence why we collected the sizeable sample. Despite this, we make no claim to be representative of all fans of football clubs across the UK, but the findings give us the first real large-scale insight into fans' views regarding the presence of homosexually-themed language at men's professional matches across the UK.

In analyzing the data, the closed-ended data was analyzed via descriptive statistics, whilst the open-ended responses were inductively analyzed by each author in an initial period of open coding across first and second order phases to begin identifying any patterns and commonalities (Bryman, 2016). Once this was complete, all the authors then collaborated to collectively identify and verify the master themes emerging out of the open-ended data. This subsequently led to the emergence of two recurring themes that informs the analysis section below: (1) contextualizing the presence of homosexually-themed language; and (2) presentations of masculinity. Of course, we cannot provide responses from the 87% of the 2,663 participants who left a comment in the open-text boxes, so the quotes we use below are illustrative of the two recurring themes that emerged from the data.

Contextualizing the presence of homosexually-themed language

Reflecting the wider societal shift highlighted by Clements and Field (2014) and Watt and Elliot (2019) and what has been found in the culture of football in the UK (see Cashmore & Cleland, 2011, 2012, 2014; Cleland, 2014, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Cleland & Magrath, 2019; Cleland et al., 2018; Magrath, 2017, 2018; Magrath & Anderson, 2017; Magrath et al., 2015; Roberts et al., 2017), 95% of our participants said they would support a gay player at their club. One explanation why we had a higher proportion of participants demonstrating more inclusivity towards same-sex relationships compared to respondents to the British Social Attitudes Survey and the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles could be the allegiance fans show to their club and its players, irrespective of what happens in the player's private life. As outlined by Cashmore and Cleland (2012), what is of primary concern to football fans is how their team performs on the field of play.

Contrary to this overwhelming display of inclusivity, however, just over three-quarters of our participants have heard homosexually-themed language at men's professional matches but are split on how they interpret its presence. For example, 41% consider it malicious and toxic as they believe it contains homophobic intent, in comparison to 37% who believe it does not contain homophobic intent, instead ascribing it as playful and humorous banter. The remaining 22% outlined that they have never heard any homosexually-themed language at matches.

Not surprisingly, the split in interpreting homosexually-themed language was also reflected in our open-ended responses. On the one side were participants who argued that there was homophobic intent behind its continued presence. By way of illustration was this response by a male (aged 52) Tottenham Hotspur fan: 'It is a deliberate choice of words. The words are meant to cause hurt and embarrassment. The motivation is to be ugly and to cause harm', whilst a male (aged 31) Coventry City fan concurred: 'While some people may think it is banter, it is hate speech that is borne out of a traditional notion that LGBT people are the 'other' and football matches are a place to vocalise this.' 'Othering' under the disguise of banter was also referred to by other participants, including this male (aged 41) Queens Park Rangers fan:

> Sometimes it's malicious (and the people involved are indeed homophobic), and other times it's just thoughtless - i.e., the perpetrators probably believe it's just harmless banter and aren't raging homophobes. They just like to differentiate themselves from the 'other' – in this case, gay people. Ultimately though, even if it's not intended to be malicious, I imagine it would still be very intimidating to gay footballers or supporters, and therefore we must draw a line and say it's unacceptable. Also, if we say that 'witty banter' of a homophobic nature is acceptable, it only ends up inadvertently legitimising people who are actually doing it in a malicious way. Nobody would accept 'witty banter' of a racist nature, so no one should accept it when it's of a homophobic nature.

For some scholars, such as Caudwell (2011), expressions that trivialize the gay Other (a group that is considered distinct from or opposite to oneself or one's own group) is evidence of homophobia, but interpreting language is complex and individually subjective. As outlined by McCormack and

Anderson (2010), it needs locating in the context in which it is being used, with participants like those above clearly indicating that football remains a heteronormative space where homophobia is used to police and reaffirm traditional masculine characteristics. Indeed, other participants referred explicitly to the use of epithets surrounding 'gay' as a reason why they believed any language referencing this was malicious in nature. As one male (aged 34) Portsmouth fan argued:

> Is it really acceptable to use 'gay' in a derogatory way? I'd say it isn't. It doesn't send out a good message - maybe it's intimidating to gay people and would make them feel uncomfortable about coming to matches. Generally, I'm sure it's intended as harmless banter... but that doesn't make it acceptable. How something is intended, and how it comes across (plus it's overall effect in a wider context) are two very separate things. Essentially, what could be meant as playful banter can be very toxic!

