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Discussing Homosexuality on Association Football Fan Message Boards: A Changing Cultural Context

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a discourse analysis carried out on forty-eight association football (soccer) message boards from across the United Kingdom concerning fans' views towards the presence of gay footballers. It draws on over 3,000 anonymous posts to examine whether hegemonic or more inclusive forms of masculinity existed. The overall findings are that, despite evidence of heteronormativity and some orthodox views towards homosexuality, a majority of supporters demonstrate more inclusivity through the rejection of posts that they feel have pernicious homophobic intent. Rather than avoiding any contestation of these orthodox posts, fans frequently challenge them and suggest that on-the-field performance is what is valued the most.

Keywords: fans; football; homophobia; Internet; masculinity; message boards; sexuality.

Introduction

Although organized sport has various meanings for men, one constant feature throughout its contemporary history has been the demonstration of socially acceptable forms of heteromascularity (Plummer, 1999; Wellard, 2009). This is often recognized in the male-dominated, popular contact team sport of British football (or soccer), where heteromascularity expression and embodiment have been historically engrained in boys and men (Dunning, 1999).

During the 1980s and 1990s, increasing academic attention was given to sexuality and sport, most of which suggested that the environment for a gay athlete was intimidating and homophobic (Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). In contextualizing this, Connell (1987) advanced hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight an intramascularity hierarchical structure that placed gay men at the bottom. Despite this theory becoming a key feature of masculinity literature, more recent empirical research has illustrated a change in attitudes towards homosexuality across different subcultures within male sport (Adams, 2011; Adams, Anderson and McCormack, 2010; Anderson, 2009; Anderson and McGuire, 2010; Campbell, Cothren, Rogers, Kistler, Osowski, Greenauer and End, 2011; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Nylund, 2007). These changes are part of an increasing number of sport sociologists that are

using empirical findings to offer a more theoretical and conceptual indication of multiple masculinities existing across contemporary sport settings (King, 2008; Pringle and Hickey 2010; Seidler, 2006; Thorpe, 2010; Wellard, 2009). One such approach is Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity theory, which is based on multiple masculinities co-existing without any hierarchical arrangement in subcultures where there is evidence of decreasing 'homophobia' (the fear of being thought to be homosexual where a highly homophobic culture exists).

According to Anderson (2009), one particular influence on decreasing homophobia is the growth and interactivity of the Internet. For Anderson, men are continuously looking at ways of reconfiguring their own notions of masculinity, and the Internet is one place where this is being found. The growth of the Internet since the availability of the World Wide Web in 1992 and subsequent creation of football fan message boards from the late-1990s has provided opportunities for a significant number of 'active' fans (those fans who actively participate in the exchange of information with other fans, clubs, supporter organizations and the media) to engage online. Indeed, the opportunities for active consumption of the Internet have grown exponentially in recent years, helped in some way by the increasing number of mobile phones, laptops and other computer tablets now providing remote Internet access.¹

It has been argued that the purpose of sociology is to explore behaviors, identities, views and values (Millward, 2008). Message boards provide one rich data source as they often comprise of an asynchronous collection of personal narratives that offer explanations of personal and social change. The technical nature of message boards not only allows for content to be consumed, but also for it to be created by those who are registered on a specific website.² However, very little is often known about them to the rest of those also engaged in each message board as pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity.³ Although Millward (2009) suggests that some message board users do actually know each other, for the majority

only the moderators of each message board would know more of their identity and, in most cases, this would only be a name (potentially a fake one) and an email address. In fact, the almost untraceable nature of discourse across the Internet is problematic. Outside of football, it has provided platforms for 'hate speech' concerning racism, homophobia, disability and sexism as well as cyber bullying and the transmission of child porn across the world at the click of a button (Rivers, 2011; Shariff and Hoff, 2007).

