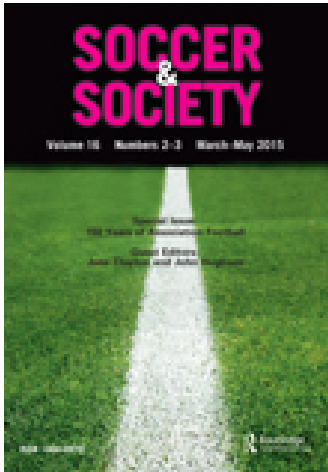


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The FREE project and the feminization of football: the role of women in the European fan community

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This article presents questions, methods, theories and early results of a study which is part of the conglomerate *Football Research in an Enlarged Europe* (FREE). A sub-project of FREE deals with the ‘feminisation of football’, by exploring the role of women as football players and fans in a European context. To answer whether, and to what extent, women are members of the European fan community, we interviewed dedicated female fans of Danish men’s football teams about the ways they support their clubs and their interest in, and identification with, clubs and teams in other countries. The interviews revealed that most women were interested in football on a European level and that many even travelled to football matches abroad where they enjoyed not only the matches, but also the live atmosphere. The interviewees combined their loyalties to their clubs with an interest in, and an identification with, foreign teams.

Introduction

This paper presents issues, questions and results of a study which was conducted in the context of the interdisciplinary collaborative research cluster *Football Research in an Enlarged Europe* (FREE).¹ The aim of the FREE project is to explore the role of sport, in particular football, in the creation of Europe as a cultural space and to find answers to the question of whether football encourages dialogues among Europeans and, if so, whether these dialogues contribute to a common identity of populations who have been enemies, or at least competitors and rivals, for centuries. The scholars participating in FREE assume that football fans, in particular the members of transnational fan communities, share loyalties to their chosen clubs as well as experiences, values and identification processes. In this way, they stimulate European-wide football dialogues and contribute to a construction of ‘Europeanness’ which may extend beyond the game.

These hypotheses are supported by numerous and various developments, for example, media representations and patterns of consumption. These indicate that football has become a transnational venture which changed not only the game, but also the forms of football fandom and identification with stars, teams and clubs. Scholars, among them Sandvoss, Giulianotti and Robertson, draw our attention to the ‘transnational character’ of star players and legendary Champions League clubs, such as Manchester United, FC Barcelona or Bayern Munich, clubs that attract global communities of supporters and form “self-invented virtual diasporas” as they

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are forged from the global dispersal of club-focused images and products, and from the voluntaristic identification of individuals with club-related symbols and practices'.² Studies reveal that those clubs are 'supported' by large communities of transnational audiences, who enjoy the excitement of the game, not least through the opportunity of BIRGing (basking in reflected glory).³ Besides an object of identification, football has also become a source of self-assurance and a means of self-representation. For hard-core fans, football is an intrinsic part of their identities as well as an important issue of communication.⁴ Fans choose their club(s), not only because of geographical proximity, but also, often unconsciously, according to the values and images that the various clubs embody and present.

Based on these insights and hypotheses, the FREE project explores whether, how and why football can be a source of a single European identity. A special focus is placed on 'transnational' fandom and on the community of national and international supporters of European clubs, which encourage the exchange of information, the development of knowledge and the formation of a European identity which is centred on football, but which may shift to other areas, including culture, politics or everyday lives. Besides providing an overview of fandom in Europe, each research group within the FREE project focuses on specific aims, tasks and topics. Currently, the participants in this project are exploring these hypotheses by means of media analyses, surveys and interviews in their respective countries.

The research group in Denmark: exploring women's football and fans

Up to now, football research has been a predominately male domain. Male scholars conduct research on men's football and on male fans. However, without a gender perspective, their discussions and results seem to be universal; referring to 'mankind', which seems to include women, but, in reality, makes them invisible. In consideration of these deficits of previous football research, the participants of FREE projects decided that gender should be an issue in all projects and that the group in Denmark should focus particularly on women's football and female fans in all the countries involved. Although this article explores the role of women in the European fan community, we provide some information about the development and situation of the game, and its players, as the history and current situation of women's football may have an impact on the development of women's fandom, due to potential connections between playing and consuming football.⁵

Football is a game invented by and for men. Until 1970, the national and international football federations did not support women's football teams and games. Since then, the number of female players and tournaments, as well as the skills of the players and the quality of play, has increased considerably. In recent decades, women's football seems to have experienced a breakthrough and, according to information provided by FIFA, 29 million girls and women play football worldwide, 12% of youth players are female and the numbers of female footballers continues to increase.⁶ In line with the mounting performance levels of female players and teams, the number of audiences and fans has also increased. An example is the TV coverage of the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany. This programme reached an in-home television audience of 408 million people, and a total of over 5900 h of coverage were aired worldwide.⁷ The numbers of players, and the interest of large audiences in women's top matches, provides clear evidence of the global acceptance of women's football. However, there are still huge differences between the

popularity of men's and women's matches, and we do not know much about the crowds who support women's teams. Not only the male and female fans of women's football, but also female fans in general, form a group which is as yet, insufficiently researched.

