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Segregated femininities? Creating female fandom through social media in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

The study analyses female fandom in Sweden, focusing on female football supporters' self-presentation on social media. We found social media to function as a forum for empowerment, where the female football fans construct and express solidarity between girls and women and challenge hegemonic notions of femininity. Female football supporters are actively involved in formulating and shaping their own agenda and self-presentation and are drawn to the supporter culture for many of the same reasons as their male peers: group community, thrill and excitement, and the love for their team. The contribution of the study is two-fold: it fills a knowledge gap regarding Swedish female fans, while also making a conceptual intervention in the study of female fandoms more broadly, demonstrating the usefulness of critical theorization on femininities and indicating how social media enables female football supporters to 'play' with different conceptions of femininity to create space within the supporter milieu.

Introduction

Until recently, sports spectatorship in general, and football fandom in particular, has been governed by a masculine code deciding who is recognized as an authentic supporter. However, the last few decades have witnessed changes in the area of women and sports spectatorship. Pope attests to a 'feminization' of sport, marked by an increasing number of female sports fans, and indicates two main changes: firstly, women are empowered and can choose to participate in different leisure activities; secondly, the sports sector has become a more inviting environment for women.¹ Opinions diverge whether this is a desirable development. Toffoletti states that the feminization of fandom includes a sexualization of female fans, leading to a normalization of 'unequal gender power relations . . . upholding male privilege by endorsing a narrow version of white, Western, heterosexual femininity within sport settings'.² She discusses whether sexual empowerment is a key feature in the making of a new, 'agentic' female subjecthood, or whether the latter simply amounts to a new mode of female oppression in a male-dominated context. Though Toffoletti's question will be problematized below, it is important to recognize at this early juncture that women's fandom is performed and experienced in various ways. Pope stresses the need for further knowledge about female fandom and how women find and negotiate their place in the male-coded football landscape.³

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In this article, we will analyse football fandoms in Sweden, focusing on female football supporters' self-presentation on social media, and specifically via Instagram. A recurring theme in research on female supporters and media, and especially social media, is the strong influence of media on the stands culture. It is therefore important to ask questions of who has interpretive precedence over the representation of female fans. In this study, we have chosen to analyse female supporters' self-presentation on social media, and specifically via Instagram. The research questions are both descriptive and analytical. Our descriptive questions concern what the groups communicate through their Instagram feeds; how they perform; and which pictures and symbols are used. Analytically, we are concerned with how the female fans' social media communication and self-presentation can be viewed as a performance of (particular types of) femininity. The contribution of the study is two-fold: it fills a knowledge gap regarding Swedish female fans, while also making a conceptual intervention in the study of female fandoms more broadly, demonstrating the usefulness of critical theorization on femininities and indicating how social media enables female football supporters to 'play' with different conceptions of femininity to create space within the supporter milieu.

Previous research: female fandom and challenges to women's participation

Pope claims that female supporters have been ignored by academics, criticizing (male) researchers whom she feels have espoused limited understandings by categorizing female fans as 'inauthentic' or 'new consumer' fans.⁴ Other researchers have also discussed the question of who has the right to define a 'real supporter'.⁵ Toffoletti states that sports fandom is gendered, classed, and racialized and that these norms determine which bodies and practices are accepted in relation to specific sporting events.⁶ Caudwell argues that sexism and misogyny in society also affect gender relations in sports, including football culture, and suggests that female fans are encouraged to represent and embody a particular femininity – congruent with a tendency towards neoliberalization and sexualization of Western culture – centred on a performance of 'sexiness' that is also shaped by power relations of 'able-bodiedness, ethnicity, "race", sexuality, class, and gender'.⁷

The question of who is an authentic fan stems from a gendered norm of fandom, in which women are believed to attend football matches for different reasons than men. Pope claims that women are expected to visit the stadiums in order to 'civilize' men, and that women and children are to be seated in the 'middle-class' family area.⁸ Pope also contends that norms regarding authentic fandom exclude ethnic minorities as well as women.⁹ Despite being regarded as inauthentic by others, Pope notes that female fans view themselves as authentic, and that they comprise a significant and heterogeneous group that watch, and love, football.¹⁰

The last decade has witnessed an increase in research on female fandom.¹¹ Several studies indicate that the growing number of female fans has had a positive impact on female supporter culture. Even so, women do not have the same opportunities as men to show dedication to their team; for instance, women are not welcomed in all supporter groups, and have limited access to some spaces, such as buses to away matches. In addition, symbolic violence such as sexist language is prevalent in the stands and may restrict women's opportunities for participation. Even so, female supporters develop strategies to participate and gain respect in the supporter culture.¹² In addition, women construct and negotiate their supporter identity in relation to space, age, and gender.¹³

Female fandom and media

Previous research presents conflicting views on the intersection of women, fandom, and social media. Bruce has argued that social media provides platforms for agency and empowerment, particularly for women, who use social media to claim space and share stories not covered by traditional media.¹⁴ Toffoletti emphasizes the importance of social media for enabling female fans

to construct alternative narratives and fostering female networks on a transnational scale. She writes that social media ‘empowers individuals ... allowing female sport supporters to bypass media gatekeepers and represent themselves’.¹⁵

This positive assessment of social media contrasts with general media portrayals of female fandom. As noted above, Toffoletti demonstrates that traditional media construe a sexy body as an important marker of female fan identity,¹⁶ interpreting ‘sexy’ images of female sports fans as a new form of sexism in sports media. She bases her conclusions on a study of women football fans watching the FIFA World Cup 2014. Toffoletti used Google to search for images of women fans using phrases such as ‘women fans FIFA World Cup 2014’, ‘women supporters FIFA World Cup 2014’, and ‘female fans FIFA World Cup 2014’.¹⁷ Her findings must be interpreted in light of her method and the function of search algorithms, as Google search prioritizes the global north as well as Western, Anglophone sites.¹⁸