Whilst research has been carried out on fan message boards across various sports in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (Clavio, 2008; Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Millward 2008; Ruddock, Hutchins and Rowe, 2010), limited research has examined discussions concerning sexuality (see, for example, Kian, Clavio, Vincent and Shaw, 2011). In their article on homophobic language used in one American football fan message board (rivals.com), Kian et al. (2011: 694) state that the 'users' performance of hegemonic masculinity seemed to be mutually reinforced or policed by subsequent postings, possibly meaning that the main board serves as a haven for men trying to attain masculine capital and acceptance from like-minded peers'. Although only a minority of posters in their sample engaged in homophobic debate, Kian et al. found that these went uncontested by other users.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to investigate the representation of attitudes, opinions and views of those football fans actively involved in forty-eight online British fan message boards from June 2010 to October 2010 towards the presence of gay footballers. It was in response to the English Football Association (FA) dropping a campaign in February 2010 that aimed to tackle homophobia, stating that football was not ready for such a campaign to take place. This decision found support from some of those involved in the game with Gordon Taylor, the Professional Footballers' Association (the professional players' trade union) Chief Executive, quoted as saying: 'we believe the time would be more appropriate when crowds are a bit more civilised'.⁴ Similarly, Max Clifford, the British

public relations advisor, claimed he had advised two Premier League players from coming out as football remained ‘in the dark ages, steeped in homophobia’.⁵ Although the FA did eventually release an anti-homophobia video as part of a new campaign in February 2012, at the time of writing little has changed since the research was conducted in 2010.

After analyzing over 3,000 posts during the four-month research period, the article shall indicate how the cultural context of football fandom is changing towards sexuality. Whilst some media sources now encourage more inclusive discussions with readers/listeners regarding gay athletes (Kian and Anderson, 2009; Nylund, 2004, 2007), this article demonstrates that the Internet and, more specifically, British football fan message boards, also contain evidence of inclusivity through the rejection of homophobia and frequent contestation of orthodox views that exist.

Theories of Masculinity and Association Football

In reviewing the expanding area of sexuality and sport, King (2008) presented three dominant theoretical approaches: lesbian-centered theories of homophobia and heterosexism; studies in hegemonic masculinity about gay men in sport; and poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and queer theory. At center stage in much of this work is the focus on homophobia and heteronormativity across many different aspects of sport, such as the experience of athletes as well as the influence of fellow players, the fans and the media (Anderson, 2009; Caudwell, 2006; Griffin, 1998; Kian and Anderson, 2009; Nylund, 2004; Plummer, 1999; Pringle and Hickey, 2010; Thorpe, 2010; Wellard, 2009). Whilst recognizing the expansion of research on sexuality and sport into many different areas, the focus of this article is on hegemonic masculinity and the growing body of contemporary empirical research surrounding masculinity and sport.

One prominent line of academic enquiry towards the relationship between sexuality and male sport in the late 1980s and early 1990s was homophobia and how contact team

sports continued to maintain traditional heteromascuine notions of identity and embodiment (Connell, 1987, 1990, 1995; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990). In conceptualizing gender power relations at the time, Connell (1987) advanced hegemonic masculinity theory to highlight the structure and demonstration of masculinity within the gender order. Within this theoretical model was the creation and maintenance of an intramascuine hierarchical structure, with gay men positioned at the bottom. Although she recognized the existence of multiple masculinities, Connell (1995) suggested that boys and men aspired to one hegemonic archetype of masculinity and by doing so were rewarded with the most social capital. To improve their position in the hierarchical structure, boys and men had to demonstrate masculine ideals, including heterosexuality, homophobia and sexism. Heterosexual men who did not conform were also marginalized, but not to the same extent as gay men (Anderson, 2011).

Connell (1990) suggested that a contact team sport such as football portrayed hegemonic notions of masculinity (in the players, media and fans), and the continued reproduction of heteronormativity was evident in October 1990 when black British footballer, Justin Fashanu, became the first professional to come out (via an exclusive in the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*). Here, the homohysteria phase that Anderson (2009) states was in existence could be applied to football as, not only did he suffer racist abuse, he was also ostracized by former team mates, fans, the media and even his own brother John (who was also a professional footballer) for being openly homosexual. He committed suicide in 1998 facing a charge of sexual assault on a teenage boy in the United States. Since this time, two notable British footballers have faced accusations from players and fans due to the perception that they are gay (Graeme Le Saux and Sol Campbell). Anton Hysén (a lower league semi-professional player in Sweden) is the only openly gay footballer currently playing any form

of professional football anywhere in the world (David Testo came out in November 2011, but is currently without a club since being released by Montreal Impact in October 2011).

