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Fan Reflections on Sexuality in Women's Football in the United Kingdom

Abstract

This article presents the responses of 1,432 male association football fans, collected via an online survey from March 2020 to April 2020, regarding their views on sexuality in women's football in the United Kingdom. The analysis focuses on two broad themes that emerged from the data: (1) the association of women footballers with masculinity and how they subsequently transgress the traditional characteristics of femininity; and (2) a reduced stigma surrounding sexuality in women's football given its lower profile in terms of coverage and the smaller number of fans in comparison to men's football. The article concludes by outlining how there is less homonegativity concerning sexuality in women's football in the United Kingdom, primarily because the heteromale position of male fans is not challenged, but fans also reaffirm the stereotypes and myths of non-heterosexual women playing a sport like football.

Keywords: fans, gender, lesbian, masculinity, femininity, sexuality

Introduction

Since the 1980s, across the Western world, in particular, there have been considerable advances surrounding greater gender and sexual orientation equality. Initially, academic attention addressed the presence of homophobia in men's and women's sports (see, for example, Cahn, 1994; Griffin, 1998; Hekma, 1998; Lenskyj, 1986; Messner, 1988; Pronger, 1990), but subsequent research has illustrated how a range of sporting environments are increasingly more tolerant of gay men and lesbians than was found in previous decades (see, for example, Anderson, 2009; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Anderson et al., 2016; Bullingham & Postlethwaite, 2018; Cashmore & Cleland, 2011, 2012; Caudwell, 1999, 2003, 2007; Chawansky & Francombe, 2011; Cleland, 2014, 2015, 2018; Cleland & Magrath, 2019; Cleland et al., 2018; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Drury, 2011; Krane, 2018; Magrath, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Stott, 2018). Within this body of research, a range of factors are making a positive contribution to a more inclusive culture surrounding sexuality in sport: the inclusive attitude of fans; the way in which the media discuss sexuality and the favorable coverage provided to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues; the rise of the internet and social media which has given a range of stakeholders (fans, media, players,

activists) a platform to comment on LGBT issues and policies in the context of sport; and the increasing numbers of athletes publicly coming out as LGBT.

These findings are also supported by some general population surveys. For example, in their analysis of 13 social attitude surveys, Clements and Field (2014) highlighted how two-thirds of participants to the British Social Attitudes Survey in 1988 stated how homosexuality was wrong, but by 2013 this had reduced to one-fifth of participants. Likewise, in their longitudinal analysis of the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Watt and Elliot (2019) found one-fifth of respondents viewing same-sex sex as 'always wrong' in 2010, down from 50% in 1990. This attitudinal shift was also reflected in changes to British policy such as the abolition of Section 28 in 2003 (a law that was introduced in 1988 by the then Conservative government that banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality in educational settings), as well as the legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples in the United Kingdom (UK) and several other Western countries in the twenty-first century. However, a caveat to this is countries across the world such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Qatar, and Egypt, where being gay remains illegal.

Unlike in men's sport, which until the second decade of the twenty-first century had very few openly gay athletes, Krane (1996) and Riemer (1997) outline that the higher number of openly lesbian athletes that have come out since the 1990s can be located within the greater levels of social support found in women's sports.¹ This, they argue, helps women athletes be more open about their sexuality and can subsequently help form the greater acceptance of a lesbian and bisexual identity in some women's sports (for a later analysis of this see Anderson & Bullingham, 2015). Following the coming out of high-profile footballers like Megan Rapinoe in 2012 and Casey Stoney in 2014, in an article by ITV (2019), it was reported that there were at least 41 female

players or coaches who were openly lesbian or bisexual at the 2019 Women's World Cup, including at least five members of the England women's team. Within the ITV article were several reasons why there were more openly lesbian and bisexual players in women's soccer or association football (hereafter football) than men's, including better support mechanisms, less media coverage and stigma, and a much smaller number of fans attending matches in comparison to men's football.

