

## **Female fans and social media: micro-communities and the formation of social capital**

### **Abstract**

**Research question:** Using the theoretical lens of social capital, this study explores the challenges faced by female football fans in performing their fandom on social media, and how they respond to these challenges in the way they consume and express their fandom within these online spaces. In doing so, the study responds to calls for further, empirical research on both the experiences of female sports fans and the darker side of social media.

**Research methods:** An exploratory, qualitative research design is adopted, comprising in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 female fans of European professional football clubs. Interview data is analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

**Results and Findings:** The study contributes novel evidence to the fields of social media, social capital and football fandom, revealing that the male hegemony of football fandom is reinforced through social media. This leads to modified online behaviour by female fans, whereby micro-communities are formed in which they discuss football. The splintering of the online fan community into these micro-communities represents a form of cyberbalkanization and has implications for female fans' ability to build bridging social capital on social media.

**Implications:** This study responds to calls for a more theoretically-informed approach to social media research in sport, drawing on theories of social capital and performative sport fandom to understand the strategies employed by female fans in performing their fandom on social media. The findings raise questions of how professional sports clubs can engage female audiences and champion inclusive cultures of fandom.

**Keywords:** social media; social capital; cyberbalkanization; female fans; football

## **Introduction**

The rise of social media has enabled a transformation in sports and football fan communications and cultures in recent years (Fenton, 2019; Lawrence & Crawford, 2018; Pegoraro, 2013). In 2020, there are 3.8 billion social media users (We Are Social, 2020) with sport being one of the most discussed topics on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Fenton & Helleu, 2019). Accordingly, football clubs have embraced social media as a way to engage current and new fans from around the world in order to build their brands (Anagnostopoulos, et al., 2018). Reflecting the multiple platforms, technologies and wide use of social media, we adopt Filo et al's (2015, p.167) definition of the phenomenon, as:

“New media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g. teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g. consumers, athletes and journalists)”.

A notable challenge raised in our recent interactions with football clubs is the question of how to engage female fans on social media (personal communication). Females constitute a sizeable and growing proportion of football fans worldwide (Davies, 2015; Varley, 2018), yet gender inequalities are still pervasive within the game (Rich, 2015). Women face sexism and misogyny both in the football stands and on social media (Dunn, 2014; Pfister, et al., 2013) and female fans are markedly under-represented in online discussions of sport (Hardin, et al., 2012). Understanding how to overcome the identified gender inequalities and engage female fans on social media is vital for football clubs. Creating more welcoming environments is likely to attract new female fans (Wann & James, 2019), who will possess significant buying

power (Fink, et al., 2002) and may greatly enhance revenue potential for clubs that respond to their needs.

Echoing their marginalisation in traditional football fan cultures, the experiences of female football fans have been largely ignored in academic literature (Allon, 2012; Gosling, 2007; Pope, 2017, 2013, 2011). Where females have been the focus of academic scrutiny, work has largely focused on their so-called ‘civilising’ influence on male fans (Dunn, 2014) or on comparing male and female fan motives (Dietz-Uhler, et al., 2000; James & Ridinger, 2002). Beyond football, Hoerber and Kerwin (2013) employed a collaborative self-ethnographic approach to understanding the female sports fan experience, while, in this journal, McDonald et al. (2018) explored differences in satisfaction between male and female season ticket holders.

Our study responds to calls for research on the experiences of female fans (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Wann & James, 2019) and for empirical work on how users respond to the darker side of social media such as cyberbullying (Baccarella, et al., 2018). Given the practical challenge football clubs face in engaging female fans on social media, and the paucity of research in this area to date, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do female football fans face on social media?

RQ2: How do females respond to these challenges in performing their fandom on social media?

In addressing these questions, the paper advances two key contributions. First, echoing work on female fan experiences more generally, we identify that many female fans find football-related social media to be an arena where sexism still prevails, leading them to modify how

they consume and express their fandom in these social spaces. Specifically, we reveal how female fans curate what we term ‘micro-communities’, in which they perform their fandom as a means of countering the prevailing male hegemony within the sport. Our second contribution proposes that whilst micro-communities can provide a short-term solution for female fans seeking safe spaces, they can also create echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001), limiting the potential for female fans to build bridging social capital online. In this regard, we draw on notions of social capital, cyberbalkanization (Putnam, 2000) and ideas regarding social media’s dark side (Swart, et al., 2018).

The paper begins with a discussion of literatures on female fandom, sport and social media, social capital and cyberbalkanization. The research method employed is then outlined, before findings are presented and discussed. We conclude by summarising the overall contribution, and identifying managerial implications, limitations and areas for future research.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Females and Football Fandom***

Football and football fandom has long been considered a male domain, with females playing a subordinate role (Hoeber & Kerwin, 2013). Despite the growth in female fans (Sveinson et al., 2019), sexism remains prevalent in the game at both the structural level and among (a segment) of supporters (Caudwell, 2016; Clarkson, et al., 2019; Dunn, 2014), with females often marginalised within fan communities (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015). Sexism in fandom can be manifest in abuse (Jones, 2008) or ridicule (Allon, 2012) of females, or in females having to ‘prove’ their fan credentials (McGee, 2015). Moreover, as sports fandom is increasingly enacted and consumed online, sexist discourses and “traditional masculine roles” associated

with football (Redhead, 1997, p. 34) become replicated in social media (Hardin et al., 2012; Kian et al., 2011), resulting in females also being marginalised in these virtual fan spaces (Hynes & Cook, 2013).