Reflecting the thoughts of Lawless and Magrath (2020), this participant was one of a number who referred to a grey area between banter and homophobic intent surrounding the use of language at football matches. As this male (aged 44) Arsenal fan explained: 'Football still attracts an element of 'lad culture' where malicious or toxic comments can be painted merely as banter when they are anything but', whilst this male (aged 50) Bristol City fan added:

> The use of homophobic language has become less prevalent and is more aligned with the majority of society becoming more inclusive in their attitudes. People still shout gay comments if a player falls over or moans after a soft tackle. I think that is more banter and isn't meant to offend. It still doesn't make it right though and I'm pleased with moves that have been made to stamp such comments out. However, when chanting is used it seems to be delivered with more hatred, it is intended to be nasty and more harmful that is delivered by smaller, more extreme sections of crowds.

Participants who defended expressions of homophobic language as harmless banter with no intent to harm gay people reflected what Connell (1995) referred to as complicit masculinity, where the traditional hegemonic model is likely to motivate heterosexual men to honor and reflect the hegemonic order and its characteristics for personal advantage. Indeed, other participants attempted to justify the use of homophobic language, including this response by a male (aged 60) Port Vale fan: 'Football is a day out. Rightly or wrongly, we have all at some time or other said

things which we do not really believe or understand. For a few hours on a match day football is escapism from the real world', whilst this male (aged 25) Blackpool fan concurred:

> Football on a Saturday gives a minority of fans an outlet to express themselves in ways they do not get in their lives outside of football. This may be because they think being in a large gathering gives them an opportunity to boost their masculine capital in ways not normally available to them. So, to reaffirm their manhood, some engage in homophobic language.

Responses like this outlined how some male fans express homophobic language to confirm their masculine capital. Indeed, this was highlighted by a male (aged 42) Cambridge United fan: 'Using homophobic language normalises it and perpetuates the idea that it is acceptable. It has reduced over the years, but its continuation shows how embedded it remains amongst fans.' On a match day, fans often see themselves as the so-called twelfth man who can help their team to victory in whatever way they can – singing, barracking, harassing the officials, opposing players, coaches, or fans (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011; Giulianotti, 1999; Magrath, 2018). As this male (aged 62) Torquay United fan highlighted:

> Fans just want to wind the opposition players up to put them off their game. Fans will pick up on any features of an opposition player to wind them up – short, tall, fat, bald, old, young, ginger, black, gay etc. There is something about the pack mentality of football fans that drives, sometimes the most inoffensive of people, to be offensive for ninety minutes.

For some participants, any claim of ignorance towards casual homophobia no longer holds credibility given the advances made inside and outside football with regards to male sexuality. As expressed by this male (aged 50) Middlesbrough fan: 'The time has long passed when people might use homophobic terms as generic pejoratives and claim ignorance. As with racial slurs, by this point anyone using them must surely know the impact', whilst this male (aged 58) Hibernian fan concurred: 'Just because it's a football match doesn't mean they can hide behind the 'banter'

excuse. If it happens anywhere else, it's an offence.' This male (aged 27) West Ham United fan went even further in his response:

> There is a lack of awareness of the damage that words can have. In football it is important to be able to have a powerfully emotive atmosphere. It is a historical part of the theatre of the game, it lends a huge amount to the enjoyment of the sport. That necessitates hostility. Players will be individually addressed by fans in a bid to put them off their game, to affect them in an important moment that benefits their team. However, people fail to recognise the gap between acceptable abuse and abuse that carries social weight. You should be able to tell a player he is bad in however many ways you like, but you can't make judgements about his sexuality, race, religion, etc. and expect them to accept a personal attack on their character that isn't relevant to the context of other abuse.

Thus, the presence of heteronormativity in British football is evident once again through comments like those above, where the embedded norms remain influential in some fans expressing discriminatory language. For example, reference by the West Ham United fan to 'acceptable abuse and abuse that carries social weight' clearly differentiates the context of football to a range of workplaces, where such abuse would be wholly unacceptable. Consequently, there exists a detachment from overwhelmingly inclusive attitudes in what has been found to be a more progressive cultural context and the use of homosexually-themed language at men's professional football matches in the UK.

