

1 Introduction

1.1 Problem formulation

Traditionally, football and football consumption have been both a male domain and a celebration of masculinity (cf. Dunn, 2014; Dixon, 2013a; 2014; Mewett & Toffoletti, 2012; Pope, 2013). However, in recent years, the European football milieu has experienced a more evident shift towards women as football consumers, and in present times, women's football is growing in popularity. The increasing presence of women as players, participants and among the television audiences at major competitions demonstrates the vast development of the popularity in the private and public arena. This rise of women's football, its increasing media presence¹ and the consumption of football as mass entertainment by men and women alike affects gender discourses, identity constructions and negotiations throughout Europe. Additionally, it fosters questions about male and female patterns of football consumption relative to motivation (cf. Fink, Trail & Anderson, 2002), identification (cf. Wann & Branscombe, 1995) and emotional investment, but also about the impact of women's involvement in football on existing gender relations and power structures (cf. Sülzle, 2011).

Football is an understudied research topic for international scholars – particularly within gender studies. While women's involvement in football actually dates back to the early twentieth century in several European countries, it is currently undergoing much upheaval. Despite the prominent place of football in society and its importance to so many people, social scientists have paid very little attention to women in football (Wann, Melnick, Russell & Pease, 2001:17). The lack of research on and about female sport fans is unfortunate because Wann et al.'s (2001) studies revealed the consumption of sport is a major element of contemporary life. Attempting to situate the meaning of women in football in Europe, first one comes across an abundance of historical or commercial literature drawing on quantitative analyses on spectator figures in women's football.

However, perceptions, meanings and understanding cannot be measured quantitatively and it is therefore salient to represent the role of women's football and female fandom as phenomena of practice by taking into consideration the interpretive communities.

In previous research, the main deficits lie in the one-dimensional approaches used to understand the structural complexities of the *feminisation of football in Europe*. This means that most studies have focused only on one aspect, i.e. the history and the experience of female football fandom or on comparative research in fandom addressing issues of gender – foremost in the United Kingdom and the United States. Hence, the past results are non-comparable as they exclude the ways in which women's movement in football emerges to challenge gender stratifications. This thesis focuses therefore on the three distinct phenomena: *women's football*, *female fandom of men's football* and *gender identities*.

The growing popularity and increasing importance of women in football both as players and spectators justify an investigation into their role in the European footballing community. In summarising the state of research the following points are displayed:

¹ E.g. in 2013, the UEFA Women's EURO broke attendance records with a total of more than 200,000 spectators attending matches (UEFA, 2014:3).

- (1) Little has been written on women in football from a distinctly European perspective with the significant exception of Williams (2013) or Magee et al. (2007).
- (2) Football, as a producer of a particularly dense and widespread discourse, offers distinct and promising perspectives for very significant observations with regard to issues of community and homogeneity across Europe.
- (3) Women's football and female football consumption have been only marginally discussed in sociopsychological and economic studies focusing predominantly on attendance figures.

This sociological investigation of women's football as physical activity, as performance and spectacle for consumption produces new knowledge about the evolution of gender dynamics in Europe. It also illuminates similarities and differences in the various countries, predominantly in Scandinavia where ideals of "egalitarianism, social democracy, internationalist solidarism and gender equality are linked" (Sawyer & Habel, 2014:1).

Scandinavian women might experience very different patterns of inequality to women belonging to nations in other parts of the world (Day & Thompson, 2004). Among the three Scandinavian countries Denmark, Norway and Sweden, "Denmark was arguably the earliest *trailblazer* in the world of women's football beyond the immediate confines of the country" (Markovits & Rensmann, 2010:172) and since 2008, football is the most popular Danish team sport, for both men and women with approximately 21 per cent of the Danish National Football Association's members being female players (DBU, 2015; UEFA, 2015). Also, in the European football arena, Denmark's growth of female players leads up to eleven per cent (in the past five years) and is therefore one of the countries with the highest amount of female football players (UEFA, 2015).

By exploring women as football consumers and the significance of the role of women's football in a European context, this study draws on research carried out in Denmark in which the author examined the role and meaning of football consumption of women through a sociological lens. The study produced rich material about different aspects of women's experiences in their personal form of men's football consumption and the women's contributions to a European football dialogue.

1.2 Identification of background, objectives and research questions

The leading questions are:

- To what extent do women consume football?
- How to identify the backgrounds, motives, interests, expectations and practices of female audiences and fans?
- What are their roles and their identification processes in the existing football and fan cultures?

