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Citation:

Fletcher, T and Walser, J and Magrath, R (2021) Fan attitudes towards homosexuality in German men's football. *European Sport Management Quarterly*. ISSN 1618-4742 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2021.1980088>

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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Fan attitudes towards sexual minorities in German men's football

Abstract

This article investigates German football fans' attitudes towards homosexuality. Drawing on an anonymous online survey with 212 Germans football fans, this article is the first to empirically investigate attitudes towards homosexuality in German football. Contrary to ongoing claims that German football remains hostile to sexual minorities, 95% of respondents were supportive of same-sex social and legal rights, while 81% espoused support for an 'out' gay male professional player. Despite this, however, 90% also believed that homophobia was still a major problem in German football, as evidenced by its hypermasculine environment, lack of out players and the prominence of homosexually themed language at events. While the presence of this language has previously been argued as evidence of pure, undiluted homophobia this research highlights the complexity of this language, and supports calls to recognise *intent*, *context*, and *effect* in the utility of homosexually themed language. This research develops existing work on equality, diversity and inclusion in the context of leisure and fandom. It provides further evidence that narratives regarding sport's intolerance of homosexuality are outdated. Findings are more progressive than other research on German sport and confirm that German football has become more acceptant of the idea of inclusive masculinities.

Keywords: Fans, German football; Inclusive Masculinity, Homophobia; Homosexually themed language

Introduction

Leisure is fundamental to understanding contemporary sexual and gendered identities, lives and communities (Caudwell and Browne, 2011). Research has typically found that sexual minorities have been marginalised and excluded from participation in sport and leisure (Curry, 1991; Hekma, 1998; Pronger, 1990), including attendance at events, sporting or otherwise (Caudwell, 2017; Lamond, 2018; Long et al., 2017; Lewis and Markwell, 2021). This is because competitive team sports – such as association football (soccer) and their associated events – have traditionally created a culture in which a hegemonic form of masculinity, notably heterosexuality, is reproduced, defined and celebrated (Connell, 1995; Jones and McCarthy, 2010; Channon et al., 2016).

In recent years, however, since the 2000s, there has been a rapid decline of cultural antipathy towards homosexuality in Western Europe and North America (Kranjac and Waagmiller, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020; Watt and Elliot, 2019). While there remain ongoing claims to the contrary (e.g., Kaelberer, 2020; Meuser, 2017), most empirical research on men's team sports and events has reflected this broader social change, and the acceptance of homosexuality in sport is now increasingly commonplace (Anderson, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Magrath, 2017, 2018). This has been reflected by the increased number of elite-level sexual minority athletes publicly coming out of the closet.

Even research on events and sports fandom has documented the acceptance of homosexuality, with most fans preferring to judge an athlete by their on-field performance (Magrath, 2018; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2015). Although sexual minority fans still comprise a significant minority at sporting events (Sykes and Hamzeh, 2018; Allison and Knoester, 2021), some evidence has suggested that this is increasing, with LGBT+¹ Fan Groups providing increased visibility and community for this group of fans (Magrath, 2021a). But despite this body of evidence documenting increasingly inclusive attitudes, sports fans – especially those

in European football – are still often blamed by sections of media and activist organisations for a lack of ‘out’ gay male professional players (Jones, 2014; Meuser, 2017; Stonewall, 2016).

To examine this empirically, this article draws on data collected from an online survey with 212 fans to measure attitudes towards homosexuality in German professional football. Consistent with research across Western Europe and North America (e.g., Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Magrath, 2018, 2021a), our findings show that 95% espoused support for homosexuality and 81% for an out gay male professional player. Despite this, however, 90% of participants also believed that homophobia was still a major problem in German football, as evidenced by a lack of out gay male players and the continued use of homosexually themed language inside stadia. However, two-thirds argued that the presence of this language should not be treated as evidence of homophobia. By applying Anderson’s (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory to our findings, this research becomes the first to apply it to a German sporting context.

Literature review

Contextualising homophobia in German football

Founded in England against the backdrop of a fast-changing, industrialised society in the mid-19th century (Riess, 1995), ‘football’² came to Germany, a sporting culture largely shaped and dominated by gymnastics, in 1873. Upon its arrival, football received critiques from sociologists and politicians, as the sport focused on individual quality, rather than the moral concepts of unity in male sport settings, and was referred to as an ‘English disease’ or ‘*Fußlümmelei*’. However, as the British education concept of young gentlemen through football became increasingly popular in Germany, the sport played a central role in conveying patriotism and nationalism (Krüger *et al.*, 2018). Football was also instrumental both, in the UK and in Germany, as a game in which young men were able to reinforce male characteristics, such as competition, aggression, violence, and strength—thus restricting women’s³ and sexual minorities’ participation (Magrath, 2017). This

was also accompanied by a cultural hysteria that boys and men were becoming too soft (Anderson, 2009).