From an academic perspective, sexuality in women's football is rarely assessed aside from the playing side of the game. For example, Caudwell (1999, 2007) and Drury (2011) illustrated how football clubs provide opportunities to examine homophobic and heteronormative discursive practices related to gender and sexuality, the extent to which they are produced and resisted, and the subsequent tensions that may arise. Whilst these studies were largely conducted before the advancements and changes that have subsequently occurred in women's football, Pfister (2015) has argued that football continues to allow for the demonstration of hegemonic masculinities, albeit with less hegemonic power than was previously the case. The reasons behind this include the re-emergence and subsequent national and international development of women's football since the 1970s, as well as the increasing numbers of women fans, chief executives, administrators, and journalists operating in both men's and women's football in the twenty-first century (see Cleland et al., 2020; Pope, 2017, 2018; Toffoletti, 2017).

Despite this growing range of research examining the role of women in football, the perspective of fans on sexuality in women's football remains an under-researched area. The fan research that exists overwhelmingly concentrates on men's sports (see Pfister et al., 2013; Pope, 2018; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012), with a dearth of academic analysis given to male fans views of all aspects of women's sports. This is particularly important given male fans are such a dominant and powerful force in the culture of football as they are typically a much older, larger, and more

established fan base than is found in women's football. This is not to say that men are the 'authentic' fans of football – a dominant construction often found to broadly exist in the discourse surrounding sports fandom (Meân, 2012; Pope, 2017) – but they make up a large proportion of UK football fandom, thus impacting the cultural discourse and narratives that exist. Furthermore, as women's football in the UK continues to expand to a broader audience base, male fans are likely to take more of an interest in following the women's game, particularly at those clubs that have men's and women's teams, as well as the increasing television coverage of clubs and national teams.

To address this gap in knowledge, in this article we present the views of 1,432 male football fans of football clubs from across the UK, collected via an online survey, to two important research questions: (1) to what extent are traditional gender stereotypes present in football fan discourse in the context of sexuality in women's football in the UK; and (2) what is the extent of homophobia or inclusivity directed towards lesbian or bisexual players in women's football in the UK?

The results primarily draw on prominent theories of masculinity, most notably Connell's (1987) hegemonic masculinity theory, to explain the gendered power relations between men and women in the context of sexuality in women's football in the UK. As outlined by Howson (2006, p. 3), this approach allows us to examine the 'axiomatic position that hegemonic masculinity has assumed' in the views expressed by male fans towards sexuality in women's football in the UK. In responding to the lack of evidence in this area of study, the results are presented in two thematic areas. The first assesses the widespread association of women footballers with masculinity and how they subsequently transgress the traditional characteristics of femininity. The second addresses how the lower profile of women's football creates less stigma for those who want to publicly come out as well as evidence of a more supportive environment given the higher number

of openly lesbian or bisexual players in comparison to the lack of openly gay players in men's football. In doing so, however, some of our participants reaffirm the stereotypes and myths of lesbian and bisexual women playing a sport like football.

Conceptual 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.' To explain the gender order through the power relations between men and women, Connell (1987) conceptualized hegemonic masculinity – an ideological construct consisting of an intra-masculine hierarchical structure in which boys and men were located. To improve their position in the hierarchical structure, Connell believed boys and men aspired to one hegemonic archetype, with those that closely adhered to the social expectations of masculinity, including the demonstration of authority, heterosexuality, aggression, strength, and power, rewarded with a greater amount of social and cultural capital than those boys and men who did not. It included the avoidance of any traits associated with femininity as well as the subordination, domination and oppression of women and other men who did not prescribe to the model (such as gay men). Although only a few men would engage with activities in accordance with the hegemonic model to reach its apex, by passively sustaining it, a bigger majority would benefit from the patriarchal dividend through complicity by simply positioning themselves in a way to gain a power advantage over women (Connell, 1995).

In relating hegemonic masculinity to football, ever since it was regulated through the creation of the English Football Association (FA) in 1863 it has been largely understood as a male institution. The demonstration of masculine characteristics, such as strength, power, authority, bravery, and toughness became synonymous with the game during the late nineteenth century as

part of a 'masculine' rite of passage that was subsequently passed through generations of boys and men (Dunning, 1999). Conversely, feminine characteristics, such as, sensitivity, frailness, and the socially expected role to be a supportive spouse and caring mother meant that the popular belief was football was better suited to boys and men with the presence of women, particularly as players, viewed as a challenge to masculinity (Hargreaves, 1994).