Since Justin Fashanu, sections of the British media have changed the way they present masculinity in the twenty-first century. The best example of this is the footballer, David Beckham. In 1998, not only did Beckham get blamed for England's exit at the World Cup (he was sent off against Argentina; a game that England lost on penalties), but he was also pictured wearing a sarong. Bearing the brunt of the media (and fans) blame for the World Cup defeat, Beckham also faced attempts by the British tabloid press to emasculate him (Clayton and Harris, 2009). However, the image of Beckham and the presentation of masculinity changed in the early part of the twenty-first century, with the *The Sun* newspaper publishing an article in 2003 stating how Beckham is 'the perfect role model for every generation. A clean-living, honest, decent, caring, gentle bloke...on the outside he is 21st Century man personified, a glamorous, handsome fashion icon' (Clayton and Harris, 2009: 135). These changes have led to the emergence of a new kind of sporting identity: the metrosexual man (a heterosexual man who displays behavior and styles that are stereotypically associated with homosexuality). This has helped move the debate away from the traditional value of team sports towards the look and appearance of male athletes.

Although there remains a focus on the traditional characteristics of heteromascularity, Connell (2012) also recognizes that this is now contrasted with an increasing focus on studying new forms of masculinity (Connell refers to this as 'modern' masculinity and suggests it is more expressive, egalitarian and peaceable). Indeed, new gender scholars are offering more theoretical, conceptual and empirical understandings of men and masculinities in contemporary sport settings. Pringle and Hickey (2010) and Seidler (2006), for example, have argued that although violence towards gays cannot be assumed to have decreased, a different gender and sexual order exists for young people, who do not carry the same hostility

towards homosexuality that previous generations have done. In fact, Seidler (2006: xxvi) has stated how it is important for scholars to ‘break with some of the inherited frameworks and ask new kinds of questions’.

One particular scholar who is developing his own theoretical and conceptual approach is Eric Anderson. Presented with empirical evidence of decreasing levels of homophobia within different sporting environments on young men aged between 16-24, Anderson (2009) introduced inclusive masculinity theory to conceptualize the existence of multiple masculinities, coexisting with near equal cultural value. As part of this new theoretical context, Anderson stated how masculinities are becoming more fluid, varied and reconfigured. He refers to those who retain ‘masculine capital’ by continuing to subscribe to the traditional form of masculinity as orthodox (based on a combination of heterosexuality and hypermasculinity) and suggests that it can co-exist with inclusive masculinity.

In fact, Anderson’s work has some resonance with this article as inclusive masculinity theory’s primary tenet is that as homophobia decreases across various sporting subcultures (such as amongst fellow athletes, the fans and the media), the balance of power shifts from a vertical hierarchy where one form of masculinity resides at the top, to a horizontal one where gendered power is more evenly distributed, regardless of sexuality. Indeed, this new theoretical concept has found support with other scholars across many sporting subcultures also reporting similar findings (Adams, 2011; Campbell et al., 2011; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012). With regards to evidence of a substantial decline in cultural homophobia within football fandom, Cashmore and Cleland (2012), as part of their research on 3,500 football fans, found that 93 per cent would support any footballer who decided to come out, but there remains a vocal minority who continue to oppose this.

At the same time, there has also been an increasing focus on the changing cultural context of language when discussing sexuality (Butler, 1997; McCormack, 2011;

McCormack and Anderson, 2010; Pascoe, 2007). According to McCormack (2011), previous discussions on homosexually-themed language normally concentrated on whether a particular phrase or word was homophobic or not. However, Pascoe (2007) argues that as subcultures across Anglo-American society have changed, so has the discourse surrounding homophobia. According to McCormack and Anderson (2010), the centralization of context is very important in interpreting the meaning and effect of the language used. As a result of this, McCormack (2011) presents a new model for understanding homosexually-themed language that is dependent on the homophobia of a particular setting. This model ranges from 'homophobic discourse' where the language is said with pernicious intent and has a negative social effect to 'pro-gay discourse' where the language used has a positive social effect. Of relevance to what it has been suggested British football operates in (Connell, 1990), in high homophobic settings the stigma attached to homosexuality results in men demonstrating their heteromascularity through the use of homophobic language, whilst in gay friendly cultures, men use language that is more inclusive towards homosexuality.

Football fan discourse and the Internet

The Internet has clearly increased the opportunity to engage in online cultures through the creation of multiple platforms that allow for ideological dissemination and consumption, community-building, social resistance, claims-making as well as social networking. Writing about the opportunities created by digital technology, Jenkins (2006: 247) argues that those who engage in a participatory culture should not be read 'as typical of the average consumer', but they should be acknowledged 'as demonstrations of what it is possible to do in the context of convergence culture'. Despite the popularity of online sites, however, they are (mainly) unregulated social spaces wherein people are granted a license to write and represent different subcultures in diverse ways. Subsequently, the Internet has become a

platform for ‘doing’ hate speech (Kian et al., 2011; Rivers, 2011; Shariff and Hoff, 2007), just as much as it creates spaces for challenging and resisting it.