Narratives of females as outsiders (Ben-Porat, 2009; Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013) are common in much of the literature on sports fandom, with females often labelled as “inauthentic supporters” (Pope, 2012, p.86), and contrasted with the traditional (authentic) male fan (Crawford, 2004). The ‘opening up’ of opportunities for females to become sports fans can be traced back to significant structural shifts in both society and sports themselves (Pope, 2017). Within UK football, moves to all-seater stadia with dedicated family-friendly areas are identified as appealing to female fans (Pope, 2017). However, the resultant association of females with the commodification and commercialisation of the sport means they can be viewed as less ‘real’ and authentic fans than men (Toffoletti, 2017).

Further, despite the sense of belonging associated with sports fandom, fan communities can become sites of social exclusion for perceived outsiders (Crawford, 2004), such as women. Within football, for example, the archetypal ‘real’ fan identity is characterised by loyalty to one team, live match attendance and an “assimilation of the masculinist/class inflected argot of consumption” (Back, et al., 2001, p. 95). Those who do not fit into such identities become stigmatized as ‘others’ (Goffman, 1963), with their authenticity as ‘real’ fans being questioned (Gosling, 2007). Accordingly, when football fandom is equated with masculine characteristics (Pope, 2011), female fans may experience a tension around their dual identities as females and sports fans (Sveinson et al., 2019) as they seek to perform their fandom differently (Sveinson & Hoerber, 2015). An example of such tension can emerge around sporting knowledge, which is not necessarily seen by females as being important to

their fandom (Esmonde et al., 2015; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2015). To more fully understand the experiences of female fans, Pope (2017) suggests we need to move away from binary distinctions between traditional and authentic (males) versus new and inauthentic (female) fans.

The experiences of female fans can be usefully viewed through a lens of performativity. Moving away from fixed notions of what constitutes or defines a fan (with its historic notion of masculinity), Osborne and Coombs' (2013) theory of performative sport fandom depicts fandom as more fluid and negotiable. This suggests fandom need no longer be equated with one defined set of behaviours; rather, fan roles are performed in context and relation to others, and are negotiable in how and when they are performed. Such a perspective may help in understanding the experiences of female football fans. Focusing on the online domain, for example, how females experience and perform their fandom in these virtual spaces is likely to be dynamically shaped by the nature of social media and the interactions taking place therein.

### *Sport fandom and social media*

Social media has had a profound impact on the consumption of sport (Filo, et al., 2015), and its growth has opened up new channels of communication and new communities, creating opportunities for sports brands to create a globalised fan base of 'always on' loyal supporters (Lawrence & Crawford, 2018; Miah, 2017). However, sports clubs are still exploring how to best use social media, particularly in an era where smartphone technologies are rapidly disrupting media consumption habits and traditional fan engagement methods.

Unlike traditional unidirectional communication channels, social media opens up the possibility of real-time, interactive communication not only between clubs and fans but also between fans themselves, wherever they are located (Meng, et al., 2015). Many sports clubs have their own social media pages, where they share content with fans (Armstrong, et al., 2016) and disseminate news content, conduct publicity, sponsorship and sales activities, and provide customer service (Abeza et al., 2019). Prominent platform types, in this regard, include social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter), online communities and discussion forums (Filo et al., 2015), along with other fora like Instagram and Snapchat. However, in many cases online interactions are solely fan-led and develop organically. This can occur through the creation of independent fan forums (Uhrich, 2014) or unofficial social media groups/pages, or more informally through mechanisms such as Twitter hashtags (Blaszka, et al., 2012) or WhatsApp groups (Weimann-Saks, et al., 2019). Social media platforms, therefore, allow fans to extend their sports consumption into the online domain (Pegoraro, 2013).

### ***Online fan communities***

Social media allows fans to coalesce, virtually, around a shared interest in sport and/or their specific club (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012; Pegoraro, 2013), and the interactions taking place within these online spaces represent an important element of fans' everyday lives (Gibbons & Dixon, 2010). Norman (2014) draws on the notion of 'electronic tribes' (Adams & Smith, 2008) to conceptualise online sports fan groups, emphasising the fluidity of their social boundaries and small size. Much other work uses the concept of community to describe such fan groupings, both offline (e.g. Asada & Ko, 2019; Hedlund, 2014) and online (e.g. Alonso-Dos-Santos et al., 2018; Hardin & Whiteside, 2012). Online fan communities relating to particular sports clubs display characteristics of brand communities, defined as "a

specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 412). These virtual groupings allow fans to express loyalty and emotional connection to their club (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006) and share rituals, traditions, values and beliefs (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), thereby facilitating a sense of belonging (Field, 2003).

Based on the characteristics of a shared language and vision, social trust and reciprocity (Meek, et al., 2018), it has been suggested that online brand (or, in this case, fan) communities can be an ideal environment for building social capital (Bauernschuster, et al., 2014; Lin, 1999). Social capital theory has three ‘foundational authors’ (Field, 2008): Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1959) and Putnam (2000). Bourdieu was one of the first scholars to explore social capital, with emphasis on the individual and the benefits accumulated by networking, viewing social capital as class-related and unequally distributed. For Coleman (1959), community is the focus of social capital and families are the primary foundation for its generation. Society gains from the transmission within families of norms and values conducive to social cohesion (Coleman, 1988).

