'To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team': Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans

Rory Magrath
Southampton Solent University, UK

Abstract

Association football (soccer) fans are becoming increasingly liberal in their attitudes towards homosexuality. However, the continued presence of homosexually themed chanting – normally interpreted as evidence of homophobia by footballing authorities – has received little academic attention. Through 30 semi-structured interviews with 30 male football fans of various English football clubs, this article uses McCormack's model of homosexually themed language to investigate the prevalence, triggers and interpretation of this chanting. It highlights that, despite unanimous acceptance of homosexuality, all but five participants engaged in homosexually themed chanting. This was predominantly facilitated by the nature of sporting competition and matches involving rival clubs. Alongside a variety of perceived weaknesses, fans interpreted these chants as a way of attempting to benefit one's team. Accordingly, this research highlights a discursive gap between fans' inclusive attitudes and their practice of chanting homosexually themed language inside football stadia.

Introduction

Association football has traditionally been an institution hostile towards sexual minorities (Hughson and Free, 2011). Through its historical association with physical strength, skill and power, professional football has promoted an orthodox form of masculinity. Yet

Corresponding author:
Rory Magrath, School of Sport, Health and Social Sciences, Southampton Solent University, East Park Terrace, Hampshire, SO14 0YN, UK.
Email: RoryMagrathPhD@gmail.com

while the media report that contemporary football remains homophobic (Jones, 2014) and football fans continue to harbour homophobic attitudes, a growing body of research documents that football is becoming an increasingly inclusive space for sexual minorities (Magrath, 2015, 2017; Magrath et al., 2015). In their pioneering research on British football fans, Cashmore and Cleland (2012) found almost unanimous acceptance of the presence of openly gay footballers – with most also claiming that homophobia has no place in football.

Despite this increasingly inclusive environment, homosexually themed chants – that is, any football chant or song utilising implicit or explicit epithets related to gay people or same-sex desire – persist in at least a minority of football stadia. Cashmore and Cleland (2011: 421) describe this as 'counterintuitive and paradoxical': the convergence of declining homophobia among football fans alongside the continuance of problematic, oft-described homophobic, chanting is an intriguing social problem – particularly given the growing interest in the political motivations and effects of football chanting in other aspects of society (e.g. Poulton and Durrell, 2016).

In order to investigate this phenomenon, this research draws upon interviews with 30 male British football fans who regularly attend English football matches, the majority of whom have witnessed and engaged in such chanting – despite espousing positive attitudes towards the presence of openly gay men in football. Using McCormack's (2011) model of homosexually themed language, I examine the frequency of homosexually themed chanting at football matches, and outline instigating factors behind its presence. I show that homosexually themed chanting is predominantly facilitated by the intense nature of competition and club rivalry. In highlighting the role of cultural lag with respect to these fans' attitudes, compared to their use of language, I argue that these chants need to be recognised within the broader football context and attention needs to focus on institutional sporting structures in addition to the attitudes of individual fans.

Football, Fandom and Homophobia

The emergence of football as an organised sport in the UK can be traced to the mid-19th century, when representatives from several football clubs met to codify the rules for the regulation of association football (Taylor, 2008). The influence of the industrial revolution was particularly significant, as it was thought sport instilled the qualities of discipline and obedience of labour necessary in dangerous occupations (Rigauer, 1981). Workers were required to sacrifice both their time and their health for the sake of earning the wage needed to support their dependent families. Sport taught boys this value of self-sacrifice (Raphael, 1988).

Sport also played an important role in 'masculinising' boys at this time (Anderson, 2009). Given emergent concerns about homosexuality among adolescent boys, men had to demonstrate their heterosexuality by aligning their gendered behaviours with an extreme form of masculinity and disavowal of femininity. Participation in early modern sport was epitomised by violence, and sport was described by Dunning (1986: 79) as a 'male preserve'. This reinforcement of masculinity through sports like football also led to near-compulsory heterosexuality through the creation of a homophobic sporting culture (Anderson, 2005).

Thus, any alternative sexual minority was violently rejected: as shown with the example of Justin Fashanu. The first black footballer to command a £1m transfer fee, Fashanu suffered vilification from his manager, fans, fellow players and members of his own family when he came out in 1990. Following the downfall of his football career, he committed suicide in 1998 following allegations of sexual assault in the USA. Fashanu became symbolic of the fractious and incompatible relationship between homosexuality and football at the time. This homophobia was not limited to football, but argued to be a social and structural issue within competitive sport across the western world (Raphael, 1988).

