Module 2. Women's football fan communities – Horizontal relationships driving fandom

Unit 2.1

2.1.1 Horizontal relationships in diverse football fan communities

In the previous module, we have learned that social scientists have tried to make sense of the dynamics in football fan communities by categorising their members according to certain characteristics or archetypes. In most cases, football fan researchers distinguish between fans that they perceive to be more authentic and loyal in juxtaposition with fans that are less deeply attached with any club. The latter share more trades with typical consumers, meaning they watch football more for the excitement and entertainment of the game, rather than the values attached with a club. Some researchers, however, find these dual categorisations too simple and too reductive. Crawford (2004), for example, calls these binary distinctions problematic because they "are often based upon subjective and romanticized ideas of 'authenticity', which see the celebration of one form of sport support and the rejection of all that is seen as 'new'" (p. 92). The categorisations further "tend to speculate about the concept of authenticity, but fail to identify how perceptions of authenticity are formed, maintained, managed, altered and ultimately practised by agents in the field" (Dixon, 2014, p. 426). In this case, "agents in the field" obviously refers to the fans themselves. This module introduced a different way of making sense of football communities, borrowing from the latter sentiment. Rather than exposing external categories to understand fan experiences, in this module, we will take a closer look at the relationships within fan communities and the ways in which these relationships impact on football fan experience. By doing this, we will explore how fan communities are formed and maintain strong community cohesion. The first unit looks at how internal relationships in fan communities are formed in more depth. The second unit of this module looks at specific case studies, highlighting the way vertical relationships between fans are formed in those fan communities.

In the past, football was considered a sport mostly watched by white working-class men, but this is no longer the case. Today's football fan communities are very heterogeneous in nature, and there are a variety of ways in which fans consume football and live their fan experiences. For example, a study conducted among sports fans in the US has showed that football has a more diverse fanbase than other sports in the US (Silverman, 2022). Women's football, in particular, draws even more diverse crowds as the fan community

is more equally split among men and women: 46% of women's football fans are female while women only make up 38% of the men's football fanbase (Nielsen Sports, 2019).

Naturally, in diverse communities, it can be quite difficult for all individuals to always meet eye-to-eye on different issues. Despite the common goal of wanting to see the own football team succeed, this also happens in football fan communities. An example that highlights such issues very well are fan boycotts. Sometimes, football fans boycott games because they are not happy with a decision made by the football club or – as it is perhaps more often the case – the relevant football association in their country or on their continent. Sometimes a group of fans will propose a boycott as a protest measure, but not all fans follow suit. This can cause a divide in the fan community and result in various fans of the same team reacting differently and making different decisions. An excellent example of such a fan boycott that turned out to be divisive happened among the fans of Borussia Mönchengladbach men's team in 2015. In order to protest strict measures taken by the German Football Association after fans of local rivals FC Köln misbehaved and stormed the pitch during a match between the two in spring of that year, many fans felt they were punished for something they did not do. In fact, the German Football Association decided to shorten the ticket allocation of the Mönchengladbach fans for their next away match against FC Köln. During a meeting of different fan groups in Mönchengladbach, most of them decided that fans should not travel to the next local derby at FC Köln in September 2015 (MitGedacht, 2015). Many of the fans chose to stay at home instead of travelling to the important fixture. However, around 100 fans still attended the match (RP Online, 2015). It could therefore be said that these fans practically boycotted the boycott as they did not agree that the protest measure was going to be successful, and they felt it was more critical to support their team for the important local derby. Fan boycotts and the ways in which they impact on fan relations are discussed in more detail in the third section of this unit.

So, if fan communities are made up of very diverse opinions and this leads to fans disagreeing on significant matters, this warrants the question of how positive relationships are formed within fan communities so that community cohesion can be maintained. Dixon (2014) explains that the dynamics of fan communities are shaped by fans determining each other's authenticity. However, in this case, this is not an externally imposed category, but authenticity is measured through what Dixon calls peer to peer monitoring. That means rather than imposing external factors that determine whether fans fit into a specific category, the best people to determine fans' loyalty and identification with their fandom are other football fans. Moreover, Gibbons and Nuttall (2016) explain that for "English [football] fans, how they support their club is just as important as who they support" (p. 1). Although they look at football fans in England, this statement is also true for other football fan cultures across the world. At first sight, this may seem like yet another differentiation between the "authentic" and the "other". However, the difference is that this kind of categorisation comes from within the fan

culture. The primary aim of this module is not to apply external categorisations that explain fan motivations and paths into fandom, like the previous module did. Instead, the examples used in this module show how fan communities come together and form internal relationships despite being very heterogenous and diverse in nature – that means that fan communities are made up of individuals of different social classes, genders, religions, and political orientations, but who follow a common cause like supporting their football team.