Our paper builds on Putnam’s (2000) concept of social capital. Putnam’s work resonates with Bourdieu in suggesting that individuals benefit from social capital, yet explores the implications for the wider community, as Coleman did. In his seminal work ‘Bowling Alone’ (2000), Putnam noted the negative societal effects of a decline in social capital and how affiliation with groups and societies such as sports clubs can have a positive effect on society. He defined social capital as “connections among individuals — social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, 2000, p.19). For Putnam, social capital is underpinned by two types of relations: bonding and bridging

(Putnam, 2000). Bonding is inward looking, encapsulating homogeneity and exclusivity, and existing amongst individuals with strong relationships who are emotionally attached.

Bridging is outward looking, promoting diversity and refers to connections between individuals who share useful information but are not emotionally engaged.

The potential of online sport fan communities to build social capital is highlighted in the work of Palmer and Thompson (2007) in their case study of the ‘Grog Squad’, a group of South Australian football fans. Here, membership of the offline (and particularly the online) fan community affords members bonding social capital benefits including the exchange of advice, information and support. Palmer and Thompson (2007) note that while the behaviours of the Grog Squad can embody the hegemonic masculinity prevalent within sport, the supportive exchanges between members, particularly online, reveal a less hyper-masculinised side to this community. However, any benefits to community members emerge at the expense of outsiders (non-members) who are excluded. **This resonates with the work of Numerato and Baglioni (2011, p.594) who argue that a dark side of social capital exists, whereby the “trust, social ties and shared beliefs and norms that may be beneficial to some persons are detrimental to other individuals, sport movements, or for society at large.”** This effect is arguably mirrored in a dark side of social media too.

### ***The dark side of social media***

Social media are “neither universally good nor universally bad, but simultaneously have both bright and dark sides” (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 432). The latter is characterised by practices such as cyberbullying, trolling, fake news and abuses of privacy (Baccarella et al., 2018).

Highlighting this, a report by Amnesty International (2018) found that women face high levels of abuse on platforms such as Twitter and called for an “urgent and adequate response”

to the problem. More broadly, sexism is widely reported as an issue across social media (Fox, et al., 2015). In a sporting context, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity associated with football fandom and the resultant opportunities for sexism to prevail online are augmented by the anonymity afforded by the internet (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012; Kian, et al., 2011) and social media platforms. The ease with which content can spread on social media (Hambrick, 2012) also means that sexist content can quickly proliferate. Online fan communities can therefore become sites of social exclusion (Crawford, 2004) for female fans, threatening their willingness to participate and consequently their ability to build social capital.

In offline contexts, it has been suggested that sexist abuse and ridicule of female fans may be symptomatic of male fans perceiving females as a threat to their domain (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000; Gosling, 2007). Abuse and sexist comments towards female fans are also evident online. For example, Hynes & Cook (2013, p. 102), document the experiences of female fans on internet message boards, revealing a picture of “unwelcome advances, suggestive language and sexist remarks intended to undermine the credibility and validity of comments made by female posters.” Returning to an offline context, previous studies report various responses amongst female fans to abuse received, including downplaying or trivialising sexism (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015), or accepting the gender stereotype of femininity as incompatible with authentic fandom (Jones, 2008). A seemingly smaller number of female fans respond with disgust and challenge masculine fan behaviours (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016), often leading them to redefine fandom to exclude abusers (Jones, 2008). In some cases, female fans may form women-only fan groups (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015; Pfister et al., 2013) as they seek safe spaces in which to discuss sport (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012) and perform their fandom. An example of this is the VGK Ladies women-only fan group on

Facebook, which describes itself as “a Ladies ONLY fan group for the Vegas Golden Knights [ice hockey team]” and goes on to say that it is a place where women fans can “[t]alk hockey, ask questions, and cheer on the Knights without fear of ridicule or mansplaining” (VGK Ladies, 2020).

Where the response of females is to form women-only online fan groups, we find echoes of what Swart et al. (2018) refer to as the growing phenomenon of dark social, namely closed social media groups or groups on instant messenger apps which are hidden behind passwords or invisible to search engines. This resonates with Putnam’s (2000) work, which states that the “Internet may be part of the solution to our civic problem, or it may exacerbate it” (p. 170). Online communities could potentially create an effect dubbed cyberbalkanisation, whereby communities are divided into specialised groups or silos (Putnam, 2000). Within these closed groups, with less scope for diversity and cross fertilisation than in more open fora, members “find themselves in an echo-chamber in which their own beliefs are amplified and reinforced, and those who do not fit into those groups (outgroups) are belittled” (Baccarella et al., 2018, p. 434). Thus, depending on whether they develop as open or closed communities, online fan communities have the potential to either add to or **inhibit** social capital.

