The Internet as a Site of Decreasing Cultural Homophobia in Association Football: An Online Response by Fans to the Coming Out of Thomas Hitzlsperger

This article analyses 5,128 comments from 35 prominent football fan online message boards located across the United Kingdom and 978 online comments in response to a *Guardian* newspaper article regarding the decision by former German international footballer, Thomas Hitzlsperger, to publicly come out as gay in January 2014. Adopting the theoretical framework of inclusive masculinity theory, the findings demonstrate almost universal inclusivity through the rejection of homophobia and frequent contestation of comments that express orthodox views. From a period of high homophobia during the 1980s and 1990s, just 2 per cent of the 6,106 comments contained pernicious homophobic intent. Rather than allow for covert homophobic hate speech towards those with a different sexual orientation, 98 per cent of the comments illustrate a significant decrease in cultural homophobia than was present when Justin Fashanu came out in 1990.

Keywords: fans; football; homophobia; internet; masculinity; sexuality

Introduction

Justin Fashanu came out as the first openly gay professional footballer in 1990 through an exclusive interview with the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. Fashanu had already attained fame by becoming the first black football player in the world to sign a contract worth at least a million pounds in 1981, despite having played in an era of heightened racism amongst the fans (Cleland and Cashmore 2014). Fashanu, however, faced arguably more bigotry via overt homophobia from fans, the media and even his own team mates after coming out. He later committed suicide due to a combination of factors, including an allegation he had sexually abused a 17-year-old young man in the United States (US).

The circumstances surrounding Fashanu likely had an adverse effect on any gay footballer that thought about coming out. At the time of writing, there are only two known currently active and openly gay male footballers playing any form of professional football, anywhere in the world: Anton Hysén (a lower league semi-professional player in Sweden who came out in 2011) and Robbie Rogers (a player who came out in 2013 and currently plays for LA Galaxy in the US).

Within other male team sports, very few active or even former professional athletes have ever come out publicly. That trend has changed in recent years though, with former

Welsh rugby player, Gareth Thomas, coming out in 2009; a decision that has subsequently been followed by Jason Collins (basketball) and Michael Sam (American football).

This increase, albeit somewhat limited, correlates with an emerging acceptance of homosexuality and gay rights in most Western societies (Weeks 2007). In the context of this article, the greatest change in the annual British Social Attitudes Survey over the past 30 years has been in attitudes towards homosexuality. In 1988, for example, nearly two-thirds of respondents thought homosexuality was wrong, but by 2013, it had decreased to one-fifth (Clements and Field 2014). In fact, the British Social Attitudes Survey was one of 13 social attitudes surveys reviewed by Clements and Field (2014) that reflected wider changes such as the legalization of gay marriage in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2014, adoption rights for same-sex couples in 2002 and the abolition of Section 28 in 2003 (Section 28 was a law introduced in 1988 under the Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher that banned local authorities from promoting homosexuality). Indeed, Section 28 led to the introduction of the organization, Stonewall, in 1989 and it has subsequently become a very successful campaigning and lobbying organization for the LGBT community in the UK.

Nevertheless, since the introduction of the English Premier League in 1992, no past or present footballer had ever come out publicly by the end of 2013. That changed on 8 January 2014, when Thomas Hitzlsperger came out through an interview with the German newspaper, *Die Zeit*. The public revelation by Hitzlsperger, who played professionally for clubs in his native Germany (where he also won 52 caps for the national team) and Italy, in addition to his contracts with three different English Premier League clubs, quickly became a major news story.

Previous research has examined fans' views towards gay footballers (Cashmore and Cleland 2011, 2012; Cleland 2015), but no large-scale research has been conducted on the online reaction to an openly gay footballer. Thus, the coming out of Hitzlsperger became the

focus for this article: now that a high-profile, albeit retired, player has come out, what is the reaction to this across a wide range of online football message boards and comment sections within particular national newspapers? Does it reflect the assumption that there exists a resentment and continued stigma towards homosexuality in football; or does the discourse provide further inclusive evidence of a changing cultural context that is reflective of decreasing homophobia?

Through the collection of 5,128 comments from 35 football message boards across the UK and 978 comments submitted in response to an article published online by the *Guardian* national newspaper[1] (Christenson 2014)[2], in this article we provide evidence of a more permissive and inclusive culture towards homosexuality with regards to the language used on online platforms. Adopting the theoretical framework of inclusive masculinity theory (Anderson 2009), we show how homophobic language is almost non-existent in an online environment that provides an opportunity to capture personal narratives offering explanations of personal and social change. Although there is an assumption that hate speech has moved to more covert platforms provided by the internet (Foxman and Wolf 2013), only 2 per cent of the 6,106 comments contained pernicious homophobic intent. Rather than being used to spread vicious hate against those with a different sexual orientation, the comments contain almost universal inclusivity through the rejection of homophobia and contestation of those that contain orthodox views.

A History of Football and Heteromasculinity

Heavily linked to the industrial working-class during the late nineteenth century, the growth of clubs and competitive football all over the world meant that the game became a significant feature in the lives of millions of boys and men (Dunning 1999). Through the physical labor requirements of the changing industrial landscape, boys and men admired footballers for their own demonstration of power, strength, bravery and skill on the playing field. According to

Kimmel (1994), the social and personal focus on demonstrating an acceptable form of masculinity led to it also becoming synonymous with sexism and homophobia.

The relationship between sexuality and male team sports became a prominent feature of sociological analysis from the 1980s through the continued maintenance of a socially desired gendered identity and presentation of the male sporting body as an 'idealised, orthodox, heterosexual sign' (Polley 1998: 109). This was a period which included the moral panic surrounding HIV/AIDS and led Anderson (2009: 7-8) to refer to it as one of 'homohysteria' (the cultural fear by boys and men of being thought to be homosexual) that incorporated three variables: (1) an awareness of homosexuality as a sexual orientation; (2) cultural disapproval of homosexuality and its association with femininity; and (3) the public presentation by boys and men of their heterosexuality to avoid homosexual suspicion.