Football message boards provide a unique type of sport communication as they allow disparate fans from all across the world to engage in everyday asynchronous discussions concerning footballing and non-footballing matters (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010; Millward, 2008). In the 1980s and early 1990s, the only available outlet for fans to air their views publicly was to contribute to a print fanzine (an often humorous magazine-type publication written through supporters’ eyes, which was usually sold at every other home match). However, the introduction of the Internet moved many fanzines online and they quickly became known as e-zines. According to Millward (2008: 299), these changes became popular with many fans as e-zines provided ‘a site for both the construction of (collective and individual) identities and “information age” sports fan democracy’. Even though more than one e-zine can be unofficially linked to a particular club (and for the bigger clubs this is the case), usually an interactive message board is available for supporters who have registered to air their views publicly and debate these with other members of the same e-zine. Within each message board area are often a choice of sections where a post can be placed, including ‘first-team chat’, ‘general football and other sports’ and ‘off topic’ (to name but a few). Fans that are not registered on each e-zine can view the message board as a ‘guest’ but cannot contribute to any discussion.

Whereas a large number of fans remain passive in their consumption of football (i.e. they do not seek to engage in a participatory role in football-related consumption and interaction), for Cleland (2010) and Dart (2009), the creation of blogs and message boards has encouraged a number of active football supporters to take up a more participatory role in exchanging information and thoughts. These fans are also found to be some of the most committed as, according to Gibbons and Dixon (2010), they are also regular attenders of

matches, which is often seen as a traditional and authentic practice. In terms of the social demographics of those engaging in this type of practice, Clavio (2008) conducted a population analysis across 14 American college sport message boards and found that 88 per cent were male, 91 per cent were 'White', 77 per cent were at least 30 years old with 25 per cent aged 50 or over. The frequency of users engaging in message boards was also a significant finding as 80 per cent spent up to 10 hours a week doing this.

Method

Although the research could have been carried out covertly, the aim was to avoid the kind of 'identity deception' that is available when conducting research in anonymous online environments (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2012). To try and instigate access into online fan communities, an email from my university account was sent to ninety-eight e-zine editors across the UK asking for permission to register on their respective websites. This contained a request to post a short paragraph on the respective message board about the research and forty-eight e-zine editors responded granting their permission.

Once a researcher has access, Millward (2008) has debated whether they should make themselves known during the research process. This was felt necessary as the intention was for fans to provide an honest narrative so, once registration had taken place, in the opening post I stated I was an academic looking to gather fans' views towards the presence of gay footballers in response to the decision by the FA to withdraw its campaign.⁶ By doing this, my intentions were clear from the outset and nothing was hidden from those engaging in the online debate (Gibbons and Nuttall, 2012).⁷ Once the original post was made, I subsequently played no further part in the discussion and had no further influence over fan behavior as the intention was to virtually observe the development of each thread in its own right. I also made the decision not to request details about ethnic background, gender, age,

occupational status or to contact particular posters through the private message facility as this would potentially disturb the ‘conversation’ that was taking place on each message board.

When conducting research like this, it is important not to assume all of the posters are male, white and heterosexual. Whilst Clavio (2008) found this in his population analysis of college sports message boards, it needs to be recognized that this was likely to consist of a mainly American audience. Anonymity from each poster cannot be assumed either, as previous research on message boards has found that some members of the online fan community actually know each other (Millward, 2009). In this type of scenario, it could encourage posters to lie or exaggerate about their true feelings in the hope of impressing fellow posters. Conversely, the anonymity of message boards also allows for exaggerations from posters who do not know each other. Thus, in the analysis that follows, I remain cautious with the claims that are made (both positive and negative) as this online behavior might not translate into their offline life (Jenkins, 2006; Kozinets, 2010).

The research was conducted from June 2010 to October 2010 and received over 3,000 posts. Most opening posts were put in the ‘off topic’ area of each e-zine message board as they tend to remain as a discussion point for longer than topics in more of the club-specific message boards, where a higher turnover of posts focusing on the first-team occurs. In each area of a message board, threads with the newest response remain at the top of the listings and due to the interest in this area my thread remained a prominent feature for longer. Moreover, whilst it could be assumed that my openness with each e-zine editor might encourage homophobic posts to be deleted by the forum moderator, this was not the case across all forty-eight message boards as homophobic posts did exist on each site. Only on rare occasions was there evidence of random posts that diverted away from the thread’s intention, but because of the volume of interest in this area very quickly the debate was brought back into its original focus.