The importance of masculine characteristics also meant that for a large part of its history, men's football has been viewed as a heteronormative environment where homophobic discourse is reproduced and maintained, a fact brought true through the hostile reaction to footballer Justin Fashanu coming out as gay in 1990 via an exclusive interview with the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. Fashanu came out during a period of time which Anderson (2009) refers to as consisting of 'homohysteria' – the fear by boys and men of being labelled as gay in a highly homophobic culture that resulted in men overtly demonstrating their heteromascularity by engaging in practice containing elements of violence, sexism, and homophobia to raise their masculine capital and avoid any suspicion that they were gay.

Although hegemonic masculinity theory retained prominence in the latter part of the twentieth century, Anderson (2009) devised inclusive masculinity theory by arguing how hegemonic masculinity theory does not adequately address cultures where changing attitudes towards masculinity and sexuality have led to decreasing levels of homophobia in the twenty-first century. And while there have been some criticisms of Inclusive Masculinity Theory (see, for example, O'Neill, 2015), one of the important points Anderson raises is rather than have one form of masculinity at the apex of an intra-masculine hierarchical structure, multiple masculinities can co-exist with equal cultural appeal across a range of sport settings. Men adopting more inclusive attitudes were found to reject homophobia, compulsory heterosexism, stoicism, and sexism as well

as engage in a range of behaviors that no longer presented a threat of homosexual suspicion, such as hugging and kissing each other, whilst men who continued to subscribe to traditional forms of orthodox masculinity retained views and behaviors consistent with compulsory heteromascularity (Anderson, 2009).

Likewise, in their analysis of the relationship between lesbians and team sports in the United States (US), Anderson and Bullingham (2015) argue that homophobia regulates gendered behaviors and, as it decreases, so should its intensity. Following the pattern of more inclusivity in men's football (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011, 2012; Cleland, 2014, 2015, 2018; Cleland & Magrath, 2019; Cleland et al., 2018; Magrath, 2017, 2018a, 2018b), Chawansky and Francombe (2011) illustrate that the social acceptance of lesbians in women's football has been reflected in their representation by the media, whilst Drury (2011) highlights how this is also evidenced through the increasing number of gay-identifying women's teams in the UK. Whilst the lesbian label has historically been weaponized against women presumed to be breaking from the prescriptions of emphasized femininity, and remains weaponized in certain contextual situations, there is the argument that the presumptions of lesbianism do not carry the same negative connotations that it once did (Mann & Krane, 2018).

With pertinence to the focus of this article, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) recognize that more work is needed on the interplay between masculinities and femininities, particularly given how Connell (1987) did not directly address multiple femininities or hierarchies of femininity when conceptualizing hegemonic masculinity. Identifying the lack of symmetry in masculinity and femininity, Connell (1987, p. 183) initially conceptualized 'hegemonic femininity', but was later changed to 'emphasized femininity', which was 'oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men', most notably concerning marriage and raising

children. In her analysis of the gender order, Schippers (2007, p. 94) uses hegemonic femininity to refer to the characteristics of femininity that ‘establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.’ Likewise, Skogvang and Fasting (2013) illustrate how women footballers challenge hegemonic femininity by having multiple identities that move between different characteristics of masculinity and femininity. For those women who enact characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, such as sexually desiring other women and showing aggression and strength, Schippers (2007) outlines how they are labelled as performing ‘pariah femininities’, which can lead to stigmatization and prejudice.

Concerning the powerful influence of sexual stigma and prejudice in sport, Herek (2007) outlines how heteronormativity is the structural base of sexual stigma and that often leads to the marginalization of those individuals with a ‘non-normative’ sexual orientation. Indeed, Herek’s work is particularly useful in analyzing the historic heteromascline culture present within football given how the social construction, sharing and reproduction of sexual stigmas can be a powerful influence in shaping beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes towards sexuality.

With regards to the inclusion of lesbian women in sport, Waldron (2016) conceptualized a dominant discourse entitled ‘the myth of the lesbian athlete’. While gender is widely viewed as dichotomous (i.e., masculine and feminine), sexuality is popularly viewed as a binary that falls within the nexus of gender identity and expression. The myth, which is culturally and ideologically deeper than just stereotypes, is defined as, firstly, a woman playing sport must be a lesbian, and secondly, a lesbian identity is ‘butch’ or ‘masculine’ – meaning lesbians are perceived to be more masculine and subsequently play sports requiring greater levels of aggression and strength. Upheld by cultural and social norms, language, and institutions, the myth of the lesbian athlete is pervasive

through sport but is reproduced and interacted with quite differently across temporal and sport-specific contexts.