In sum, views diverge as to whether social media have an empowering function by giving space to, and magnifying, marginalized voices and perspectives, or whether social media users encounter new gatekeepers and restrictions on the stories and self-presentations that are allowed. Although social media may function as a forum for women’s empowerment, sports media research has demonstrated that social media can also be an arena for gender discrimination in connection to sports.¹⁹ Furthermore, media representations are coloured by cultural contexts of gender, producing differing media representations of female fandom, and social media must thus also be problematized in relation to cultural context.²⁰

Multiplicity of femininities

Norms and ideals connected to gender influence our thinking and behaviour, as well as perceptions, interpretations, expectations, and bodily practices. Sport and sports fandom are no exceptions. Gender structures can both be conserved and transgressed within sports, which function as an arena in which conflicts regarding the existing order can be staged and negotiated.²¹ However, most existing research on women sports fans has not engaged with theoretical perspectives on femininity, which we will utilize in this article.

Femininity is not one. Critiquing the idea that male-female relationships are negotiated in tension between one masculinity and one femininity, sociologist R.W. Connell has proposed that any social system may contain multiple masculinities that relate hierarchically to each other as well as to femininity. Connell posits hegemonic masculinity as the most culturally privileged form of doing maleness. In Connell’s view, femininity cannot be hegemonic, as all femininities are subject to male domination.²² However, Connell’s framework has inspired critical theorization of multiple femininities, including that of American sociologist Mimi Schippers, whose framework will be applied to our source material. Schippers understands masculinities and femininities as symbolic constructions tied to clusters of characteristics and traits that are perceived as manly and womanly. She argues that masculinities and femininities ‘provide a legitimating rationale’ for ‘embodiment and behavior’, as well as for the regulation and construction of social practice.²³ Based on the notion that hegemony serves the interests of the ruling class, Schippers links hegemony to those (ascribed/perceived) gendered qualities or characteristics that structure male-female relationships as complementary and hierarchical, defining hegemonic femininity as consisting of

... the characteristics defined as womanly that establish and legitimate a hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity and that, by doing so, guarantee the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.²⁴

In Schippers’ view, the dominance of hegemonic masculinity is preserved through the circumscription of specific characteristics as only available to men, such as physical strength, authority, and desire for women. Other clusters of ‘feminine’ traits are stigmatized and marginalized. Thus, women who desire other women, or who are promiscuous, ‘frigid’, or aggressive, fail to embody

the proper complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity, thereby threatening male dominance. Schippers therefore posits that hegemonic femininity is elevated above 'pariah femininities', such as the 'slut', lesbian, and 'bitch', which are so deemed as they are seen as contaminants to the proper relation of masculinity and femininity. Pariah femininities are thus 'the quality content of hegemonic masculinity enacted by women'.²⁵

Schippers observes that some characteristics associated with masculinity or femininity in a specific context may not legitimize a hierarchical, complementary relationship between men and women. She refers to such configurations of gender as 'alternative' femininities and masculinities. Suggesting avenues for research on the multiplicity of femininities, Schippers proposes asking which characteristics and/or practices are understood as womanly in a given social context, and which of them conversely serve to situate femininity as 'complementary and inferior to masculinity'.²⁶ This helps answer which features of masculinity and femininity are not hegemonic, as well as which pariah femininities are in operation.

The notion that femininities are plural also implies a recognition of power differentials between femininities, and that what is construed as appropriately or inappropriately feminine is mediated through other hierarchies of power. As mentioned above, Caudwell,²⁷ Pope²⁸ and Toffoletti²⁹ discuss race in relation to fandom, indicating that female football supporters are often white. In utilizing Schippers' theorization of multiple femininities, our analysis is also informed and inspired by Sara Ahmed's discussions of bodily privilege and whiteness, especially in relation to space.³⁰ Ahmed highlights the phenomenological problem of whiteness as lived and received, stressing that whiteness is not 'ontologically given' but rather an 'ongoing and unfinished story' – a story that orients bodies in particular directions in relation to space and place.³¹ Ahmed claims that bodies and spaces mutually influence each other; that spaces are shaped by the bodies that inhabit them and vice versa.³² Below, we will thus discuss the ways in which female football fandom and the stands in Sweden are governed by whiteness.

Method

Men's football is the most popular spectator sport in Sweden, and the men's top football league, Allsvenskan, has a large female fan population. Our study is focused on Swedish female-only fan groups supporting Allsvenskan. In Sweden, the number of such groups has increased from two in 2012 to ten in 2018.³³ We focused on the five largest female fan groups: Malmö Sisters, abbreviated MS (supporting Malmö FF); Yellow Black Sisters, abbreviated YBS (supporting IF Elfsborg); BajenBaes, abbreviated BB (supporting Hammarby IF); Blue Striped Ladies, abbreviated BSL, (supporting Djurgårdens IF); and Peking Sisters, abbreviated PS (supporting IFK Norrköping). All groups were established between 2012 and 2017. Exact founding dates for these groups are difficult to determine as some of them were differently named in their early stages. The five groups appear to have similar goals; they want to involve more girls and women in supporting their teams, and coordinate fan activities for girls and women.

Our source material consists of semi-structured interviews with eight women representing the above-mentioned fan groups, as well as the groups' Instagram feeds. Interviews and social media representations are interpreted not as neutral depictions of 'reality', but as part of the construction of a female fan identity that may be perceived differently depending on one's notions of female fandom. Interview questions focused on the activities of the supporter groups and the women's experiences of being female fans, as well as on the role of social media and the respective groups' engagement with the latter. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were read and re-read, and thematic categories were developed based on the female fans' self-presentation. All interviewees are anonymized.