A theory that explains why this can cause problems is the social identity theory. Social identity refers to someone's self-categorisation in relation to the group they are a part of ("we"). This is different from personal identity, which is the unique definition an individual may have for oneself ("I"). When alone or just with a friend or close family member, most people will act based on their personal identity (Leaper, 2011). However, when in a group, an individual's social identity is more prevalent. The following video explains the concept in more depth:

Source: Frank M. LoSchiavo. (2018). *PSY 2510 Social Psychology: Social Identity Theory* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8pAsOngE_b0

To put it simply, in football fan cultures, social identities sometimes overlap, and sometimes they clash as people come from diverse backgrounds. As there is usually a form of prejudice towards other social groups, this may also cause differing opinions among the fans. Within a fan culture, football fans often engage and organise in groups which align with their specific fan practices or consumption patterns – and social identities (e.g., Fillis and Mackay, 2013; Nash, 2001). These are sometimes organised in formal ways (e.g., officially registered fan clubs or Supporters Trusts) and sometimes in informal ways. This module highlights the horizontal relationships built within fan communities by showing how fans of women's football teams organise, communicate and form relationships across these different groups within the same fan culture (that means the fans supporting a specific club or country).

Exercise

Most of us navigate multiple social identities daily without realising that we are doing so! Reflect on your own social identities and list them. Think of social identities that you already had as a child, but also others that you may have acquired later in life through a group of friends or by picking up a new hobby or job.

2.1.2 Football fandom as a performance

The previous module explained how football fandom is closely linked to identity and the experience of emotions through ritual. At the same time, however, football fan communities are made up of people that come from diverse socio-economic, ethnic, and

religious backgrounds. An individual can dip in and out of these identities depending on the context. This can be described as "performing" this identity. This means that one person may have various identities (such as race, socio-economic background, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and affiliation with a football team), but these identities will be exhibited more dominantly in some environments and contexts over others, depending on whether the individual is at home with their family, at work, or attending a football game.

The theory of Performative Sport Fandom improves upon social identity theory to explain how sports fandom can be seen as a performance rather than reducing it to group-affiliation (Osborne and Coombs, 2013). We explained earlier how people become fans via socialisation or via making a rational, albeit often subconscious, choice. While it is true that these theories explain how the process of becoming a fan starts, an individual only becomes a fan when they start performing their fandom. Such performances are socially constructed, which means they depend on the context (e.g. the football stadium, home, the workplace) and the audience that are there to view, rate and evaluate this performance.

In the last module, it was also explained that football fandom is motivated and driven by the collective experience of emotions. Hochschild (1983) explains the display of emotions is also a social performance. She analyses the control of emotion according to specific rules and guidelines set by others. Her work mostly focuses on people displaying emotions in their workplace. The example she draws on are flight attendants, for whom the display of positive emotion is a substantial part of their job. However, this concept can also be applied to other areas of society that are determined by cultural rules (Hochschild and Machung, 1989).

Conceptualizing both fandom and emotions as performance explains why football fans disagree with one another, despite the fact that they share an identity (that of being fans of their team) and a common goal (to support their team and ideally see them do well). Disagreements arise over the question of how exactly this fandom should be performed and what qualifies as an authentic performance. Using the example of the boycott mentioned earlier, the key question is: Which is more important: standing up for their rights after perceived injustice or supporting the team in an important local derby? While there are, of course, other problems that can cause sour relations within a football fan community, especially when it comes to wider societal problems like racism or homophobia, disagreements over how fandom should be performed can be considered a common cause of conflict in football fan communities.

To summarise the last two sections: Football fan communities are very diverse in nature. While fans share a common identity, experience and – to put it in Bourdieu's terms – habitus (see Section 3.2.1), they sometimes disagree on the way in which fandom should be performed. In other words, this means just sharing an identity like being a fan of a

certain football club does not automatically lead to the building of strong horizontal relationships within a fan community. The final two sections of this unit focus on the question of how relationships are formed in fan communities by addressing reasons why football fans rally behind a common cause and the way in which internal communication in football fan communities works.

Exercise
Look back at your list of social identities that you compiled for your previous exercise. Try to think of a way in which you perform these identities. You can consider behaviour towards others, mannerisms, clothing, and activities tied to each of these identities.