From the literature above we can see how social relations are embodied and influence our behavior and our meanings about what sports are associated with demonstrating femininity and masculinity. However, even though theories of masculinity and femininity illustrate the discrimination and subordination of women in practices across many social spheres of everyday life, no evidence exists of male fans views on sexuality in women's football in the UK. Thus, it is the aim of this article is to eliminate the gap in knowledge and make an original contribution through the presentation of large-scale data on such an important, yet under-researched, topic area.

Method

The focus of this article was part of a larger study examining fans' views on sexuality in both men's and women's football. To do this, we constructed an online survey and advertised it on over 150 fans forums that are associated with professional football clubs from across the UK, where the lead author has approved permission from the moderators who allow the use of their platforms to conduct academic research. Before any data collection took place, ethical approval was gained from one of the author's institutions and in designing the survey we followed the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers concerning privacy, harm, informed consent, and deception.

In posting to the forums about the subject area of the study, we embedded a link to the survey within a brief description of the project that took potential participants directly to the participation information sheet located at the start of the survey. Here, we provided a more detailed explanation about the study, the level of confidentiality provided to participants (for example, no personal details were recorded outside of age and sex), how their data would be stored and the

contact details of the researchers and the university ethics committee that had approved the study. It also reminded participants that a submitted survey would indicate that they have understood the information provided to them and that the researchers have their informed consent to use their data to advance academic research. The self-selecting nature of the survey meant that fans could just ignore the request on the fans forums or choose to not proceed to the survey questions after they had read the participant information sheet. For those who did proceed and completed 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 academic research project.’

The survey was conducted from March 2020 to April 2020. As part of our wider study on fans’ views on sexuality in men’s and women’s football, we base the focus of this article on the responses from those participants whom self-identified as male to questions on sexuality in women’s football. To address our two research questions stated earlier, we chose to ask a mix of closed and open-ended questions. Supporting this approach, Cleland et al. (2019) explain that by combining quantitative and qualitative questions in an online survey it can enhance the depth, richness, and rigor of the research findings. One question, for example, invited participants to open a hyperlink to an online article published by the British television broadcaster, ITV (2019), that was titled ‘why are more female professional footballers openly gay or bisexual than male players?’ Via some multiple-choice questions and open-ended text boxes, we wanted to understand what fans thought about sexuality in women’s football as well as the main reasons why more players had come out as lesbian or bisexual in women’s football in comparison to the low number of openly gay players in men’s football.

All the authors are aware of self-selection issues with regards to online surveys but given the subject matter and our aim to gather as wide a geographical range of views from male fans of

football clubs across the UK as possible, we felt this approach was the right one in the circumstances. Braun et al. (2020) questioned much of the criticism levied at online qualitative surveys and have argued for a greater use of this underutilized method in more empirically based research. For instance, they argued that qualitative surveys can provide rich data just as efficiently, if not more efficiently, than interviews by reconceptualizing the data as an entire dataset. Online surveys also allow participants to complete the survey in their own time by sharing their views in an open and honest way that avoids the potential bias of social desirability that can arise with face-to-face research. We offered no prizes to participate and there was no motivation to deceive. Furthermore, even though we captured a large number of responses, we make no claim that the results are representative of all male fans of football clubs across the UK, but we contend they do give us the first real insight into the under-researched area of male football fans' views on sexuality in women's football.

For this study we did not ask participants to highlight their age range (such as 20-29); instead, we just asked them to state their specific age and the club they supported, and this will be highlighted in the analysis section of the article. The closed-ended responses were analyzed via descriptive statistics and are presented as percentages. For the open-ended data, the initial approach was for each author to inductively analyze the responses in a process of open coding that went across first order and second order phases to begin thematically identifying emerging patterns and commonalities (Bryman, 2016). When this was complete, all the authors then worked in a phase of collaboration to collectively interpret and verify the themes established by each individual author during the first phase of independent analysis. Upon its conclusion it led to the identification of two recurring themes that form the analysis section of this article below: (1) the association of women footballers with masculinity and how they subsequently transgress the traditional

characteristics of femininity; and (2) a reduced stigma concerning sexuality in women's football given its lower profile in terms of coverage and the smaller number of fans. Of course, we cannot provide responses from all 1,432 male fans, so the quotes we use below are illustrative of the two recurring themes that emerged from the entire dataset.