Nearly a century later, in the 1980s, sport again found renewed cultural significance for masculinity in the West. At this time, conservative socio-political responses to the emergence of the HIV epidemic – which disproportionately affected the gay community – fed the perception that homosexuality was dangerous and illicit (Weeks, 1991). This elevated deleterious cultural attitudes towards homosexuality to an all-time high by the end of the decade (Watt and Elliot, 2019). In Germany, attitudinal research at this time showed that only approximately 20% of the population espoused favourable attitudes towards homosexuality (Jensen *et al.*, 1988). Perhaps unsurprisingly, sports research at this time also documented high levels of hostility for sexual minorities. Pronger's (1990) research in the US, for example, revealed that homophobia is “usually an important subtext if not the leitmotif” in competitive team sports (p.26). Similarly, Curry (1991, p.130) found that, “Not only is being homosexual forbidden, but tolerance of homosexuality is theoretically off limits as well.” In Europe, similar findings were evident. For example, Hekma's (1998) research in the Netherlands showed that “gay men who are seen as queer and effeminate are granted no space whatsoever in what is generally considered to be a masculine preserve and a macho enterprise” (p.2).

Given this hostile environment, very few elite-level athletes publicly came out of the closet. Those who did typically received abuse and faced rejection, as perhaps best evidenced by British player Justin Fashanu (see Gaston *et al.*, 2018). In response to Fashanu's coming out, an article published in United Press International titled “Can Gays Play Soccer, Germans Wonder” featured a quote from former Düsseldorf player Michael Schuetz, who commented: “One wouldn't want to play hard against someone like that [Fashanu], because there would be a certain fear of AIDS.” The following year, in 1991, FC Rot-Weiß Erfurt player Marcus Urban announced his retirement from football aged just 20, because “the pressure to conceal his sexual identity had become intolerable” (Cashmore and Cleland, 2014, p.7). He later came out in his 2008 autobiography,

Hidden Player: The Story of the Gay Footballer Marcus Urban (Versteckspieler: Die Geschichte des Schwulen Fußballers Marcus Urban).

Football has been Germany's favourite participation and spectator sport for a number of decades. According to Pawlik (2020), in 2019 almost 34% of the German population stated cited football as their favourite sport. This figure was more than twice that of the second most popular sport, ski jumping, with 14% (Pawlik, 2020). And yet, despite its popularity, football is frequently criticised for excluding sexual minorities among others. Such evidence has prompted the German Football Association (DFB) to examine its practices and fan cultures, while encouraging wider football stakeholders to ensure tackling homophobia is central to their anti-discrimination work.

Declining homophobia, inclusive attitudes and German football

Over the past two decades, there has been a liberalising of cultural attitudes towards homosexuality, especially in Western Europe and North America (e.g., Kranjac and Wagmiller, 2021; Watt and Elliot, 2019). 1994 saw the abolition of Article 175 of the German Criminal Code, which had criminalised same-sex sexual acts between men. Cultural attitudes in Germany since this point have continued to improve. According to the Pew Research Centre (2020), 86% of the German population thought that homosexuality should be accepted in society, around 80% supported same-sex marriage, and over 75% supported the adoption right of same-sex couples. Over the past decade, Germany has also introduced laws and legislative changes for sexual minorities—including same-sex marriage, in 2017, and the banning of conversion therapy the following year. Accordingly, we can conclude that, on the whole, German society has become increasingly tolerant of more diverse and inclusive environments.

Despite this positive shift, however, homophobia in German football has rarely been discussed in academic work (Hek, 2011). Research elsewhere, however, has documented increasingly positive attitudes in football. Cashmore and Cleland's (2012) anonymous online survey, for example, documented that 93% of 3500 participants were supportive of gay male

professional players, and argued against the presence of homophobia in the game. Additionally, Cleland's (2015) research, which examined over 3000 anonymous posts on football fan forums, again showed that the vast majority of fans espoused inclusive attitudes—either through generally positive comments or a rejection of posts containing homophobic sentiment. Moreover, Cleland *et al.*'s (2018) analysis of fans' online response to Thomas Hitzlsperger's coming out showed that “just 2 percent of 6,106 comments contained pernicious homophobic intent” (p.91). Finally, confirming this positivity, Magrath's (2021a) research on the experiences of gay male football fans in England showed that all but four of his participants believed that football had become increasingly acceptant of homosexuality in recent years.

Elsewhere in Europe, however, findings have been less positive. An analysis of 5000 LGBT+ individuals, for example, concluded that “homo- and transnegativity are still present in sport in Europe and are potent problematic influences on the sporting experiences of LGBT+ people” (Hartmann-Tews *et al.*, 2020, p.13). Similarly, despite a general improvement in attitudes, a continued stigmatisation of gay men exists in Italian football (Scandurra *et al.*, 2019). Thus, gay men drop out of Italian sport at a disproportionately higher level than heterosexual men (Baiocco *et al.*, 2018). In the Netherlands, there has been a growing acceptance of homosexuality in sport, although the use of homophobic language among ostensibly heterosexual athletes remains pervasive (Smit *et al.*, 2020). Finally, in Spain, the sporting context is described as being between ‘homohysteria and inclusivity’, denoting a “pseudo-inclusive culture, characterized by...partial tolerance towards sexual diversity, which is distinct from full acceptance and inclusion” (Piedra *et al.*, 2017, p.1037).