2.1.3 Performances of football fandom and expression of (geo-)politics

This following section explains why performances of football fandom and the building of horizontal relationships within fan communities are often linked to (geo-)political mobilisation and expressions of political identity, as this is linked to all the case studies discussed in the second unit of this module. Space and locality are a recurring theme when football fans come together and to successfully form relationships and agree on a unified performance of fandom and emotions. It is normally the smallest common denominator among all fans. The ways in which national teams are tied to locality are self-explanatory: Supporting the national team is almost always a catalyst for national pride. In clubs, football fan communities are deeply rooted in local values and history. Despite the fanbases sometimes being spread around the globe, the football stadium remains an important space for performances of fandom, especially when trying to bring across a shared message of support or protest. Guschwan (2016) highlights the importance of the football stadium as offering "the chance for average citizens to gain a voice" (p. 388). This means that the football stadium is a public stage that is both local (through its situation within a city) and global (through those that watch the match on television or follow football online).

The notion that the stadium can be used as a venue to spread messages is, of course, not new. As Guschwan (2016) correctly points out, the stadium has historically also been used for purposes of political propaganda. The Nazis did so in Berlin in 1936 and most major sporting events in the United States promote nationalism through the centrality of the national anthem, the flag and sometimes the armed forces during breaks. The fact that sports stadia are a public stage is sometimes also used by football fans. Although football stadia are public and widely watched platforms, there are limitations and challenges to the use by fan mobilisations. Guschwan (2016) points out that free speech is often restricted. Banners and flags are usually inspected before they can be displayed at a game, and fans can be banned from the stadium if their behaviour is considered inappropriate. Moreover, ticket prices make the football stadium an exclusive place that not everybody can afford to enter. Nonetheless, based on his observations, Guschwan

(2016) makes a strong case for the stadium as a public political space that can be used as a platform by everyone:

> Despite its shortcomings, the football stadium consistently draws large crowds and fanatical media interest. It is a political space where individuals and marginalized groups can have a voice, regardless of any attempts to 'cleanse' sport of politics. The football stadium is just one political space, but a highly visible space for the expression of political identity and public opinion.

The stadium clearly remains an important physical space when it comes to the communication of interests. This is especially true for football fans, as the stadium is a place where community convenes on a regular basis, despite all differences that they may have.

Williams' (2012) analysis of the Spirit of Shankly (shortened to SoS) movement among Liverpool FC supporters is an excellent example that shows how football fans form relationships over a protest mobilisation while also discussing the importance of space. Williams (2012) highlights how local Liverpudlian values were crucial in the formation and organisation of the movement that started when the American investors Hicks and Gillet took over the Merseyside club in 2007. The new owners initially received a warm welcome from the supporters. The fans were hopeful in light of their "powerful rhetorics about 'heritage', 'community' and the 'family' [...] all seen as locally important" (Williams, 2012, p. 431). When these expectations were not met, a "proudly local Supporters' Union" (Williams, 2012, p. 433) – as opposed to an institutionalised Supporters Trust – was founded based on shared local values. Williams' research makes clear that the movement was built on the idea of having Scouse roots and

> coming from Liverpool was deemed by those involved in setting up SoS [...] to be the surest way of ensuring the new organization was organically rooted in the body politic of the city, its working people and the club. But it was also perceived as a way of responding to the unique selling proposition Liverpool FC offered its many non-local followers – cultural assimilation into the club's prized and acutely Scouse textures, cultures and traditions.

This movement is an example that raises interesting questions about how supporters' movements can and should negotiate tensions between the global and the local in supporters' mobilisations. The movement is based on the notion that it had authentically Scouse roots. Nonetheless, the movement enjoyed popularity among the global fan base of a club the has many fans that live further afield.

If you are interested in finding out more about this mobilisation and its rootedness in the local community, the following video provides a more in-depth portrait of SoS and interview with some of the members:

Source: SOS Liverpool. (2010). *Spirit Of Shankly - Liverpool Supporters' Union* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz7z0R9nY0k

Millward (2012) explores how SoS communicated online during its inception period by using a variety of different online communication channels, including e-zines, message boards and Facebook groups, meaning the supporter mobilisation took offline – at the stadium – but relations were also built through online communication. The importance of different modes of communication for building relationships within fan communities is further explored in the next section.

2.1.4 Different modes of communication to build horizontal relationships

As mentioned before, football fan communities are diverse. Moreover, they are also large – making them so-called imagined communities. The imagined community is a concept first introduced by Anderson (1983). In this type of community, the boundaries are unknown and impossible to clearly define. Anderson (1983) explains that imagined communities are a by-product of the establishment of technology and the print media. Although Anderson (1983) uses the concept to explain nationalism, it has since been applied to more localised spaces in an increasingly globalised world and is also frequently used in football fan research (see for example King, 2000; Sandvoss, 2003; Blackshaw, 2008).