The Instagram feeds of the fan groups were studied in order to capture these groups' self-representation on social media. In contrast to Toffoletti's³⁴ study of female fans during WC 2014, where image selection was determined by algorithms, our material consists of images deliberately

Table 1. Women's supporter groups in Sweden, number of Instagram account posts, followers and how many they follow on Instagram, and dates for their first post and their latest post from when they started until 20 August 2019.

Supporter group	Posts (number of analysed post)	Followers	Following	First post (date)	Latest update in the studied period
Malmö Sisters	72	710	1	7 Aug 2017	6 July 2019
Peking Sisters	163	264	34	9 April 2017	27 August 2018
Bajen BAES	211	1187	317	26 April 2017	12 July 2019
Blue Striped Ladies	721	2598	0	13 May 2013	25 June 2018
Yellow BlackSisters	352	556	1	22 Dec 2013	8 July 2019
Total Number of Posts (Number of Analysed Post)	1519 (635)				

curated by the female fan groups themselves. Boyd highlights four aspects that make Instagram a useful platform for social science research. Instagram 1) affords *persistence* 2) affords *visibility* of content 3) enables *replicability* and 4) affords *searchability*.³⁵ Another argument for using Instagram as source material is that is the media platform most frequently used by the female fan groups.

We began with an examination of the fan groups' Instagram accounts from the time when they started posting on Instagram until 20 August 2019. The number of posts ranged between 72 for MS and 721 for BSL (see Table 1).

The study used a netnographic method.³⁶ All images posted on Instagram by the five groups (1519 in total) were collected, printed, and saved in a folder in order to systematize the material for analysis. In cases where images recur within the same Instagram feed, the image has only been counted once. Ultimately, 635 unique images were counted. We have limited our analysis to images showing actual girls and/or women, rather than cartoon characters, artworks, or memes, resulting in a selection of 292 unique pictures for analysis. The captions were also saved and are part of the analysis. Upload dates as well as a brief description of the images and the groups' self-presentation on their websites were added. Furthermore, we created files for each supporter group storing all pictures and the descriptions. Inspired by Müller,³⁷ the image analysis comprised three steps: first, the content of the pictures was described; second, categories were created to reflect the images in the study; third, image content was situated within its social, political and cultural contexts in relation to the performance of femininities and whiteness. When analysing the images using the theoretical framework, three themes were identified, discussed below under the following headings: 'Segregation, not Complementarity'; 'Lads, Sluts, and Bitches'; and 'The Whiteness of the Female Fan'.

Segregation, not complementarity

Previous research has indicated that the sports arena is gender-coded masculine, and that space is organized according to a patriarchal premise 'of the universal male norm'. This impacts how sports spectators move depending on sex, age, and ethnicity, and Pope observes that sport arenas can create a 'topophobic' feeling amongst female fans, a 'landscape of fear' or a 'no-go' area.³⁸ Our study, both of the Instagram feeds of the fan groups and our interviews with the female fans, demonstrates that female and male fans of the same team both take up space in the same areas in the stadiums. However, female fans have their own pre-assigned sections within these areas, which remain the same at every match. Female fans are not only segregated in the stands, but also have their own banners with logos. The analysed Instagram feeds show that all of the studied female fan groups have distinct banners, which they display inside the inner railing of their home stadiums, side by side with the other (male groups') banners. This gender-specific positioning suggests that the expression of female fandom and male fandom hinges on a segregation of space. There appear to be no conflicts between male and female supporters in relation to space in the stadiums; the interviewees claim to feel they are taken seriously and shown respect by the male supporters when in the stands. This suggests that the female fans' position is not seen as a threat to the normative relationship between masculinity and femininity.

The female supporter groups also claim space outside the football stadiums. Logos and stickers of varying design representing female supporter groups can be found in most Swedish cities with a professional men's football club, often in adjacency to iconic buildings, landmarks, or neighbourhoods central to the identity of the team city. The fan groups' Instagram feeds show photographs of home-made stickers posted in restaurants and bars, on lampposts, and, of course, in and around arenas and other sites frequented by the female fans before and after matches. In the interviews and on Instagram, the female fans express pride at becoming a visible part of the public space. Like in the stadiums, there do not appear to be conflicts between the male and female supporters of the same team about where the female fans post their stickers; while it is customary to paste one's own team stickers over those of rival teams, male and female supporters of the same team appear to respect each other's stickers.

Female fans participating in tifo activities is a recurring motif in the Instagram images. Tifo is used to frame the stands and the matches by using enormous flags, banners, fireworks, and other attributes to create a positive atmosphere at the beginning of matches. Here too, gender segregation seems to be the organizing principle; female fan groups create their own tifo independent of the male fans, and images show female fans working with the tifo flags and banners as well as the official tifo arrangements at matches. Working to create tifos creates a sense of community, both within the female fan group and with other supporters and is an important part of the cultural identity shared by different fan groups. Karlén states that it is essential to the fans that all tifos are authentic and original; a tifo cannot be re-used.³⁹

The female fan groups also organize independent activities in relation to away games. Bus trips to and from away games have often been a no-go zone for women, something the female fan groups have worked to change.⁴⁰ Arranging women-only bus trips has thus become an important activity for the studied fan groups, all of which post photos of such arrangements on their Instagram feeds. A photo showing a group of female fans gathered outside the match bus, displaying their team banner, is the most common travel image in the material. One such image posted by PSbears a caption underlining: 'Everyone is welcome – the only requirement is that you are not a man'.⁴¹ Another caption by the same group reads: 'Do not forget to book a seat on the girl bus. You do not have to be a member; all women and non-binary persons welcome'.⁴²