Conceptualizing gender power relations during the 1980s, Connell's (1987) hegemonic masculinity theory developed into the most prolific means of theorizing the maintenance of patriarchy as well as the existence of an intra-masculine hierarchical structure incorporating multiple forms of masculinity: hegemonic, complicit, marginalized and subordinated. To improve their position, Connell suggested that boys and men aspired to one hegemonic archetype, and those that were successful in engaging in violence, homophobia and sexism were rewarded with the most social capital. Exhibiting subordinated masculinities, gay men were placed at the bottom of this hierarchy, victims of homophobia from those atop (Anderson 2014). Accordingly, hyper-masculinity became compulsory, with homophobia a powerful weapon that policed men's gendered behaviors and stratified and marginalized those that did not conform (Anderson 2009).

Hegemonic masculinity was thought to be present throughout nearly all male team sports regardless of the level or age of competitors, with Connell (1990) suggesting how football, based on its industrial working-class history, portrayed it amongst the players,

managers, coaches, media and fans. Summarizing male sport, Messner (1992: 34) wrote, 'The extent of homophobia in the sport world is staggering. Boys (in sport) learn early that to be gay, to be suspected of being gay, or even to be unable to prove one's heterosexual status is not acceptable'. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, however, there has been a growing body of theoretical, conceptual and empirical gender scholars who are highlighting a changing context towards homophobia, masculinity and sexuality in different subcultures within football (Adams et al. 2010; Cashmore and Cleland 2011, 2012; Cleland 2014, 2015; Magrath et al. 2013) and sport more widely (Anderson 2009, 2011, 2014; Thorpe 2010).

In reflecting on his own empirical findings based on young men aged 16-24, Anderson (2009) devised inclusive masculinity theory to argue that hegemonic masculinity theory did not adequately explain changes in male sporting environments in the twenty-first century where there is evidence of decreasing homohysteria. Demonstrating how the hegemonic form of conservative masculinity had lost its dominance as a social process, Anderson found multiple masculinities existing without any hierarchical arrangement in cultures with low homohysteria where homophobia, stoicism and sexism are rejected and no longer regulated the gendered behavior of boys and men. Instead, masculinities were becoming more fluid with many gender roles existing in different cultures where the behaviors that once would have led to homosexual suspicion (such as hugging and kissing), no longer viewed as a threat to heterosexual identity.

Anderson (2009) argued that there remain men who seek to retain 'masculine capital' by expressing traditionally orthodox views (that combine homophobia, heterosexuality and hypermasculinity), but they were no longer hegemonic and could co-exist with inclusive masculinity as gendered power becomes more evenly distributed, regardless of sexuality. This cultural change, according to Anderson (2011), was due to a range of influences including: the growth and consumption of the internet, the ever expanding and influential

media, decreasing cultural religiosity, the rise and success of feminism, the prominence and political success of LGBT members, and the influence of out gay men and lesbians.

A key tenet of inclusive masculinity theory is the use of language. At a time when hegemonic masculinity theory had social and cultural significance, Messner (1992) argued that the prevalence of homophobic language in sporting settings policed the gendered behaviors of boys and men. Indeed, this was reflected in football fan culture with Giulianotti (1999: 155) outlining how supporters had traditionally used 'idioms of masculine identity through an uncomplicated public emasculation or feminization of the 'others' (such as opposing players, supporters, match officials). Supporters aim epithets such as 'poofter', 'fanny' and 'nonce' at the allegedly weak masculinity of players and officials.'

In the twenty-first century, there has been an increasing focus on the use of language (Harvey 2012; McCormack 2011), with McCormack and Anderson (2010) outlining how the centralization of context in the meaning and effect of language has become increasingly important in interpreting the extent of homophobic intent. Rather than a simplistic analysis of whether language is homophobic or not (including the possibility of exaggeration based on the culture in which it is expressed), McCormack (2011: 673-675) developed a new four-stage model to understand homosexually-themed language that should be placed in the setting in which it is being used (i.e. low or high homohysteria): 'homophobic language' (where it has pernicious intent and a negative social effect in trying to degrade or marginalize a person or behavior through an association with homosexuality); 'fag discourse' (where it has a wide range of intent but has a less negative social effect); 'gay discourse' (where it has no intent either way but privileges heterosexuality); and 'pro-gay language' (where it has a positive social effect and is more inclusive towards sexuality). Thus, in a high homohysteric setting, homophobic language continues to regulate gendered behaviors, with Thurlow (2001) stating that these settings contain the frequent use of 'intensifiers' (additional words to a phrase that

are intended to degrade or wound an individual or group, such as 'you *fucking* queer') than any other form of insult.

The work of Butler (1997) on the effect of speech remains a feature of contemporary research. Although message boards and comments sections of the media were not a prominent feature of discourse analysis in the 1990s, Butler's work on the 'gap' between the intention of the speaker and its effect of the recipient does have clear resonance with an analysis of online communication. For example, in inclusive cultures, there should be evidence of the declining significance of pernicious homophobic language, but given the assumption raised by McCormack (2011) that homophobic language and attitudes operate within a homophobic environment, the coming out of Hitzlsperger allowed for an analysis of contemporary football fan culture given that players have traditionally remained closeted and sexual minorities have been marginalized through homophobic discourse amongst boys and men to promote their own masculine capital and heterosexual identity.