Social interaction (Charleston, 2009) and social integration (Fillis and Mackay, 2014) are central to the experiences and performances of most football fans. The only way for fans to do this and build horizontal relationships in such a large, imagined community is through the usage of different, flexible modes of communication. Therefore, this final and longest section of the unit introduces a typology of different modes of communication and explains some of the particularities of communication in football fan communities, such as the development of fanzines and contemporary forms of online communication.

While face-to-face communication is, of course, still important among football fans, many communication tools that fans use on a regular basis are online. Kimmerle and Cress (2008) have come up with a typology of different modes of communication to help make sense of how people in general – not just football fans – communicate. This typology specifically discusses computer-based communication, which usually takes place online. However, to suit the purpose of discussing and examining football fan communications that take place both offline and online, we will expand on the usage of the typology to also include face-to-face communication and printed communications (e.g. fanzines can

be published online as e-zines or offline as paper-based magazines). Kimmerle and Cress (2008) argue that all modes of communication fall into one of the following categories:

1) One-to-one communication: This means that only one individual communicates with another. In the form of computer-based communication, this can include emails or direct messages via social media. However, when including offline-based forms of communication, then a face-to-face conversation will also fall into this category.

2) One-to-many communication: All communication that falls into this category is formulated by a single author and sender, but received by many. In terms of computer-based fan communications, online blogs are a typical example of one-to-many communication written by football fans. However, this categorisation can also be applicable to some forms of offline communication. As outlined later in this section, football fanzines used to exist exclusively in print only, and some fanzines are still printed at the time of writing. These fanzines mostly include articles authored by a single person, but read by many, which means that forms of offline communication can also be classed as "one-to-many" communication.

3) Many-to-many communication: In this form of communication, every participant of the conversation can post a message, and it is public to read for all other participants. Kimmerle and Cress (2008) argue that this form of communication usually involves a high degree of anonymity. This is certainly true for platforms such as online message boards, but also Twitter or Instagram, where users can post under a nickname. The lines, however, have become blurred on Facebook because this social platform requires members to sign up using their real name and may block profiles for not doing so.

Football fans have historically had well-organised forms of communication. This has especially been the case in the United Kingdom and Ireland, where football fans have created so-called fanzines as channels for easily distributable one-to-many communication. These fan-produced media outlets date back to the 1970s, when a group of former Cambridge University students started publishing a magazine called **Foul** (Haynes, 1995). The title was reminiscent of popular commercial football magazines such as **Shoot** and **Goal,** but its style was modelled after music fanzines of that period, which often criticised the mainstream media. Millward (2008) describes the early fanzines as having a "liberal voice" and "cultural resistance against the 1980s widespread conflation of football with the racist hooligan couplet" (p. 300). This means football fanzines grew out of a counter-culture that emerged in opposition to the mainstream and distanced itself from socially problematic and violent football spectators such as hooligans. The early fanzines were also there to be entertaining and included jokes or cartoons (Haynes,

1995), but they also discussed more serious topics such as criticising racism in football and the power structures within the football clubs that normally would not involve the fans or their opinions (Haynes, 1995).

Although the fanzines have been and continue to be most popular in the British Isles, similar fan-led publications exist in other countries. Moreover, internet blogs run by football fans have become another important communication tool, serving a similar purpose to the fanzines. However, like most forms of online communication, blogs are a little more interactive. Woodly (2008) explains that blogs can be extremely significant to their readers and in fact can influence their experiences of participation. Despite reaching a smaller audience than the mass media, "blogs help mobilize opinions, and set the agenda for political elites such as journalists and politicians while providing interested citizens with a new and surprisingly effective way to participate in politics" (Woodly, 2008, p. 109). Blogs provide a participation platform for ordinary people with an interest in the topics discussed. The internet has revolutionised counter-cultural or alternative fan communications as they have not only moved from being one-to-many communication channels that only allow communication to flow into one direction, but now give the readers the option to participate by leaving comments or even contributing their own blog posts. Woodly (2008) further finds that blogs have changed communications on American politics in two ways. First, through

> an effective conduit (although not the only one) through which opinions and analyses can percolate up, instead of always cascading down. The second kind of impact blogs have is not primarily on political debate, but instead on participants. Blog readers are able to contribute to dialogue with amateur authors that they have *made* legitimate and influential by and through their sustained readership. (p. 122)

That means the fan blogs also provide an opportunity for fans to engage in a meaningful dialogue.