## **Methodology**

Consistent with the exploratory approach to research in an evolving area, this study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research design to unearth ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) phenomenological insights from female fans. This approach allows us to fully explore the lived experiences of female fans (advocated by Pope, 2017) from their perspective (Hair et al., 2019). The

prioritisation of the female fan voice is important in moving away from previous studies which have reinforced narratives of female fans as inauthentic. Responding to Pope's (2017) call to avoid replicating narrow definitions of fandom in research with female fans, we placed no descriptor on what a fan is in terms of match attendance or duration of their fandom. In-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 15 female fans of professional football clubs' male teams and interviewees ranged in age from 24-60 (see Table 1). The interviews were guided by a series of questions which started by exploring participants' fandom in general in order to build a picture of the role football plays in their life, before focusing specifically on their experiences in relation to football fandom on social media. Interviews took place in July and August 2019, over the telephone or via Skype, and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes each. The use of telephone and Skype interviews enabled us to achieve a more geographically dispersed sample from the UK, Europe and North America. It also allowed us to include a broad variety of participants supporting clubs from different leagues and of different sizes, and to reach fans who attend matches regularly as well as those whose fandom is conducted often online and largely from a distance.

Interview participants were recruited using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Bryman, 2004) in order to identify fans who are active on social media and could offer the detailed insights sought. Female fans are a highly heterogeneous group (Jones, 2008; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012), so the intention was not to select interviewees to be representative of this heterogeneity (Bryman & Bell, 2011), but to identify those with relevant experiences relating to the research questions. Key inclusion criteria were that respondents must: be over 18; self-identify as a female and as a fan of the male team of a professional football club; and use social media in their fandom. Consistent with the definition of Filo et al. (2015), social media was defined to potential participants as including Facebook, Twitter, message boards and discussion groups. No limitation was put on the level

or geographic location of the football club supported. To situate our work in the extant body of literature on football fandom and to specifically explore the experiences of female fans in environments where a pervading hegemonic masculinity has been identified (Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013), it was necessary to focus on females who identified as fans of the male team. This did not preclude participation from respondents who are also fans of a club's female team, but this aspect of their fandom was not the focus of study.

[Table 1 near here]

Prior to the interviews, each respondent was provided with a participant information sheet. To avoid priming effects while still offering appropriate levels of disclosure, the focus of the research was identified as being to explore the experiences of female fans on social media. All respondents completed a consent form in advance and were given the opportunity to ask questions before the interview began. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim, resulting in 199 pages (1.5 line spacing) of data. Each researcher initially undertook an inductive form of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), **exploring the raw data in what Tracy (2019) refers to as primary-cycle coding, noting “words or phrases that capture [the] essence” of the data (p. 219). While these codes were allowed to emerge from the data, it is important to acknowledge the researchers’ prior immersion in relevant theory and literature on social media, sexism and social capital, which may have shaped, to some extent, this initial coding (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Next, guided by the research questions, the researchers collectively discussed and reviewed the codes to develop themes to explain the data. This process of collective secondary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2019) acted as a form of confirmability testing (Lincoln & Guba, 1982) of individual researchers’ primary-cycle**

coding, triangulating interpretations across the three researchers (Tracy, 2010). Table 2 below provides an example of how this two-stage approach to coding was employed. The themes were subsequently grouped into three key areas, namely: fandom on social media; sexism; and online fan micro-communities. The findings relating to these areas are presented and discussed below.

[Table 2 near here]

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Female football fandom on social media*

When discussing the role of social media within their fandom, the most commonly utilised platform among the female fans in this study was Twitter (all 15 participants), followed by Facebook (11 participants) and Instagram (9 participants). For these fans, social media acts as a “useful resource” (Interviewee 3) for keeping “up to date with any news” (Interviewee 1), including match reports, team news and transfer information. It also allows for engagement with other fans by “tak[ing] part in a collective conversation,... participating and engaging in collective moments around [their] team” (Interviewee 13). Therefore, social media becomes a vehicle for female (and male) fans to engage in collective social interactions and fandom experiences (Abeza et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2019; Vale & Fernandes, 2018; Stavros et al., 2014), even if they are not geographically proximate:

on Twitter especially, there's big groups of [club] fans... that all just follow each other and then we just will sit and discuss... what's happening with the team, with the club and just discuss like after the games and that (Interviewee 1).

### *Sexism on social media*

Echoing notions of community building around a shared interest, typical of brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), we see fans (male and female) coalescing on social media around shared fandom of their football club. However, the online community relating to particular football clubs is dispersed, using different social media platforms, hashtags, forums or WhatsApp<sup>1</sup> groups. Importantly, WhatsApp represents a more private channel (Karapanos et al., 2016) as messages within the group cannot be seen by non-members. Fan communities across these different platforms and groups each have their own sets of norms and behaviours (Meek et al., 2018; Goulding, et al., 2013), often reflecting different ideals of fandom. In some cases, and reflective of the dark side of social media (Baccarella et al., 2018), these fan communities reinforce the male hegemony of football fandom (Hynes & Cook, 2013; Kian et al., 2011) as their members exhibit (and in many, but not all, cases tolerate) sexist behaviours. Two thirds of the female fans interviewed had witnessed or experienced this:

Twitter can be so male dominated for football and they are so quick to be misogynistic and sexist and expect you to look a certain way and expect you to speak in a certain way and expect you to just even like have the exact same opinions (Interviewee 8).