Presentations of masculinity

Although our data illustrated inclusive attitudes amongst football fans with regards to sexuality in men's professional football in the UK, hegemonic attitudes also remain prominent in the match day practice for some fans. This was perfectly illustrated by this response from a male (aged 49) Brighton fan: 'Overall things have improved from the past, but there's a minority of men who need to shout louder to try and reassert some sense of power. Football is probably the last bastion to demonstrate their relative power and influence of being a 'man'', whilst this male (aged 36) Bristol Rovers fan suggested:

> In my experience there are very few football fans who are genuinely motivated by a hatred of gay people. It is more about the toxic masculinity that is engrained in aspects of fan culture. In most instances homophobic abuse at football grounds is less about the hatred of gay people and more about staking a claim to a hyper-male identity and the easiest way to do that is to create an 'other' – an outgroup that is weaker than the ingroup.

Extracts like this reflected the theoretical thoughts of Connell (1987), where the stratification of masculinities within an intra-masculine structure leads to quests to acquire greater levels of social capital by marginalizing other men that are not seen as adhering to the normative expectations of masculinity, such as heterosexuality, toughness, and bravery. Illustrating this further, in other excerpts of the data, regular reference was made to homosexuality being a weakness, with some participants, such as this male (aged 26) Wolves fan, stating: 'Whilst the culture of football has improved, the underlying attitudes are largely still there. Fan conceptions of strength and weakness, or players being 'soft' certainly don't help improve matters for men who don't conform to traditionally accepted notions of masculinity at football matches', whilst this male (aged 60) Middlesbrough fan shared similar views: 'It's intended to demean a person, suggesting he isn't a 'real' man – a weakling, not part of the team, an outsider.'

Another example was this response by a male (aged 34) Chelsea fan: 'You might see a player duck out of some form of contact with another player and you'll hear 'man up you fucking poof'. Fans want physically tough players and automatically associate any weakness with being gay.' Although responses like this were not a recurring feature of the dataset, as outlined by Thurlow (2001), the use of intensifiers in language indicates how gendered behavior remains regulated through homophobic language, but this does not always need to contain expletives. For example, there were a small minority of responses across the data where hegemonic masculine values were more explicitly presented, such as this account by a Hibernian (aged 29) fan: 'Football is a man's game. It is not the place to push the gay movement. Push your agenda where somewhere

cares because most real football fans cannot stand homosexuals', whilst this male (aged 60) Leeds United fan argued: 'Queers used to quietly carry out their disgusting acts in private. They have now infiltrated the media and force their unnatural way of life onto us all. Obviously, this will lead to more abuse inside stadia as fans need to highlight more resistance.' Responses like this provided clear evidence of toxic masculinity being played out in the context of a football match for a small number of participants, where there is sexual conflict taking place between male football fans and 'queers' that is fought using explicit homophobic language as a form of resistance to any countenance towards heteronormativity.

In fact, a sense of 'resistance' to what some participants felt was a move to greater acceptance and inclusivity regarding sexuality was a consistent point raised by those who held more traditionally orthodox views. Some participants vented this forcefully, such as this response from a male (aged 36) Liverpool fan: 'Homosexuality is an illness. We do not want our children brainwashed into such a mental illness. Homosexuals need psychological help, NOT a pat on the back. Football is a place where such resistance can be vented.' Some context needs to be offered here given that most of our participants demonstrated more inclusivity towards the presence of a gay footballer at their club. But, given the evidence presented so far in this article, homophobic epithets are likely to remain part of the match day practice for some fans unless there are more rigidly applied deterrents in place, such as the proposed changes to the Football Offences Act 1991 in July 2020 by the British government's Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee to make homophobic chanting illegal.

Despite calls for a change to legislation, many of our participants stated that in their experience of attending matches over several decades, there had been a more positive changing culture with regards to the use of homosexually-themed language. Some participants, such as this

male (aged 49) Liverpool fan, were keen to link it to wider societal change: 'Homophobic language is less prevalent because bigotry has become more taboo in society', whilst this female (aged 45) Norwich City went further in her explanation:

> Over the last 10 or so years there has been a major decline in the use of homophobic language at football matches. Back then people did not know or did not think about the consequences of homophobic language, so they just did it without thinking. However today, thanks to high-profile campaigns and a wider acceptance of same-sex relations people are better informed and the abuse is limited to a just a few individuals hanging on to the use of football to present their views.