Aside from fanzines and blogs, social media have become an incredibly important form of communication in contemporary times. Social media platforms clearly are many-to-many communications tools where everyone can participate in the discussion. Millward (2008) is one of the first academics to take a closer look at social online platforms used by football fans when he examines the message boards associated to football fanzines at the time. Over a decade later, online message boards appear to be a dying phenomenon though and most people have moved on to social media platforms. It is by no means surprising that football fans increasingly engage with each other online, considering how intertwined social media has become with civil society. A report compiled by social media marketing giants *We are social* and the social media management platform *Hootsuite* in

early 2018 found that 3.196 billion people were using social media worldwide – a growth of 16% from the previous year (Kemp, 2018).

It is not just the football fans that use social media to communicate with each other, though. Price, Farrington and Hall (2013) examine the other side of this relationship by looking at clubs that use Twitter to communicate with fans, finding that this tool has indeed become an increasingly popular way "to reach fans directly and convey their message without the at times, unwanted input and analysis of journalists" (p. 458). Despite some challenges (e.g. club's lack of control over the direct line of communication between fans and players), these forms of communication seem to have been embraced by most clubs. For the fans, this kind of unfiltered access is clearly an important step towards a more reciprocal relationship, which is explored in more detail in the third module of this course.

There are some downsides to football fan communications shifting to the online sphere though that should be kept in mind. We already discussed that football fan communities are diverse. This implies that they also include people of different ages and educational backgrounds. Not every football fan possesses the same amount of digital literary. The "gap that exists between those who can access and use (digital) technologies and information/content effectively, and those who cannot" is referred to as the digital divide (Amaral and Daniel, 2016, p. 162). This digital divide means that the usage of communication channels that are not accessible for everyone in the community can widen existing gaps in the fan culture. Age is one factor that impacts on this, but another can be through choice, as even young people decide to delete their social media accounts – as reported by Brait (2016) for The Guardian, for example. While the examples in the second unit of this module highlight more successful cases of online many-to-many communication tools by football fans, this is a downside to online communication and specifically many-to-many communication that takes place online. Nonetheless, Fan communications are clearly shaped by the development of digital technology. For that reason, fanzines have in some instances been replaced by other platforms such as blogs with a comment function, podcasts, and social media pages or accounts. This section shows how the capacity to use social media can be both enabling and limiting. The use of many-to-many communication tools has the potential to involve more fans in discussions and fans can use their knowledge of social media to engage in dialogue with football stakeholders that would normally be out of reach, like the football clubs themselves.

Exercise

Search for an online football fanzine or a fan-run blog on the internet. Browse around and read a few of the articles. There is no written element to this exercise, but this will give you an idea of how football fans communicate and how fanzines set topics for discussion in a fan community.

Unit 2.2

2.2.1 US sports and patriotism

The second unit of this module looks at different case studies to highlight how horizontal relationships are formed over shared values and identities. The first two sections look at the USWNT and discuss how supporting the US women's footballers has become an expression of alternative, new or liberal patriotism that is instigated by the players, but widely shared among the fans. The second case study looks are Barça Femení and discusses how an existing geopolitical movement has become the driving force behind the creation of a new women's football fan community.

However, before we can analyse how and why USWNT fans form relationships over a new form of patriotism, it is necessary to first understand the status quo in US sports. Sports, and especially sports spectatorship, in the United States are closely linked to expressions of patriotism. We discussed the role that (national) identity can play in creating and strengthening fan communities. This process also happens in the US, especially so as sports and American patriotism are deeply intertwined. For example, the national anthem is often played before sports matches – and that includes games on the club level, something that is practically unheard of in Europe. In some instances, the US military even performs during the half-time breaks of sports games. The video below shows an example of this, where a Marine Corps Platoon performs a drill during the half-time break of an American Football game:

Source: Houston Texans. (2020). *Silent Drill Platoon Performs at Halftime on Thursday Night Football | Texans vs. Colts* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xvXMEnwyYM

Such displays of nationalism motivate Thorson and Serazio (2018) to find out whether sports fandom in the US can be tied to political attitudes and positioning. In their study, they test several hypotheses that can all be narrowed down to the assumption that intense sports fandom can be linked to a politically more conservative orientation. Their study finds that sports fans are more likely to believe that individual effort (rather than social and cultural circumstances) lead to wealth and success, and they are also much more likely to support the military. Moreover, the study also finds that political conservatism can be associated with stronger opposition towards what is perceived as mixing sports with politics. Thorson and Serazio (2018) argue that this finding "may be partly attributable to the fact that, historically, most ideological challenges that have arisen in sports have come from left-leaning agitators" (p. 7). They refer to examples such as Tommie Smith and John Carlos showing the Black Power salute at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City and, more recently, many athletes following the example of American Football player Colin Kaepernick and kneeling when the US national anthem is played.