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<sup>1</sup> WhatsApp offers audio and video calling and multimedia messaging facilities to individuals or closed groups.

sometimes you'll put a comment and someone who you don't even know will reply saying... 'what do you know', or, 'should have guessed you're female making this comment', that sort of thing. I've had things before where I've put up... a video, like on the way to a game, like on a supporters coach and people have replied saying, 'oh what's that bird doing on there' and it's a bit like, well I'm entitled to go as well (Interviewee 9).

In addition, most notably on forums or message boards, females reported “sexism,... violence” (Interviewee 4) and content of a sexual nature. One interviewee candidly spoke of her experience on a forum in this regard:

Part of the reason I don't comment on it is because... it's just so full of [this type of content]... They joke about doing this, that and the other to their missus. Really? I mean that's pretty close to rape jokes really. That's pretty hideous... This is not really a discussion that you want to be part of. My impression is that there are very, very few women users of that forum and you could completely see why. It's because of how it's run. It's because that sort of s\*\*\* is tolerated (Interviewee 4).

The above statement is just one example of how female fans feel that they don't fit into the prevailing sexist male football fan communities on social media. One participant suggested that “there's a lot of men that don't want to share soccer, like it belongs to them or something” (Interviewee 2). In this regard, female fans represent a threat to the established ‘ingroup’ of male fans (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2000). Relevant literature suggests the existence of stereotypical views (mainly amongst male fans) that female fans lack football knowledge (Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Dunn, 2014; Gosling, 2007; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012), or, in the words of interviewee 6: “sometimes there is this sense that women have sort of joined on

the bandwagon because it's popular now, but they don't really understand football. And I think that's quite a misconception nowadays." Extending the work of Sveinson and Hoerber (2016) into the online domain, this stereotype prevails on social media, with females often obligated to prove their fandom credentials: "People are always just expecting you to trip up. There'll always be a point where like you don't know something, you'll always have to justify yourself way more" (Interviewee 8). When females do prove their credentials or knowledge of the game, this may drive male fans to resort to abusive comments:

I found that in my earlier days of using Twitter, they'd be like 'Well what would women know about the offside rule?' and I'm like 'what a cheap shot... Why don't you call me out for something that is genuinely wrong?', but they can't... they don't really want the smoke of arguing with you, they'll just call you dumb and this kind of thing (Interviewee 8).

Such experiences highlight how female fans can feel excluded from **online fan communities and become positioned as outsiders. Consistent with the work of Palmer and Thompson (2007), the positioning of females as outsiders, communicated and reinforced through the overt sexism they face on social media, restricts their ability to enjoy the social capital benefits of community membership afforded to male members. Thus, we see the dark side of social capital (Numerato & Baglioni, 2011) embodied in sexist discourses on social media.**

The issue of sexism on social media is not restricted to football (Shaw, 2014), but the reach and anonymity afforded to individuals on social media magnifies the effect: "I really think it's more of a social problem, a lot of things that people claim on social media are really just more visible there but they happen everywhere" (Interviewee 2). Female fans in the study also equated football fandom with politics in terms of the levels of passion it engenders: "People get less, I would say bothered about things that aren't football, people get

really upset, people get quite annoyed... people care more about football” (Interviewee 5).

This can therefore act to amplify any abuse that female football fans might experience.

However, sexism and sexist abuse appear to be more of an online issue in relation to football.

Echoing the work of Pope (2017) on the feminization of fandom, which discusses how

sport has become a more welcoming environment for women fans, two fans specifically

noted that, while they prevail on social media, sexist behaviours and comments are

disappearing from (or getting challenged in) stadia:

I feel like people think they can say more on social media because they are hidden behind the screen, particularly a lot of these fans on social media will have a player as their image so it's not even like coming from them, or, you know, people's names are disguised... they feel like they're able to say whatever they like. Whereas in stadiums and particularly if you are attending... with a group of men and females, I feel like people are less likely to say something to your face. (Interviewee 9)

Patterns of male and female posting behaviour on social media might also serve to reinforce

the visibility of sexist comments, with females perhaps preferring to send a private message

rather than getting drawn into public discussions:

if I get in a discussion on social media because someone is treating something that I said sexist, a lot of times other guys will answer the first guy and tell him what a brave guy he is... and women should be, you know, doing something else and not care about soccer... Women will not write a remark so quickly, but they will write me a message... and I see that I'm not alone in this, but it goes to silencing I think a lot of the women [who] don't want to talk publicly about certain topics because they don't want to get into said discussions (Interviewee 2).

In this sense, the behaviours of the female fans who refrain from posting publicly-visible comments may serve to reinforce the male hegemony of football fandom.

### *Online fan micro-communities*

Reflecting a clear disbenefit of football fandom on social media, over half of the fans in this study reported not engaging in discussions on social media where the threat of sexism exists. These female fans may well read social media content about their club, but avoid contributing to the online discussions. As one participant explained: “I refrain from responding to a lot of people because I don’t want to get the backlash” (Interviewee 7). Unlike the work of Hynes and Cook (2013), which found that female fans adopted the characteristics of male language and concealed their gender to overcome sexism on internet message boards, female fans in our study did not report changing their communications style or profile information. Rather, many reported curating their own content and forming what we term ‘micro-communities’ in which they discuss football. These micro-communities contain both men and women, but differ from the more public and open social media spaces in that they are private WhatsApp groups involving carefully selected and invited members, or more tightly curated, closed groups on social networking sites. By withdrawing from the more public online fora, female fans limit their visibility; this highlights how the marginalisation of the female voice within football (Lenneis & Pfister, 2015; Wenner, 2012; Gosling, 2007; Crawford, 2004) can extend into the social media domain, further reinforcing male hegemony within (online) football fandom. The creation of these micro-communities represents a further fracturing of online football fandom, allowing new sub-communities to appear. In many cases, female fans are very selective in their online football-related interactions, restricting them to known contacts, as exemplified in the following: “I tend to just engage with the people that I know and we can have a bit of banter because we know each other. But if it’s external people, then no I

wouldn't" (Interviewee 6). "I tend to only really have discussions with people who I've spoken to before" (Interviewee 12).