Despite an increasing interest in women and football, the numbers, motivations and forms of consumption of female football fans remain underresearched. Scholars conducted interviews with female supporters revealing a high degree of discrimination in the fan stands, but also showing that women found ways and means to deal with resistance and enjoy fandom. The available studies focus on the situations of female football supporters in few countries, for example, in Germany, UK, Italy and Spain, although a European perspective on women's football and fandom is lacking.⁸ The FREE project aims at closing this research gap, thus making female football consumers and supporters more visible.

Aims and questions of the Danish researchers

The task of the Danish scholars of the FREE project is to investigate the 'feminisation of football', with a focus on female members of the national and European football and fan communities. Main research questions are whether and, if so, how women participate in the diverse European football cultures as managers, coaches, players and, in particular, fans. This includes the development and situation of women's football in various European countries, the conditions and migration of female players, and the media coverage of women's football events. A specific focus is placed on female football fans and how they conform to, or resist, fan cultures dominated by men, how they use fandom for their own gendered projects, and whether they position themselves in the discursive field of European football. Surveys and interviews conducted not only in Denmark, but also in the other participating countries, provide answers to these questions.

The aim of this article is to explore and understand women's transnational football experiences and dialogues, as well as their role in the European supporter scene. The main questions are whether and to what extent women are integrated in the European fan community, and what their backgrounds, motives, interests, expectations and practices are. This paper focuses on female fans in Denmark, and aims to improve our current knowledge and understanding of their participation in football consumption, in general, and in European football events and dialogues, in particular.

Women and fandom – background information

The answer to the question of whether or how women participate in European football depends primarily on the number of female fans and the involvement of women generally in communities of football supporters. In an article entitled 'Female fans of men's football – a case study in Denmark', the authors provide information on gender ratios in various fan communities, for example, among media users and spectators at stadiums.⁹

Available Danish studies yielded similar results to research in other countries. Damsgaard et al. revealed that 15% of the members of official fan clubs in the Danish top football league (Superligaen) were female.¹⁰ In an internet-based survey of Danish fans, Havelund et al. discovered that, of the 1775 respondents, only 9%

were women.¹¹ The extensive exploration of available information conducted by Pfister, Lenneis and Mintert has revealed to a similar result: around 10% of dedicated Danish fans are women. The authors also emphasize that ‘football plays a different role in men’s and women’s socialisation as well as in their lives’ and that it provides different ‘uses and gratifications’ for the two genders. ‘Football consumption – live or via the mass media – is an arena for doing gender, in particular for acting out hegemonic masculinity in the community of mostly male fans’.¹²

Surveys in various European countries, such as Germany and the UK, confirm the marginalization of women among fans, in general, and in football stadiums, in particular. Pope states that ‘female fans are estimated to make up around fifteen to nineteen percent of all Premier League fans and around one-quarter of fans at some clubs’.¹³ Depending on the type of involvement and the context, the percentage of female football supporters in Denmark ranges from 10 to 30%. Whereas quite a large percentage of women watch football on TV, the number of female fans in the stadium is only around 10%. In the fan stands, women form an even smaller minority. Women’s interest in the game also varies depending on their nationality. In Germany, women seem to be more interested in attending football matches than in other countries. At some Bundesliga matches, the percentage of women among the crowds is around 20–30%.¹⁴ However, attending a game does not necessarily reveal the degree of fan involvement; some women in the stadium may be dedicated fans while others may just accompany their partners or friends. For many people, both men and women, the game is a form of entertainment which offers opportunities for various ways of ‘doing gender’.

The aforementioned numbers reveal that a large percentage of women do not, and cannot, participate in European football dialogues because they simply do not follow football, either at a national or European level. However, it is still debatable whether the small group of active female fans is interested in, or even identifies with, teams of other countries.

Theories and methods

The questions raised and the hypotheses put forward in this article derive from various theoretical concepts which provide insights into, and an understanding of, the gender differences among fans, as well as on fandom, in general, and its meaning for groups and individuals in a mediatized and globalized world.¹⁵ We claim that interest in football is acquired through socialization processes, embodied and embedded in self-constructions and identities, and performed in real or virtual interactions on and off the football ground. Fandom is constructed, gendered and adopted in cultures and societies as well as in individual lives.¹⁶

Based on the information and theoretical approaches presented above, we constructed questions, developed guidelines and conducted an interview study with 12 Danish female football fans. The interviews, carried out between March and August 2013, provided space for individual narratives of specific football-related issues. The interviewees were approached during football matches and through snowball sampling, with initial respondents providing names and contact details of other members of our target group.¹⁷ Information about their private lives, education and professions is provided in Table 1, which is based on a short questionnaire filled in by all subjects. All interviewed women whose ages ranged from 26 to 59 years were recorded as being dedicated fans of a men’s football team since childhood.

Table 1. Socio-demographical data of the interviewed women.