Expanding on this, a number of other participants, such as this male (aged 44) Southampton fan, related the improvements to changes within the game: 'It can be partially linked to the change in demographic of match attending fans: more children, women, families, less 50+ 'old school' fans. We now have players wearing rainbow laces, as well as an increase in the number and prominence of LGBT fan groups.' Likewise, this male (aged 47) Brighton fan added: 'Improvements can be located towards more internal policing by fans themselves, potential bans from stadia, specific campaigns (i.e., rainbow laces), and LGBT fan groups at clubs.' Although anti-homophobia policies established by the English FA have been criticized (see Magrath & Stott, 2019), there are various campaign groups including Stonewall, Football v. Homophobia, Kick It Out, the Gay Football Supporters Network, and the Justin Campaign now championing the need for more inclusive sexual equality. More locally, clubs are increasingly found to have a recognized LGBT supporter group that champions pride amongst the fan base and is becoming more visible in its presence on a match day and in communications regarding LGBT issues by the respective clubs.

Other participants also reflected on the policing of language by fans themselves, with this male (aged 53) St Mirren fan stating: 'In the 1980s and early 1990s homophobic chants and language were widespread. Society has (thankfully) changed and homophobia is now frowned

upon. In my experience as a fan nowadays such comments or shouts are not tolerated by the average fan', whilst this male (aged 49) Manchester United fan argued:

> People are more educated these days and decisive in challenging discrimination. People are more willing to stand up and tell those that do shout such things that they are out of order. Most people who shout at matches are doing it to vent frustration etc. but also to get a laugh or a nod of acceptance from other fans and this remains a problem. Still, there is a greater chance of being told to shut up these days than was the case in the 1980s and 1990s.

Other participants made note of the self-reflection fans have gone through over a generation since the negative reaction directed towards the coming out of footballer Justin Fashanu in 1990 by the media, fans, opposition players, his own team mates, and even his own brother, John, who was also a professional footballer. As explained by this male (aged 56) Glasgow Rangers fan:

> The derogatory terms such as 'faggot', 'poof' and 'queer' are much less heard in society in general and this has gradually impacted on their use within football grounds. The majority of fans are more aware of the people around them and are less inclined to make derogatory remarks relating to someone's sexuality than they were in the past. There are also more channels where homophobic language or chanting can be reported anonymously.

With regards to fan behavior at matches and online on various social media platforms such as Twitter and fans forums, Kick It Out is the most high-profile campaigning body attempting to eradicate discrimination in football. Although it initially focused on racism when it was created in the 1990s, the scope of Kick It Out has broadened to try and address discrimination more broadly, including homophobia. As referred to by the participant above, one of the initiatives Kick It Out introduced in 2015 was an app that can be downloaded to encourage fans to anonymously report incidents of discrimination to the relevant authorities (notwithstanding the low rates of prosecution that have taken place since it was introduced). The key element is making fans aware of this, as Magrath and Stott (2019) found that an awareness of it amongst fans remained low.

Conclusion

This article has presented the first large-scale sociological insight into the presence of homosexually-themed language at men's professional football matches across the UK. What the results illustrate is a paradox with 95% of our participants stating support for a gay player at their club, yet fans are clearly split on their interpretation of the presence of homosexually-themed language, with 37% stating such language does not contain homophobic intent, whilst 41% believe it is malicious and toxic. These findings are not unique, however, as they are consistent with the findings of a study of self-reported use of homophobic language by 97 male rugby union players and 146 ice hockey players by Denison et al. (2020), which found that there was no statistical relationship between homophobic attitudes and the use of homophobic language.

Our evidence points to similar conclusions, where the interpretation of language expressed by football fans remains a complex and divisive issue, particularly surrounding the use of sexual epithets at matches. For example, at one club in the south of England, Brighton and Hove Albion, the city's association as the gay capital of England sees their supporters regularly face chants of 'we can see you holding hands' and 'does your boyfriend know you're here?' from opposition fans. As a case in point surrounding the focus of this article, some people would see this as homophobic, yet others would not, and this highlights the complexity as interpretations are not based on shared sexually inclusive norms. Indeed. across the data were responses that linked to McCormack's (2011) four-stage model of homosexually-themed language. At opposite ends of this model, there were examples that would fall into pro-gay language as well as homophobic language, yet there were other examples that could be interpreted as fag discourse and gay discourse.

Following the legal recognition of same-sex marriage in many countries across the world since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there have also been two world-altering movements in recent years – Me Too and Black Lives Matter. Collectively, these gender, sexuality, and race movements have contributed to more progressive attitudes, not just in certain demographic groups in specific countries, but across all ages and globally. One of the most profound changes is, to put it in the vernacular, 'it is not cool to discriminate'. That means against women, or ethnic minorities, or any group that has historically been subject to bigotry – gay men included. In the case of football, fans have a reputation as being steeped in fanaticism, partisanship, sectarianism, dogmatism, intolerance, narrow-mindedness, heterosexism, and homophobia. With regards to accusations of homophobia, following the study of 3,500 football fans by Cashmore and Cleland (2012) that found that 93% would support a gay player, our article has also found that the majority of football fans do not manifest homophobic attitudes.