The recurrent emphasis on separate yet equal spaces in the female fans' communication and self-presentation is significant. Our study shows the female fans generally feel that they are respected and taken seriously, and often engage in similar or identical activities to the male supporters. Although male football fan identities contain various aspects of hegemonic masculinity,⁴³ the female football fans we have studied are not simplistically subordinated to their male peers in the way Schippers⁴⁴ describes the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and femininity. As will become apparent in the subsequent section, the female football fans' performance of femininity contains several aspects of hegemonic masculinity, yet which – when performed in gender-segregated spaces – appears to be accepted and respected by male fans as an expression of genuine football fandom. As such, the female football fans' gender performance may, in Schippers' terms, be described as an alternative femininity, that is, a configuration of roles and traits associated with femininity that does not simplistically legitimize women's subordination to men. However, it is possible that the acceptance of this alternative femininity is contingent on its situation within segregated spaces, and that a similar femininity – if performed in mixed-gender or male-dominated spaces – might be perceived as a potential threat to the expected relationship between masculinity and femininity. We will return to this tension in our concluding discussion.

Lads, sluts, and bitches

On Instagram and in the interviews, the female football fans present themselves as lads, sluts, and bitches, and in both verbal and visual communication the women appropriate aesthetic styles and behaviours conventionally associated with hegemonic masculinity. Thus, in accordance with what

Pope and others have claimed in relation to the construction of authentic fandom, we propose that the expression of a female football fan identity entails deliberately drawing on aspects of what Schippers refers to as pariah femininity.

In Instagram images, the fan groups present their members wearing t-shirts with the groups' own logos. The most common dress code comprises sneakers, jeans, and matching t-shirts or sweaters with the women's fan group logo. These pictures are a far cry from those analysed by Toffoletti, which she describes as focused on 'the depiction of bodily displays of sexiness in the form of voluminous hair, exposed midribs, plunging necklines and pouting lips'.⁴⁵ Instead, the style of dress shown in the images we have studied is closer to that of male supporter culture and represents a style that has long characterized male football supporters. Previous research has shown this dress-code to enhance group identity among male football supporters.⁴⁶ Congruently, we interpret the female fans' visual self-presentation not simply as a matter of comfort or practicality, but as a deliberate aesthetic choice; in dressing according to a traditionally masculine supporter dress-code, the female fans present themselves like the 'lads'. As will be discussed below, the female fans' appropriation of a traditionally masculine aesthetic style does not result in stigma or marginalization in the stands; quite the contrary, it appears essential to the performance of a football fan femininity that connotes 'authentic' fandom.

Local rivalry between football clubs in Sweden has a long tradition. As is the case for their male peers, the female football supporters' self-presentation includes explicit rivalry between football clubs. The analysed Instagram images show women fans wearing tops with logos and captions that express antagonism towards other supporter groups. One picture shows three women from BB, posing in support of Hammarby IF, wearing t-shirts with a print of Snow White carrying a machine gun and the caption: 'Get lost, Djurgårdenfuckers' (In Swedish: FörsvinnDjurgårdsjävlar). Based in Stockholm, Djurgården is a local rival club of Hammarby. Another example is a picture from the Instagram feed of MS showing a new-born baby wearing a romper with the printed words 'Hate Gothenburg'; a reference to the long-standing rivalry of IFK Gothenburg and Malmö FF. This is an example of early socialization into a love-hate culture that has also been shown to characterize club football in Sweden among (male) fans.⁴⁷

Our interviews showed that the female fans themselves debate and reflect on self-presentation through styles of dress. Commenting on what women should wear in the stands, Tove, one of the female supporters, says:

I am divided on that issue because I am also an outspoken feminist. Because women have the right to dress exactly how the hell they want, at any time without apologizing for it. So, I am divided on that issue because I also have the opinion that we follow the rules of the collective and the collective has a dress code. There is colour, there are shoes, there is a dress code and that is the template you follow, and it is unfortunately a rather masculine dress code because it is a male-dominated culture. So, the clothes are masculine, but you have to adapt to that.⁴⁸

In the above excerpt, Tove highlights a tension between her own feminist commitment, which she feels signifies that woman should be allowed to dress as they want, and her feelings about how female football fans should dress in the stands. Tove explains why she feels particular conventions should apply in the stands:

[T]he problem is that the women who want to be taken seriously and want to be seen as equal are undermined by women who want to be objectified. Then several years of work can be undermined in 10 minutes by the arrival of three beautiful girls who have dressed up very, perhaps provocatively . . . so a little more undressed. Because then the role of women getting a place on the football podium is confirmed here in exchange for them showing their ass, which I do not understand at all.⁴⁹

Tove implicitly suggests a distinction between a performance of femininity she sees as congruent with authentic football fandom, and what she sees as an undesirable femininity in the stands. The latter is epitomized by women who 'want to be objectified' – a fact signified by their revealing clothing, which emphasizes heterosexualized feminine desirability rather than belonging within the

female fan group. Though Tove does not say so explicitly, there appears to be a suggestion that women who dress ‘provocatively’ in the stands are more concerned with attracting the gaze of male football fans than with supporting their football team, thus undermining the credibility of ‘real’ female fans.

Our interviewee Siri similarly claimed to deliberately dress ‘down’ for football matches. She appears to associate dressing ‘down’ with more ‘masculine’ styles of dress, stating that this includes understated jewellery and baggy rather than form-fitting clothing. For Siri, this choice of aesthetic self-presentation signals that football and the club matter the most to her. She also underlines that she wants to avoid being sexually harassed. It seems that Siri wants to dress in a way she perceives as gender neutral as she primarily wants to be seen as a supporter rather than as a woman. This is significant, paralleling with the conclusions of previous research with regard to the gender coding of authentic fandom; being accepted as an authentic football fan appears to require a departure from (some aspects of) femininity.