Interviewee	Age	Fan of Danish team	Fan of European team	Fan club member	Occupation	Civil status
Amalie	52	Lyngby BK	Roma (Italy)	Former	Nursery nurse	Married, 2 children
Bente	37	Lyngby BK	Platanias FC, Crete (Greece)	Yes	Paramedic	Married
Caroline	30	Lyngby BK	Liverpool FC (England) FC Bayern Munich (Germany)	Yes	Office assistant	Single
Ditte	31	Lyngby BK	Fútbol Club Barcelona (Spain) Borussia Mönchengladbach (Germany) Swansea City Association FC (Wales, but playing in English league)	Yes	Administrator (Lyngby BK)	Engaged
Emilie	34	Lyngby BK		Yes	Pharmacist	Married, 2 children
Frederike	37	Lyngby BK	Borussia Dortmund (Germany)	Former	Head of Communications	Married, 2 children
Grethe	26	Brøndby IF	Liverpool FC (England)	Yes	Office assistant	Co-habiting, 1 child
Hanne	29	FC København	Liverpool FC (England)	Yes	Media boss	Single
Ida	59	Boldklubben 1893	FC Bayern Munich Borussia Dortmund (both Germany)	No	Teacher	Widowed, 2 children
Johanna	39	Danish national team		No	Teacher	Single
Luna	32	FC København, FC Nordsjælland	Fútbol Club Barcelona (Spain) Arsenal (England)	Yes	Marketing manager	Co-habiting
Nanna	37	Danish national team	Manchester United (England) FC St. Pauli (Germany)	No	Media secretary	Married, 2 children

Among the interviewees was one fan of the Superligaen team *Brøndby IF*, one fan of *FC Nordsjælland*, two fans of *FC Copenhagen* and six fans of the 1st Division club *Lyngby Boldklub*. One woman supports the lower division team *Boldklubben af 1893* and two fans support only the Danish national team. Seven of the 12 interviews took place in the fans' homes, four at the university's sports department and one at the Lyngby BK clubhouse. They lasted between 42 and 69 min and were conducted in either Danish or English, according to the participants' preference. The texts were digitally recorded and transcribed in the language of the interview, with pseudonyms used to safeguard the interviewees' anonymity. The interview transcripts were coded and analysed in the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti.

Results

According to Giulianotti's 'taxonomy of spectator identities in football', all 12 interviewees were 'hot' fans, meaning that they were loyal supporters of a football club and, in the case of our interviewees, since childhood.¹⁸ Although all informants were dedicated fans with a high degree of attachment to their clubs, their experience of football, as well as their fan biographies and ways of expressing or living out their loyalty, were different. The interviews contained various narratives on becoming and being a female football fan in Denmark. They also revealed that being a dedicated fan of a Danish club was compatible with an interest in, or identification with, clubs of other European countries. Ten of the 12 interviewees supported a foreign club, most of them clubs in the Premier League (England), Bundesliga (Germany) or Primera División (Spain). One Lyngby fan also followed *Platanias FC* of Crete, playing in the Greek Super League.

These double or even multiple loyalties raise the question of how fans balance their interest in, and support of, different clubs and how they combine their Danish fan identities with an identification with a club of another country. Does the support of their club at home differ from their membership of a European fan community?

Four of the 12 interviewees have played football in clubs, and others had gained experiences with the game in unorganized settings. All of them had a clear focus on men's football, despite the proliferation of women's football in the country and their own previous involvement in the game, none of the interviewees followed a women's team.

Female fans in Denmark – narratives

Being a female fan in Denmark

Six of the 12 interviewees were supporters of Lyngby BK and all, according to their narratives, were dedicated and authentic fans, deeply involved with their club, teams and players. Four were current, and two previous, members of the official fan club the *Blue Vikings*; two were also members of the *Female Vikings*, a women-only fan club founded by hard-core female fans with the aim of creating a space, in which women can be fans and follow their own agenda.

The assumption that women with an interest in, and experiences of, football follow not only men's, but also women's, football is not supported by our findings. A typical example of the opinions of the interviewees is the statement of Caroline who played football for 15 years. She said: 'I do not watch women's football, I think

it's boring'. Other women agree with Caroline, describing men's football as 'exciting' and women's football as a 'different game'. Ida, who started to play as a child, followed the matches of the women's European Championship in Sweden in 2013 on TV and stated that 'I must say that I actually look at it as another game. When men play football, it is one game, and when women play, then it's a different game'.

The interviewees described and expressed their loyalty to their club and its men's top team in various ways. Caroline, a *Female Viking*, confessed that as a Lyngby BK fan, she had 'trouble supporting the Danish national team', not least because she did not like many of the national team players. She could not remember the last time she supported the Danish team. Emilie, president of the *Blue Vikings*, shared Caroline's opinion. She, too, was not very interested in the national team because she could not identify with the players: 'For me, football is a lot of emotion, and the national team is just a collection of random players'. She revealed to watch games of the Danish national team when she '[didn't] have anything else to do', but she did not consider those games as 'something she bother[ed] about'. Some interviewees remembered that they loved to watch the national team as children, not least because the football was so much better than the football played by the teams of their clubs. Ditte, currently employed by Lyngby BK, confessed that she had 'loved watching matches of the national team', but as she increasingly identified with Lyngby BK, she lost interest in football at national and international levels.