Despite the significant number of posts received, this article makes no suggestion that it is representative of all football supporters across the world, just the subjective responses of those active supporters involved in each of the forty-eight British message boards. However, they still represent a significant composition of views that fans have towards sexuality in football. Furthermore, although there is no way of knowing whether those who responded to the posts were actually supporters of the clubs that I engaged with, the research objective was not to test fans of a particular club. Whilst the research could be accused of bias towards those who have access to the Internet, as this article has so far proved, an increasing number of households and mobile phones, laptops and other computer tablets now have online access. For example, in the Office for National Statistics publication, 'Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2011', it was reported how the number of individuals accessing the Internet through wi-fi hotspots had increased from 0.7 million in 2007 to 4.9 million in 2011. It was also highlighted how the number of British households with Internet access has increased from 9 per cent in 1998 to 77 per cent in 2011 (in 2004 it was 49 per cent and has gradually risen every year since).

Every fan that provided a post was given a number (identified by their chosen pseudonym) and they retained this even if they contributed later in the thread. However, to protect the anonymity of posters even further, any subsequent reference in this article will be, for example, Aston Villa fan 1, Aston Villa fan 25. Each thread of data was analyzed through discourse analysis as specific attention was paid to the existence of heteronormativity as well as any posts with homophobic intent and the response by fellow posters to this. In support of this approach, Clavio (2008) and Millward (2008) have stated how message boards are a form of 'live' discourse and, as such, provide the ability to observe, record and analyze subtle and explicit messages in an unobtrusive way. Once all of the data had been collected across the forty-eight message boards, the analysis sought to discover any patterns, commonalities

or differences across the responses (Miles and Huberman, 1984: 9). Here, multiple levels of data were broken down into thematic categories falling under sexuality and homophobia.

Results

To assess the cultural context of football message boards towards sexuality, what is presented here are examples of individual posts and more substantial threads within five message boards selected at random. This was due to the consistent nature of responses across all forty-eight message boards, highlighted by the discourse suggesting that although heteronormativity and homophobia remain in some posts, attitudes are slowly changing. For example, out of the 3,000 posts, a number of fans made isolated comments indicating a shift in cultural context, albeit in different ways. Aston Villa fan 19 represents the thoughts of many by stating: 'I fear that football crowds will be some of the last people in society to abandon their homophobia, but even here I think attitudes are changing, slowly'. A number of fans also raise the case of Justin Fashanu, who as a black footballer not only had to contend with racism, but also homophobia, when he came out in 1990. Twenty years later, many fans reflect on cultural changes within other team sports, such as the decision by the Welsh rugby league player, Gareth Thomas, to come out in 2009 and the English cricketer, Steven Davies, to come out in 2010. Those fans that refer to this suggest similar levels of acceptance can also occur in football, with Cardiff City fan 5 providing one such example:

For me, it's an issue of society and what people deem acceptable to believe and how to behave. Most of us will know what happened to Justin Fashanu and how long ago that was. If a seemingly 'macho' and 'straight-edged' sport like rugby league can accept a gay player, then for football it must only be a matter of time.

Similarly, Liverpool fan 21 also makes comparisons between rugby and football:

If that Welsh rugby player can 'come out' in what I imagine is an even more macho culture, then I can't see why football should be taboo. I may be looking through rose-coloured spectacles but I think the great majority of people now don't give a toss about a person's sexuality and I can't imagine it being the issue it would have been ten years ago, except to a cabal of knuckle-draggers.

Although this is just a small number of examples of isolated posts, the changing cultural context can also be found with threads of support across many of the message boards; as shown by this virtual ‘conversation’ on an Aston Villa e-zine:

Aston Villa fan 5: Of course everybody’s sexuality should be irrelevant to anyone outside of his/her private life. Sad if football is really lagging so far behind in this.

Aston Villa fan 7: It’s a private issue and should remain that way.

Aston Villa fan 8: A person’s sexuality has absolutely nothing to do with anybody else. What does it matter to anybody else? This is the 21st century.

Aston Villa fan 9: Is the correct answer, a person’s sexuality is their choice.