In Germany, while the DFB has made significant progress in tackling discrimination such as racism, other forms of inequality – including homophobia – often remain largely unchallenged. This is most notable through hostile fan chants and language: epithets such as *Schwabenschwuchtel* (‘Swabian faggot’), *Weicheier* (‘sissies’), *Arschficker* (‘ass fuckers’), or *Warmduscher* (‘warm showerer’) to denigrate opposing teams have been a common – and

uncontested – occurrence in German football (Kaelberer, 2020, p.798). Banners and tifos⁴ with discriminatory messages are also routinely deployed against the opposition (Heissenberger, 2018). While the effect of this language has been debated in recent academic work (e.g., Magrath, 2018; McCormack *et al.*, 2016;), Pearson (2012) argues that its prominence makes football an ‘uncomfortable’ space for gay (or bisexual) people (see also, Cleland *et al.*, 2021).

But following increasing calls for governing bodies to tackle discrimination in German football, a more inclusive discourse has begun to emerge in recent years, and tackling homophobia has become a central component of the DFB’s anti-discrimination agenda. In 2019, for example, the Berlin Football Association (BFV) created regulations for third gender⁵ people to be better integrated into grassroots football. There has also been a significant decline of homophobia in German football, including a rejection of homophobic attitudes among some fans (see Degele and Janz, 2011), and increased willingness among German players – including Lukas Podolski, Arne Friedrich, and Max Kruse – to speak out in support of homosexuality in sport. Further evidencing this, nearly 1000 German players signed up to *11 Freunde*’s⁶ “You can count on us campaign,” designed to show support to LGBT+ participation and involvement in football. Regulations were also recently amended to prohibit homophobia (along with racism and sexism) inside German stadia. Finally, German media representation of homosexuality in men’s sport – and football – has also undergone a positive shift (e.g., Schallhorn and Hempel, 2017). For example, Schallhorn and Hempel’s (2017) media analyses of Thomas Hitzlsperger’s coming out showed that mainstream media praised Hitzlsperger’s courage, with many expressing hope that he might encourage more young (sports-) men, to accept their sexual orientation, and that homosexuality in (Germans) sports will become less of a taboo.

Theorising masculinities and sexualities in sport

The most prominent theoretical paradigm underpinning the social stratification of men and masculinities in Western Europe and North America has been Raewyn Connell’s (1987)

hegemonic masculinity theory (HMT). HMT effectively articulates two social processes: (1) that all men dominate women and thus benefit from the existence of patriarchy—what Connell (1995, p.26) describes as the ‘patriarchal dividend’; and (2) that multiple masculinities exist in an intra-masculine hierarchy, with one archetype of masculinity “culturally exalted above all others” (Connell, 1995, p.77). Gay men, being traditionally subjected to social exclusion, exist at the bottom of this hierarchy. Because of its accuracy in a homophobic zeitgeist, HMT has been widely cited in research on sport, masculinities and sexualities. In Germany, for example, Worsching’s (2000) analysis of *Der Spiegel* concluded that “images of hegemonic masculinity are constructed to underline men’s power...[and] the exclusion of women and most men” (p.61).

HMT, however, began to receive growing critiques about its inability to accurately theorise contemporary patterns of masculinity (e.g., Howson, 2006). In response, Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) reformulation of the theory argued that hegemonic masculinity presupposes the subordination of non-hegemonic masculinities, and that it continues to be predicated upon one dominating – hegemonic – archetype of masculinity. While the attributes of this archetypal masculinity may change, an essential component remains: that other forms of masculinity will continue to be stratified in relation to it (Alsarve, 2020). Problematically, however, HMT’s reformulation still fails to accurately conceptualise masculinities – and the generally positive experiences of gay men – in an era of declining homophobia (Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

Changing attitudes, then, have been instrumental in facilitating a theoretical paradigm shift in recent years. The most influential attempt to theorise the change in contemporary masculinities has been through Anderson’s (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT). IMT emerged from research that examined more inclusive attitudes toward sexual minorities, initially among young, ostensibly heterosexual sporting men. In contrast to previous research with sporting men, for example, there was evidence to suggest that players and teammates espouse positive attitudes toward homosexuality and embraced gay and bisexual male athletes onto their team as equals (e.g.,

Magrath, 2021b; Anderson, 2009; Anderson *et al.*, 2016). Central to Anderson's theorising is the concept of 'homohysteria', which seeks to explain the power dynamics of heterosexual masculinities within an historical frame. The concept was defined by Anderson (2011, p.83) as explaining a "homosexually panicked culture in which suspicion [of homosexuality] permeates."

IMT argues that when a culture becomes less homohysterical, there will be a positive impact on young men's gendered expression, effectively expanding previously rigid displays of masculinity (Anderson, 2014). This includes, for example, the increased prominence and acceptance of physical affection between men, such as kissing, cuddling, and spooning (e.g., Anderson *et al.*, 2012), greater social fluidity (including a decline of the 'one-time rule of homosexuality') (e.g., Anderson, 2008), a broader range of 'acceptable' gender performances, eschewing violence, and increased emotional intimacy with other men, termed by Robinson *et al.* (2018) as a 'bromance'—each without the threat of homophobic policing (McCormack, 2012).