Evidently, micro-communities can form as a rejection of the sexism present in open football-related social media discussions, which these fans feel does not cohere with a culture of fandom they identify with. Through these micro-communities female fans elect to perform their sport fandom (Osborne & Coombs, 2013) in a different way: one which is founded on inclusive practice and enacted through the norms and values of their micro-community. This is articulated by interviewee 15:

I feel it's also important to have other men really allying with the women to show others who feel it's ok to aggress (*sic.*) women – and it's not ok – to have this solidarity between women and of course also other people, men, to really say 'hey this is the place where everyone [is welcome] and whoever tries to get someone out just because he or she is a woman, that's not ok at all, we don't accept that,' so this whole opinion and mindset of football is for everyone. (Interviewee 15)

Thus, females are using these micro-communities as a means of "self-protection" (Veletsianos et al., 2018, p. 4689) but also as a means of countering the prevailing male hegemony within football by taking control of the way in which they perform their fandom online. In terms of self-protection, micro-communities can form a safe space where female fans (and the like-minded males referred to in the above quote) can "be there for each other [in the face of abuse coming from a] stranger behind an app" (Interviewee 8).

These safe spaces are highly valued by female fans who feel uncomfortable interacting in more general football-related discussions on social media. As one participant articulated: "in my experience a lot of the women are looking for kind of a safe space and a lot of times on

social media they don't find that" (Interviewee 2). Another fan called for the creation of a "female friendly forum, [with] discussions there so that you don't feel... the unsafety (*sic.*) [that] you will be abused in any way" (Interviewee 10). Such safe spaces allow female fans the opportunity to interact and share their experiences with other, supportive fans without fear of judgement:

I really love the idea of women just supporting each other and starting off in a safe place, so... you can join your forces somehow or... so that you don't really feel alone there and whenever there is something you don't really want to endure yourself you can tell the others and they will support you... so there are those safe spaces (Interviewee 15).

An example of how female fans use micro-communities to counter male hegemony and control the way (and the space) in which they perform their fandom is the online female fan group 'This Fan Girl' - "a digital community for female football fans, capturing the faces, voices, stories and opinions of women who love the beautiful game" (This Fan Girl, 2019). As one participant explained, This Fan Girl coheres with ideas of a shared, open and non-partisan performance of female fandom:

So I think things like This Fan Girl are really good [examples] of like a safe space where you can kind of share your opinions. And you almost find that even though we don't all support the same clubs, we just care how the other one feels about it... I think we need more forums and places where we can just like openly talk about how we feel and know that there's not any judgment. (Interviewee 8)

Within such micro-communities, female fans reported forging strong relationships, facilitated by their love of a particular football team and the game:

there's people that I feel like I know in real life that I've actually only spoken to on Twitter or Facebook... so yeah, there are some people I've honestly never met but I will interact with them continually, like daily on some of these channels. (Interviewee 9)

Micro-communities therefore facilitate the building of bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) for their members. This form of social capital, referring to close friendship relationships within groups, aligns with the performance of fandom as an inclusive and mutually-supportive practice. It is important to note, as articulated in the above quotes, that the micro-communities discussed by female fans are not all exclusive to women and many contain male and female members, united by a wish to perform fandom in an inclusive manner. In order to create these micro-communities in which the bonding social capital is created (and prioritised), female fans are selective over who will be 'allowed' into their social media sphere. In many cases, this involves females "muting... [and] blocking" (Interviewee 8) other individuals or accounts (in this case on Twitter), to control the content and interactions occurring in their social media spaces:

I might have a look at somebody if they said something interesting about Spurs. If I have a look at their Twitter feed and find out that they're racist or something, that's the end of them. I don't want to see any more from them. What that means is, I've basically got reasonably nice people in general. (Interviewee 4)

In other instances, this curation of micro-communities might be even more deliberate from the outset, through the creation of invitation-only social media groups:

I think my podcasting community around [the] women talking about football podcast I have, there is a like social media thing we use there but you have to be invited to get in... I really feel that's something also really empowering to have a safe space where you know that there are just women there for a start (Interviewee 15).

Communities with high bonding social capital foster social trust (Putnam, 2000) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), and these deliberate attempts at creating micro-communities which prioritise bonding social capital permit those trusted, safe spaces (Putnam, 2000) that several of the female fans value. By building these safer spaces, female fans can feel empowered and supported in the performance of their fandom.