Aston Villa fan 11: I would be delighted if a gay footballer were to come out. I cannot understand people’s homophobia. I really can’t. A player’s sexuality doesn’t affect the way he plays football and the way a player plays is the most important thing.

Despite this particular conversation showing more inclusivity towards the presence of gay footballers, a deeper analysis shows how heteronormativity remains privileged through the reference to a player’s sexuality remaining a private matter. Fans across all of the message boards refer to performance on the field of play as the most important factor in their support, and this *is* likely to be the case, but for some supporters there is also an interest in what occurs off the field of play. Football is a significant part of popular culture and given the media’s focus on any high-profile heterosexual player’s personal life, there is likely to be a large focus given to the first openly gay high-profile professional footballer. In this way, it would unlikely remain a private matter and would receive widespread public attention.

Even though homosexuality has become more accepted in sport (Anderson, 2011), the small number of openly gay sportsmen has not really affected heteronormativity in football, and when some fans feel threatened by this, reactionary responses occur. This was found with Anton Hysén immediately after he came out in March 2011, when Swedish channel TV4 was forced to take down an online article about him due to the volume of hate-filled comments. According to Connell (2005), exaggerated practices of hypermasculinity and homophobia are often carried out by men who are economically or culturally marginalized and, therefore,

need a public platform to continue to raise their masculine capital. Although it can only be assumed that posts of this nature were written by men, message boards, it seems, provide an opportunity for the presentation of hypermasculinity (as suggested by Kian et al., 2011). By way of illustration, Cardiff City fan 76 states: 'Surely footballers are brimming with testosterone; hardly a recipe for gay tendencies really. With rugby there's a bit of cuddling involved'. As highlighted earlier, research suggests some posters 'perform' on message boards as, despite using pseudonyms, they know other posters and thus a sense of bravado and humor (however misplaced) can exist (Millward, 2009). Even those that do not know anyone else are liable to a form of exaggeration or bravado in the posts they write; a type of 'performance' often recognized by fellow posters and typified by these two Huddersfield Town fans:

Huddersfield Town fan 58: I'm not surprised by a lot of people's comments sadly. I think it's more people [that] spout the macho answers about disliking gay people because they haven't got the strength of character to speak up against those that have these archaic views.

Huddersfield Town fan 93: A lot of people go along with views of people whose company they are in in my view. They will have views on a wide variety of groups but if they meet any of those persons they'd be as pleasant with them as anyone...there's a lot of bravado and conforming to the group with things like this in my opinion.

Whilst some fans are happy to place homophobic thoughts into the public domain and accept the contestation that follows, on some occasions the ways in which posts were interpreted by others on the same message board required further clarification. Here, the author of the post being contested would often respond to his/her accusers with a post that clarified their position on this issue. This highlights the complexity of discourse (particularly online) and shows how some fans seek to protect their online identity within a particular fan community.

One example of this defensive re-interpretation came from Huddersfield Town fan 27:

This is exactly what I mean!!!! Who, on this thread, has said that they dislike homosexuals? It seems that if you are not openly FOR them, then you must be AGAINST them. Why can't I be not bothered...all I've said is that I couldn't give a toss about someone's sexuality!!!! I'm only joining in the debate.

This and other examples of misinterpreted or misunderstood language in the data has been raised by Butler (1997), who stressed the existence of a “gap” between the intention of the speaker and the effect it has on the recipient. Explaining this gap, Butler (1997: 15) explains how, over time, words can ‘become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualised in more affirmative modes’.

In Butler’s earlier work on sexual identity (1990), she suggested that whilst it is impossible to escape heteronormativity and implicit homophobia, it is possible to subvert it. Although it has been shown how performance and bravado are present on message boards, Millward’s (2008) research found that when fans have opposing views, two possible outcomes emerge: (1) comments are reinterpreted to create a group consensus and (2) fans that make posts that are not welcome by the group can be challenged, criticized, mocked and even shunned. An example of the latter outcome occurred on a Manchester United message board after a series of posts made by Manchester United fan 24, who is then challenged by Manchester United fan 25, 26 and 56 (there were many more additional posts that could have been added):

Manchester United fan 24: With any collection of men, there is going to be an undercurrent of blokes who don’t like the idea of gays, simple as. You can’t force people overnight to grow to be comfortable around people who, not so long ago, would be chastised by the authorities for their sexuality and condemned to hellfire...most straight men (I’d hazard a guess) aren’t comfortable with the idea of gays even working in the same office, so how can you expect the same men to chant the name of a homosexual man?