As homophobia has continued to decline in most Western cultures, IMT has burgeoned into the most useful apparatus through which to conceptualise contemporary masculinities. Since its publication, it has been applied to studies investigating masculinities and sexualities in a variety of settings, including sport (e.g., Anderson, 2011), British education (e.g., McCormack, 2012), and the workplace (e.g., Roberts, 2013). Indeed, while the theory has received some critiques – notably those which claim that it fails to account for gender relations and that it exaggerates or overstates the decline of cultural homophobia – Anderson and McCormack (2018) respond to these in their recent refinement of the theory. Recognising how IMT has become so dominant in capturing the complex masculine dynamics between men, Borkowska (2020) argues that this 'third-wave' of masculinities research should be referred to as "Andersonian" (p.411), in reference to the creator of the theory. Thus far, however, most research utilising IMT has been restricted to the UK, US, and Australia. And while IMT applied to research elsewhere in Europe does exist (e.g., Baiocco *et al.*, 2018; Piedra *et al.*, 2017; Scandurra *et al.*, 2019), the current article is the first empirical analysis of the German sporting context.

Methods

The focus of this article was to investigate German football fans' attitudes towards homosexuality. To do so, we used an anonymous, qualitative, online survey. The survey consisted of 19 questions. Of these three were multiple-choice and four were Likert-type questions. In each instance, respondents were invited to elaborate on their answers with qualitative comments. There were a further seven open-ended questions with a character limit of 5000. The survey was advertised on several online platforms, including fan groups' social media pages (e.g., BAFF, Fußballfans, Schickeria München), online fan forums (including those of various German sports companies), and football associations and institutions (e.g., F_in, 1. FC Köln 'Südkurve', QFF, Berlin Football Association, Bavarian Football Association, Munich Sports, and KOS). Prior to data collection, the research was granted institutional ethical approval (from the first author's institution), and, throughout the research process, we followed the guidelines established by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the British Sociological Association (BSA). This included participants' informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, right to withdrawal, and data storage and disposal.

For the purpose of data collection, a link to the survey was shared on the various platforms (listed above). Through this link, potential participants were shown an information page, on which they were provided with a brief description of the project's overall aims and objectives, information pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity, and the contact details of the first author. After reading this initial information, potential participants could choose whether or not they desired to proceed with completion of the survey. Those who did complete the survey were also encouraged to share the link upon completion with German football fans as widely as possible. Data were collected in July and August 2020.

The survey was aimed at football fans in Germany who support a professional German men's club and/or the men's German National Team. To that end, there was only one mandatory

question: “Are you a football fan?” Because this research is only concerned with football fans, negative responses to this question (of which there were 17) were removed from the final sample. The survey then consisted of 19 other questions, which revolved around five main areas: (1) Attitudes towards homosexuality; (2) Gay players; (3) Coming out; (4) Presentations of masculinity in German football; (5) Progress and developments in German football. The survey included three multiple-choice, four Likert-type questions (with the possibility to describe the answer within a subsequent open-ended question), and seven additionally open-ended questions with a character limit of 5000. According to Pawlik (2020), only 36% of Germans have basic or no proficiency of English. Thus, to avoid exclusion through language barriers, and to give all participants the opportunity to express freely, the survey was written in German, and translated into English by the first author upon completion.

In total, 229 people took part in the survey. Of these, 166 were active football fans, 46 watched all the main games and tournaments, and 17 reported not being football fans and were removed from the sample. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 212 participants: 123 were male, 86 were female, and three were third gender. At the time of data collection, two participants were aged below 18, 113 were between 18 and 35, 55 were between 36 and 49, 36 were between 50 and 65, and five were above 66. One participant preferred not to disclose this information.

We acknowledge here that there are potential issues when utilising online surveys for data collection (Cleland *et al.*, 2020). Although we recognise the potential ‘digital divide’ in using the internet for data collection (Sparkes and Smith, 2014, p.114), recent estimates suggest that 95% of households have internet access (Tenzer, 2020) and 79% of Germans use social media (Kemp, 2021); thus reducing the risks of sample bias. Adopting this approach to data collection remained desirable because it allows participants to articulate opinions freely without fear of judgement or the risk of social desirability—a crucial element when dealing with potentially sensitive topics. Indeed, Aricak *et al.* (2008) argue that participants are more likely to share opinions and perspectives online than in a face-to-face conversation. Moreover, no incentives were offered for

participation in the research, and we had no intention nor motivation to deceive any participants. We also make no grand claims that the results presented in this research are representative of all German football fans; however, they do provide an important contribution into the under-researched area of attitudes towards homosexuality in German football.