Decreasing Homophobia and the Changing Nature of Football Fans

The experiences suffered by Fashanu reflected broader cultural attitudes towards gay men at the time he came out. Close to the end of the decade, homophobic attitudes hit an apex in British culture: in 1987, 75 per cent of the UK population believed that same-sex sex was 'always wrong' or 'mostly wrong' (Clements and Field, 2014). However, the early years of the 1990s saw the liberalisation of attitudes towards gays and lesbians – a trend which has continued ever since. In the 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey, just 22 per cent of those sampled believed same-sex sex to be 'always wrong'.

A growing body of research has documented how these increasingly liberal attitudes are also present in contemporary football culture. Given that sport has traditionally been slower to embrace gay men than wider society (Butterworth, 2006), Cashmore and Cleland (2012: 377–378) present what they describe as 'a new and surprising image' regarding the overarching inclusivity of football fandom. Ninety-three per cent of 3500 participants indicated that a footballer's sexuality is irrelevant to their value on the team – their performance on the field is the only significant factor. Many participants resented the assumption of homophobia levelled at football fans, claiming that they are frequently perceived as scapegoats for the lack of out gay players.

In his analysis of contemporary football, Cleland (2016) also documents inclusive attitudes towards homosexuality on football fan message-boards. Here, the small numbers of posts containing homophobic sentiment were challenged by other users. Similar themes were found in analyses of football fan responses to Thomas Hitzlsperger's coming out in 2014 (Cleland et al., 2016) and Anton Hysén's coming out in 2011 (Cleland, 2014). Media responses to these players are a marked positive shift from the reaction to the last openly gay footballer, Justin Fashanu. However, while the absence of openly gay professional footballers is perceived as an issue, it does not appear to be the result of active homophobia (Anderson et al., 2016). Indeed, the only overt homophobia documented in current British sports culture is that of homophobic language and, specifically, chanting.

Chanting, Football and Homosexually Themed Language

While a range of academic evidence exists documenting a significant and sustained shift towards one of inclusivity in football (Magrath, 2015, 2017; Magrath et al., 2015), the issue of crowd chanting in football remains. The role of chanting and singing songs

inside football stadia is unique and with a long history. Armstrong and Young (1999: 181) write that '[p]layers are always seen as employees of the fans, and consequently the fans always understood it to be their duty to instruct them' – normally through supporting one's team or ridiculing the opposition. In most cases, this can be broadly categorised into three broad narratives of chants and/or songs: (1) supporting, celebrating and encouraging one's team towards success; (2) confirming collective identities as 'fans' of a particular club; (3) vilifying match officials or opposition personnel for thwarting their team's success (Collinson, 2009). Clark (2006) argues that the humorous nature of chants is as much an attraction to fans attending football as the match itself.

However, limited research has attempted to interrogate the complex purposes and interpretation of football fans' chanting – particularly concerning homophobia. Homophobia in football fan culture has traditionally been maintained through various discursive epithets and chants, typically against those who fail to comply with the masculine 'norm'. As Giulianotti (1999: 155) acknowledged, '[s]upporters aim epithets such as "poofter," "fanny" and "nonce" at the allegedly weak masculinity of players and officials'. Pearson's (2012) ethnography of the various identities of British football fandom observes the commonality of terms such as 'gay', 'queer' and 'sausage jockey' to insult other teams' fans and players. Such terms or chants, according to Caudwell (2011: 126), 'suggest male heterosexuality as the highly prestigious norm and gay men's sexuality as the trivialised "other"'. Yet most research is limited to understanding football chants in the creation of fans' belonging and social identity to a particular club (Armstrong and Young, 1999; Clark, 2006).

Despite this lack of research, significant attempts have been made by football's key stakeholders to combat homophobia in British football in recent years (see Magrath, 2017). The most prolific organisation doing this in UK football currently is the equality and inclusion organisation, Kick it Out.[1] Originally introduced in 1993 in an attempt to tackle widespread racism (Giulianotti, 1999), it is now responsible for tackling all forms of discrimination – including homophobia. The banning of 'homophobic chanting' in 2007, and increased attempts at pursuing discriminatory comments inside stadia and on social media (see Cleland, 2016) are evidence that Kick it Out has had some impact in ensuring a more gay-friendly football environment in British football. Other organisations, including FARE – Football Against Racism in Europe – have also adopted proactive approaches to combating homophobia internationally.