Manchester United fan 25: Maybe by accepting homosexuals as equals, just like with black people? You’re right, it’s not happening over night, but respect to the steps that are being taken.

Manchester United fan 24: The ‘just like black people argument’ holds no water and is frankly ridiculous. Gays choose to have sex with other males. There’s a difference most red blooded straight men will have issue with. Don’t dare compare what black people have gone through, based purely on the shade of their skin, to the pining’s for parity and protection from poofter jokes from people making a life choice which will disgust a lot of people in an alpha-male dominated society.

Manchester United fan 25: Well you obviously choose to see the argument in the stupidest way ever. What I mean is that it’s a matter of accepting other people and that is something that everyone needs to grow up with from childhood – acceptance of people different than themselves....they’re probably gay because it is what comes natural, not something they can choose differently. You make it sound like it’s a choice they can stop making.

Manchester United fan 26: First of [all], it's not a choice ...just because something disgusts a lot of people in a society doesn't mean they are right about it...homosexuals didn't choose to be homosexuals, just like black people didn't choose to be black, and neither of those things is bad.

Manchester United fan 56: as an ignorant, bigoted fool, it's just your inclination. The difference is that most gay guys just go about their business and don't spend their time trying to convince the world to see things as they do, like you're doing.

To highlight the similarity found across all message boards where posts deemed to have homophobic intent were challenged, below is another example taken from a Cardiff City message board. It shows how fans 21 and 62 react strongly to what they perceive as comments with homophobic intent made by fans 19 and 20 (again more posts could have been added):

Cardiff City fan 19: What's the point? Quickest way in my opinion, for homophobia to go away, is for gay people to stop acting like they're different to the rest of us – gay pubs, gay clubs, gay pride, gay marches etc etc, what a load of bollox, you're MEN, who you get your kicks with is irrelevant, or should be, so stop making a flipping issue of it!!

Cardiff City fan 20: Homosexual culture is detrimental to a cohesive family based society.

Cardiff City fan 21: How exactly do homosexuals affect family based culture? By not having children? There are plenty of childless heterosexual couples that I know. I would argue that there are far more pressing and serious issues affecting this utopian family based society that you speak of – alcoholism, unemployment, divorce, domestic abuse etc.

Cardiff City fan 62: People are free to act however the fuck they want regardless of sexuality! I have no problem with 'laddish' heterosexuals, I have no problem with camp gays (or metrosexuals for that matter) or anyone in between...your views belong in a previous era.

A number of interpretations can be made from these two threads. As suggested by Kian et al. (2011), a poster's performance of orthodox views can be reinforced or challenged by subsequent posts. For some posters, there is a sense that the message board allows them an opportunity to raise their masculine capital by stating homophobic views, whether they are accepted by fellow posters or not. The suggestion that homosexuality is 'detrimental to a cohesive family based society' and the 'disgust' of homosexuality in an 'alpha-male society' highlights the homophobic intent that remains for some fans (McCormack, 2011). In posts such as this, hate speech retains a place in football discourse (Butler, 1997). However, what is frequently found across all message boards are a significant number of fans resisting offensive orthodox masculine fan practices by expressing their own disgust at any

presentation of homophobia. These fans do not feel the need for a hypermasculine presentation of self and, instead, demonstrate inclusivity through the rejection of homophobia and acceptance of multiple masculinities, regardless of sexuality.

Discussion

Although there is the assumption by football's governing bodies and some scholars that the sporting environment (of which fans play a significant role) is homophobic (Connell, 1990; Plummer, 1999), this article has presented findings that begin to show, despite the anonymous nature of fan message boards, how fans are displaying more inclusive attitudes towards the presence of gay footballers. Concurring with the findings of Adams (2011), Adams et al. (2010), Anderson (2009, 2011), Anderson and McGuire (2010), Campbell et al. (2011), Cashmore and Cleland (2012) and Nylund (2007) on sporting subcultures where decreasing homophobia has also been found, this article has provided empirical evidence of a changing cultural context of football fans towards sexuality through the frequent contestation of homophobic posts in online discourse.