Data collection and analysis followed a ‘qualitative follows quantitative’ research framework (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Within this framework closed questions captured overview data from the respondents, offering important contextual information for understanding the qualitative comments. For the purposes of this paper data integration of our survey results includes descriptive baseline statistics and is not intended for convergent validation purposes (Fielding, 2012). The qualitative responses were then translated from German to English, following Klein-Ellinghaus *et al.* (2016) transcription method for foreign language data collection. The data were then analysed in accordance with Gläser and Laudel’s (2010) recommendations for qualitative data analysis. Given the originality of the research topic, an inductive framework to data analysis was adopted (Charmaz, 2014). This initially included the first author analysing survey responses and coding the initial themes. All three authors then worked collaboratively to further interpret, clarify, and confirm the various emergent themes in the data (Cleland *et al.*, 2020). This led to the emergence of the following themes: (1) Attitudes towards homosexuality in German sport and society; (2) Gay players coming out; and (3) The continued prevalence of homosexually themed language. We now explore these in greater detail below.

Findings

In this section we critically explore the three themes identified through data analysis. Theme one, ‘attitudes towards homosexuality in German sport and society’, points to a growing tolerance and acceptance of sexual minorities in society broadly and football specifically. Theme two, ‘gay players coming out’ examines participant attitudes towards professional male players coming out, whether they feel coming out is necessary and whether having out players on their team and

opposition teams would change their perceptions of those teams. Finally, theme three, ‘the continued prevalence of homosexually themed language’ explores the existence and significance of homosexually themed language within football stadia.

Attitudes towards homosexuality in German football

Football has historically been a hostile institution for sexual minorities. However, a significant body of recent research has documented how it has become increasingly tolerant and inclusive of homosexuality (Anderson *et al.*, 2016; Magrath, 2017, 2018, 2021a; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland *et al.*, 2018). Consistent with these findings – and research which points towards inclusive attitudes towards sexual minorities more broadly (e.g., Kranjac and Wagmiller, 2021; Watt and Elliot, 2019) – 95% of survey respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of homosexuality and same-sex social and legal rights. Interestingly, no one who participated in the survey rated their response as either ‘disagree’ or ‘strongly disagree’ (with same-sex rights).

Respondents justified their positive response on the basis that equal treatment is a basic human right. One respondent, a male (aged 18-35), wrote, “Sexual orientation must never be an argument for granting people different rights ... It is a fundamental human right and should not be up for debate.” Another respondent, a female (aged 18-35) fan, responded by writing, “Not only should there be equality, but our Constitution requires them to be [accepted]. A [negative] answer is not an opinion, but criminally liable.” The most detailed response was provided by this third gender respondent (aged 18-35):

In this day and age, we still live with prejudices and stereotypes that are completely unbearable. Every person is free to choose their lifestyle, as this affects no one but that person. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights says:

- Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

That only a small number responded negatively to this question thus articulates the positive attitudes towards sexual minorities evident in the sample overall.

When discussing football, however, matters were more complex. Indeed, 90% of survey respondents believed that homophobia is still a significant social problem in German football, and 50% believed that this is a broader social problem, reflective of prejudice against sexual minorities in wider German society. Moreover, only 10% of respondents believed that football encourages the inclusion of sexual minorities, compared to almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents who did not. One respondent, for example, a female (aged 36-49) fan, wrote, “Responsible for this [homophobia] is still the predominantly heteronormative view in society.” Another respondent, a male (aged 18-35) fan, wrote, “The fact that no player or coach has come out of the closet to date answers the question [about the acceptance of football culture].” Indeed, another respondent, a female (aged 18-35) fan, wrote:

Yes, it is a problem and ALL players are responsible. Clubs and associations must actively do something that goes beyond meaningless campaigns, homosexual players must be allowed to come out and get any support from clubs and teammates, fans could also do more to accept homosexuality and stop insults.

Respondents articulated a broad range of reasons for the apparent ongoing homophobia in German football. These included obsolete and patriarchal structures within clubs and associations,

politics, coaches, players, the absence of out male players, and continued use of homophobic language in football. This female (aged 18-35) fan attributed homophobia to politics:

Being ‘different’ or not belonging to the classic image that is recognized in society still is an obstacle for many people! Diversity must be exemplified above all by opinion leaders - starting in politics.

Another respondent, a female (aged 36-49) fan, referred to prevailing media stereotypes: “Responsible for this are outdated gender role images, which are also only very timidly challenged in the media.” Moreover, another female (aged 18-35) fan, wrote about the lack of public debates around homosexuality and homophobia:

Yes [it is still a problem], [responsible for this are] not individuals or groups, but societal pressure. There is (too) little public debate about it, to make a step towards a more tolerant society, where more people who are affected have the courage to publicly admit to their sexuality.