Indeed, in May 2016, the world's global governing body, FIFA, punished seven[2] national footballing associations following homophobic chanting in a range of international matches with various sanctions, including financial penalties, bans on certain stadia and, in extreme cases, playing matches without spectators. In the UK, although attitudes towards sexual minorities are more progressive than these countries (Frank et al., 2010), a Stonewall report claimed that 'anti-gay' chanting has been witnessed by 70 per cent of British football fans (Dick, 2009). But this is a problematic statistic: there is a seeming disconnect with the prevalence of such chants and the increasingly inclusive nature of football fans. While the presence of such could seem to undermine the inclusivity thesis, another perspective is that the understanding of these chants – as demonstrating broader homophobia – is too simplistic for what is a complex social issue (McCormack,

2011). Before homophobia is inferred from such football chants, a greater understanding of the social context and dynamics of these chants is needed.

Theorising Homosexually Themed Language

The presence of homosexually themed chanting at football matches has typically been interpreted as evidence of homophobia (Caudwell, 2011). This was understandable in a context of the 1980s and 1990s where such chanting occurred in homophobic contexts. However, using such understandings from a homophobic zeitgeist may be simplistic in a period where homophobia has significantly decreased – it is necessary to turn to contemporary research on the complex usage, meanings and effects of this type of language.

Ethnographic research on the divergent use of phrases such as 'that's so gay' demonstrates the complexity of meanings associated with homosexually themed language. McCormack and Anderson (2010) examined how university rugby players regularly used such terms as a form of joking with friends, but would condemn their coaches' more aggressive use of similar terms that they felt were stigmatising. McCormack (2012: 116) also documented such language being used as 'a cathartic expression of dissatisfaction', and as a form of male-bonding through phrases such as 'hey, gay boy' and 'my lover' (see also Rasmussen, 2004).

It can be argued that heterosexual men's rationales for their language use are defensive mechanisms to avoid being labelled homophobic. Contesting this position, McCormack et al. (2016) interviewed 35 openly gay male youth about their experiences of using and hearing phrases like 'that's so gay'. These men reported notably similar perspectives to athletes in the previous studies. McCormack et al. (2016) noted an important condition to this interpretation – the presence of shared norms when hearing such language. The participants interpreted the phrases in a positive way because of their prior experiences and friendships with people using the term – they emphasised that their view would be different if they overheard a stranger using such language.

Also highlighting the importance of shared understanding, Poulton and Durrell (2016) demonstrated similar complexity in their analysis of seemingly anti-Semitic language among football fans. They focused on the importance of cultural context and intent underpinning the usage of the term 'Yid' by Tottenham Hotspur fans. A term controversially adopted by many of the club's fans in response to its strong association with North London's Jewish community, they argued that 'epithets and slurs are defined and shown to be determined by context of use and not simply lexical form' (Poulton and Durrell, 2016: 717). While the term Yid was used pejoratively in some contexts, Poulton and Durrell found it was an important demonstration of support and contestation in others.

These studies draw on McCormack's (2011) conceptualisation of homosexually themed language that argues the broader cultural context of levels of homophobia influences how this language is interpreted. While this literature evidences a cultural shift in language, it is important to recognise that language remains a multi-faceted and complex issue – perhaps more so in football, where epithets and chants often differ from a person's attitudes and also occur in a public place (Cashmore and Cleland, 2011). Even so, this is the first research which develops rich understanding of football fans' use and

interpretation of homosexually themed chants (that is, chanting which uses language related to gay people or same-sex desire).

Method

Participants

Part of a broader project on football fans' attitudes towards homosexuality, this study initially drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 33 fans of various English football clubs. Three participants espoused at least some attitudinal homophobia – predominantly through antipathy towards homosexuality, and rejection of hypothetically gay players representing 'their' football team – while 30 condemned homophobia and claimed to be pro-gay. This article focuses on the 30 participants who espoused positive attitudes about same-sex desire and sexual minorities to enable critical examination of the seeming paradox of maintaining positive attitudes but participating in homosexually themed chanting. It is important to note here that a forthcoming research project will address participants who espouse less progressive attitudes towards sexual minorities and the presence of homosexuality in football.

Representing the traditional demographic of English football stadia (Pearson, 2012), participants were white males aged between 19 and 58. All were working class or middle class as determined by occupation and/or educational status. Participants supported a range of football clubs from the Premier League and Football League but, due to the location of the research, a third of participants identified with one particular Premier League club. Thus, given the qualitative nature of this research, discrepancies may exist between fans at different levels of the game and according to geographical factors, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Participants were initially located through social media, where an advert was posted encouraging football fans to take part in the research. However, after this proved relatively unsuccessful, it was decided to recruit fans from public houses near to a local Premier League football stadium. The public house – commonly referred to as 'the pub' – has a long history in both its association with football, and among football scholars capturing illuminating data. Dixon (2014) highlights two major benefits of using the pub to conduct research: (1) it allows research participants to feel comfortable and unintimidated in an informal setting; (2) participants are able to draw on 'rich cultural cues in relation to their practice of football fandom culture' (2014: 386).