The Media and Masculinity

Historically, the media presented masculine traits and avoided any debates concerning a shift in masculinity, as well as a wider discussion of sexuality in football or in sport more generally. Thus, many scholars concluded that the media have long upheld Connell's (1987) notion of hegemonic masculinity in sport.

In describing his decision to come out publicly, Hitzlsperger told Sean Gallagher of the *Mail* Online (8 September 2014) how 'it would have been impossible had I still been playing – not because of the fans or the other players, but because of the media'. Despite these views, research has started to show how sport media are contributing towards a cultural change in the ways in which they discuss masculinity and sexuality (Cleland 2014; Kian and Anderson 2009). At the heart of this is David Beckham and how the shift towards the look

and appearance of men has led to a resistance to the traditional hegemonic value of male team sports that have long been associated with working-class masculinity (Vincent et al. 2009).

Reflecting on the coming out of Swedish semi-professional footballer, Anton Hysén, in March 2011 via an interview with the Swedish football magazine, *Offside*, Cleland (2014) analyzed the print media's reaction to this over a one-month period and found evidence of widespread inclusivity. Comparing this with 1990, and the environment facing Justin Fashanu, he illustrated within each article how there was a decline in the reporting of traditional hegemonic masculinity through a consistent narrative that presented homophobia in a negative light.

Outside of the print media, the availability of the internet (particularly through remote access on devices such as mobile phones and tablets) has transformed daily life for millions of people through the opportunities it has created for interconnectivity, social networking, consumption, dissemination, resistance and community-building (Bargh and McKenna 2004). Within football, the introduction of unofficial websites and message boards have provided fans with an opportunity to engage in synchronous (debate and respond to posts in real-time - like a conversation) and asynchronous communication (outside of real-time) with fellow fans at any time of the day.

As a public platform, football message boards can be viewed by anyone, but a large number require registration to take place before any user can post or respond to messages within a number of different sections (including 'first-team', 'other football' or 'off-topic'). In the vast majority of cases, pseudonyms are used to protect anonymity and only the website moderators would know the actual details of a registered user (notwithstanding the potential to also falsify personal details). Given the anonymity afforded by social media platforms (including sites like Twitter), not surprisingly, they are increasingly being used by a minority of people as a platform for hate speech. For football message boards, however, it has become

a common feature to find registered users effectively self-policing these sites where discriminatory discourse is often challenged, dismissed or resisted (Cleland 2015).

Whereas sports message boards in the UK and US have been utilized for research purposes (Clavio 2008; Millward 2008), very few have actually looked at the discourse surrounding sexuality for evidence of homophobia (Cleland, 2015; Kian et al., 2011). In fact, both of these studies found significant differences in the discourse on fan message boards. For example, in their analysis of homophobic language on one American football fan message board (rivals.com), Kian et al. explain that despite the prevalence of homophobia, it went largely uncontested, and led them to state how the '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' (p. 694). On the other hand, in his analysis of over 3,000 anonymous posts on 48 football message boards from across the UK on fans' views towards the presence of a gay footballer, Cleland found that despite the presence of heteronormativity and orthodox views, posts deemed to contain pernicious homophobic intent were rejected by the vast majority of posters who demonstrated inclusive discourse and support for any gay player. Given that Cleland's research was based on a hypothetical situation, the focus of this article on the online reaction to the coming out of a high-profile footballer like Hitzlsperger provided a new dimension to sociological research as it allowed for a large-scale analysis of the extent of homophobic language amongst boys and men on a real-life case study.

Method

The introduction of football message boards has provided a number of opportunities for researchers to unobtrusively observe, record and analyze the synchronous and asynchronous discourse taking place between posters. However, as identified by Griggs (2011), this also poses a number of ethical issues concerning potential harm, consent, privacy, and deception

that researchers have to address. The lead author, in his previous research on online platforms, has always referred to the guidelines expressed within 'The Association of Internet Researchers' about the ethical practice of conducting research in online environments. As a consequence, he has built up extensive relationships with over 150 editors of football message boards who allow him to conduct research via their platforms, by posting messages that explicitly state how it is for academic purposes.

Despite reacting immediately to the news of Hitzlsperger coming out, a debate had already started on a number of message boards. To maintain methodological consistency, only those message boards where the lead author initiated the debate were analyzed for this article.[3] Within those football message boards that were yet to debate it, every opening post avoided identity deception as it allowed the message board user to voluntarily consent in providing an opinion on the decision taken by Hitzlsperger. For the purposes of this study, no personal details surrounding gender, age, ethnicity and occupational status were collected as the intention was to make the opening post and allow the thread to flow naturally in its own right.[4] Furthermore, no contact was made with any contributor in the private message facility that is often available on football message boards where two registered members can exchange personal communication outside of the observation of other forum users.

The research was conducted from 8 January 2014 (the day Hitzlsperger came out) to 15 January 2014. Reflecting the status of Hitzlsperger as a high-profile footballer, 5,128 comments were collected from 35 prominent football message boards from across the UK as well as 978 comments from one *Guardian* article published online on 8 January (Christenson 2014). The *Guardian* was chosen as it had the highest number of comments from readers in comparison to other broadsheet newspapers (the *Independent* had 35 comments on its lead article whilst the *Daily Telegraph* had no facility for comments on its lead article). Both the *Guardian* and message boards also attract different contributors (more general readers for the

Guardian with an interest in wider current affairs compared to fans who engage with other registered users on message boards through a shared interest in a specific club).