Another more provocative way to inhabit the identity of ‘the lad’ is found in a picture that shows three seated BB supporters urinating together outside against a wall. The women in the photo laugh and make victory signs while looking into the camera. The caption states: ‘Girls who pee together, stay together. Burn the bra’.⁵⁰ It is certainly no coincidence that the picture was posted on March 8, that is, on International Women’s Day. This image could be interpreted as a visual reaction to the thousands of pictures of urinating male football supporters that have existed since the emergence of football culture and which are shown in both movies and books, and in recent years on social media.

The image of the urinating BB supporters may also be read as a deliberate engagement with what Schippers denotes pariah femininity. It is worth noting that BB’s Instagram feed stands out in the source material by showing considerably more naked skin and other sexualized imagery. BB’s visual performance of femininity thus does not simplistically mirror traditionally masculine aesthetic styles; instead, the group draws, seemingly deliberately, on imagery evoking the pariah femininities of slut and bitch. An additional example of this is an image showing a drawing of a naked female torso with the text: ‘A real Bajen Bae has a piercing in the left nipple’, with an additional comment added on the side of the image; ‘PS. If you take the piercing in the clit, you will be BB’s honorary member 2018’.⁵¹ Some of YBS’ photos also explicitly allude to sex. In one picture, nine lightly dressed women are looking into the camera, some holding up their breasts and sticking out their tongues. The caption reads: ‘Tonight we have Sweden’s biggest orgy’.⁵²

The above examples show that the ‘dressed down’ style indicated by Tove and Siri as appropriate for a female football supporter in the stands co-exists with other manners of feminine performance within the female supporter landscape. The ‘slut’-like imagery shown in the Instagram accounts of BB and YBS combined with a ‘fuck-off attitude’ that signals uproariousness rather than acquiescence. As such, the self-presentation of these clubs also draws on the pariah femininity we have called the bitch. BB’s main logo shows two hands in the process of applying green (the colour of the club) nail polish. The left index finger is raised in a cocky ‘fuck you’ gesture. YBS, similarly, show their finger(s) in a ‘fuck off’ gesture. One picture shows seven women from YBS looking straight into the camera, some of them sticking their tongues out and showing their middle finger, with the text line: ‘Who the fuck are you?’. In another picture, nine women from YBS stare into the camera, smiling, with the hashtags, #theworldmostbeatifulgirls ‘GSS13’.

Jackson and Tinkler discuss the phenomenon of ‘ladettes’, a stigmatizing concept used to describe aggressive and demanding women who smoke, binge drink, party, and have casual heterosexual encounters. According to them, ‘ladettes’ claim traditionally male spaces and behave in a traditionally masculine manner; as male football fans have done for ages.⁵³ In public discourse, ladettes are seen as an example of feminism gone ‘too far’, and the phenomenon is accused of creating growing problems with drinking, crime, and violence.⁵⁴ In contrast, we argue that the

female fan groups we have studied deliberately play with and challenge hegemonic notions of feminine respectability and modesty by presenting themselves in a manner congruent with pariah femininities. As suggested by their Instagram feeds, the female fans test the limits of acceptable femininity, and seemingly derive pleasure from doing so.

As noted above, however, there are complexities in the material; while the female fans appropriate some aspects of pariah femininities, the quotes from Siri and Tove also suggest a concern with distancing oneself from what is perceived as inappropriately, or excessively, feminine. In order to be perceived as serious fans and avoid unwanted sexual attention, they suggest a need to adopt 'masculine' styles of dress, indicating that women who embody hyper-femininity (signified by revealing clothing, conspicuous jewellery, and an orientation towards the male gaze) in the stands threaten the credibility of all female fans. Thus, there is an interesting tension in how the female fans flaunt expectations of hegemonic feminine respectability, while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from other, locally defined marginalized femininities. The comments by Siri and Tove also suggest an implicit heteronormativity in the football supporter culture. Specifically, women who appear overly dressed up in the stands are perceived as problematic within the context of opposite-sex desire; they are seen as courting the sexual attention of men, and the fact that some women may dress up (or indeed down) in order to attract a queer female gaze is not articulated as a possibility.

The whiteness of the female fan

In our material – Instagram as well as interviews – football culture is often described as a 'free space', separate from everyday life, where one can show emotions, where one's social affiliation does not matter, where one is allowed to show total devotion and disappointment. In short, football culture appears as a place where both individual and collective identities are enhanced through a shared love of the team and the club. As mentioned above, however, male and female fans' self-presentations are governed by contextually specific norms related to gender, and research also indicates problem areas in football culture related to gender, sexualization, and racism.⁵⁵ In this section, we will indicate how a socially inclusive rhetoric on the part of the female fans partly contrasts with an implicit, white norm among the studied groups. In their communication, the female fan groups underline their work to strengthen the position of female supporters in the Swedish football stands, as exemplified by the following statement by YBS:

Hi all Elfsborgers out there! We know how difficult it can be to dare to step into a supporter culture as lonely or lonely girls, so we now urge you to apply for membership of Yellow Black Sisters and be part of our group/.../If you are a determined girl who can stand up for herself and with a heart that is passionate about Elfsborg, do not hesitate to let us hear from you. Apply!⁵⁶