Associations with Masculinity

Unlike in men's football where heterosexuality is largely deemed to be normative, ever since the re-emergence of women's football in the 1970s (it had been banned since 1921 after the FA upheld the objections raised by member clubs regarding hosting women's matches on their grounds following World War I), women footballers have often been categorized as masculine, mannish, butch, or their sexuality is regularly questioned regardless of whether they are heterosexual or not (Bourne & Pitkin, 2018; Caudwell, 1999, 2006, 2009; Cox & Thompson, 2001; Dunn, 2014; Skogvang & Fasting, 2013). Reflecting responses that highlight an association of women footballers with being lesbian, Drury (2011, p. 437) explains how, 'Lesbian football contexts, though transgressive in the sense that they challenge heteronormativity, might also inadvertently contribute towards a reproduction of dichotomous constructs of gender and sexuality.' Similar thoughts were also raised by our participants, including this Wolverhampton Wanderers fan (aged 53):

Women's football is not seen as classically 'feminine' and it attracts women who embrace more 'masculine' characteristics and attitudes, such as competitiveness, including lesbians who identify as having masculine attributes, such as dominance and aggression.

Certain sports, such as football, symbolize what Bryson (1990, p. 174) refers to as 'flag carriers of hegemonic masculinity' through the promotion and celebration of heteromascularity in male players. Likewise, across our data was frequent reference to football being a heteromascularity sport,

with several participants questioning the sexuality of women footballers. By way of illustration was this response by a Sunderland fan (aged 56):

The nature of all women's sport that has historic associations with men and masculinity for some reason attracts a disproportionate number of lesbians and, in some respect, this enables them to be more open with their sexuality than their male counterparts.

For women playing a sport traditionally defined as masculine, Drury (2011, p. 424) contends that they are seen to 'transgress the boundaries of 'acceptable femininity'', or what Connell (1995) would describe as 'emphasized femininity'. As suggested by the Wolverhampton Wanderers fan above, by playing football, women are seen to encompass traditional masculine characteristics, such as being athletic, strong, and competitive – characteristics that are not traditionally seen as feminine. Indeed, in her analysis of lesbian participation in sport in the 1980s, Lenskyj (1986, p. 95) stated that 'femininity and heterosexuality [were] seen as incompatible with sporting excellence: either sport made women masculine or sportswomen were masculine from the outset.'

For some participants, male players are exemplars of hegemonic masculinity, with the strong assumption that men are naturally physically superior to women and that football should remain a sport for men. As Pope (2018) outlined in her analysis of the gender norms expressed by fans in football, men's football is seen as a better version of the sport because men are 'naturally' stronger than women. Thus, there is a need expressed by Pope's participants for female players to become more masculine – i.e., to adopt more aggression and competitiveness in the way they play for it to be more accepted amongst male fans. In this way, male fans benefit from the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995) surrounding their association to a game traditionally viewed as masculine. Providing an example of thoughts like this was the following response by a Tottenham Hotspur fan (aged 29):

The men's game is steeped in history and tradition and this passes through the game at every level. The presence of women in football does not mean the game has become feminine, it is because women players are more masculine.

Concurring with Connell (1995), who explained how the practice of activities is linked to the gender order in society, from responses like this we can see how football remains an important site for some male participants to sustain the hegemonic gender order of masculine dominance by not recognizing the role of femininity in football. One way in which it was demonstrated in our data was that for many of our participants, sexuality in women's football does not challenge their heteromale status. Summarizing the thoughts of some participants was this response by a Hibernian fan (aged 47): 'Male football is bound up in machismo, and to be gay is seen to be more feminine. Straight men aren't threatened so much by gay women.' With lesbian or bisexual footballers not seen to challenge the masculinity of male fans through responses like this, power relations in the gender order of football are maintained.