This study by Thorson and Serazio (2018) is interesting, as this means that sports fans potentially not only bond over a shared identity and identification, but also over shared (political) values. Moreover, this highlights that there is a personal bias present, as the participants in this study do not realise that they do so. In fact, they are more likely to see a mixing of sports and politics happening, when political messages come from the opposition and therefore, racial protests are considered mixing sports with politics whilst military showcases are not.

2.2.2 Supporting USWNT as an expression of alternative patriotism

The United States Women's National Team are without a doubt one of the most well-known and women's football teams with a very solid support in their home country. In fact, before Barça Femení started setting attendance records in 2022, the USWNT were the only women's football team in the world to surpass 80,000 viewers for a game – and they did so not only once, but twice. The first time, they surpassed this viewership figure for their 1999 World Cup victory over China (with an attendance of 90,185 people). They then did so for a second time at England's Wembley Stadium for the final of the 2012 Summer Olympics versus Japan (with an attendance of 80,203 people). Murray (2020) goes as far as to say that USWNT is the most influential team in all of women's sports. She supports this statement by explaining that before a hype ensued over USWNT and their successful 1999 World Cup, public interest focused on individual female athletes and usually not on women's teams.

> "[F]or the first time, the biggest star in the sports world was a group of women fighting in the trenches together. That in and of itself started to change the way people thought about athletes, and the way in which young girls though about themselves", she recounts. (Murray, 2020, para. 13)

This status as role models explains some of their popularity in the US. However, as this section will explain, in more recent years, supporters of the USWNT have also bonded over their shared experience of an alternative, more liberal form of patriotism that is situated in a stark contrast with the more traditional relationship between US sports and patriotism with their nationalist displays and military showcases.

In relation to the study discussed in the previous section, it is interesting to observe that the fan community of this team differs a little from the sample of American sports fans used for the research: USWNT tends to be more politically liberal. In 2019, USWNT Megan Rapinoe was openly criticised by the then US president Donald Trump, who went on a Twitter rant to question her patriotism and warned the openly queer and left-orientated football player "to never disrespect our country" (Martinelli, 2019). Rapinoe responded in an interview:

> I think that I'm particularly and uniquely and very deeply American. If we want to talk about the ideals that we stand for, the song and the anthem, and what we were founded on, I think I'm extremely American. [...] It doesn't mean that we shouldn't always strive to be better. I think that this country was founded on a lot of good ideals, but it was also founded on slavery. And I think we just need to be really honest about that, and be really open in talking about that, so we can reconcile that and hopefully move forward and make this country better for everyone (Martinelli, 2019, para. 6).

This exchange happened during the 2019 World Cup – and instead of accusing Rapinoe and her teammates of attempting to mix sports with politics, the USWNT fans rallied behind their superstar and embraced Rapinoe's form of unique patriotism as their own. For example, Foer (2019) writes:

> One of the reasons I've become so enamored with this team is that it has permitted me to feel an explosion of joy about the country, a sentiment that has felt especially alien these past few years. Earlier in the tournament, I went with my wife and two daughters to watch the team play in France. Before a game in Paris, we walked to the stadium in our jerseys, singing about our country, aware that denizens of the city might sneer at this display of unabashed Americanism. But at a moment when there are very good reasons to feel national shame, I felt the opposite, wearing that shirt. (para. 3)

While it needs to be mentioned that some critics of Rapinoe and her teammates went on to actively root against USWNT during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, hoping Rapinoe and her woke teammates lose every game (Hartman, 2021), it is evident that for Foer and others, supporting the USWNT forms a new or alternative form of American patriotism. They connect over supporting a team that stands for a more inclusive America that they feel proud to see represented by a diverse team like USWNT. Whether it is through vocally demanding equal pay for the players that they support, or through permitting themselves to be patriotic Americans in a political and historical context that had them feel ashamed of their nationality before: It can be argued that fans connect and constitute relationships not just with their identification with a football team, but over a set of shared (political) values that the fandom of this team represents.