YBS acknowledge that women are in minority as supporters and that this minority status may be an obstacle they need to overcome in order to attend football matches at the stadiums. They present a solution: if women join together (without men), they will be less lonely and will be able to support their team together with other women. BSL state that their basic aim is to provide a space for girls who want to attend matches, go on away trips, and be actively involved in the supporter culture as well as other activities related to Djurgårdens IF. Just like YBS, BSL actively invite interested girls and women to join their supporter club:

Are you a girl and passionate about Djurgårdens IF and want to be part of and contribute to a positive grandstand culture? Do you feel that Blue Striped Ladies sounds like something for you or do you know someone who might be interested? Did your friend bail so you have no one to stand with? Do you want to go to an away match but have no one to go with? Or do you just feel like you want to meet new friends within the Djurgården family? Do not hesitate to contact us!⁵⁷

PS problematize the masculine norm in football fan culture. Ellinor Jakobsen, one of the initiators of PS, says that the group was founded mainly out of a desire to find like-minded people, but also out of a frustration that many women do not feel they have an obvious place in the stands and during away trips:

Above all, it is probably a norm about how a supporter should be: a white young man. And when it comes to away trips, you do not always think about making toilet stops adapted for women. Not everyone can get up and pee along the way . . . ⁵⁸

BB present themselves differently; they underline that that they support their club, but do not actively (at least not on social media) invite other female fans to join their community. Instead, they prompt women to join together and form their own fan groups:

Now the offseason begins, and we want to remind all chicks that this is a great opportunity to get organized. Gather a bunch and start your own grouping. ⁵⁹

BB thus encourage a do-it-yourself approach. Their self-presentation also focuses more on the fan group's own activities and internal affairs rather than the sporting aspects of the football club. Another group, MS, stress on their website that all girls and women who view themselves as Malmö FF supporters are welcome. The female founders of MS claim to be a diverse group of new and old supporters from different parts of Sweden who populate both the seating areas and the stands during matches, and who have different opinions on many issues:

What we all have in common is love and commitment to the world's finest association Malmö FF. As a member of Malmö Sisters, you are not primarily a female MFF supporter but simply an MFF supporter. We see ourselves as a platform for girls and women with a love for MFF, a way to meet like-minded people and a way into the stands for those who felt unsure about taking that step. ⁶⁰

MS' self-presentation underlines the identity of the supporter – rather than the female supporter. Similar to the above interview excerpts wherein the female fans stress the need to dress a certain way, MS are seemingly careful to separate themselves from what is perceived as excessively or inappropriately feminine by stressing that they are supporters first. MS' website states the need to work actively for an inclusive environment around and within Malmö FF and for the preservation of union democracy. They also claim that MS are active in the fight against racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, as well as other forms of discrimination within the Malmö supporter culture. ⁶¹

The female fans clearly see themselves as part of a supporter landscape, inviting all women supporters of their team to get involved. However, it is questionable whether all women (or femininities) are equally free to attend matches. In a study of female fans in Leicester, UK, Pope shows that ethnic minorities are not well-represented among female football spectators despite the ethnic diversity of the city of Leicester, and nearly all of the respondents in Pope's study were white. ⁶² This is congruent with our own findings. All of the images from the studied Instagram accounts show white women, and the online Swedish female supporter culture does not appear to reflect ethnic diversity. The logos of the various fan groups are, to some extent, more ambiguous: logos are consistently rendered in the respective football teams' colours, making it difficult to ascertain the intended ethnicity or skin colour of the stylized female characters shown in the images. PS' logo stands out by showing two women, back-to-back, flexing their biceps and raising their fists: one of the women is clearly dark-skinned, whereas the other is clearly light-skinned. This may be interpreted as a visual signal that all women are welcome. Though further research would be needed to ascertain whether the members of PS are more ethnically diverse than the other fan groups we have studied, all pictures representing actual PS members show white women – suggesting a discrepancy between the inclusivity of the logo and the demographic composition of the fan group.

During the interviews, the female fans acknowledged that there is a lack of ethnic diversity among female supporter groups in Sweden. For instance, Julia says:

As far as ethnicity is concerned, I would argue that it is almost exclusively Swedish girls in football, at least it is very rare for an immigrant girl to be seen in the stands. At the same time as we have many, many immigrant guys in our stands.⁶³

As seen in this quote, Julia uses concepts such as ‘ethnicity’ and ‘immigrant’. Of course, the Instagram images do not reveal whether or not a person is a Swedish citizen, or if they have moved to Sweden from abroad. What is apparent is, instead, skin colour; as noted above, only white girls and women appear in the Instagram feeds studied. The term immigrant thus appears implicitly to connote a non-white, racialized identity. In explaining the lack of ethnic diversity, the female supporters speak about expectations of gender roles in relation to differing cultural backgrounds. Tove says:

It is culturally conditioned, and it is about gender roles. If you come from another culture where you have a narrower framework for gender roles, what you can be and what you can do, then football – or football culture is male-dominated and has always been men’s sport since time immemorial in some way. If you then come from a culture that has narrower gender roles – harder cemented – then it is perhaps more difficult to break out of, but also to understand what there is to be gained from getting into an activity that is typically male. So, it does not surprise me that there is a very homogeneous background among the women who attend football.⁶⁴

Tove has been a supporter since 1997 and was among the first women in Sweden to start working actively with supporter culture. The harsh climate in the stands reappears as a theme in the interviews, and all of our interviewees stress that a woman must be tough in order to withstand the climate in the football stands:

It’s a terribly tough environment and you have to deal with it and you have to deal with it by being quick-witted and able to speak up for yourself.⁶⁵

Standing up and speaking for oneself, claiming space and showing commitment to football and one’s team are construed as essential to being perceived as an authentic supporter. It seems like the male supporter culture is more diversified when it comes to multi-culturalism. One of the interviewees, Elin, states:

My opinion is, if you look at the stands, the boys have ethnic diversity, but if you look at girls who watch football, it seems to be mostly Swedish girls in Swedish stands.⁶⁶

Some of the interviewees in our study claim that a woman needs to have a privileged background to be part of the supporter culture:

I think it’s pretty tough to be a girl in the stands, especially if you have to assert yourself in the football debate and be active. To be so, one must to some extent be privileged. It is easier for a girl who is white and “rich” and has all these conditions – then it is easier to go in and resist.⁶⁷

In congruence with previous studies of female fandom in other national contexts, Swedish female fandom seems governed by whiteness. The female fans themselves partly view this as an effect of the way non-white, ‘other’ women live and behave, which is constructed as incompatible with the toughness and assertiveness required of a female football supporter. This is exemplified by Anna’s comment that whiteness and class privilege make it easier for some women to assert themselves in the stands; a comment that also suggests the supporter culture at large (including male supporters) as a barrier to some women’s participation. To speak with Ahmed,⁶⁸ our interviewees do not see themselves and their activities as representing whiteness as an ongoing and unfinished story; they do not attribute the dearth of non-white female supporters to discriminatory attitudes on their own part. Nevertheless, the ‘rooms’ of female supporter culture appear to differ from the male supporter groups and their activities, where a masculine norm seems to be stronger than the white norm.

While further research is needed to determine the reasons for the lack of ethnic diversity among (Swedish) female football supporters, it is possible that concerns with respectability and social inclusion render the identity of the female football fan in the stands less feasible for non-white women. The potential sense of liberation experienced by some female football fans deliberately engaging with the pariah femininities of slut or bitch is, perhaps, shaped by the experience of having originally been ascribed values and traits associated with hegemonic feminine respectability. As noted by Beverly Skeggs⁶⁹ among others, respectability is classed and racialized, and thus women read as white may have greater opportunities to 'play' with stigmatization and subvert expectations of femininity by being drunk, rowdy, and provocative without risking the more extreme consequences of social stigma, such as forcible detainment, incarceration, or violence from police or guards. Moreover, the heightened vulnerability of racialized women to sexual harassment and violence may render strategic appropriation of the pariah femininity of slut (as exemplified in BB's communication) less accessible.⁷⁰ In contrast, a football fan identity may be more feasible to non-white men in Sweden, whose participation in the supporter culture does not entail the same subversion of gendered norms. However, the female football fans' explanation of the lack of ethnic diversity may also be read as part of a discourse of 'othering', in which non-white, 'immigrant' women are construed as passive and unemancipated in contrast to the white, Western, liberated feminist subject – ascribing responsibility to the outsider group rather than interrogating how whiteness is upheld as a norm within the fan culture.

Conclusion

Within this study, we have analysed the statements and online communication of female football fans active within women-only fan groups in Sweden. Our source material shows a clearly defined female football fan identity (or possibly, identities). The groups themselves highlight the masculine norm within 'mainstream' supporter culture, and the need to create space for female football fans. The female-only fan groups distinguish themselves through their own logos, social media presences, visual communication in the form of stickers, banners, and tifo displays, and activities such as women-only trips to away matches. Rather than claiming space within the traditionally masculine domains of supporter culture, the female fans establish their own, parallel spaces, where they attest to feeling respected and taken seriously, including by male supporters.

The femininities inhabited by the female football fans in focus for this study do not fit neatly within Schippers' notion of hegemonic femininity. Football fan femininity is not positioned in a hierarchical and complementary manner vis-à-vis the masculinity of the male football fan. In many ways, the female fans' identities are constructed around similar values as those of their male peers: a sense of community, loyalty, and perhaps above all, love for one's favoured football team.⁷¹ As noted repeatedly above, the female football fans also visibly draw on traits and characteristics conventionally associated with a hegemonic masculinity, such as aggression, toughness, and sexual assertiveness, subverting expectations of hegemonic feminine respectability and playing with the pariah femininities of slut and bitch. Importantly, however, the female football fans' inhabitation of roles and behaviours associated with a hegemonic masculinity do not result in social stigma and marginalization (associated with pariah femininities) *within* the supporter culture. Football fan femininity is not perceived as a contaminant or threat to the gender order – instead, the female fans are taken seriously as authentic football supporters. As such, it is possible to speak of football fan femininity, in Schippers terms, as an alternative femininity – a configuration of gendered characteristics and traits that does not simplistically legitimize female subordination to men.

However, it is significant that this subversion of gendered norms consistently takes place within segregated spaces, prompting the question whether these 'separate but equal' spaces are a prerequisite for the female football fans' ability to occupy an alternative femininity. It is possible that this alternative femininity is permitted and respected, and not seen as a potential threat to the gender order, so long as it is spatially kept separate and distinct.

It is also interesting to note that out of the various aspects of pariah femininity that the female football fans draw on, heterosexualized assertiveness and desirability appear to be the most problematic. While BB, as noted above, stand out in the source material through their more explicit evocation of the pariah femininity of slut, we have also seen how some of the female football fans carefully distinguish themselves from women who ‘want to be objectified’ and dress in a sexually provocative manner when attending matches. According to these interviewees, displays of hypersexualised hyperfemininity have the potential to weaken the credibility of all female fans – suggesting, perhaps, that women in the stands are more interested in attracting their male peers than supporting their team. While overt heterosexual interest thus appears problematic in relation to football matches, these comments also highlight an implicit heteronormativity within the supporter culture – the female football fans do not seem to think that a woman may dress in form-fitting clothing or elaborate jewellery in order to sexually attract other female fans.