Interest in football and attachment to a club can be regarded as the result of socialization processes. All informants stated that their enthusiasm for football had started in childhood when they attended football games with their parents, siblings or other relatives. Frederike was particularly lucky because she could often accompany her father, a TV reporter, to the stadium. Later, she played football for Lyngby BK, became a coach of a girls' team and a member of the *Blue Vikings*.

During their teenage years, most of the interviewees went to away matches by bus. Today, six of the women interviewed regularly attended their club's matches, at least when the team played at home in Lyngby. However, when they had the time, they also travelled to away games. Ditte, a paramedic, reported that she worked shifts and if she did not have a television nearby, she listened to the radio broadcast because she did 'not want to miss anything'. The women interviewed could not imagine missing a single match. Ditte explained her attachment to the team as follows: 'I can't be more interested. On Sundays we [Lyngby fans] start at one pm and end at nine o'clock here in our house, so I do not think I can become more interested in football and more committed'.

All fans of Lyngby BK interviewed were deeply attached to, and identified with, their club. Being a fan of Lyngby BK was part of their self-concepts and identities, as well as an important aspect of their daily routines; for many of them, the club is an intrinsic part of their lives. Bente even got married at Lyngby stadium wearing the club's football jersey, thus football plays an important role in, and for, the social relations of football followers and supporters. Fan groups are cliques of people with the same addiction, communities of practice which focus on the support of a team. By joining the *Blue Vikings* and founding the *Female Vikings*, some of the interviewees even institutionalized their bonds with the club.

For many women, attending football matches with husbands, relatives or friends was a way of spending time and sharing a common interest with people they were attached to. Amalie, who lived close to the Lyngby BK stadium, usually attended every home game in the company of her husband or her parents. All members of

her family were lifelong supporters of the club. Both her 25- and 28-year-old sons were active members of the *Blue Vikings* and involved in different fan activities (i.e. creating banners, writing newsletters, composing songs).

Whereas some Lyngby BK fans – especially members of the *Blue* and the *Female Vikings* – were only interested in the games of their team, other interviewees also supported the Danish national team. Johanna, for example, was six years old when she began to support the national team. She soon knew the names of all the players by heart and the results of the games. For her, football was more interesting at the national level because of the better quality of the matches.

All 12 interviewees agreed that football played an important role in their everyday lives. For 54 years, 59-year-old Ida has supported the local team Boldklubben af 1893, which currently plays in the Second Division. Around 20 years ago, the mother of two sons (now 28 and 27 years old) watched her children playing football, and emphasized in the interview that for her it was ‘the excitement of the live game and the experience of being there and cheering’. Although she reported that she enjoyed supporting her local football club, she stated that she would also like to watch other games, but did not like to go to a football match on her own. The last time she went to *Parken* and watched an FC Copenhagen match together with her eldest son, she was very enthusiastic about it and enjoyed being among thousands of spectators.

For the last 19 and 16 years, respectively, Luna has cheered for the Superligaen clubs, FC Copenhagen and FC Nordsjælland. Luna is a dedicated fan of both clubs and talked at length about football. Her ‘split loyalty’ does not seem to affect her enthusiasm for both teams. She told us that when she was not watching football, she discussed it with her father, sister and male colleagues. In addition, she posted updates and comments about match reports and results on Facebook. She subscribed to FC Copenhagen’s fan club magazine, *Brølet*, and read all kinds of football publications.

Another dedicated fan was Grethe, a member of *Brøndby Support Club*. Since the age of 16, she has been involved in various fan activities from preparing tifos (pre-game celebrations) and sewing flags to collect money for the fan club. Currently, she was taking a ‘baby break’, but could not wait to take her small child to the stadium.

Despite the differences between the interviewees, with regard to age, social background or personal circumstances, they shared a common interest: their love of football and long-term loyalty to a football club. This dedication to football distinguishes the interviewees from the majority of the female population and makes them part of the community of predominantly male fans. This raises the question of whether or how the fans interviewed extend their fandom beyond borders, i.e. whether or how they support clubs and teams in other countries.

Danish fans and their interest in football abroad

Female fans of foreign teams

Ten of our interviewees reported that they supported football clubs in other countries. Among the most popular clubs named were Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich (both Germany), Liverpool FC (England) and FC Barcelona (Spain). All of them followed their teams on television. Ida, for example, supported two clubs:

Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund. She followed important games, such as the semi-finals and finals of the Champions League, on television and enjoyed seeing 'her clubs' win, for example, in 2013, when they defeated the two Spanish clubs FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, respectively. Two months after the German Champions League final, she followed the last round of the 2013 UEFA Super Cup final and stated that 'it was great for Dortmund to win against Bayern Munich'.