This gendered power was also evident in the responses presented by some participants concerning how the presence of lesbian and bisexual women players act out an imaginary sexual fantasy for some men. As this Liverpool fan (aged 41) explained: 'Women continue to be sexualised, so anything is accepted and even more so gay females to stimulate the lesbian/bisexual fantasy in men', whilst this Leeds United fan (aged 54) shared similar thoughts: 'Macho male views are open to the 'fantasy' of lesbianism, so men rationalise women's sexuality in a different way.'

Following on from recognition that society is more accepting of homosexuality than in previous generations, several participants, including this Tranmere Rovers fan (aged 40), demonstrated more inclusive views concerning the presence of lesbian or bisexual footballers in women's football: 'Simply by virtue that there are women playing what is viewed as a man's sport means that they are already being defiant of misplaced outdated prejudices.' As illustrated earlier, responses like this are reflective of advancements in the acceptance of gay men and lesbians in

Western society and sport in recent times (Anderson et al., 2016; Anderson & Bullingham, 2015; Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2014, 2015; Cleland & Magrath, 2019; Magrath, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). Representing those participants who shared this view was the following response by a male (aged 37) Torquay United fan: ‘Who cares if there are lesbians in women’s football? Likewise, I would have the same thoughts about gay men in men’s football. Judge them by how they play the game, not by their sexuality!’, whilst this Aston Villa fan (aged 43) outlined:

Whereas homosexuality is seen as a weakness in men, in women stereotypically it is the opposite and gay women are seen as being 'hard' and 'tough', perhaps making them seem more suitable to these environments than 'straight' women. These are old fashioned stereotypes and thankfully disappearing now as people become better aware and more open-minded.

Through reflections like this, there clearly remains a presumption that butch lesbians are better suited to football than heterosexual women. So, while the construction of lesbian women in football has less of a homophobic attachment than men’s football and is assumed to be more inclusive than it is for gay men, it is still rooted in dominant understandings of gender and sport that is predicated on the continued myth of the lesbian athlete (Waldron, 2016).

Reduced Stigma and Continued Myths

Following the work of Herek (2007), the culture of football continues to shape the beliefs and behaviors of some fans surrounding sexuality in both men and women’s football. Like the social construction of gender, stigmas can become normalized within a particular culture, such as the traditional heteromasculine nature of men’s football and the subordination of women’s football through a large part of the game’s regulated history. However, a significant feature of our data was the lack of prejudice directed towards sexuality in women’s football. Of course, this could be reflected in the focus on male fans for this study, but summarizing the thoughts of many participants was this response by a Manchester City fan (aged 27):

Being lesbian or bisexual does not have the stigma it may once have had in previous generations. Gay men aren't generally thought to be strong and masculine, which (stereotypically) could be said to be a prerequisite for sports such as football or rugby. A butch gay woman fits this description, so is more accepted.

Similar views were raised by this Queens Park Rangers fan (aged 41):

Historically, many women have come out in other sports (especially tennis) which over time makes it easier for other women to come out, regardless of which sport they are participating in. There's almost an assumption that a fair proportion of women playing football (or any sports) are lesbian anyway, so it's no surprise when a female footballer comes out.

While participants like this demonstrate an openness to lesbians, they also paradoxically propagate the same stereotypes and dichotomous thinking that perpetuates sexual stigma. The Aston Villa fan's quote above embodies the idea that masculine qualities in football are inherently a strength, and it is only gay women who can perform these feats, thus erasing the complex and multifaceted ways people perform and identify with gender and sexual orientation. The stereotyping associated with the myth of the lesbian athlete also erases masculine gender expressions of heterosexual women, and femme bisexual or lesbian women.

Open-ended responses concerning the inclusion of lesbian and bisexual footballers were also reflected in the broader closed-ended data where 41% of participants stated how the women's game does not carry the historical heteronormative prejudices existing in the men's game given that the first Women's World Cup did not take place until 1991 and that the emergence of a professional league in the UK only occurred after the introduction of the Women's Super League in 2011. Indeed, a number of other participants recognized the different historical periods concerning the emergence of men and women's football and society's views on sexuality. In providing an example of this more inclusive culture was this response by a Glasgow Rangers fan (aged 25): 'More female footballers are openly gay because that is a reflection of society as a whole', whilst this Nottingham Forest fan (aged 65) stated:

Football has a history of being a 'working man's game' when players and spectators were mainly working-class men. In those days, homosexuality was not only kept hidden in society

as a whole, but its practices were also illegal. Conversely, the women's game is a more recent phenomenon, and has emerged at a time when society is generally more accepting of sexuality than they were previously.