But despite these perceptions, attitudes towards homosexuality in football were predominantly positive. Indeed, 77% of respondents believed that having gay players contracted to a team they supported would not change their opinion. While the overall level of inclusivity is less pronounced than previous research (e.g., Cashmore and Cleland, 2012), it remains substantially positive, and provides a challenge to previous literature which claims homophobia in German football remains prominent (Kaelberer, 2020). As one respondent, a male (aged 65+), put it: “It would not make no difference at all [to have a gay player]...Sexual orientation has nothing at all to do with sport.” Similarly, a third gender (18-35) fan wrote, “I don’t care about that at all, he should love who he wants to love.” Another respondent, a male (aged 36-49) fan, wrote, “My

opinion would not change at all. I would be proud that my club offers the openness and the environment for coming out.” And, finally, another respondent, a female (aged 50-65) fan, provided the most detailed perspective and outlined how her opinion would only change if the respective club failed to support the player:

First and foremost, sexual orientation shouldn't matter at all in sports. Depending on how the team deals with it, however, my opinion would probably change as well, especially if the player was treated negatively...That would negatively influence my club loyalty.

Almost a quarter of participants (23%) even declared that an ‘out’ gay player contracted to the team they support would have a positive impact on their perception of the club. One respondent, a female (aged 36-49) fan, wrote, “An openly gay player? Great, everything done right!” whilst a male (aged 36-49) fan, wrote, “I would be proud of my football club being inclusive and diverse.” And a female (aged 36-49) fan responded by writing, “I would be proud that one of the first openly gay footballers would play for my team!” Only two survey respondents (1%) stated that an out gay male player would have a negative impact on their opinion about the player or the club; however, these participants provided no further information about why they espoused these views.

Recognising that club allegiance and rivalry often impacts hostility towards sexual minorities (Magrath, 2018; Wann and James, 2018), survey respondents were also asked whether their opinion would change if a gay player represented a rival team. Nearly 97% said that their opinion would not differ, irrespective of which club the player represented. One fan, a male (aged 50-65) fan, wrote, “My attitude and my values cannot depend on which side he’s playing on...It doesn’t matter where he plays and what his sexuality is.” Another respondent, a third gender (aged 18-35) fan, responded with, “No [my opinion would not change], I would even support the

opposing team a little.” And this respondent, a female (aged 36-49) fan, wrote: “No, I would be happy that there is such an inclusive climate there. Perhaps I would be envious.”

The vast majority of respondents, however, simply responded by writing “no” when asked whether their opinion would differ; a short, but nevertheless powerful statement which leaves no room for ambivalence regarding their acceptance. Only two respondents believed that their opinion would differ, and they might verbally abuse the player. Again, these respondents provided no further information to this question. Overall, the findings in this section are evidence that German football fans’ attitudes towards homosexuality are inclusive—and thus consistent with those documented in previous research (e.g., Magrath, 2018, 2021a; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland *et al.*, 2018).

Coming out in German football

The inclusive attitudes espoused by survey respondents also extended to encouraging gay male professional players to come out. While 99% of respondents believed that the sexuality of a player was unimportant, 81% believed that they should be supported and encouraged to publicly come out the closet. This was also supported by qualitative comments, including this, from a female (aged 18-35) fan: “I would encourage players to come out...Football has a wide reach. It connects people from all strata of society and plays an important role in social education.” Another respondent, a female (aged 18-65) fan responded by writing, “In order to ‘learn’ a normal handling with it [a player coming out], it would be great if players officially come out.” And this fan, a male (aged 18-35) wrote, “An outing by an active professional player would help to create more acceptance and would serve as a role model for other players. This should definitely be supported.” And this fan, a male (aged 18-35) wrote:

By coming out, further public interest would be drawn to the issue, which would hopefully lead to football in general becoming more inclusive. On the other hand, in the

worst-case scenario, the player would be reduced to his sexuality instead of being noticed (positively or negatively) for his playing ability like any other player.

Aligned with Cleland *et al.*'s (2018) research, these respondents encourage gay male professional players to come out, provided it was done on their own terms.

By contrast, however, approximately 12% of survey respondents were undecided about whether gay male professional players should publicly come out. Seemingly, though, this tentativeness was more concerned with the process of 'coming out' rather than evidence of conservative attitudes towards homosexuality. "I don't think outings are necessary [because] everyone can decide for themselves whether they want to make it public," opined one female (aged 18-35) fan. For another respondent, a male (aged 50-65) fan, coming out set down an unnecessary marker of difference:

I think coming out is actually outdated. It just says that you have to justify your sexual orientation. And unconsciously says that you are different from the mainstream. No straight person has to come out.

Finally, this third gender (aged 18-35) respondent, articulated a strong sense of ambivalence towards coming out:

In theory I don't think coming out is good. This compulsion comes from the pressure of heteronormative society to label supposedly "different" and that the responsibility lies with these people. I don't think anyone should have to come out. Nevertheless, male professional football is such a big part of society that this step would be good.

While these fans felt that football needs to be more inclusive and diverse – for gay male professional players to feel comfortable – most participants (94%) acknowledged that there remain barriers preventing their doing so. One respondent argued that the media exposure would complicate the coming out process: “I can well imagine that the media would give too much attention to a player who comes out. They would parade him as a ‘circus animal.’” Potentially problematic media coverage was also acknowledged by a female (aged 36-49) fan, who wrote, “It continues to be hyped up by the media and thus negatively influenced,” and a male (18-35) fan, who wrote, “I think that the media would fuel this in such a way that it would not have a positive outcome.”