Eight of our interviewees shared their interest in football with their partners, which meant that they could spend 'quality time' together attending football matches at the stadium and watching football on TV. Some fans were able to combine their private life, commitments as a fan and work. For example, Ditte, employed as an administrator at Lyngby BK and engaged to one of her colleagues cheered for Lyngby BK, but at the same time supported FC Barcelona (Spain), Borussia Mönchengladbach (Germany) and Swansea City Association Football Club (Wales, but playing in the English Premier League) – at the time of interview, managed by the former Danish footballer Michael Laudrup. Ditte explained that her boyfriend was a long-time ardent fan of Borussia Mönchengladbach, 'Barça' and Swansea, therefore, she considered it natural to watch the games with him. However, she stated that she 'does not suffer with them as much as with Lyngby, and never will do'.

Five of the interviewees reported that they regularly followed news about players and transfers of teams outside Denmark in online and print media and two of the women interviewed (Bente and Hanne) engaged with their fandom in such a way that their lives focused on following and supporting football clubs in Denmark and abroad. In particular, Hanne, 29 years of age and single, was totally absorbed by football, in particular the English Premier League. She had been a supporter of Liverpool FC (UK) from the age of 15 and member of their fan club since the age of 19. On television, Hanne primarily watched the English Premier League and all matches televised on the channels she could receive. Additionally, she used various Premier League, Liverpool FC, sport live score and TV2 sport applications on her mobile phone in order to receive news about the football league in England. Luna was involved in football to a similar degree to Hanne. She supported four different football clubs (FC Copenhagen and FC Nordsjælland in Denmark, FC Barcelona in Spain and Arsenal in England) and, therefore, followed the Danish, Spanish, English, Champions and European leagues, as well as the Danish national team and the European and World Championships. According to her, she watched football on TV more or less daily, 'when possible almost every match', which meant that her TV football consumption might add up to four matches per day. She said that 'football in general is very important' in her everyday life. Although Luna had no children, she might be tied up with work, and in this case, she recorded the matches and football highlights of her teams.

Danish 'travelling fans'

Seven interviewees travelled to various European football matches on a more or less regular basis. Nanna, for example, supported Manchester United (England) and FC St. Pauli 1910 (Germany). She admitted: 'I used to travel a lot to watch football', mainly with her husband who supports the same teams.

Many of the interviewees were involved in more than one footballing community, and there were various ways of practising 'international fandom', such as by following teams in the media or by attending matches abroad. Lyngby fans Amalie,

Bente, Caroline and Frederike used the opportunity to explore football in Europe during their travels. Besides being members of a Danish club, they watched football matches abroad and met supporters, some of whom had become friends. Bente was a fan of Plataniás FC, a football club based in Plataniás, Chania (Crete) and playing in the Greek Super League. The wedding of Bente and her husband took place at the Lyngby stadium, where the couple celebrated their marriage with their football friends. A second celebration took place in Crete at the Plataniás FC stadium. Bente explained in the interview how she combined tourism and fandom:

I follow the club because we like to travel to Crete, in particular to the cities of Chania and Plataniás. There, we became fans of the local football club which has been successful in the top league in Greece. That's where my friends are.

During her travels to Greece, Bente met numerous football supporters, establishing a social network supporting Plataniás FC. The joy of a match day in Plataniás is linked to socializing with, and talking to, more fans, as well as meeting locals outside the fan community.

Other interviewees also travelled to matches abroad and even integrated their passion for football into their holiday activities. Amalie, for example, attended a national game between Norway and Denmark in Oslo two years ago with her husband. She revealed that they also regularly visited Rome, where they attended football matches and '[tried] to experience a different atmosphere'. The couple went to Rome for the first time on their honeymoon five years ago, and were planning future trips to Italy which included the opportunity of attending football matches.

Luna emphasized the importance of large football audiences and the feeling of being part of the crowd. In 2012, she attended an FC Barcelona match at *Camp Nou*, the club's home ground, and was overwhelmed by the atmosphere during this game. Luna was sure that she would continue supporting her foreign team in future. She was confident that her attachment to this club was something that would never change and she hoped to watch more games in Barcelona 'just because it is a greater experience to sit at Camp Nou with 100,000 supporters than at FC Nordsjælland's stadium with 5,000 supporters'.

Most women talked in their interviews about experiencing a sense of togetherness when being at the stadium. Hanne is a fan of Liverpool FC. She even managed to travel to England to watch a game of her club in 2012. She mentioned in the interview that she 'would go to Liverpool matches more often' if she lived in England. She also described how she had established bonds with other Liverpool fan club members in Denmark. During her journey to England she bumped into a group of Liverpool supporters from Odense, Denmark, whom she did not know well, 'but now', she said in the interview, 'we regard them as friends'. For her, having a group of Liverpool fans as friends was a means of showing solidarity with her club.