The objective is, first, to develop new knowledge and understanding about *the impact of football on gendered identity construction and negotiation* – in both the *performance* and the *consumption of football* – *how these female fans contribute to a European dialogue, the gender-specific experience and acting out of fandom, and the intersection between gender and national/European identity.*

The second objective is to study the role of gender in football and fan cultures with regard to *gender-specific patterns of cross-cultural communication and identification.*

The third objective is to investigate how the recent increase in women's presence in football across Europe has caused discourses to emerge and evolve, to assess the place of women's football in European football discourses, and to explore to what extent the feminisation of European football has modified audience perception and interpretation of the sport.

Based on the overall leading question and given that socialisation processes in football influence sociocultural habits, preferences and opinions, studies 1–5 were conducted in order to answer the following questions:

- How and why do women develop a long and often lasting relationship with a football club? (Article 1, 2, 3, 4)
- What does it mean to be a female fan in an environment traditionally dominated by men? (Article 1, 2, 3, 4)
- How do women comply with or resist fan cultures traditionally dominated by men? (Article 2, 3, 4)
- How do women use fandom for their own *gendered projects*²? (Article 1, 2, 3)
- How do women position themselves in the discursive field of European football fans? (Article 1, 3)
- How can research on fandom incorporate historical perspectives? (Article 2, 3)
- How can women's football be promoted in national football associations? (Article 5)

² Connell (2000:465) stated "gender is not merely some configuration that gets articulated at a given point of time. Gender is a project: The idea of a project expresses the intentionality of social conduct and the way conduct is organized and coordinated through historical time, either by an individual person or a collectivity."

Studying the level of women's football in Danish and European football discourses and exploring the potential of women's football to attract female and male fans across Europe, which could elicit cross-cultural identification, will investigate these questions. In sum, this Ph.D. produces original knowledge about gender constructions in the field of football, and patterns of feminisation in a traditionally male dominated social practice, and gender-based influence on attitudes to national and European identity (FREE³ research proposal – SSH-2011-5.2.1).

The following questions are formulated:

- Do girls and women in Denmark follow football, identify with clubs and join the local, national and transnational fan communities? (Article 4)
- What are the influences of gender and socialisation as well as the backgrounds, experiences and identities of female football consumers? (Article 4)
- How do women adapt to a 'man's world'? (Article 4)
- What are women's roles in this 'male environment'? (Article 4)

Furthermore, it is significant to explore how women across Europe feel about football and its multiple implications, how football shapes identity dynamics and perception patterns in contemporary Europe. As women are also part of their specific culture and context it is crucial to consider their opinions. The following questions are formulated:

- What are the beginnings, developments and activities of a club's female fans and the influence of the club's history on its supporters? (Article 2)
- What are the aims, motives and activities, as well as the role of a women-only football group with regard to the influence of the club's history? (Article 2)

The preceding reflections show that significant others play a decisive role in consuming football or becoming football fans and, therefore, dominant in the socialisation process. Thus, the following questions are relevant:

- Who are the significant others involved in becoming a football fan? (Article 3)
- When did women initially follow football? (Article 3)
- What social events or moments were significant for women to support a particular football club? (Article 3)

³ Based on the interdisciplinary research project 'Football Research in an Enlarged Europe' (FREE) financed by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme for research, technological development & demonstration under grant agreement No. 290805.

The influence of competitions hosted by FIFA and UEFA is developing and the desire to close the existing development gap between the national associations is of high priority. The number of female football players in the European football associations has increased in five of the most influential nations for women's football in Europe; Denmark, Norway, Sweden,⁴ England and Germany – all nations where international tournaments play a significant role. In those countries, women's football is considered as one of the fastest growing team sports, predominantly in Norway and Sweden, women's football is viewed very positively which leads to the assumption that the press should be interested in the promotion of women's football, i.e. via publishing interviews, results of league matches, match previews (UEFA, 2015:32). Besides the influence of significant others and events, the process of socialisation into fandom is further reinforced by the media landscape. However, in the past, the media coverage for women in football has been scarce. The framing of women's football in the media landscape is considered by asking:

- How does women's football coverage in Denmark, England, Germany, Norway and Sweden look like, in general, due to their success at large international events such as the FIFA Women's World Cup Germany 2011™ along with local sporting events? (Article 5)
- How can football organisations frame football to promote women's football? (Article 5)
- What are the future directions of the mainstream media development within women's football? (Article 5)

Women invest – like their male counterparts – a significant amount of time, energy and financial resources for their club. This raises the question of what forms of loyalty emerge and to what extent do women fans express their identities across the Danish border? Specifically, it is relevant to investigate:

- Does the football expertise of Danish women transfer into football consumption and fandom? (Article 1)
- To what extent are women integrated in the European fan community? (Article 1)
- What are the women fans' backgrounds, motives, interests, expectations and practices? (Article 1)
- Do girls and women in Denmark follow football, identify with clubs and join the local, national and transnational fan communities? (Article 1)

⁴ Sweden has the largest number of professional players among all European Football Associations. Nearly 50% of their 423 players play outside the top domestic division *Damallsvenskan* (UEFA, 2015:16).