Our findings support Pope’s⁷² conclusions about a feminization of the supporter culture, showing how the increasing visibility and participation of female fan groups can be seen within the Swedish supporter landscape. Addressing and responding to the traditionally masculine norm in supporter culture, female football fans in Sweden claim space and organize activities in order to further the involvement of women in the supporter culture both within and outside the stands. In contrast to Toffoletti’s⁷³ assessment of the sexualization of female football fans in the media, we found social media (specifically, Instagram) to function as a forum for empowerment, where the female football fans construct and express solidarity between girls and women and challenge hegemonic notions of femininity. While some of the fan groups’ self-presentations draw on sexual imagery and language, we feel it is overly simplistic to view this in terms of acquiescence to the ‘sexualization’ of the female fan; instead, this communication can be interpreted as part of a gendered performance that challenges expectations of female modesty, passivity, and respectability. Although further research is needed to determine whether female football fans outside of the Swedish context perform gender in similar ways, we have aimed with this study to show how female fans’ involvement in the supporter landscape is affected, but not completely determined, by hegemonic logics of gender. Female football supporters are actively involved in formulating and shaping their own agenda and self-presentation and are drawn to the supporter culture for many of the same reasons as their male peers: group community, thrill and excitement, and the love for their team. Through this study, we have also sought to demonstrate the usefulness of theorization on (multiple) femininities to understand the agency and gender negotiations of female football fans – as well as which groups of women may be included and excluded in these negotiations – and our conceptual framework and conclusions thus have broader applicability within future on female fandom.

Notes

1. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 8.
2. Toffoletti, ‘Sexy women sports fans’, 458.
3. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 5–8.
4. Ibid.
5. Coddington, *One of the Lads*; Toffoletti, *Women Sport Fans*.
6. Toffoletti, *Women Sport Fans*, 2.
7. Caudwell, ‘Gender, feminism and football studies’, 340.
8. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 80–81.
9. Ibid., 154–155.
10. Ibid.
11. Hynes, “‘Jaysus! Is Janno a Bird?’”; Pope, “‘There are some daft people out there!’”; Pope, ‘Female fan experiences and interpretations of the 1958 Munich air disaster’; Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*; Toffoletti, *Women Sport Fans*; Toffoletti, ‘Sexy women sports fans’; Lenneis and Pfister, ‘Gender constructions and negotiations of female foot-ball fans’; Radmann and Hedenborg, ‘Women’s football supporter culture in Sweden’; and ‘Gender trouble in digital football fandom’.

12. Jones, 'Female fandom'; Hynes, "'Jaysus! Is Janno a Bird?"; Pfister et al, 'Female fans of men's football'; Pope, "'There are some daft people out there!"; Radmann and Hedenborg, 'Women's football supporter culture in Sweden'.
13. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*.
14. Bruce, 'New rules for new times'.
15. Toffoletti, *Women Sport Fans*, 102.
16. Ibid., 465.
17. Ibid., 464.
18. Ibid., 465.
19. Kavanagh et al, 'Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment'; Radmann and Hedenborg, 'Women's football supporter culture in Sweden'.
20. Radmann and Hedenborg, 'Women's football supporter culture in Sweden'.
21. Hargreaves, *Sporting females*; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Pfister, 'Women in sport'; Hedenborg and Pfister, 'Introduction'.
22. Connell, *Masculinities*.
23. Schippers, 'Recovering the Feminine Other', 91.
24. Ibid., 94.
25. Ibid., 95.
26. Ibid., 100.
27. Caudwell, 'Gender, feminism and football studies'.
28. See note 13.
29. Toffoletti, *Women Sport Fans*; 'Sexy women sports fans'.
30. Ahmed, *Vithetens hegemoni*.
31. Ibid., 126.
32. Ibid., 135.
33. See note 20.
34. Toffoletti, 'Sexy women sports fans'.
35. Boyd, 'Social network sites and networked publics'.
36. Berg, *Netnografi*.
37. Müller, 'Iconography and iconology as a visual method and approach'.
38. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 161.
39. Karlén, *Vad är tifo?*
40. See note 20.
41. PS, Instagram 20,180,318.
42. Ibid. 20,180,222.
43. Radmann, *Huliganlandskapet*; Radmann, *Vad är huliganism?*
44. Schipper, 'Recovering the Feminine Other'.
45. Toffoletti, 'Sexy women sports fans', 465.
46. Radmann, *Vad är huliganism?*
47. Radmann et al, 'Scandinavian Football Fandom'.
48. Interview with Tove.
49. Ibid.
50. BB, Instagram, 20,190,308.
51. BB, Twitter, <https://twitter.com/bajenbaes/status/992774772902760448/photo/1>.
52. YBS, Instagram, 20,180,313.
53. Jackson and Tinkler, 'Ladettets and «modern girls»', 268; Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 39.
54. Jackson and Tinkler, 'Ladettets and «modern girls»'; Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*.
55. Toffoletti, 'Sexy women sports fans'; Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*.
56. YBS, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmbNptGhCK2/>.
57. BSL, homepage, <https://bluestripedladies.wordpress.com/om-oss/>.
58. PS, Kamraterna, homepage, <https://kamraterna.net/tag/pekingisystrar/>.
59. BB, Instagram, 20,181,112.
60. MS, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BpXU-b-BvtI/>.
61. MS, homepage, <https://www.malmoisystrar.se/stadgar/>.
62. Pope, *The Feminization of Sports Fandom*, 11.
63. Interview with Julia.
64. See note 48.
65. Ibid.
66. Interview with Elin.
67. Interview with Anna.
68. Ahmed, *Vithetens hegemoni*.

69. Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender*.
70. hooks, 'Madonna'.
71. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, followers, fans and flaneurs'.
72. See note 13.
73. See note 34.

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