The close proximity of the pub to the football stadium also ensured that participants represented supporters who attend football matches regularly: this was also confirmed by participants confirming their status as regular attendees, as well as holding season tickets for their respective clubs. In particular, the pub in question was one in which regular fans would have a pre-match drink. This is what Pearson (2012) refers to as 'carnival fans' – those who attend both home and away matches regularly and made an emotional investment in their club (those recruited from the pub were all home fans). Given their emotional need to see their football team succeed, these are fans most likely to instigate and regularly participate in a range of chants at matches (Pearson, 2012). Thus, for this research, the sampling technique employed ensured that the participants recruited represented this category of fan.

Procedures

All interviews were conducted in person and averaged approximately 50 minutes. Due to the structure of a public house on a matchday, only a relatively short window was available to speak to participants: between roughly 12pm, when fans typically arrive, and 2.45pm, when fans begin to disperse to the stadium to watch the match which (usually) commences at 3pm. Data were collected over a four-month period, with around half of interviews conducted on site between these times; the remainder were arranged and conducted on the phone or in person on a non-matchday. Prior to interview, participants were emailed with further information about the research, and all signed a consent form. All guidelines of the British Sociological Association were followed, and pseudonyms have been used throughout the research.

Interviews began by discussing a range of contemporary football issues, which was important in developing rapport (Magrath, 2017). A range of hypothetical questions were asked during the interview, and answers to these were compared with espoused attitudes to examine for consistency. The absence of social desirability was also evidenced by the candid and consistent responses throughout all interviews. Interviews covered four main themes: homophobia and football culture; gay footballers; gay-friendliness; and hypothetical examples related to homosexuality/homophobia and football.

Where possible, interviews were transcribed and coded upon completion. Given the originality of the research topic, an inductive framework was adopted with a thematic analysis (Charmaz, 2014) employed when analysing results. Twenty-five per cent of interview transcripts were co-verified by two researchers external to the project, thus enhancing the overall process of inter-rater reliability (see Armstrong et al., 1997).

Football Fans and Inclusive Attitudes towards Homosexuality

Consistent with recent research (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Cleland, 2016), all participants[3] were supportive of the presence of homosexuality in football and wider society. This was determined through generalised discussions about gay rights, gay friends and gay footballers. Approximately three-quarters of participants had at least one gay or lesbian friend or family member. Wolverhampton Wanderers (hereafter Wolves) fan Adrian said that, 'I don't have any issue with homosexuality. I have a group of gay friends I go to Birmingham Gay Pride with every year and we always have a laugh'. Similarly, Bournemouth fan Andrew said, 'I don't care if someone's gay. My stepbrother is gay and I would say I've embraced it more since then'. Bournemouth fan Kevin added, '[i]t amazes me that, in my lifetime, it's been illegal to be gay. Things have changed […] people have much more freedom, thankfully: as long as nobody's getting hurt, what's the problem?' These were common assertions among all participants in this study, irrespective of having gay friends.

Further supporting pro-gay perspectives, other participants extended their support for homosexuality to that of hypothetical openly gay players competing for the team they support. Arsenal fan Terry simply said, 'I'd have no issue – I'd welcome it'. Some participants contrasted sexual identity with ability, suggesting the latter was the most important element on which a player should be judged (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012). For

example, Bournemouth fan Brian drew upon his previous experience playing semi-professional football: 'I used to have a gay teammate […] In the same way now as it was then, I've absolutely no problem. It's not his sexuality which counts, it's his ability'. Similarly, Aston Villa fan Simon said that, '[p]ersonally I wouldn't care – I'm interested in seeing good footballers playing good football, preferably for my team. That's the most important thing'.

Despite these positive attitudes, six participants expressed concern about their team employing an openly gay player – although they never argued a gay player should remain closeted. They worried that a player's sexual orientation could be used as a source of ridicule by either fellow or opposition fans. Coventry City fan Alan said that,

> It'd be totally fine if my team had a gay player […] but I think some fans might be funny about it. It might be used as a target if he wasn't playing well or if it was the other team's fans.