However, aside from the positive benefits of these closed communities for female fans, a potential darker side emerges in that they could lead to an increase of cyberbalkanisation, whereby bridging and linking with the wider fanbase and the sports club community is limited. Despite several fans espousing the benefits of performing their fandom in carefully curated micro-communities, by creating these tight-knit groups they may be (inadvertently or otherwise) creating echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001) in which homogenous views are perpetuated, excluding these female fans from the wider network benefits of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000). In this case, micro-communities formed as a response to female fans being positioned as the outgroup, in themselves represent the creation of new ingroups (albeit created out of laudable intentions), and may contribute to a further splintering of online football fandom into ever more disparate groups.

For some participants in our study, there was a desire to see females breaking out of these newly-formed micro-communities to bridge to wider (male-dominated) online fan groups, despite any challenges from male hegemony this may bring:

I think that's something really important to have some... who do have the courage to just step up and do it and let others see ok there's nothing bad happening (Interviewee 15).

I think it's down to ourselves really. We need to man up a wee bit. Jesus, that's the worst thing I could have said - 'Man up a wee bit!' [Laughter]. I don't know. It's just about being more confident, I think. I don't know whose responsibility it is. You can't ask men to be nicer to people on Twitter (Interviewee 11).

By contrast, in other cases, fans felt that the potential costs of seeking this bridging social capital may outweigh any benefits it could bring:

there's a bit of me thinks I really would love to get involved in that argument and there's another bit of me that thinks life is way too short (Interviewee 14).

a lot of people won't want to sign up publicly because they don't want to fight the fight and I can understand that to some extent, but I also wish more women would be willing to fight the fight (Interviewee 2).

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out with two primary research questions: to identify the challenges faced by female football fans on social media and to explore how female fans respond to these challenges in performing their fandom on these online platforms. Echoing work on female fan experiences more generally (Dunn, 2014; Hoerber & Kerwin, 2013; Pfister et al., 2013), and drawing on social capital theory (Putnam, 2000), the findings identified that fan communities formed on social media reinforce the male hegemony of football fandom,

meaning female fans still experience substantive challenges and accordingly curate their own micro-communities.

Some female fans feel that they do not fit into wider online fan communities where sexist behaviours, discussions of (sexualised) violence and exchanges of content of a sexual nature are exhibited by male fans. When performing their fandom online, female fans often have to justify their fan credentials to gain (sometimes grudging) acceptance and report receiving sexist comments either directly or indirectly. In the face of these challenges, and within the conditions of male dominated online fandom, female fans adopt more passive social media behaviours, often reading content without actively participating in the football-related online discussions. This represents the first key contribution of the study.

The study adopts the principles of social capital theory to extend knowledge on how social capital develops within micro-communities. For female fans, these appear to be trusted, safe fora removed from more sexist social media spaces (Fox, et al., 2015). As such, micro-communities allow females to actively engage with a carefully selected group of fans with whom they build social bonds and trust (Putnam, 2000). Whilst acknowledging the positive aspects of creating online environments in which females feel safe in performing their fandom, our paper contributes to the growing body of literature documenting the dark side of social media, particularly in terms of the curation of micro-communities. Specifically, whilst the largely closed nature of these micro-communities renders them ideal for developing bonding social capital through social encounters within a safe, homogenous group, they can also lead to a further splintering of the online fan community, representing a form of cyberbalkanization. This restricts the ability of female fans to build bridging social capital online. These findings extend Holland's (2008) work, demonstrating how it applies in the

realm of sports fandom, suggesting that the formation of bonding social capital within safe and supportive micro-communities permits female fans to “get by”, yet its existence also inhibits female fans’ ability to build bridging or linking social capital, which would help them to “get on” (p.9) and contribute equally with males in open online communities. Thus, the paper’s second contribution reveals that there is an emergent process of cyberbalkanization (albeit with laudable intentions) in the splintering of online fan communities, with new ingroups forming as a response to the previous outgroup status of female fans in larger and more open online football discussions. As such, the paper contributes to the field of social capital research, revealing a tension between the creation of micro-communities, which empower and encourage females in their fandom and build valuable bonding social capital, and the fact this can potentially close off opportunities to build bridging social capital that arise through participation in wider online fan communities.

Building on this contribution, and consistent with Filo *et al*’s (2015) call for a more theoretically informed approach to sport and social media research, additional research is required to further strengthen this claim, specifically to explore the potential benefits and disbenefits female sports fans experience in performing their fandom in micro-communities as opposed to more open forums. Similarly, longitudinal research exploring the ongoing experiences of female sports fans on social media, the extent to which behaviours exhibited in this study persist, and whether these may ultimately lead to shifts in online (and offline) fan culture would add valuable insight.

Through the above stated contributions, this study reveals opportunities for social media and sport managers to understand and improve reach and engagement with their female fan base online. The incentive for clubs (should they need one) to champion female voices is that by

creating a more open and tolerant online environment female fans may become more visible to the clubs themselves. The results of this study point, in some cases, to a desire of female fans to be more confrontational and step out of their micro-communities to bridge to the wider male dominated fan base. Others believe that the costs of direct confrontation outweigh the bridging social capital benefits. The creation of the closed groups, which prevail at present, renders some female fans invisible to the football clubs on social media, making it harder for the clubs to interact with their female fan bases. Thus, if football clubs want the opportunity to engage with their female fans, it is incumbent upon them to contribute to the creation of online spaces which promote tolerance and inclusivity, perhaps helping to normalise the performance of fandom as a fluid and non-gendered practice. Here, the modelling of inclusive fandom behaviours by clubs and players may contribute towards a more open and tolerant online environment. There are also implications for digital policy in sports organisations, for instance in the nature of social media messages disseminated by sports clubs, to maximise the diversity and inclusion of their female fanbase.