The previous unit discussed different modes of communication that football fans use to build and strengthen horizontal relationships. The case of USWNT is particularly

interesting though, as this is not only fandom of a national team, but the United States are also a large country, which means that fans are spread out far and wide. This makes face-to-face communication much more difficult and a less efficient tool for building relationships among the fans. This, of course, does not imply that meaningful face-to-face interactions do not happen. On the contrary, the fans gathering around demands for equal pay in women's football during the 2019 World Cup and using both the streets of Paris (Bogage, 2019) and the stands at the final (Clarke, 2019) as platform is an excellent example of football fan communication. The previous unit discussed how the stadium has historically become a platform for fans to spread messages not only to other fans, but also the rest of the world, and this is exactly what happened here as well. Using football as a platform like this is an excellent example of many-to-many communication – the community of the many uses the public platform to spread their message. Their platform is enhanced not only by the presence of video cameras, but also of smartphones, with the videos being instantly uploaded to social media after the event. The latter is a good example of forms of offline and online communications mixing. Undoubtedly, a lot of fan communication and relationship-building in the USWNT also happens online, especially due to the size of the country and the size of the (imagined) fan community. The importance of online communication was, of course, only elevated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public online communication platforms always fall into one of two categories, they are either one-to-many communication tools or many-to-many communication tools. In the case of online news outlets and blogs, the two often merge through the function of the comment section. These forms of communication were widely used to discuss shared feelings over the USWNT, their relationship with patriotism, and the pride fans felt over the 2019 World Cup win. Writing for the news outlet "The Nation", Zirin (2019) comments on this phenomenon and calls USWNT "a social movement that happens to play soccer" (para. 2). Underneath the article, there is a critical comment, calling the political undertones of the players' messages "unsportswomanlike". Immediately, fans rallied in its defence. For example, one commenter muses: "Not sure it's competing patriotisms. More like Patriotism vs. Nationalism. Patriotism: love of country because of what it does. Nationalism: 'love' of country regardless of what it does" (Zirin, 2019, https://bit.ly/3BrvDu4). This exchange is a classic example of many-to-many communication – albeit behind a paywall, as in this instance one has to be a paid subscriber to the newspaper. In theory, however, anyone can subscribe and subsequently comment. The exchange is, of course, only one example for numerous similar exchanges, but the baseline is similar, the piece written by Zirin (2019) is a typical form of one-to-many communication, but by framing the argument in a specific context, it sets an agenda for further many-to-many communication. Through this form of communication, like-minded people defend their feelings and values that they associate with their support of USWNT and thus form horizontal relationships with other fans. These then, of course, may

turn into action on the stands or within the context of a match, such as publicly demanding equal pay for female and male football players.

Exercise
Online debates happen constantly and are ever evolving. Go on Twitter – you do not need to have a Twitter account to search for hashtags – and search for posts relating to a football team of your choice. Take note of what people are discussing. Are there any recurring themes? Obviously, the results of this exercise may vary whenever you complete it due to the fast-paced nature of social media.

2.2.3 Barcelona Femení: A women's team becomes part of an existing social movement

In his journalistic portrait of Barcelona's women's team – Barça Femení – Gastelum (2022) introduces the team as follows:

> This is not a women's soccer story. This is not about the boys vs. the girls. This is a fútbol story.
>
> This is a story that goes from dirt fields to world-record crowds, one about the planting of tiny seeds that sprouted to shatter glass ceilings. This is a story about dynasties and blueprints, about queens and pioneers. This is about the sacrifices that the next generation won't have to make, and about being the hero you never had. This is a story about how a culture crafted a club, and how that club brought that culture to the world. This is the point where a revolution becomes a dynasty. But mostly, this is a story not about what soccer has lost, but about what it is gaining back. (para. 1-2)

What happened prior was that Barça Femení had shattered attendance records in women's football not only once, but twice in 2022. Over 90,000 people went to see the women play at Camp Nou for their Champions League quarter- and semi-finals respectively. The rest of the story is – in comparison – unremarkable, Barcelona went on to lose to Lyon in the finals, a much smaller crowd of over 30,000 watched the game live in Torino. However, there is more to this "fútbol story", as Gastelum (2022) calls it. FC Barcelona, with the name in this case traditionally being associated with the men's team only, has played an important role in the movement towards Catalan independence for many years. With the slogan "Mes Que Un Club", which translates into "More Than A Club", FC Barcelona has taken both a symbolic and active role in this geopolitical movement. In

his analysis of the club's stance and role during the sovereignty process between 2012 and 2017, Pulleiro Méndez (2021) concludes:

> The official statements, the board members and the players that chose to speak have constantly exposed that they support the celebration of a negotiated binding referendum as a democratic solution for Catalonia, encouraging the Catalan and Spanish government to establish a process of dialogue and negotiation in order to find a peaceful solution to the political conflict. Even though the club or its members have never supported the independence of Catalonia, defending that it is a decision that the Catalan people must take via referendum, we should not be naïve either, since Barça has always been very close to the Catalan nationalist movement. (p. 11)