In any research that is conducted online, it is impossible to know if the individual commenting on a topic like Hitzlsperger and referencing the wider culture of football is male and heterosexual. The sexuality of users is not prominent in those studies that have examined this area, but in his population analysis of 14 American college sport message boards, Clavio (2008) found that 88 percent were male, whereas in their analysis of fantasy sport users (again in the US), Ruihley and Hardin (2011) found that 93.5 percent were male. Indeed, the lead author has found that where a particular research focus in online football fan networks allows for the collection of information regarding the gender of participants (such as through an online survey where this information is volunteered), the number of men have ranged from 83 per cent to 92 per cent (Cashmore and Cleland 2012; Cleland and Cashmore 2015, 2016). In terms of age demographics, Clavio (2008) also found that 77 per cent were at least 30 years old, with 25 per cent aged 50 or over.

Despite the anonymity used within each message board, Millward (2008) and Clavio (2008) also refer to how some posters actually know each other and this subsequently could encourage posters to lie or 'perform' their true feelings that may not be present in their everyday life outside of this online community. Indeed, despite the use of pseudonyms, there is evidence that some contributors to message boards do know each other and those that are deemed to have an elevated status (often through the number of comments they make) could potentially influence the direction of the discussion that takes place. Therefore, in any methodological process of self-selection, we are cautious in claiming that these views are representative of all fans supporting teams based in the UK (such as those who do not own a computer, tablet or mobile phone or those who just choose not to engage in online discourse),

but given the amount of comments collected, it does provides a significant analysis of fans communicating online.

After the research period had ended, the authors initially examined the raw data independently to minimize subjectivity and aid the validity and reliability of the data analysis process. Each comment was inductively analyzed through open coding and initially placed into a range of first order themes to separate different meanings within the data and begin reducing large data sets into appropriate conceptual categories that are valid and mutually exclusive (Bryman 2012). Once this initial theming had been completed and the range of themes had been reduced over a number of phases, selective attention was then given to the emergence of dominant patterns, commonalities and differences within the comments. When this had been completed, the authors worked together in a collaborative process of interpretation and verification that eventually led to the emergence of three recurring themes: (1) decreasing cultural homophobia; (2) a condemnation of online homophobia; (3) the use of homophobic language to negatively portray opposition players and fans. Whereas this type of research is subjective and interpretive by nature, the use of multiple coders and multiple levels of coding added more validity to our results (Vincent and Crossman 2007).

In analyzing the comments, as each fan uses a unique pseudonym, it was easy to trace if they only made one contribution to the topic or contributed at different points to the virtual conversation. Every person that contributed was given a number depending on where their first comment was located and this number remained even if they made multiple contributions. For the purposes of the analysis that follows, the identifier will be the club and the number (such as Everton fan 3, Everton fan 75, *Guardian* contributor 100). Whilst recognizing the potential of harm to those participants whose discourse has been quoted directly, through this method we concur with Griggs (2011) that anonymity has been

protected as far as possible given that the discourse is freely available on a publicly available platform.

Although examples of virtual conversations and individual comments will form the basis of the analysis section for illustrative purposes, the overall aim is to provide a representative overview of the discourse taking place across the 35 message boards and *Guardian* newspaper comments section. Examples used from the data will be presented exactly as they appeared, including grammatical mistakes, misspelled words and profanity. However, parentheses were used by researchers to add clarity for readers in some cases, with the content in parentheses not included in the original comment unless otherwise noted.

Decreasing Cultural Homophobia

Reinforcing the findings by Anderson (2009, 2014) that there are subcultures within male sporting environments demonstrating a decrease in cultural homophobia, there were hundreds of individual 'well done', 'fair play' and 'good for him' types of short comments that supported the decision by Hitzlsperger to come out. Many of these were even more thoughtful, such as this by Aston Villa fan 102: 'Unless these prejudices are challenged they live on. His gesture is significant, as was Robbie Rogers, because they provoke thought and discussion. Top bloke'. Contextualizing examples of inclusivity like this, a number of comments referred to the culture of football at the time when Justin Fashanu came out, such as this response to the *Guardian* article (just three are highlighted below but 72 people contributed to this one virtual debate on its own):

Guardian contributor 133: Well done, but let us not forget Justin Fashanu.

Guardian contributor 165: His brother [John, also a professional footballer at the time, publicly disowned Justin when he came out] is a fucking disgrace and should never be on TV again. A tragic story and John doesn't have the human decency to accept his brother in death.

Guardian contributor 197: If John Fashanu struggled with homophobia, it is because it was socialised within a culture in which the logic of heteronormativity or hetero-

supremacy is internalised – to some extent – by all of us, including homosexual people.

Across the message boards, a number of fans made similar references to those of *Guardian* contributor 197 with regards to their own experiences of the 'socialised' and 'heteronormative' culture of football when Justin Fashanu came out. However, a number of fans shared how their experience had also changed since 1990, as highlighted in this Everton message board discussion:

> Everton fan 85: When opposition fans are grabbing every opportunity to wind players up, giving them such an obvious target would be suicidal.

> Everton fan 89: I disagree. No-one gives a shit. At the risk of suggesting Everton fans are no more or less tolerant than any other set of fans, I would say this country is far more tolerant and progressive than many others so that's obviously an issue that needs addressing.

> Everton fan 121: I have read through this thread and there is not one 'shit-shovelling poofta' comment. Hard to deny, therefore, that we have quickly moved on as a sub-culture from the 1990s and what Justin Fashanu faced.

Reference to the decline of cultural homophobia through examples like this is important because it indicates a changing context professional male football in the UK is operating within. It also reflects the wider findings from Weeks (2007) and the British Social Attitudes Survey that have illustrated a significant shift in attitudes towards homosexuality since the 1980s (see Clements and Field 2014). This was also present in a number of other reflective comments, such as these two Aston Villa fans who both stressed their changing approach towards sexuality given some personal experiences:

> Aston Villa fan 196: The conversation on here a few years ago made me think long and hard about my opinions and I realised the error of my former ways. It was quite weird, just after that thread, my favourite cousin 'came out' and it made me realise what a wanker I had been. I was wrong.