Frederike, too, shared with us stories and experiences as a 'travelling fan'. During the 1992 UEFA European Football Championship, Denmark played against the Netherlands. Frederike attended this game and was impressed by being among 37,450 spectators in the stadium in Gothenburg: 'I went there; it was so crazy that I got tickets for it; even for the final'. In the extra time of the semi-final, Denmark defeated the Netherlands, and Frederike remembered: 'This was such a long match, and we were not many Danish roligans [peaceful fans of the Danish national team], only a few. My favourite player at that time was Flemming Poulsen, and when he scored, I think that was like "wow". I was so happy!'

As a teenager, Frederike wrote to the German football magazine *Kicker*, presenting herself as ‘Danish football girl looking for pen friends in Germany’. She got numerous answers, travelled to North Rhine-Westphalia to visit one of the ‘candidates’ and to watch a Borussia Dortmund match. From then on, she was a loyal Borussia fan and even cheered for the German team, when they played against Brøndby IF at the Brøndby stadium. She remembered that the security guards tried to deny her access to the Borussia fan stands because she was a Danish girl and, therefore, supposed to cheer for the Danish team, but she argued with them: ‘I am a fan of Borussia, I am wearing my Borussia shirt, why can’t I support my team?’ Once they had entered the stadium, some Borussia fans took her by the hand, elbowed their way through the crowd and finally got her to the Borussia fan stands.

Around 20 years ago, with other Danish football friends, Frederike attended a legendary match between the two famous Old Firm clubs in Glasgow, Rangers and Celtic, in the Scottish Premier League. However, one of her best experiences as a football fan was a match at Anfield between Liverpool FC and Manchester United. All Liverpool FC fans were standing and singing the club song, *You’ll Never Walk Alone*, which she only knew from television. She remembered that she ‘got up cheering together with the other fans and felt great to be part of this event’. However, Frederike was also reminded of the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, when she observed an overcrowded stadium. Although this experience had been a bit ‘scary’, Frederike was sure that she would be a Liverpool fan forever.

The narratives of the travelling fans revealed that they had experienced unforgettable moments attending matches of their dream teams and that they had developed a high measure of loyalty to their clubs abroad, although they could only sustain long-distance relationships. In addition, being a fan of a prestigious club provided attention and reputation at home. As Frederike mentioned in the interview, being a Liverpool FC fan was ‘some form of image-making’.

Women following Danish star players working abroad

Interest in, and identification with, foreign teams can be triggered by fans identifying with players. One way of developing an attachment to a club abroad may be to follow and support a Danish player in one of the European teams, and to transfer this interest to the club for which he is playing.

Three of our interviewees followed – more or less intensively – footballers who played in another country, with two of them (Frederike and Grethe) cheering for the Danish player Daniel Agger (Danish talent of the year 2005), who played for Brøndby IF from 2004 until 2006, before joining the Premier League team Liverpool FC. Grethe stated that she ‘liked the fact that he was modest, down to earth, quiet and calm’. She did not think that he was ‘snobbish’ and believed that ‘he still cares for what is happening in Hvidovre’, Agger’s home city. She described his attitude as having ‘his feet on the ground’. This example shows that a successful Danish player can divert the interest of Danish fans and create an enthusiasm for foreign clubs, in this case Liverpool FC.

Hanne’s favourite player is Liverpool FC’s Steven Gerrard. The versatile midfielder is loved by fans of the club; he is captain of Liverpool FC as well as frequent captain of the English national team. Gerrard is portrayed in the media as ‘a true leader and a tireless runner with outstanding vision’.¹⁹ Hanne said that she liked him in particular because:

he grew up, learned to play and has always played in the same club; no matter how many offers he has received from big clubs, he has always stayed in the same club. He really is where his heart lies, loyal and a great ambassador for all the fans and kids who are fans, the city's children. He has integrity and I think that's incredibly refreshing in a world where they [footballers] are traded for a lot of money and often lured with big games and trophies.

A further example of a transfer of interest in a player to the support of a team is provided by Lyngby BK fan Caroline. She regularly watches games of the Champions and English Premier leagues, especially Liverpool FC and Bayern Munich (Germany). A few years ago she got attached to Bayern Munich because she discovered the French football player Franck Ribéry. Last year, Caroline bought an expensive ticket through a semi-legal agency and travelled to Munich to watch a Bundesliga match in the Allianz Arena. For Caroline, it was a great experience: instead of going to a Lyngby BK match in the Superligaen with 1300 spectators, she watched a match between Bundesliga teams along with 69,000 spectators. She said that she knew that 'Germany [was] well known for the atmosphere in their league matches' and her experience lived up to her expectations. She did not care that the ticket was overpriced: 'I think that's totally fine; it was worth every penny. I was a hundred percent in the stadium'.

The majority of the interviewees were interested mostly in the cult teams of the European football scene. They named various reasons for supporting one of these teams, for example, a player who attracted their attention because he previously played football in Denmark or because he was a star with positive attitudes and, therefore, a subject for identification. There are many ways of following and supporting footballers from a distance; some women combined their fandom with their passion for travel, while others watched live games on television in bars together with friends and other football fans.