Although some of our participants defended homosexually-themed language as good natured and just part of the game where fans exchange insults with each other, they exhibit a form of cultural lag with regards to their support for a gay player and their expression of language when attending matches. Ogburn (1957, p. 167) describes how this occurs when 'one of two parts of culture which are correlated, changes before or in greater degree that the other part does, thereby causing less adjustment between the two parts than existed previously.' Even though a significant majority of male fans express inclusive attitudes towards the presence of a gay player on their team, some are broadly complicit with the key characteristics of the hegemonic masculinity model devised by Connell (1987) through the continued use of homosexually-themed language at matches. Yes, the use of overt homophobic epithets might not be at the same level it was in previous generations where cultures like football were found to be in a highly homohysteric

setting, but the results outline how homosexually-themed language still polices the behavior of some fans and results in a stigmatization of presumed masculine weakness for those who are not seen as conforming to heteronormativity (i.e., gay men).

Overall, our findings indicate that the homosexually-themed language used by fans does not reflect widespread homophobia. So why is it possible to hear what some interpret as homophobic language? The answer is that football culture must be approached in its own linguistic context, in its own particular code of principles, particularly when addressing expressions of language. As we have outlined, fans will do anything to gain an advantage for their team, even if it means engaging in language that could be interpreted as prejudicial or discriminatory towards gay men or the wider LGBT community. Hence, there remains a need to challenge the traditional norms surrounding masculinity in men's football in the UK that allows discriminatory language to remain in the culture of fandom on a match day. In terms of finding a solution, what we have seen is some success with regards to the LGBT movement in football. Clubs across the UK are increasingly recognizing LGBT fan groups and with greater visibility and inclusion, change can happen. It remains slow progress, but the need to address the presence of homosexually-themed language is paramount if football wants to be a sport for people of all sexual orientations.

References

Adams, A., Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2010). Establishing and challenging masculinity: The influence of gendered discourses in organized sport. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *29*(3), 278-300.

Anderson, E. (2009). *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities*. New York: Routledge.

Anderson, E. (2011). Updating the outcome: Gay athletes, straight teams, and coming out at the end of the decade. *Gender & Society*, *25*(2), 250–268.

Anderson, E., Magrath, R., & Bullingham, R. (2016). *Out in sport: The experiences of openly gay and lesbian athletes in competitive sport*. London: Routledge.

BBC Sport (2010). PFA chief says homophobia not high on football agenda. *BBC Sport*. http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/football/8513284.stm

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cashmore, E., & Cleland, J. (2011). Glasswing butterflies: Gay professional football players and their culture. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *35*(4), 420-436.

Cashmore, E., & Cleland, J. (2012). Fans, homophobia and masculinities in association football: Evidence of a more inclusive environment. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *63*(2), 370-387.

Cashmore, E., & Cleland, J. (2014). *Football's dark side: Corruption, homophobia, violence and racism in the beautiful game*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Caudwell, J. (2011). 'Does your boyfriend know you're here?' The spatiality of homophobia in men's football culture in the UK. *Leisure Studies, 30*(2), 123–138.

Cleland, J. (2014). Association football and the representation of homosexuality by the print media: A case study of Anton Hysén. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *61*(9), 1269-1287.

Cleland, J. (2015). Discussing homosexuality on association football fan message boards: A changing cultural context. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *50*(2), 125-140.

Cleland, J. (2018a). Sexuality, masculinity and homophobia in association football: An empirical overview of a changing cultural context. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport, 53*(4), 411-423.

Cleland, J. (2018b). Britain's first openly gay football referee: The story of Ryan Atkin. In R. Magrath (Ed.), *LGBT athletes in the sports media* (pp. 125-146). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Cleland, J., Dixon, K., & Kilvington, D. (2019). *Online research methods in sport studies*. London: Routledge.

Cleland, J., & Magrath, R. (2019) Association football, masculinity, and sexuality: An evolving relationship. In R. Magrath, J. Cleland, & E. Anderson (Eds), *The Palgrave handbook of masculinity and sport* (pp. 341-357). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cleland, J., Magrath, R., & Kian, E. (2018). The internet as a site of decreasing cultural homophobia in association football: An online response by fans to the coming out of Thomas Hitzlsperger. *Men and Masculinities*, *21*(1), 91-111.