> Aston Villa fan 200: I was in a similar position about 10 years ago. Yes I laughed and joked about all the homosexual innuendos out there. It was only when one of my colleagues at work declared that he was gay I realised my shameful state of mind and attitude. I went through a cleansing process that made me hopefully a better human being.

Although there were many examples of a shift in attitudes, orthodox views remain. These include the FIFA president, Sepp Blatter, whom, in 2010, warned travelling gay fans to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar (where homosexuality is illegal) to 'refrain from any sexual activities',[5] while the president of Croatian football, Vlato Markovic, in 2010, stated that no gay players would represent his country as 'only healthy people play football'.[6] Heteronormative views have also been expressed by former German captain, Philipp Lahm, whom, in 2012, suggested how 'the football community is not ready to accept homosexuality as a normality'.[7]

Despite views like this, only 2 per cent of the total number of comments across the message boards and the *Guardian* comments section contained pernicious homophobic intent. In fact, a primary difference between the results of this study and those presented by Cleland (2015) is that a number of orthodox views received very little recognition from fellow contributors, including this comment by Aston Villa fan 85 that the other 225 contributors on this particular thread did not engage with:

> What an abomination! I can't believe it and I must admit I am really sickened by this news. We will be the laughing stock of football once again. I thought he was one of the lads. A real man's man. Why did he hide this revolting news from us for all this time? I am gutted this has come out and that all along he was covering it up and pretending be was something he was not. It disgusts me. Bloody freak of nature.

Condemning Online Homophobia

Typically, homophobic language is simplified into being merely homophobic or non-homophobic, often leading to exaggerated perceptions of homophobia. However, as argued by Thurlow (2001), a feature of online homophobic language like that above by Aston Villa fan 85 is the pernicious intent to degrade or marginalize a person or persons through association with homosexuality. On some sites, such as the virtual conversation taken from a Leeds United message board, comments of this nature were challenged, often by more than one contributor:

Leeds United fan 119: It will never be the same. It's different. It should not be encouraged through legislation. The terms wife and husband are now NOT gender exclusive to appease the gay community.

Leeds United fan 121: I would place a fair bet that humans were engaging in homosexual activity way before the origin of language, let alone the terms 'wife' and 'husband'.

Leeds United fan 122: The current obsession with gays will only stop once close-minded individuals like yourself realise that homosexuality is absolutely natural and nothing one can "cure". Even the good old "no procreation" card is useless as there are millions of heterosexual people who cannot have children.

Leeds United fan 119: You want to encourage gays? That is your choice. My choice is to disagree with the redefining of the terms 'husband' and 'wife'.

Leeds United fan 122: How does this meaningless decision have any impact of you, your family or the universe?

Leeds United fan 119: I disagree with this redefining and abolition of thousands of years of history.

Leeds United fan 122: Same history that contains slavery, genocide etc.?

For some fans, homophobic intent remains an important component of their everyday language and the introduction of the internet has provided other opportunities where these views can be expressed (Kian et al. 2011). As well as those raised above, there were other examples that illustrated how some fans are prone to a homophobic outburst, where for a minority of other fans (such as Aston Villa fan 85), a deep dislike of homosexuality exists. Attempting to address discourse of this nature, the Crown Prosecution Service and Association of Chief Police Officers in the UK announced in 2013 that they were going to target abuse and hate speech communicated via computers, smartphones or other non-verbal means (BBC News 2013). Perhaps this was one reason why a moderator (referred for the purposes of this article as West Ham United fan 66) felt the need to remind contributors of the rules on a West Ham United message board:

It is a shame that I have to, but may I take this opportunity to remind all members that homophobia, like racism, is prohibited on this forum and anyone responsible for posting homophobic comments will have their membership instantly revoked.

Although moderators oversee the discourse taking place on online platforms, a feature of football message boards raised by Cleland (2015) is the self-policing by contributors where homophobic intent is challenged through discourse that demonstrates inclusivity by rejecting homophobia. In his analysis of how members self-police message boards, Millward (2008) found that two possible outcomes emerge from comments that are deemed to fall outside of the normal rules of discourse: (1) comments are reinterpreted to create a group consensus and (2) unwelcome comments can be challenged, criticized, mocked and even shunned by the majority of other posters. Indeed, an interesting challenge to West Ham United fan 66 came almost immediately from West Ham United fan 71 that then led to further challenges from other contributors to the debate:

> West Ham United fan 71: Surely no need for the warning. As enlightened members of our liberal society I am sure we are all perfectly comfortable with the image of two big hairy fellas sticking their todgers up each other's arses…I do not give a stuff about anyone's homosexuality but I do not much like the way that society has moved against anyone who dares to hold a contrary view, and how people are frightened to say what they might really think as they might be vilified or even jailed. Education is better than repression. P.S. Is it still OK to condemn bestiality, incest, necrophilia or pedophilia?

> West Ham United fan 83: Seriously? Think about what you have just said. You are comparing two consenting adults to pedophilia (rape), bestiality (rape), necrophilia (rape). You are right, education is better than repression but does that mean we have to tolerate bigotry?

> West Ham United fan 71: Personally I will put up with a bit of bigotry in exchange for freedom of speech. I am of an age where both were in no short supply. As for the comparison, it was half in jest. I was simply making the point that some innate and involuntary aberrations are treated more sympathetically than others.