In some ways, it can present greater opportunities for lesbian and bisexual players to initially connect with the game and be accepted in a more welcoming environment than they might find in other women's sports. For example, in their study of women's football in New Zealand, Cox and Thompson (2001) found that homophobia can be reduced through the greater visibility of lesbian players. Indeed, one of the reasons behind the higher number of openly lesbian and bisexual players than gay male players (ITV, 2019), according to Anderson and Bullingham (2015), is because of better support mechanisms. Thoughts like this were supported in the closed-ended questions with 29% of our participants stating how the culture of women's football attracts players who are already openly gay or are more likely to come out at some point in the future. As this Arsenal fan (aged 33) stated: 'The culture of women's football is to a large extent very lesbian friendly given there is already an existing culture of openly gay/bisexual women footballers', whilst a Doncaster Rovers fan (aged 27) concurred:

There is a very good camaraderie amongst the women's football community. There are challenges just playing the game at all due to perception of football as a fairly masculine pursuit. Perhaps some women are just braver or perhaps the support networks for them are better and more understanding.

This Crystal Palace fan (aged 67) reflected on the women's movement and the LGBT movement that emerged in the late 1960s and how they cumulatively began to play a crucial role in seeking to achieve greater gender and sexual equality at the same time as the re-emergence of women's football:²

The women's game is a new world. It has created a brand of football, separate to the men's game that is able to start fresh and celebrate difference, diversity, and culture. It began with a small number of fans, mostly women or men with their eyes open and lacking the prejudices against the women's game. With this more tolerant and open-minded fan base, women feel more secure to come out.

Alongside a reduced stigma for women was consistent reference in the data to the lower profile of women's football and how this made it easier for footballers to be more open with their sexuality than their male counterparts who participants felt would come under greater media scrutiny. As outlined by this Liverpool fan (aged 47):

Despite the relatively high profile of the recent World Cup, they are not in the spotlight anywhere near as much as male footballers. If a female footballer comes out as gay it's not newsworthy so fans are less likely to know about their sexuality in comparison to if a male footballer came out whilst still playing. Thus, there is less of a stigma attached.

A Shrewsbury Town fan (aged 36) agreed:

Women's football does not have the culture that has grown up around it which is so pervasive of the men's game. There is no 'myth of masculinity' or 'macho' culture to uphold, and the game itself is more open to all. Hence, women's football is played in a more progressive environment and does not attract a significant number of male supporters and, by doing so, has not yet developed the tribal attitudes that are prevalent in the men's game, thankfully.

Despite views like this, it should be stressed that while some participants felt there was a reduced stigma towards women footballers, their own gender identity and position as fans played an influential role in how they interpreted sexuality in women's football. Given the lower number of fans watching women's football, their thoughts may, once again, stem from the lesbian athlete myth that assumes that sports deemed to require masculine characteristics are better suited to lesbian and bisexual women (Waldron, 2016).

For other participants, the lack of exposure given to the women's game also helps break down barriers regarding sexuality. As this Rochdale fan (aged 29) explained: 'Those following women's football are less prejudicial in some ways – after all, they are watching the less popular sport of the two sexes', whilst this Birmingham City fan (aged 35) shared similar thoughts:

The women's game attracts a newer, different audience that is less steeped in tribalism and traditional rivalries. This might be because women's football has a lower profile in terms of media coverage, so it is easier for players to be open about their sexuality. There is less pressure and focus on them.

Reflecting on the gendered power relations in football, in their analysis of men's football in Denmark, Pfister et al. (2013) outline how the strict gender segregation leads to a hierarchy with men's football seen as normative with women's football dismissed as not as important. However, there were a number of other participants that referred to the growing profile of women's football following the increased exposure to World Cups and domestic competitions as well as the increasing coverage given to high-profile lesbian players like US player, Megan Rapinoe, who has become an activist for LGBT issues and other forms of inequality. For example, a Hibernian fan (aged 55) outlined: 'As the profile of women's football rises it is giving a platform to openly gay footballers like Megan Rapinoe to show it is possible to lead a successful sports career and be confident with their sexuality.' In doing so, it reduces the stigma attached to sexuality in women's football and allows debates about sexual equality to have greater visibility and substance than is found in men's football, which has a lack of openly gay players in comparison.