Clements, B., & Field, C. (2014). Public opinion toward homosexuality and gay rights in Great Britain. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *78*(2), 523–547.

Connell R.W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person and sexual politics*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Connell, R.W. (1990). An iron man: The body and some contradictions of hegemonic masculinity. In M. Messner, & D. Sabo (Eds), *Sport, men, and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives* (pp. 83-95). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Connell, R.W. (1995). *Masculinities*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Connell, R.W. (2012). Masculinity research and global change. *Masculinities and Social Change*, *1*(1), 4–18.

Denison, E., Faulkner, N., Jeanes, R., & Toole, D. (2020). Relationships between attitudes and norms with homophobic language use in male team sports. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*. Online First. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1440244020308094

Giulianotti, R. (1999). *Football: A sociology of the global game.* Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Harris, N., & Godwin, H. (2009). Two top gay footballers stay in closet. *Independent.* https://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news/two-top-gay-footballers-stay-in-closet-1845787.html

Hein, W., & O'Donohoe, S. (2014). Practising gender: The role of banter in young men's improvisations of masculine consumer identities. *Journal of Marketing Management*, *30*(13-14), 1293-1319.

Lawless, W., & Magrath, R. (2020). Inclusionary and exclusionary banter: English club cricket, inclusive attitudes and male camaraderie. *Sport in Society*. Online First. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17430437.2020.1819985

Magrath, R. (2017). *Inclusive masculinities in contemporary football: Men in the beautiful game*. London: Routledge.

Magrath, R. (2018). 'To try and gain an advantage for my team': Homophobic and homosexually-themed chanting among English football fans. *Sociology, 52*(4), 709-726.

Magrath, R., & Anderson, E. (2017). Football, homosexuality and the English Premier League. In R. Elliott (Ed.), *The English Premier League: A socio-cultural analysis* (pp. 150-164). London: Routledge.

Magrath, R., Anderson, E., & Roberts, S. (2015). On the door-step of equality: Attitudes toward gay athletes among academy-level footballers. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *50*(7), 804-821.

Magrath, R., & Stott, P. (2019). 'Impossible to implement?': The effectiveness of anti-homophobia policy in English professional football. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, *11*(1), 19-38.

McCormack, M. (2011). Mapping the terrain of homosexually-themed language. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *58*(5), 664-679.

McCormack, M., & Anderson, E. (2010). The re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in educationally-based organised sport. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, *12*(8), 913-927.

McCormack, M., Wignall, L., & Morris, M. (2016). Gay guys using gay language: Friendship, shared values and the intent-content-effect matrix. *British Journal of Sociology*, *67*(4), 747-767.

Messner, M. (1992). *Power at play: Sports and the problem of masculinity*. New York: Beacon Press.

Messner, M., & Sabo, D. (1990). *Sport, men, and the gender order: Critical feminist perspectives*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Ogburn, W. (1957). Cultural lag as theory. *Sociology and Social Research*, *41*(3), 167–174.

Pfister, G., Lenneis, V., & Mintert, S. (2013). Female fans of men's football: A case study in Denmark. *Soccer & Society*, *14*(6), 850-871.

Polley, M. (1998). *Moving the goalposts: A history of sport and society in Britain since 1945*. London: Routledge.

Pringle, R., & Hickey, C. (2010). Negotiating masculinities via the moral problematization of sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *27*(2), 115-138.

Pronger, B. (1990). *The arena of masculinity: Sports, homosexuality, and the meaning of sex*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Roberts, S., Anderson, E., & Magrath, R. (2017). Continuity, change and complexity in the performance of masculinity among elite young footballers in England. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *68*(2), 336-357.

Rodriguez, N.S. (2017). #FIFAputos: A Twitter textual analysis over "Puto" at the 2014 World Cup. *Communication & Sport*, *5*(6), 712-731.

Thorpe, H. (2010). Bourdieu, gender reflexivity, and physical culture: A case of masculinities in the snowboarding field. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 34*(2), 176-214.

Thurlow, C. (2001). Naming the "outsider within". *Journal of Adolescence*, *24*(1), 25–38.

Watt, L., & Elliot, M. (2019). Homonegativity in Britain: Changing attitudes towards same-sex relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *56*(9), 1101-1114.