Despite the majority of the 6,106 comments reflecting a changing cultural context within professional male football, there were also some comments like those above that could be interpreted as either 'fag discourse' or 'gay discourse' (McCormack 2011). The last comment by West Ham United fan 71, for example, highlighted a sense of bravado within his or her earlier orthodox comment that when challenged forced him or her to clarify their position on this issue. According to Millward (2008), examples like this illustrate how some people can

'perform' in front of other members, particularly if they know each other (despite there being limited evidence within orthodox comments that this existed). In comments of this nature that are constructed by men, a practice of exaggerated hypermasculinity can occur as message boards allow for boys and men to engage in discourse that creates an opportunity to raise their masculine capital through the protection of anonymity.

Homophobic Language in a Wider Football Context

Although research on football, masculinity and sexuality suggests a contextual shift towards one of inclusivity, the culture of football remains a place where antagonistic language is used to negatively portray opposition players and fans. Despite finding that 93 per cent of their 3,500 sample of fans, players and coaches from 35 countries across the world would accept a gay player, Cashmore and Cleland (2011), for example, also raises the paradoxical situation where some of these fans also felt it necessary to barrack opposition players with homophobic epithets to try and exploit a weakness in their game. This, they argued, reinforced their own heterosexuality by not only questioning the gender behavior of opposition players, but in some cases those of opposition supporters (such as the homophobic abuse directed at fans of Brighton and Hove Albion because of the stereotype that it is the gay capital of England).

In his analysis of homosexually-themed language, McCormack (2011) stresses the need for its context and meaning to be centralized when interpreting the extent of homophobic intent and its affect. Football creates a unique context in which homophobic language has been used as part of 'normal' everyday practice, yet this is now recognized and discouraged by more enlightened fans. Examples of this occurred on numerous message boards, including this virtual conversation amongst Brighton and Hove Albion fans:

> Brighton and Hove Albion fan 85: Away from the pitch, we are usually a reasonable bunch. But when you throw in tribal rivalries, heat of the battle and the 'banter' will flow. It would be naive to say it won't cross the line, where many of the types of

people who would react as the people reacting reasonably on here would find themselves joining in, getting caught up in the moment and not stopping to think how appropriate their chants are.

Brighton and Hove Albion fan 94: Some areas of the crowd are too easily led by one Neanderthal loudmouth and a reasonable percentage who have not escaped from the schoolyard to recognise the limits of acceptability that some of the more mature of us might have.

Brighton and Hove Albion fan 102: Of course you would get the old troglodyte, determined to share his hilarious banter with the rest of the crowd, but I genuinely believe in this day and age most people are a bit more civilised and would realise what a step that player had taken to get to that position.

An interesting aspect of threads like this was the reaction to homophobia that positioned those fans looking to engage in homophobic behavior at matches in a negative light. Reflections on the 'civilised' and 'mature' nature of modern football fans suggested by Brighton and Hove Albion fans 94 and 102 supports the findings of Cashmore and Cleland (2012) that highlight a more gentrified and enlightened crowd watching professional matches. However, fans are also reflective that whilst they are experiencing a cultural change, reference to 'tribal rivalry', 'heat of the battle' and 'pack mentality' outline how social capital remains an important element for those who continue to engage in either overt or covert homophobic language.

Discussion

In addressing the research questions outlined in the introduction, the response to the coming out of Hitzlsperger provided further support to research that is also finding decreasing levels of cultural homophobia across football (Adams et al. 2010; Cashmore and Cleland 2011, 2012; Cleland 2014, 2015; Magrath et al. 2013). Through its focus on 6,106 comments, the findings illustrate how men engaging in football message boards and comments sections of national newspapers no longer need to construct their own masculinity by opposing homosexuality through the use of homophobic language.

As a consequence, arguments that the internet has allowed for anonymous hate speech to flourish (Foxman and Wolf 2013), are misplaced as only 2 per cent of the comments contained pernicious homophobic intent. Instead, we suggest that heterosexual men are becoming less obsessed by historic definitions of masculinity and, instead, are using the internet to present more inclusive forms of masculinity and sexuality. Indeed, the wholesale changes we see with regards to attitudes towards homosexuality among young, straight British men in recent years (McCormack 2014) are more than just men acting in politically correct ways. The attitudinal change is genuine and exists amongst a greater age demographic of boys and men. Even when given the opportunity to speak disparagingly about gay men, 98 per cent of the comments did not.

For those fans that continue to express homophobic views, the culture of football is changing. Rather than gain power through the use of language with homophobic intent, it is actually homophobia that is stigmatized by the vast majority of fans who effectively self-police those views that fall outside of the collective online majority. Concurring with the arguments put forward by Cleland (2015), as decreasing homophobia is increasingly being found in the culture of football, this has had a positive impact on the attitudes of heterosexual boys and men, particularly on the internet.

While widely adopted, inclusive masculinity theory has also been critiqued for its focus on male peer groups at the expense of women's group dynamics and what this means for the reproduction of patriarchy (O'Neill 2015; Roberts 2014). This is an important issue: Anderson (2014) has clarified that he used the term 'inclusive' to describe behaviors toward gay men because the exclusion of gay men had been central to hierarchies of masculinity previously (see Kimmel 1994). O'Neill's critique of inclusive masculinity theory is thus a useful reminder that the question of how the softening of masculinities relates to issues of gender inequality has remained largely unexamined (although, see Anderson 2005;

Blanchard, McCormack and Peterson 2015 for data on this issue). Given that the focus of our study is on male group dynamics further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of our data.

Similarly, there remain interesting questions of how straight men interact with gay men in the workplace (Rumens 2011), yet the presence of inclusive masculinities on internet forums related to organized team sport is nonetheless a significant finding. For example, the culture of football is often perceived as one that has remained traditionally heteronormative and homophobic, but the findings reflect Thorpe's (2010: 202) analysis of snowboarding when she states masculinities 'are multiple and dynamic; they differ over space, time, and context, and are rooted in the cultural and social moment'. In later writing, even Connell (2012) now refers to a more expressive, egalitarian and peaceable form of 'modern' masculinity. Thus, the findings challenge Plummer's (2006: 122) analysis of sport, where he argues that 'homophobia is deeply implicated in the gender order and its influence on contemporary masculinities and male identity is comprehensive'.