Discussion and concluding remarks

The point of departure of the interviews presented in this article was the outcome of an investigation into female football fans in Denmark.²⁰ This inquiry, along with the results of existing fan research in a Danish, as well as European, context, revealed a considerable underrepresentation of women among football supporters. The number of female fans, moreover, decreases with the intensity of fan commitment. Among the hard-core fans who dominate the fan stands and dictate behaviour, women form a tiny minority.²¹ The small number of female fans and the hierarchical gender order among football supporters gave reason to assume that women were not interested in European football and were not members of a European football community.

However, the results of this study show that those women who develop an interest in football can be as dedicated and loyal as their male fellows. They share with male fans their football-related emotions, habits and practices, such as the consumption of football through the mass media, their attachment to their club(s), their attendance at matches and their forms of support – by cheering, singing fan songs and participating in choreographies in the stadium. Several interviews reveal that women invest a high amount of passion and commitment in football consumption. The results also demonstrate the interviewees' loyalty by consuming and putting on display various club-related paraphernalia and clothing, such as scarves or jerseys, as an expression of their identities and a demonstration of their fan loyalties.²²

The specific attire, mostly in the colours of the club, reinforces a feeling of identity and belonging, which is an intrinsic feature of fandom.

The women in our study integrated fandom into their everyday lives and supported their teams, enjoying ‘the feeling that they are important and “belong”’.²³ Fandom offers them the opportunity to experience a sense of cohesion and community. Several interviewees talked about this attachment and their deep conviction that football was a part of their lives, that the other fans were something like a family, and that their club was their second home.

Like male fans, our interviewees, too, spent a considerable amount of time and money on football consumption, both at home and abroad.²⁴ All women interviewed attended the games of their team as often as possible, and most of them were willing to use their leisure time to work for their club, for example, in preparing choreographies and tifos, including stomping, jumping, shouting, singing, drumming, waving banners or lighting fireworks. Many statements in the interviews highlighted the degree of passion and commitment that could be put into football consumption.

Some of the fans interviewed not only supported their Danish club, but also travelled abroad and were willing to pay for ‘overpriced’ tickets just to be able to see their ‘dream team’ play. In the narratives about their ‘foreign clubs’, the fans showed a genuine emotional attachment, emphasizing the exceptional circumstances of their first encounters with these clubs and the special relationship that arose with their ‘cult team’, leading to a deep bond with it. However, the forms of their attachment and the strengths of their ties, as well as the ways of acting out their fandom, differed considerably. One of the fans celebrated her wedding at the Lyngby BK stadium and a second time with her football friends in Crete; other interviewees used their holidays to experience unforgettable football matches in the awe-inspiring environments of packed mega stadia. For these fans, the competition between the teams and the outcome of the match were still important, but they also enjoyed the event itself, the entertainment surrounding the match and the atmosphere in the fan stands.

The fans interviewed experienced football consumption as a collective event. Most of them shared their interest with their partner, many also with other family members and/or friends. Some interviewees described how ‘significant others’, mostly fathers or brothers, ‘introduced’ them to football in their childhood. These findings are supported by other studies which emphasize that fandom is adopted through various processes of socialization.²⁵ Theoretical concepts of socialization provide an insight into the mechanism of acquiring habits and tastes, for instance, an interest in football. Sandvoss emphasizes that football in general, but a specific club in particular, is integrated into the fans’ identities and used as a means of self-assurance and communication.²⁶ Being a fan of a specific team is an important and significant message to other fans, as well as to their social environment in general.

However, our interviewees are not just football supporters; they are women and, thus, also confronted with the prevailing norms and ideals of femininity in society. Lorber emphasizes the importance of gender categories in societies and understands gender as a ‘binary system of social organisation’, which is embedded in subjectivities, presented in social encounters and ‘embodied’.²⁷ Gender researchers agree that gender is not something we are or we have, but, according to Rakow, ‘something we do and something we think with, both a set of social practices and a system of cultural meaning’.²⁸ Sport in general, and football in particular, is a concept and a practice which systematically identifies and ‘naturalises’ differences, including diversities between women and men. There is men’s football, the passion of our

interviewees and women's football, which they do not acknowledge. In the interviews, the participants downplayed femininity and emphasized that true fandom was gender neutral. However, their narratives revealed that there were gendered expectations which female fans had to meet, such as being *football ugly* by wearing jeans, t-shirts and flat shoes, showing their dedication through working for the club or demonstrating their football expertise. Many interviewees shared their fandom with their partners, which may also contribute to their acceptance within the fan community.

The football-related aims, activities and practices of our interviewees, along with their commitment, correspond with the ideologies and behaviour patterns of female fans in other countries. Our results are consistent with the findings of English and German studies, such as those by Pope and Sülzle, which focus on female fans of men's teams in their respective countries.²⁹ Studies in Norway have revealed that 'contemporary football provides a space in which the meanings of partisan fanhood are more focused on local than on national conditions and realities, whether 'the local' means the physically immediate surroundings or the location of a club located elsewhere or in a different country'.³⁰ Our interviewees combined loyalty to their Danish clubs with an interest in, and support for, various clubs in Europe, in particular the large cult clubs such as Manchester United or Bayern Munich, and also small clubs like Platanius FC.