This means that while Pulleiro Méndez analysis shows that those representing the club itself have been cautious to outright speak in favour of Catalan independence, they have supported the movement and openly defended the right of the Catalan people to vote on a referendum. The fans, however, are not limited by the same constraints as the club officials. Pro-Catalan independence flags are a recurring feature in the stands, and supporters take the 17th minute of home matches to chant "independència" to mark the 1714 Siege of Barcelona and Catalonia's loss in the War of Secession. This example of Barcelona is particularly interesting, because there is a stark contrast to the earlier example of the SoS mobilisation at Liverpool. It is still a geopolitical mobilisation rooted in identity and local values. However, instead of being a movement against the club (SoS originated in protest to the ownership at Liverpool FC at the time), in Barcelona, it is a movement *with* the club and against the wider political context in Spain. The movement for independence in Catalonia became a little quieter during the pandemic, but in the second half of 2021 negotiations with the newly elected government in Spain were back on the table (Hedgecoe, 2021).

This context created a perfect storm for the 2022 Barça Femení fixtures. FC Barcelona was already considered more than a club. The fan community had turned it into a social movement and a community strengthened through the relationships formed by this, and the Femení were set to play arch-rivals Real Madrid in the Women's Champions League quarter-finals. The stadium became a public platform again, the choreography by the home fans spelt out "More Than Empowerment" with the Catalan yellow and red stripes and the symbol for female displayed on the other stands.

Source: DAZN UEFA Women's Champions League. (2022). *The Barcelona Anthem Rings Out Around Camp Nou For The Massive UWCL Clasico* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VYxsKQKAeyI

Gastelum (2022) describes the atmosphere at the match as "church, choir and communion". In the previous module, we discussed how the rituals associated with sports are often reminiscent of religious practice, and this is yet another example of this. The fact that 11 of the 21 players representing Barcelona that night were Catalans themselves further added to the symbolic power of the match and the choreography. At the same time, the chosen form of communication – a highly visual choreography using English wording rather than Catalan – also maximises the impact the message has when spread online through the mainstream media and social media.

Moreover, this fan choreography is also an excellent example of fans connecting over shared values and ideas to use their platform to spread a message to the rest of the world. However, there is a difference between this display and the equal pay chants of the USWNT fans. While the chants were no less meaningful, chanting can be much more spontaneous. The choreography, however, was well-prepared and needed to be planned well in advance. Every seat in the stadium received the right colour sheet to hold up depending on where they were located. However, all of this was only possible because Barça Femení are an integrated club – a women's team attached to one of the biggest men's clubs in the world – and as such they are part of an existing infrastructure and an existing community of fans. Complex choreographies have been a staple of men's football in Europe for many years. Barcelona's positioning in the Catalan independence movement further elevates the importance and symbolic value attached to Barça Femení. What the fans have then done is to integrate their own message of female empowerment into this existing infrastructure, and they have cleverly used the existing platform and the existing relationships to maximise on the impact of that message.

2.2.4 Forming horizontal relationships through the shared communication of values

In the first unit of this module, we have learned that some fan movements or protests can turn out to be divisive through looking at the example of the fans of Borussia Mönchengladbach's men's team. However, the key in this conflict was not a disagreement over the values or the cause, but rather the form of communication to show the discontent with the regulations imposed by the German Football Associations. Fans did not agree over the boycott of an important match being the optimal way to communicate this message. In its essence, this is a disagreement on the question of how football fandom should be performed, which is more common than a disagreement over why fandom should be performed.

The examples from women's football discussed in this unit differ significantly, fans formed relationships and strong community cohesion over a shared set of values (alternative American patriotism and the intersectionality of Catalan national identity and female empowerment, respectively), they also found a shared mode of communication that not only worked for them, but also considered how these messages are spread and create an impact via social media. This is undoubtedly more efficient in the context in which Barça Femení operates though; through their status as an integrated club, their situation in an ongoing geopolitical and social movement and the existing fan base with established communication channels, the fans were able to optimise their outwards communication for the 2022 Champions League matches. This setting does not exist at every woman's team yet, though. Even the USWNT cannot compare when it comes to their level of organisation and communication, simply due to the lack of localisation of their imagined community and lack of an existing fan infrastructure the way it already existed in Barcelona.

Moreover, one of the established communication tools from men's football such as fanzines are not widely used in women's football yet. However, if the fanzines in men's football allow fan communities to strengthen internal relationships over alternative or counter-cultural views, then the same can be said of the two examples we looked at in this unit. Both case studies involved fan cultures that position themselves in opposition to the mainstream culture of US/Spanish nationalism.

Despite there being some differences, the examples discussed in this module clearly show that similar to the way it has already happened in men's football, fan communities in women's football form horizontal relationships not just through the support for their team, but through a set shared of values which include, but are not limited to nationalism or patriotism.

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