Despite the large number of posts collected, this article only examined the online discourse on one high-profile gay ex-footballer coming out from sites based in the UK. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized globally, especially outside of Western societies, where cultural acceptance of gays and lesbians significantly lags behind those in the UK (Pew Research Center 2013). As Plummer (2014) has illustrated, examples of declining homophobia in a variety of cultural settings is not an inevitable consequence of modern society.

Although he played much of his professional career in the English Premier League, it is also unknown how Hitzlsperger's German nationality influenced content posted in the comments. Would the mostly English posters have been more supportive or critical of an openly gay athlete coming out who they identified as one of their own? This is unknown,

especially in light of the long and contentious football rivalry between England and Germany (Giulianotti 1999).

The openness of the lead author on the message boards could also be a reason why a moderator intervened on a West Ham United message board, although there was no way of knowing if this was the case. Further, even though 6,106 comments were analyzed, it makes no claim to be representative of all fans, particularly as a significant number do not engage in virtual discussions on football-related matters. Thus, the article also makes no claim that homophobia has been eradicated as a vocal minority remain, both online and within football stadia. Indeed, as suggested by Bridges (2014: 79), the move of male supporters toward 'inclusivity' might be interpreted in multiple ways, and 'does not necessarily indicate declining levels of gender and sexual inequality'. As raised earlier, one Championship club in England that suffers from consistent homophobic abuse is Brighton and Hove Albion. During the 2012-13 season, for example, Brighton and Hove Albion fans and the Gay Footballers Supporters Network compiled a dossier that highlighted how they had suffered homophobic abuse in over half of matches during the season (BBC Sport 2013).

What this and some of the examples used in this article illustrate is that a minority of fans continue to exhibit a form of 'cultural lag' towards homophonic language that occurs when 'one of two parts of culture which are correlated, changes before or in greater degree than the other part does, thereby causing less adjustment between the two parts that existed previously' (Ogburn 1957: 167). Despite fans defending this as good-natured, the use of language that could be construed as homophobic strengthens the claim that football remains an unwelcome environment for a gay player.

Whereas the findings do not suggest that football message boards and comments sections of national newspapers contain complete pro-gay language (i.e. a near-total absence of homohysteric discourse), the vast majority of comments referring to Hitzlsperger

demonstrate the changing nature of homophobic language through condemnation, contestation, resistance and reflection. Therefore, the assumption might remain that the culture of football and particularly the fans are homophobic, but the reality is different. It will obviously be a bigger news story when an active player comes out in a major European professional football league. As societal attitudes continue to move towards more inclusivity on sexual minorities, any decision like Hitzlsperger's will provide a much-needed opportunity for further scholarship in this area.

Acknowledgements

---

[1] The *Guardian* is a center-left newspaper with 180,000 daily print sales in October 2014. In 2013, it was reported how the *Guardian* News and Media's website (guardian.com) had nearly 79 million monthly browsers (Reynolds, 2013).

[2] See: http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/jan/08/thomas-hitzlsperger-gay-announces-homosexual

[3] The opening post simply stated: "I am an academic at a UK-based university and I am interested to hear your thoughts on the decision by Thomas Hitzlsperger to come out as gay for research purposes – see http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/25628806"

[4] When a post receives responses by other users a 'thread' then develops detailing the virtual conversation. Each thread is ordered according to the date/time of the post, so the newest posts appear at the end of the thread.

[5] See: http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/9284186.stm

[6] See: http://www.theguardian.com/football/2010/nov/14/gay-backlash-croatia-football-chief

[7] See: http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2012/01/20/the-comments-from-germany-captain-phillipp-lahm-purport-homophobia/

References

Adams, Adi, Eric Anderson, and Mark McCormack. 2010. "Establishing and challenging masculinity: The influence of gendered discourses in football (soccer)." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 29:278–300.

Anderson, Eric. 2005. "Orthodox and inclusive masculinity: Competing masculinities among heterosexual men in a feminized terrain." *Sociological Perspectives* 48:337-55.

Anderson, Eric. 2009. *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*. New York: Routledge.

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

Anderson, Eric. 2014. *21st Century Jocks: Sporting Men and Contemporary Heterosexuality*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Bargh, John, and Katelyn McKenna. 2004 "The internet and social life." *Annual Review of Psychology* 55:573-590.

BBC News. 2013. "Online football abuse targeted by police." 23 August. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23796712 (accessed 23 August 2013).

BBC Sport. 2013. "Brighton fans report homophobic abuse to the FA. 2 April." Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/0/football/21988433 (accessed 2 April 2013).

Blanchard, Callum, Mark McCormack, and Grant Peterson. 2015. "Inclusive masculinities in a working-class sixth form in northeast England". *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, OnlineFirst. Available at:
http://jce.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/10/12/0891241615610381.full.pdf+html

Bridges, Tristan. 2014. "A very "gay" straight? Hybrid masculinities, sexual aesthetics, and the changing relationship between masculinity and homophobia." *Gender & Society* 28:58-82.

Bryman, Alan. 2012. *Social Research Methods* (4th Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech*: *A Politics of the Performative*. London: Routledge.

Cashmore, Ellis, and Jamie Cleland. 2011. "Glasswing butterflies: Gay professional football players and their culture." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 35:420-436.

Cashmore, Ellis, and Jamie Cleland. 2012. "Fans, homophobia and masculinities in association football: Evidence of a more inclusive environment." *The British Journal of Sociology* 63:370-387.