It is important to emphasize, however, that all the fans interviewed, particularly the Lyngby BK supporters, can be regarded as loyal and true or in Giulianotti's term 'hot', fans of their clubs who would never follow a rival club in Denmark.³¹ This attachment does not rule out an interest in a club of another European country, and in this way, most of our interviewees are members of a European football scene. However, it must be added that some interviewees regarded attending a football match abroad as a highlight of their holidays, the atmosphere in the stadium apparently playing a more important role than the game itself. Few interviewees seemed to be addicted, in the same way as many men, to a permanent flow and exchange of information about their teams.

This study offers insights into the experiences and practices of female fans in Denmark and reveals that dedicated female fans may participate in a European supporter scene. However, the ways in which they act out this fandom may differ from the habits and practices of male fans. In addition to this research, the surveys conducted by the members of the FREE project will provide quantitative data and extensive information about male and female football fans in different European countries and the results will allow more extensive insights into European football fan cultures, including gender differences among the fans of the various countries.

Notes

1. For more information, visit <http://www.free-project.eu/Pages/Welcome.aspx>.
2. Giulianotti and Robertson, 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Game – An Introduction to the Anthropology of Football', 551; Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television and Globalization*, 2003.
3. Compare Cialdini et al., 'Basking in Reflected Glory: Three (Football) Field Studies', 1976.
4. Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television and Globalization*, 2003.
5. Mintert and Pfister. 'The Female Vikings, a Women's Fan Group in Denmark: Formation and Development in the Context of Football and Fan Histories', 2014.

6. <http://www.fifa.com/mm/document/footballdevelopment/women/01/99/95/93/03wfdvelopment.pdf>.
7. FIFA Women's World Cup Germany 2011 Television Audience Report, 2011, 18.
8. Cere, 'Witches of Our Age: Women Ultras, Italian Football and the Media', 2003; Crawford, *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture*, 2004; Crolley, 'Lads will be Lads', 1999; Coddington, *One of the Lads: Women Who Follow Football*, 1999; Gosling, 'Girls allowed? The Marginalization of Female Sports Fans', 2007; Pope, "'Like Pulling down Durham Cathedral and Building a Brothel': Women as 'new Consumer' Fans?", 2011; Sülzle, *Football, Women, Masculinities: An Ethnographic Study in the Fan Stands*, 2011; Llopis Goig, 'Female Football Supporters' Communities in Spain: A Focus on Women's Peñas', 2007; see also the contributions in Toffoletti and Mewett, *Sport and its Female Fans*, 2012.
9. Pfister et al., 'Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark', 2013.
10. Damsgaard, *It's Not About Winning. Book about the Danish Football Supporters*, 1997.
11. Havelund et al., *A Study about the Danish Supporter Culture – Main Results*, 2006.
12. Pfister et al., 'Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark', 2013, 15.
13. Premier League website 2010; Williams 2001; cited in Pope, "'Like Pulling down Durham Cathedral and Building a Brothel': Women as 'new Consumer' Fans?", 2011, 473.
14. Fürtjes, 'The Feminization of the Stadium Audience in Football', 2012.
15. Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television and Globalization*, 2003.
16. Connell, *Gender: In World Perspective*, 2009; Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender*, 1994.
17. Goetz and Lecompte, *Ethnography and Qualitative Design in Educational Research*, 1984; Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 2012.
18. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs', 2002, 34.
19. <http://pavineetang.hubpages.com/hub/10-most-loyal-football-players>.
20. Pfister et al., 'Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark', 2013.
21. E.g. Pfister et al., 'Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark', 2013; Pfister and Lenneis, 'Gender constructions and negotiations of female football fans. A case study in Denmark', 2014 (forthcoming).
22. Derbaix and Decrop, 'Colours and Scarves: An Ethnographic Account of Football Fans and their Paraphernalia', 2011.
23. Giulianotti and Armstrong, 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Game – An Introduction to the Anthropology of Football', 1997, 6.
24. Roose et al., *Fans: Sociological Perspectives*, 2010, 183.
25. E.g. Skrobanek and Jobst, *Fans and Sozialisation*, 2010; Dixon, *Consuming Football in Late Modern Life*, 2013; Pfister et al., 'Female Fans of Men's Football – A Case Study in Denmark', 2013.
26. Sandvoss, *A Game of Two Halves: Football, Television and Globalization*, 2003.
27. Lorber, *Breaking The Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*, 2005, 6.
28. Rakow, 'Rethinking Gender Research in Communication', 1986, 19.
29. Pope, "'Like Pulling down Durham Cathedral and Building a Brothel': Women as 'new Consumer' Fans?", 2011; Sülzle, *Football, Women, Masculinities: An Ethnographic Study in the Fan Stands*, 2011.
30. Hognestad, 'Long-Distance Football Support and Liminal Identities among Norwegian Fans', 2003, 100.
31. Giulianotti, 'Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs', 2002, 33.

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