Watford fan Carlo had similar concerns: 'I'm supportive, I wouldn't really care, but I would feel sorry for the player because he would be targeted in every game. Football fans can be brutal'. Interestingly, the apprehension that an openly gay player's sexual orientation would be used as a source of derision is about concern and support for the player, who they would nonetheless support if they came out (Cashmore and Cleland, 2012).

Experiencing Homosexually Themed Chanting

Despite the unanimous support for homosexuality among these participants, all but five participants declared that they would actively participate in homosexually themed chants when supporting their team – though only if the situation arose. Although all these fans considered themselves to be vocal at matches, none considered themselves to be orchestrators of any chants. The prevalence of homosexually themed chanting was not universally agreed, and there were various perceptions regarding the frequency of homosexually themed chanting at matches involving their club.

Twelve participants believed that homosexually themed chanting was a regular occurrence at football matches involving their club. While some discussed general examples, half were able to provide more specific examples. Bournemouth fan Kevin, for example, said that, 'Does your boyfriend know you're here?' was the most common homosexually themed chant, and Derby County fan Warren said that '[player's name] takes it up the arse' was also heard fairly frequently. Bournemouth fan Joe also discussed this chant, having recalled a specific occurrence:

> I remember we played an away game once […] the other team had a young goalkeeper, about 18. We sung that he 'takes it up the arse' for quite a long time. It obviously affected him, he conceded two soft goals afterwards, and we won the game.

He then described this as: 'a bit of a laugh which helped us win'. Further evidencing this, Brentford fan Gary spoke of a player disliked by fans of his club: 'Brentford fans don't like Jermaine Beckford, and there are homophobic chants about him – not because he's gay, but because they'd thought it'd be funny and don't like him'.

In contrast to these examples, the remaining 18 participants said that homosexually themed chanting rarely or never occurred at matches which they had attended. When it did occur, most participants' disclosures were consistent with previous research which shows discriminatory chants to be predominantly restricted to small groups (Pearson, 2012). Kris, a Bournemouth fan, said that, '[i]f there is anything, it would certainly be a minority. I'm a season-ticket holder and I don't think I've heard many, if any, chants'. Ronald, a Manchester United fan, said, 'I can't remember anything specific. There are other things, but not much homophobia'. Likewise, Simon, an Aston Villa fan claimed that, '[r]acism is worse […] I've been going to Villa for years and I don't recall there being anything frequent'. The limited presence of homosexually themed chanting is an interesting finding, suggesting that football is not 'one of the greatest fortresses of homophobia' (Jones, 2014; see also Hughson and Free, 2011). Importantly, the rationales and explanations of participants who experienced and participated in these chants could be categorised into two themes: sporting competition and club rivalry.

Competition

Among these participants, there was evidence of elevated competition at matches these fans attended. For example, most participants suggested that these chants were primarily instigated by events which occurred on the pitch – specifically players' injuries (or apparent injuries). Liverpool fan Stuart commented that, 'I would say that players – either directly or indirectly – instigate homophobic chants against them when they go down too easily and fake an injury'. Similarly, Bournemouth fan Oscar said that, '[t]hings are set off by things which occur on the pitch […] If a player was to go down injured, be might get called a fag or a poof'.

This situation is best summarised by another Bournemouth fan, Joe, who drew upon gender stereotypes in an attempt to rationalise these sorts of chants:

> Homophobic chants aren't premediated. Not anymore, at least. It's normally players on the pitch; the sort of player who writhes around in agony when there's no obvious sign of anything wrong […] It's macho men who show they're not hurt […] so players who fake injury might be subjected to more effeminate, maybe homophobic comments.

Joe's comments are particularly interesting, as he makes reference to the alleged persistence of gender norms in the construction of homosexually themed chants (Plummer, 1999). Accordingly, there is clear link between masculinity, homosexuality and injury (perceived or otherwise), in the attempted emasculation of players 'guilty' of this (Roderick, 2006). It is also noteworthy that these participants refer to these chants as homophobic, perhaps illustrating how fans themselves interpret these chants in the wider context of football.

But there was also evidence among participants that these chants were deemed a necessary component of being a '*proper* football fan', and that this was the best opportunity to 'get behind your team', ensuring their success on the pitch. Wolves fan Henry, for example, commented that, '[i]t [homosexually themed chanting] isn't done out of spite. It's about putting him off his game […] to try and gain an advantage and help us win'.

Similarly, Manchester United fan Charlie said, 'I get frustrated when we're not doing well, and it's all about winning, so I try my best to support any way I can'. Likewise, Millwall fan Martin said, 'I chant about a lot of things – anything to get my team an extra 10 per cent […] it's stuff about sexuality, the player might be thinking about it, putting him off'.