For others, the fear of gay players being solely recognised for their sexuality, rather than their athletic performance, was another significant barrier in why they might remain closeted. As this respondent, a male (aged 18-35) fan responded, “I think there is a danger that - perhaps only subliminally - the player is no longer measured only by his performance.” Similarly, a male (aged 18-35) fan provided a detailed assessment of the potential barriers in place for gay footballers:

Public perception would shift from the player’s performance and behaviour to his sexual orientation. In addition, public pressure to perform on the pitch would be greater. This kind of differentiation creates isolation...isolation usually leads to greater pressure.

While the potential barriers for gay male professional players coming out have been suggested elsewhere (see Magrath and Anderson, 2017), the findings presented here are significant because they provide a further rationale, particularly from fans’ perspectives, into why these players might remain closeted.

Homosexually themed language

Almost a third of participants (29%) blamed fans for maintaining and often exacerbating homophobic environments in stadia through the utility of discriminatory language. Indeed, language has typically been the most ubiquitous way by which to judge the gay-friendliness of a particular culture (e.g., Schallhorn and Hempel, 2017). Consistent with recent research in British football (Cleland *et al.*, 2021), almost two-thirds of survey respondents (64%) noted the prevalence of homosexually themed language inside football stadia. Comments such as “I see that [homophobic language] as a very big problem” and “You can regularly hear homophobic language during games” were evident among some of these respondents. Interestingly, however, 21% of respondents believed that homosexually themed language was no longer a significant issue in German football, and 14% suggested that it was in decline (e.g., Magrath, 2018, 2021a). This was accompanied by comments such as this response from a female (aged 18-35) fan: “Personally, I hardly ever hear it in the stadium.” Another respondent, a female (aged 36-49) wrote, “Stadium language has been passed down for generations, but is slowly becoming more neutral.” A male (aged 50-65) fan offered a more detailed response. He wrote:

I wouldn't say [language is] a permanent problem, but an occasional problem. Since there are official gay fan clubs, the ‘other’ fan clubs have also learned a lot in terms of tolerance and careful choice of words.

And for a male (aged 18-35) fan, the increased condemnation of problematic language was significant. He wrote, “Homophobic comments are more often criticised, or even withdrawn by the person who was using it.”

Consistent with previous research on homosexually themed language in sports contexts (Magrath, 2018; Cleland *et al.*, 2021; see also McCormack *et al.*, 2016), however, almost 90% of survey respondents believed it was important to look beyond the existence of language as homophobic, but to also consider its intent. In this context, recognising the emotional surroundings

of events and stadia, the use of hostile language is oftentimes enhanced (Wann and James, 2019). This perspective was evidenced by this particularly detailed response from a male (aged 18-35) fan:

It is now actually meant to be deliberately homophobic but has become part of general language use. However, it ensures that a culture is created in which homosexuals feel uncomfortable and are, therefore excluded.

Indeed, over 40% of respondents also believed that homosexually themed language is often used ‘unintentionally’ to comment on or describe something they perceive to be weak or bad (e.g., Lalor and Rendle-Short, 2007). For example, this male (aged 50-65) fan, surmised in his response that homosexually themed language is, “Often used in common language without wanting to reflect the actual meaning.” This language, they believed, has become part of common, everyday parlance. Another fan, a male (aged 18-35), wrote in his response, “Unfortunately, the language has become established in common language. And in every age group. That's why I think it's a problem.” And, finally, this male (aged 18-35) wrote:

Yes [homophobic language does exist in stadia], however, in most cases I don't believe that such a statement is meant to be homophobic - which is of course no excuse. I think that a lot of it is common language that is also used in other social contexts.

Clearly, then, by its very presence in stadia, homosexually themed language remains a significant issue in German football. Importantly, however, some participants in this research believed that this language was in decline, and some had witnessed a change in terms of general awareness and sensibility—including those who actively seek to challenge those fans who use such language. While this should, undoubtedly, be taken as a positive sign, this language is still

evidence of how football – and competitive team sports more broadly – remain a heteronormative environment (Smits *et al.*, 2020). Further research is therefore, required to judge the effect of this language on the lived experiences of sexual minority football fans.

Discussion

By drawing on 212 fan responses to an online survey, this research provides the first-ever empirical analysis of attitudes towards homosexuality in German football. Consistent with recent research on sports fandom elsewhere (e.g., Magrath, 2018, 2021a; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2015; Cleland *et al.*, 2018), the participants in this research espoused generally positive attitudes towards homosexuality. Reflecting broader cultural acceptance of homosexuality in Germany, 95% of survey respondents were supportive of same-sex social and legal rights. Contrary to ongoing claims (e.g., Kaelberer, 2020), these positive attitudes also extended to an out gay male professional player. Interestingly, however, unlike previous research which has argued that club rivalry “foster[s] socially divisive attitudes which increase the possibility of social conflict and lead to hostility” (Bentwitz and Molnar, 2012, p.483), our findings show acceptance of gay male players, irrespective of their club allegiance.