Conclusion

Although theories of masculinity have highlighted the importance of future research engaging with the subordination of women, one empirical omission has been the lack of research undertaken on men's attitudes to sexuality in women's sport. Men's views on these matters are a bridge into the broader advancements (or reaffirmations) of dominant discourse surrounding women's sexuality in sport, and more specifically, football. Hence, this article has offered new and original insights into gender relations in sport by analyzing male football fans' views on sexuality in women's football in the UK. Engaging with the prominent theories of masculinity, as well as Waldron's (2016) work on lesbian athletes, the results present evidence of asymmetrical gendered power relations through regular reference to the cultural importance of masculine values in football in the

UK. Despite this, however, there was also evidence of inclusive attitudes of lesbian and bisexual women footballers. Whilst evidence of more inclusive attitudes held by men towards lesbian and bisexual women in football is cause for celebration and an important finding to highlight, we do so with caution. One of the reasons behind this is because the open and inclusive beliefs can be primarily attributed to the view that lesbian and bisexual women do not pose a threat to the heteromasculine position of male fans because of sex segregation and the lower profile of the women's game in the UK.

For those male participants demonstrating characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity, football remains a sport for men that reaffirms masculinity and, with it, heteronormativity. Even when referring to sexuality in women's football, traditional definitions of masculinity remain a prominent feature of the discourse for a significant number of our male participants. As Herek (2007) outlines, men express more negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals than women, with men often adhering to stricter gender norms when discussing sexuality. Thus, despite the growth of women's football over recent times, resulting in what Petty and Pope (2019) refer to a 'new age' of media coverage dedicated to women's sports like football, men still control the symbolic power given their historical association and sizeable interest in men's football compared to women's football.

By playing a sport traditionally viewed as the domain of men, some of our male participants argue that women footballers are not complying with the traditional characteristics associated with femininity. Instead, they are using their bodies for strength, skill, and power – characteristics that demonstrate masculinity in football. As identified by Caudwell (2009, p. 257), by disrupting the gendering processes of a sport like football through transgressing expectations of the traditional characteristics of being feminine and heterosexual, women footballers who are lesbian or bisexual

also ‘contest the production of normative sexual identities.’ In the case of our findings, in some circumstances, the participants reaffirmed the gender-sexuality binary by assuming that a woman’s use of her body in playing football would inherently connect with a butch lesbian identity. While they share inclusive beliefs and desires for women’s football, some participants legitimate and prioritize certain behaviors, some of which are built upon dichotomous understandings of lesbian identity and gender expression. Thus, the hegemonic masculine lens that is applied to men’s football is also applied to women footballers as well, where the myth of the lesbian athlete continues to delineate ‘proper’ gender identity, expression, and sexuality.

From the evidence presented in this article, whilst heteronormativity is a stronger feature in discourse surrounding men’s football (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012), women’s football gives marginalized sexual identities like lesbian or bisexual women a space in which to express themselves with less fear of stigma and discrimination. For example, the openly lesbian US footballer, Megan Rapinoe, has become a popular and fearless activist not only in women’s football, but also outside the sport (Frederick et al., 2020).

As the profile of the women’s game continues to expand at a national and international level, not only will women footballers continue to challenge the heteromasculine nature of football, but it will also give added spotlight to the level of inclusivity and openness surrounding sexuality. Hence, there will be further opportunities to engage in research that examines dominant discourses surrounding gender and sexuality in women’s football across the world as well as within other sporting contexts involving women.

Notes

¹ It was not initially a supportive environment, with two high-profile tennis players, Billie-Jean King and Martina Navratilova, suffering reputational damage that negatively impacted on their off-court earnings when they came out as lesbian in 1981 (Stott, 2018).

² The rise of the women's movement and LGBT movement from the late 1960s led to wider challenges to gender and sexual orientation discrimination. At the heart of this was for women to take more control of their own bodies and be empowered to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of men and masculinity (Messner, 1988).

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