Table 1 summarises the thematic localisation of each article within the research project and provides a chronological overview about the order of publications in chapter five.

Table 1. *Overview of the articles*

No	Author(s)	Title	Journal	Theme
1	Mintert, Svenja-Maria Pfister, Gertrud	The FREE project and the feminization of football: the role of women in the European fan community.	Soccer & Society 16(2–3), 405–21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FREE research context and objectives • Identification with clubs and fan communities on local, national and European level
2	Mintert, Svenja-Maria Pfister, Gertrud	The Female Vikings, a Women's Fan Group in Denmark: Formation and Development in the Context of Football and Fan Histories.	The International Journal of the History of Sport 31(13), 1639–55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Portrayal of the fandom movement • Motives, activities and the role of a women-only football group
3	Pfister, Gertrud Mintert, Svenja-Maria Lenneis, Verena	You are not born a fan. You become one: the socialization of female football fans in Denmark.	Women's Football: The Game and its Fans. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (Accepted)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socialisation into fandom • Role of significant others and significant moments
4	Pfister, Gertrud Lenneis, Verena Mintert, Svenja-Maria	Female fans of men's football – a case study in Denmark.	Soccer & Society 14(6), 850–71	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview, numbers of female supporters, reasons and patterns of football consumption
5	Mintert, Svenja-Maria	Women's Football in the public media: Good practice from England, Germany and Scandinavia. Women, Sport and Media coverage in Europe.	Sport et Citoyenneté. Femmes, Sport et Médiatisation en Europe. 89–105	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's football media coverage • Best practices for improving the media coverage

1.3 Structure of the thesis

As this thesis is embedded within a wider research project, a conceptual chapter (chapter four) of the entire study introduces the collection of publications (chapter five). Within these notes the author refers to the relevant methodology and focuses on transnational fandom as a partial study within one paper. Structurally based on an introduction, theory, methods and result section, each research paper in this thesis contains a discussion of its individual findings contextualising various studies. Given the individual foci of the diverse papers, a succinct theoretical underpinning is represented.

The first publication focuses on a detailed framework to examine the subjectivity of transnational fandom and the interest levels, backgrounds, gendered expectations as well as the involvement of female fans located in Denmark who travel abroad for consuming football. The article explores the women fans' collective memories of European football events and how these women are integrated in the (inter)national football fan community. The purpose of this article is to gain insight into the socialisation processes, gender differences, self-constructions and identities of 'hot' fans experiencing football as a collective event. Drawing on theoretical concepts of socialisation this chapter illustrates how female loyal fans of a specific football club consume football both at home and abroad. The interviews provide insights into how women participate in the transnational encounters and dialogues and to what extent they contribute to a shared social practice.

The second publication scrutinises the beginnings of the female football fan culture in a wider context, the significant socialisation processes of women becoming fans and the extent to which they live out their fandom. Drawing on both contemporary theories of sociology including feminist theory and socio-history, the theoretical framework reflects broader social elements that may contextualise the phenomenon of women's fandom from a macro, meso and micro level. Following the theoretical considerations, a description of the research design and data collection is illustrated.

The third research paper displays the socialisation into fandom, influential events and significant others in becoming a female football fan. It provides a clearer picture of typical situations, environments and processes that initiate and intensify the women's meaning of fandom.

The fourth article is a case study about female fans of men's football in Denmark and centres upon the integration of women fans in the male dominated football culture.

The fifth paper investigates the media landscape of women and football identifying five European nations that have 'good practices' in certain respects for formulating future systematic, competitive and sustainable endorsements.

Four of the five articles contain a method chapter in which the corresponding findings and procedures are described. A concluding summary outlines and reflects the central results and expresses recommendations and future perspectives.

1.4 Summary

The first chapter has given a general introduction to the objectives and main contributions of the thesis. It has set the scene and outlined the scope of the thematic area. The identification of background, objectives and research questions of this work have been listed and a structure of the thesis described. The intention is to explore the topic of women in football as a sociological phenomenon. Therefore, social theoretical considerations and approaches as well as theories to gender are relevant.

It is to assume that the absence of women from sports fandom literature largely results from how fandom is theorised and therefore, the next two chapters deal with an overview of the relevant literature (chapter two) and theoretical approaches (chapter three) to reveal the experiences and football consumption patterns of women.

By doing so, this Ph.D. study genuinely adds new knowledge to the following fields: Football in general, European football, women's football, men's football and fandom.