Therefore, despite Kian et al. (2011) stating how homophobic posts went uncontested on one American football message board, this was not the case with regards to homophobic posts on British football message boards. In fact, this article has provided empirical evidence that the Internet may help reduce the homophobic accusations leveled at football. Homophobia occurs in some posts – such as reference to ‘disgust’ and ‘threats to a natural family-based culture’ – but, as Butler (1997) has argued, there is always the possibility that these contexts can change. Consequently, the assumption that homophobic language is most prevalent in a homophobic environment does not apply to British football message boards. Instead, the findings suggest that as cultural homophobia decreases further in football, it is the written expression of homophobia, rather than homosexuality that is being increasingly stigmatized by a large number of supporters. Therefore, the findings support Anderson's

(2009) inclusive masculinity theory as the fluidity of masculinity is becoming more accepted within football culture. In fact, other empirical research on football fandom and masculinity (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012) also found that the culture of homophobia is decreasing through the overwhelming support for gay footballers.

In seeking to broaden inclusive masculinity theory out from the focus on young men aged 16-24, message boards are being found to be populated by men of all ages (Clavio, 2008). Thus, the language operating in football message boards demonstrates a change in cultural context from what was reported to exist in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Connell, 1987, 1990; Messner, 1992; Messner and Sabo, 1990; Pronger, 1990) to one of increasing inclusivity (Anderson, 2009, 2011; McCormack, 2011). Similar to what happened with the eradication of overt racism in football from the 1980s, Pringle and Hickey (2010: 115) have argued that there are now a range of techniques of self that individuals use in resisting 'hypermasculine forms of subjection'. This, throughout the history of men and sport, has been 'a complex and specific challenge for many males, particularly given the cultural dominance of sport and its discursive linkages with prevailing forms of masculinities' (Pringle and Hickey, 2010: 116). Rather, through the threads that were analyzed, there are competing discourses outlining a range of masculinities. Indeed, Thorpe reached similar conclusions in her research on masculinities in snowboarding by suggesting that masculinities 'are multiple and dynamic; they differ over space, time, and context, and are rooted in the cultural and social moment' (2010: 202).

Although Kian and Anderson (2009) and Nylund (2004, 2007) have highlighted how print and broadcast media are now encouraging readers, listeners and viewers to engage in more inclusive discussions surrounding sexuality in sport, Internet message boards allow for posts of any nature to be published every minute of every day. Message boards have moderators who oversee each forum and remove certain offensive or litigious posts, but in

the majority of cases it is the fans who challenge each other's views on certain topics. In this way, the anti-homophobia social movement in football continues, and is increasingly being policed by the supporters themselves.

Despite this more inclusive and fluid response towards sexuality in football, at present, Anton Hysén, a semi-professional footballer in Sweden, is the only openly gay footballer playing any form of professional football across the world. Although there is no way of knowing how many closeted gay footballers there are, there remains a perception within football (such as the authorities, clubs, agents and players) that the environment is homophobic and unwelcome. This article has gone some way to challenging this perception, in particular by portraying the views of a significant number of active fans engaging in message boards as inclusive and positive about the presence of gay footballers.

Notes

¹ In 'Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2011', the Office for National Statistics (ONS) stated that 19 million British households had internet access (77 per cent of households), whilst 45 per cent of Internet users (or 17.6 million people) used a mobile phone to connect to the Internet (this was highest in the 16-24 and 25-34 year old age group) compared to only 23 per cent (or 8.5 million people) in 2009. The ONS also stated that 6 million people had accessed the Internet for the first time over the last 12 months through their mobile phone. See <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2011/stb-internet-access-2011.html> (accessed September 2, 2011).

² A registered user on a message board can start a new conversation (or post) by creating a title and writing some text that fellow users can read and respond to. When a post receives responses by other users a 'thread' then develops. A thread usually lasts for 20-25 separate posts before it starts a new page. Each thread is ordered according to the date/time of the post, so the newest posts appear at the end of the thread.

³ Most message boards have moderators who monitor discussions taking place to ensure that each topic area and the language being used does not break the terms and conditions that users had initially accepted in order to be registered on the particular e-zine in the first place.

⁴ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/8513284.stm> (accessed February 13, 2010).

⁵ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/two-top-gay-footballers-stay-in-closet-1845787.html> (accessed December 20, 2009).

⁶ This was the opening paragraph posted on each message board: "I am an academic at Staffordshire University, UK, conducting research on fans' views towards the presence of gay players. This is in response to the Football Association dropping a campaign on homophobia in February 2010 stating that the game was not ready and Max Clifford claiming that 'football is steeped in homophobia'. I want to assess how fans feel about this and I appreciate the time you can give to this subject. Thanks in advance for your thoughts."

⁷ Throughout the research process the ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association were adhered to - see <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/27107/StatementofEthicalPractice.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2010).

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