Other participants outlined that these chants were a general means of demonstrating support, and frequently participate at the expense of harming or victimising opposing teams' players. Aston Villa fan Simon, for example, said, 'I don't think it's against that individual player, it's because it's his team playing against yours'. This was also an important factor for Bournemouth fan Andrew, who commented, 'I've been involved in these chants, but not maliciously. It's not hatred about being gay, it's about backing your team to win'. Similarly, Henry, a Wolves fan, said that, '[i]t's not targeting gay people […] it's more to get a negative reaction against that player so that we can win'. Participants' comments highlight the complexities of attitudes towards homosexuality, compared to the practice of using homosexually themed chants, and deemed the use of such language as a stylistic component of supporting one's team.

Local Club Rivalry

While competition was as an important factor of homosexually themed chanting, more specific elements of competition were also evident. Indeed, the most significant component which intensified the presence of homosexually themed chanting concerned rival clubs. In football, club rivalry – often referred to as a 'derby' match – most commonly arises through similar geographical proximity, either in the same or nearby cities. In English football, there are several examples of 'derby' matches between local rivals. Arsenal v Tottenham Hotspur (North London) and Manchester United v Manchester City (Manchester) are examples of derby matches known for intense and often hostile atmospheres.

Derby matches are typically characterised by hostile and aggressive atmospheres. Every participant made reference to the intensity of local rivalry matches – especially when compared to 'normal' matches that do not involve such rivalry. Contextualising this, Carlo, a Watford fan, said that, '[t]he songs between different teams are normally quite fun […] whereas local derbies are brutal'. Similarly, Bournemouth fan Andrew said that, '[a]t these matches, noise levels [among fans] are elevated anyway, and anything is used to get under each other's skin'.

All participants argued that homosexually themed chanting was more prevalent at these matches, where competition and rivalry was more intense. Tony simply said, '[l]ocal derbies tend to contribute to the fact that homophobia is worse'. Similarly, Terry, an Arsenal fan, commented, 'I think in the big local rivalry matches, players would be subject to it regardless of what they did on the pitch. Local rivals *hate* each other, and use anything to abuse each other'. This point was supported by Millwall fan Martin, who said, '[t]here's a load of gay chants about West Ham [Millwall's East London rivals] […] it's something to "get one up" against your rivals'.

Ryan, an Ipswich Town fan, commented, '[y]ou expect it against Norwich […] Homophobic chants have been about Justin Fashanu [who previously played for Norwich

City] being called a "faggot" or about committing suicide'. Asked his opinion of these chants, he replied: '[t]hat's not one I join in with, it's pretty disgusting, and crosses the line'. Paul, a Rochdale fan, also said that matches against local rivals Bury are known for chants about 'sausage jockeys' and Bury being a 'bunch of poofs that take it up the arse'. Adrian and Henry – both Wolves fans – mentioned similar chants towards their local rivals West Bromwich Albion, which also extended to players. For example, Adrian said that, '[t]here's a chant against Lee Hughes [a former West Bromwich Albion player] which talks about homophobia with him being in prison'.

Other participants discussed similar chants against specific players, typically those who had been perceived to have wronged the club in some way. Both Arsenal fans in the sample, Jimmy and Terry, acknowledged that Ashley Cole – an Arsenal player until 2006, after an acrimonious transfer to London rivals Chelsea, combined with his alleged bisexuality in the English media – had resulted in frequent chants against him. Interestingly, in the context of chants towards and against rival clubs and players, the purpose and intent of such language was to wound and provoke the opposing team. In turn, these fans believed that this was their opportunity to ensure success for their team.

Public Chanting and Private Attitudes

In understanding the nature of homosexually themed chanting, it is useful to consider McCormack et al.'s (2016: 765) call for scholars to move away from 'simplistic under-standings of language'. Instead, they emphasise the significance of intent, context and social effect and, most importantly, the presence of shared norms. In the current study, participants emphasised the detachment between these football chants and general atti-tudes towards homosexuality. Evidencing this, Bournemouth fan Brian said that, '[t]here is literally 100 per cent difference between what I shout and how I feel about homosexu-ality. Chanting is the only way I can "help" my team'. Wolves fan Adrian mirrored this sentiment: '[s]ometimes I'll join with the gay stuff, but it's not because I hate gays', while Bournemouth fan Oscar said, 'I chant stuff occasionally, but I don't mean it mali-ciously'. Arsenal fan Terry also discussed a detachment of attitudes and chanting, using his father as an example:

> There's definitely a strong detachment from chants – always, without fail. My dad, who is so laid back, was calling Robin Van Persie a cunt the other week. It was unusual and out of character for him [...] If my sisters saw him like that, they'd be so shocked.