Christenson, Marcus. 2014. "Thomas Hitzlsperger announces he is gay in newspaper interview." 8 January. Available at:
http://www.theguardian.com/football/2014/jan/08/thomas-hitzlsperger-gay-announces-homosexual (accessed 8 January 2014).

Clavio, Galen. 2008. "Demographics and usage profiles of users of college sport message boards." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 1:434-443.

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

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

Cleland, Jamie, and Ellis Cashmore. 2016. "Football fans' views of racism in British football." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 51:27-43.

Cleland, Jamie, and Ellis Cashmore. 2015. "Football fans' views of violence in British football: Evidence of a sanitised and gentrified culture." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 40:124-142.

Cleland, Jamie, and Ellis Cashmore. 2014. "Fans, racism and British football in the 21st century: The existence of a colour-blind ideology." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40:638-654.

Clements, Ben, and Clive Field. 2014. "Public opinion toward homosexuality and gay rights in Great Britain." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 78:523-547.

Connell, Raewyn. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Connell, Raewyn. 1990. "An iron man: The body and some contradictions of hegemonic masculinity." In *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, edited by M. Messner and D. Sabo, 83-95. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Connell, Raewyn. 2012. "Masculinity research and social change". *Masculinities and Social Change* 1:4-18.

de Boise, Sam. 2015. "I'm not homophobic, "I've got gay friends": Evaluating the validity of inclusive masculinity." *Men and Masculinities* 18:318-339.

Dunning, Eric. 1999. *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence and Civilization*. London: Routledge.

Foxman, Abe, and Christopher Wolf. 2013. *Viral Hate: Containing its Spread on the Internet*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gallagher, Sean. 2014. "Thomas Hitzlsperger: It would have been impossible for me to come out as gay when I was a player due to all the attention." 8 September. Available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-2747813/Thomas-Hitzlsperger-It-impossible-come-gay-I-player-attention.html (accessed 8 September 2014).

Giulianotti, Richard. 1999. *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Griggs, Gerald. 2011. "Ethnographic study of alternative sports by alternative means: List mining as a method of data collection." *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics* 6:85-91.

Harvey, Andy. 2012. "Regulating homophobic hate speech: Back to basics about language and politics?" *Sexualities* 15:191-206.

Kian, Edward, and Eric Anderson. 2009. "John Amaechi: Changing the way sport reporters examine gay athletes." *Journal of Homosexuality* 56:799-818.

Kian, Edward, Galen Clavio, John Vincent, and Stephanie Shaw. 2011. "Homophobic and sexist yet uncontested: Examining football fan postings on internet message boards." *Journal of Homosexuality* 58:680–699.

Kimmel, Michael. 1994. "Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame and silence in the construction of gender identity." In *Theorising Masculinities*, edited by H. Brod and M. Kaufman, 119-141. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Magrath, Rory, Eric Anderson, and Steven Roberts. 2013. "On the doorstep of equality: Attitudes toward gay athletes among academy-level footballers." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, OnlineFirst. Available at: http://irs.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/07/26/1012690213495747.full.pdf+html

McCormack, Mark. 2011. "Mapping the terrain of homosexually-themed language." *Journal of Homosexuality* 58:664-679.

McCormack, Mark. 2014. "The intersection of youth masculinities, decreasing homophobia and class: An ethnography." *British Journal of Sociology* 65:130-149.

McCormack, Mark, and Eric Anderson. 2010. "The re-production of homosexually-themed discourse in educationally-based organised sport." *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 12:913-927.

Messner, Michael. 1992. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Millward, Peter. 2008. "The rebirth of the football fanzine: Using e-zines as a data source." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32:299-310.

Ogburn, William. 1957. "Cultural lag as theory." *Sociology and Social Research* 41:167-174.

O'Neill, Rachel. 2015. "Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics." *Men and Masculinities* 18:100-120.

Pew Research Center. 2013. "The global divide on homosexuality." 4 June. Available at: http://www.pewglobal.org/files/2013/06/Pew-Global-Attitudes-Homosexuality-Report-FINAL-JUNE-4-2013.pdf (accessed 22 October 2014).

Plummer, David. 2006. "Sportophobia: Why do some men avoid sport?" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 30:122-137.

Plummer, David. 2014. "The ebb and flow of homophobia: A gender taboo theory." *Sex Roles* 71:126-136.

Polley, Martin. 1998. *Moving the Goalposts: A History of Sport and Society since 1945*. London: Routledge.

Reynolds, John. 2013. "Mail Online tops 150m monthly users." 14 November. Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/nov/14/mail-online-monthly-browsers-top-150m (accessed 12 September 2014).

Roberts, Steve. 2014. *Debating Modern Masculinities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

Ruihley, Brody, and Robin Hardin. 2011. "Message boards and the fantasy sport experience." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 4:233-252.

Rumens, Nick. 2011. *Queer Company: The Role and Meaning of Friendship in Gay Men's Work Lives*. Surrey: Ashgate.

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

Thurlow, Crispin. 2001. "Naming the "Outsider Within"." *Journal of Adolescence* 24:25-38.

Vincent, John, and Jane Crossman. 2007. "Champions, a celebrity crossover, and a capitulator: The construction of gender in broadsheet newspapers' narratives about selected competitors at Wimbledon." *International Journal of Sport Communication* 1: 78-102.

Vincent, John, John Hill, and Jason Lee. 2009. "The multiple brand personalities of David Beckham: A case study of the Beckham brand." *Sport Marketing Quarterly* 18: 173-180.

Weeks, Jeffrey. 2007. *The World We Have Won: The Remaking of Erotic and Intimate Life*. London: Routledge.