One limitation of the study is that we did not directly seek the views of industry practitioners, instead concentrating on capturing the voice of the female fans. Therefore, the question of how clubs can best contribute to the integration of disparate fan communities on social media represents a useful area for future research. The extent to which female fans want and expect clubs to create and promote inclusive online fan communities was only briefly touched upon by a small number of respondents in our study, with views divided as regards how and if clubs should do this. In this regard, an exploration of how clubs might interact with fans and their role in facilitating and championing inclusive cultures of fandom, drawing on both fan and club perspectives, would illuminate current debates and provide valuable recommendations for practice.

Beyond football, the findings provide an illustrative example of a wider societal issue of sexism in sport and on social media and thus will have resonance across all sports with sizeable fanbases who interact online. We contend that placing the burden of solving this problem at the door of one group (whether that be female fans, clubs or some other collective entity) is unlikely to yield results and collaborative endeavours will be required in order to secure a shared understanding and set of guiding principles around the nature and content of (online) fan discussions. Ultimately, as with any attempt to change norms and values within a community, the bridging of these currently disparate fan communities and the evolution of fan culture, both online and offline, to one which is more inclusive will require a collective effort.

Social media is a dynamic and constantly changing environment, as is the way in which fans interact through its different platforms. This study explored social media as a whole and while in some instances respondents identified specific platforms, in many cases they discussed social media more generally. In this way, differences between participants' experiences on individual social media platforms might have remained hidden. Therefore, future research examining how female fans' experiences may differ across the range of social media platforms would be helpful. The fans in our study were based largely in the mature football markets of the UK and continental Europe. Thus it would be insightful to replicate the study with female fans in emerging markets to gain a more global perspective. Finally, work exploring the experiences of female fans beyond football, including in sports with a more gender-balanced or even female-dominated fanbase represents a fruitful avenue for future research.

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Table 1			
<i>Interviewee characteristics</i>			
Interviewee number	Age	Location	Team(s) supported
Interviewee 1	24	Scotland	Aberdeen Scunthorpe
Interviewee 2	40	Germany	Mainz
Interviewee 3	37	Germany	FC St Pauli
Interviewee 4	26	England	Tottenham Hotspur
Interviewee 5	28	Scotland	Aberdeen

Interviewee 6	53	England	Manchester City
Interviewee 7	50	England	Manchester City
Interviewee 8	26	England	Manchester United
Interviewee 9	29	England	Aston Villa
Interviewee 10	28	England	Arsenal
Interviewee 11	26	Northern Ireland	Liverpool
Interviewee 12	29	England	Manchester United
Interviewee 13	36	USA	Aston Villa
Interviewee 14	60	England	Manchester United
Interviewee 15	38	Germany	FC Augsburg

Table 2			
<i>Example of coding process</i>			
Quote	Primary-cycle codes	Secondary-cycle codes	Overall theme
<p>“To be honest, I'm more likely to just look at the people I know on Twitter. As I say, there are two or three journalists who write regularly about Spurs on Twitter that I check to see what they've said or if their write-up has been done yet. Sometimes, if you've been at the game, after the game you want to see... if the goal was up the other end, you don't necessarily see it in particularly clear detail. You're looking for somebody who has got a little video clip of it up so that you can watch</p>	<p>Researcher 1: “people I know”</p>	<p>Limiting networks</p>	<p>Micro-communities</p>
	<p>Researcher 2: “online tribe”</p>		
	<p>Researcher 3: “limit networks”</p>		

it all over again and enjoy it all over again” (Interviewee 4)			
“there’s a lot of men that don’t want to share soccer, like it belongs to them or something” (Interviewee 2)	Researcher 1: “exclusion”  “positions as outsider”	Females as outgroup	Sexism on social media
	Researcher 2: “tribal”		
	Researcher 3: “sexism”		
“I refrain from responding to a lot of people because I don’t want to get the backlash, I don’t want the backlash but I’ll try and support people who are getting backlash.” (Interviewee 7)	Researcher 1: “reading not interacting”	Not engaging in discussions	Micro-communities
	Researcher 2: “detaching”		
	Researcher 3: “don’t react”		
“So I'm sure it won't come as a surprise but people always feel, I say people, I guess more men always feel like females don't really know what they're talking about, I guess. I think that has changed over the last few years, particularly with the, you know, the uptake in women's football, but sometimes you'll put a comment and someone who you don't even know will reply saying like, oh you know, what do you know, or, oh should have guessed you're female making this comment, that sort of thing. I've had things before where I've put up like a video, like on the way to a game, like on	Researcher 1: “stereotype”  “females lack football knowledge”	Social media reinforces male hegemony	Sexism on social media
	Researcher 2: “lack of knowledge”  “not fitting in tribe”		
	Researcher 3: “perceived lack of knowledge”		

a supporters coach and people have replied saying, oh what's that bird doing on there and it's a bit like, well I'm entitled to go as well." (Interviewee 9)