Recognising context is also important here as it highlights the role of football in facilitat-ing these chants. In other words, the structure and dynamics of organised sporting com-petition enables men to engage in such chants – despite the fact their attitudes do not reflect their language (Adams et al., 2010).

Further evidencing this, Rochdale fan Paul commented on how homosexually themed chanting was not intended to be anything other than 'just empty chanting'. He said that, '[j]ust because you might say certain things, doesn't mean you mean them'. Similarly, Norwich City fan Ian said that, '[d]uring the match, it's almost like anything goes – you forget about it. But after the match, it stops and that's it; it doesn't count'. Bournemouth

fan Joe also distinguished between chants during and after a match: 'I give as good as I get during a match, to their [opposing teams'] players or fans, but I wouldn't carry it on after – that would be crossing the line'. The claim that once a match is finished, chanting ceases is significant: it highlights how homosexually themed chanting acts as a 'sporting technique', employed only during matches (Adams et al., 2010). It also cements these participants' social identity as a 'carnival' fan, where their club's success is a priority over their attitudes towards homosexuality.

As such, it might then be an expectation that these participants would continue to engage in homosexually themed chanting, even if they were aware of gay fans being present inside the stadium. However, two-thirds of participants said that this was not the case. Coventry City fan Alan said that, 'I'm aware how difficult it must be for a closeted person […] I wouldn't join in with chants if I knew there was someone like that in the stadium'. Millwall fan Martin agreed with this sentiment. When asked why, he responded, '[b]ecause it would offend them. And I'd feel really bad if I started shouting something'. West Ham United fan Nathan said he would feel 'uncomfortable' about continuing with chants in such a situation. This demonstrates a level of heterosexism among these men because they presume that the other fans in the stadium are heterosexual and that they would know of any gay fans elsewhere. This heterosexism is also, perhaps, one psychological mechanism they use to legitimate their participation in such chanting. Nonetheless, for these participants, visualising the potentially damaging consequences of this language was enough for them to cease their engagement in these chants.

For the remainder of participants, there was uncertainty as to whether they would continue with such chants if aware of gay fans inside the stadium. Bournemouth fan Duncan said he 'isn't too sure' what would happen if he became aware of gay fans. Others felt that the sexuality of fans was not relevant to how they would interpret these chants. For example, Kevin, another Bournemouth fan, said that, '[t]hese chants aren't meant to offend and if the gay person was a proper football fan, I think he'd understand that'. Similarly, Aston Villa fan Simon said, '[t]hose chants are just to help us win, so they aren't necessarily directed at anyone in particular'.

These perspectives illustrate the complexity of how individuals participate and interpret such chants. Contrary to some interpretations (e.g. Caudwell, 2011), these participants contend that the use of homosexually themed language should *not* be interpreted as homophobia. While these chants *do* have the intent to wound opposing teams and players, and might negatively influence gay fans' perceptions of the football culture, they are not intended to carry homophobic sentiment or convey negative attitudes about gay people. Participants believe this because the context of football matches means that a shared understanding exists between fans: most fans understand that homosexually themed chanting, alongside the increased sense of competition and rivalry is merely 'part of the game' (Adams et al., 2010), and used to demonstrate one's passion and desire to win matches.

Where participants' perspectives are less critical is in their lack of awareness that there are likely to be gay fans in the stadia where these chants occur. The subjectivity of interpreting homosexually themed chanting highlights the fact that multiple interpretations of the same language are possible (Harvey, 2012). Gay football fans, for example, may assume homophobic sentiment by the presence of homosexually themed chanting.

It also highlights some of the problems of competitive, organised teamsport, where winning is seen as the primary goal of participation and fans are expected to help their team achieve this goal.

Yet the argument that these chants should not be interpreted as homophobic is further supported by participants' disclosures of non-homosexually themed chanting. For example, Max, a Tottenham Hotspur fan, said, '[t]he culture of football is one that fans will support their own team by ridiculing the opposition – no matter what the topic'. Notably, Millwall fan Martin commented, '[i]t's not so much "homophobic" chanting – it could be anything, like being ugly or having a bad haircut'. Bournemouth fan Duncan extended this: '[a]nything could be seen as a weakness by fans: bald, fat, ginger, coloured boots'. Along a similar theme, Arsenal fan Jimmy said that, '[f]ans use something to latch on to […] to rile the [opposition] players up […] I've seen chants about Harry Redknapp having a twitch and Arsène Wenger for being a paedophile'. Along with chants about various physical 'weaknesses' and paedophilia, homosexually themed chants are clearly part of a broader cycle which fans employ to support their team. While this problematically associates homosexuality with negative things, participants appear to have disassociated this from their views and relationships with gay people (Rasmussen, 2004).