Problematically and paradoxically, however, 90% of participants in this research also believed that, as an industry, German football continues to oppose the presence of homosexuality, with three-quarters also claiming that football culture does not encourage sexual diversity. In line with Magrath and Anderson’s (2017) ‘coming out hypotheses’, participants acknowledged a multitude of factors to this apparent lack of acceptance, including clubs, governing bodies (and other key organisations), coaches, players, and the continued use of discriminatory language. But despite these concerns, 88% of participants also believed that gay male professional players should be encouraged to publicly come out—provided this was done on the player’s own terms. Interestingly, the remaining 12% were unsure, but this was largely because they believed that in an inclusive environment, ‘coming out’ was an outdated process.

Notwithstanding these positive findings, almost two-thirds of survey respondents believed that homosexually themed language – whilst declining (see Cleland *et al.*, 2021) – remains largely unchallenged in German football culture (Heissenberger, 2018). While the presence of this language has often been argued as evidence of undiluted homophobia, the present research highlights the complexity of this language. Consistent with McCormack *et al.*'s (2016) call to recognise intent, context, and effect in the utility of homosexually themed language, 90% of participants argued that it was important to look beyond the existence of language of homophobic. Nevertheless, the subjectivity of interpreting homosexually themed language illustrates the fact that multiple interpretations of the same language are possible (Harvey, 2012). In the absence of empirical research with sexual minority football fans, it thus becomes difficult to truly understand the effect this language may have. Further investigation into the effect – and intent – of this language is therefore, required. Moreover, further research with fan groups, equality organisations, football clubs, governing bodies, policy makers and event organisers is needed to further understand what can be done to further promote sexual equality, and its intersections, within football and elsewhere.

The results presented in this research are consistent with Anderson's (2009) Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT). Indeed, the positive attitudes of these fans support the theory's central premise of growing inclusion of homosexuality in contemporary society (Anderson, 2009). Moreover, the majority (81%) also (hypothetically) supported out elite gay male footballers. Also consistent with IMT research, there was also evidence that it is homophobia, not homosexuality, that is culturally stigmatised (e.g., Cleland *et al.*, 2018; McCormack, 2012). And, as discussed earlier, the apparent absence of pernicious intent and negative social effect of homosexually themed language in German football is also congruent of IMT's recognition of the changing nature of language (Magrath, 2018; McCormack *et al.*, 2016).

Perhaps most significantly, however, the present research also extends IMT's focus beyond the UK, US, Australia, and a small number of other European countries—and is the first empirical

study to apply IMT to German sport. Interestingly, the findings we present here are also more progressive than other, comparable research on German sport (e.g., Worsching, 2000), and confirm Kaelberer's (2020: p.796) claim that "German soccer has become more acceptant of the idea of inclusive masculinities." This is especially pronounced in German fans' unconditional acceptance of gay players (regardless of which team to which they are contracted) and rejection of homophobia. Fans' accounts of how they perceive their acceptance are, likely, roadmaps towards actual behaviours; however, while we have no reason to believe that this would not be the case, there is no guarantee that their desired narratives would be actualised (Magrath *et al.*, 2015).

Related to this, despite the acceptant attitudes of fans demonstrated in this research – and in others' research, too (e.g., Cashmore and Cleland 2012; Cleland *et al.*, 2021; Magrath, 2021a) – very few elite gay or bisexual male footballers have come out of the closet. While it may be tempting to blame homophobia for these 'missing men' (and this may, of course, have some influence), Magrath and Anderson (2017) argue there are a multitude of reasons why gay and bisexual male players remain in the closet. This includes the significant influence of clubs and agents, the effect of elite football's international dimension (which requires players to travel to parts of the world where attitudes towards homosexuality remain far more conservative compared to the West), simple personal choice or the effect of intergenerational sexualities among those involved in elite football. While there may indeed exist a culture of fear for these footballers – concerns that their sexuality would render them an outcast – there is little evidence to suggest that this would be the case.

Conclusion

In summary, this research is a valuable addition to existing work on equality, diversity and inclusion in sports fandom. It also provides further evidence that narratives regarding sport's intolerance of homosexuality are outdated. Indeed, as Bush *et al.* (2012, p.116) argued – almost a decade ago – "it is no longer sociologically responsible to generalize all sports...as homophobic.

Increasingly, it appears to be the opposite.” Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that this is the first research to examine attitudes towards homosexuality among German football fans and should, therefore, be treated as a point of departure for further research in this context.

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¹ ‘LGBT+’ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender – as well as other, more marginal forms of sexual identity (including asexual, queer, pansexual and so on).

² We refer here to the most dominant and popular version of ‘football’ (or soccer).

³ Football was officially banned by the national governing bodies of the UK (1921-1971) and Germany (1955-1970).

⁴ Common in European football, ‘tifos’ refer to a united display where fans in stadia raise a banner or a sign that forms a large image.

⁵ Third gender [or third sex] people, are individuals who do not entirely identify themselves as male nor female within a binary gender system.

⁶ *11 Freunde* (English translation: 11 Friends) is a German football magazine, published monthly.