Discussion

This article set out with the intention of investigating the nature of homosexually themed chants in English football. While the significance and centrality of chanting in English football is recognised (Armstrong and Young, 1999; Clark, 2006; Pearson, 2012), chants related to (homo)sexuality have remained an under-theorised area of study. Only Caudwell (2011) has provided in-depth analysis in this area, though her work fails to measure intent, context and effect – something McCormack (2011) argued is necessary when interpreting such language.

I drew upon 30 semi-structured interviews with gay-friendly male football fans of various English football clubs in order to further understand the frequency and interpretation of homosexually themed chanting at football matches. By recruiting the majority of participants at public houses on the day of a match, the best possible measures were taken to ensure that these fans represented 'carnival fans' – those who closely align their identities with traditional club values through dress, expression, pre-match and match behaviour – and therefore those who are predominantly involved in various chants at matches (Pearson, 2012).

Congruent with other contemporary research on football fans' attitudes towards homosexuality (e.g. Cleland, 2016), the participants in this research espoused positive attitudes towards homosexuality, both in football and in general society. These positive attitudes also extended to an openly gay player being contracted to the team they support, though six participants demonstrated concern about whether a gay player's sexuality would be targeted by fans of other clubs.

This research highlights the complexity of this chanting. Contrary to previous research and assumptions that homosexually themed chanting is widespread inside English football stadia, there were mixed views regarding the frequency of homosexually themed chanting: 12 believed that homosexually themed chanting was rarely heard, while the

remaining 18 described it as a regular occurrence. Such responses are inconsistent with Caudwell's (2011: 126, emphasis in original) assertion of the perpetual 'malignant *sounds* of […] homophobia palpable within football stadia'. Homophobia does not occur within 70 per cent of matches, as claimed by Dick (2009), nor is discriminatory chanting endemic and regularly sanctioned by governing bodies, as has recently been the case with international football (Rodriguez, 2016). It is possible the recent efforts of campaigns like Kick it Out have been successful in improving the football environment.

Rather than viewing chants as homophobic, fans provided two explanations for the presence of homosexually themed chanting: sporting competition and club rivalry. First, the heightened sense of competition was important in the prevalence of homosexually themed chanting. Many participants perceived that engaging in a variety of chants was the most significant way in which they could effectively support or even motivate their team, or as many participants termed it – 'gaining an advantage for my team' or, as Rodriguez (2016: 3) argues, 'it is more about distraction than it is about vilification'. Fans often responded to events which had occurred on the pitch, such as opposition players exaggerating or feigning injury. Furthermore, homosexually themed chanting was often intertwined with comments around other various perceived weaknesses. Accordingly, the increased sense of competition and rivalry associated with competitive and organised sport produces a different basis for this language.

Second, club rivalry also played a significant role in the frequency of these chants. Matches involving rival clubs, according to Bentwitz and Molnar (2012: 483), 'reinforce competition, bias and prejudice […] [and] foster socially divisive attitudes which increase the possibility of social conflict and lead to hostility'. Because 'local pride' is at stake in these matches, 'derby day' is one of the anticipated matches of the football season (Pearson, 2012). Bentwitz and Molnar (2012: 483) argue that football fan rivalries have typically been overlooked in academic research, and call for further understanding of how 'a rivalry is acted-out'. Accordingly, the current research shows that local derby matches facilitate a more toxic environment, culminating in the increased production of homosexually themed chanting.[4]

The practice of local rivalry is therefore clearly evident: fans feel an increased sense of hostility towards the opposition, and an increased sense of loyalty to their club. Here, the use of homosexually themed chanting is a way for fans to 'differentiate themselves through the process of denigration, from other particular topographic identities' (Clark, 2006: 502). In addition, fans situated these chants as an opportunity to establish dominance and 'get one up' against rival clubs. For fans of some clubs, this also extended to chants towards and about players who they perceived had 'wronged' their club.

Interpreting these chants, participants highlighted that there was no intention for them to be aligned with homophobia. Instead, each of the participants intellectualised positive attitudes towards gay people, and the vast majority even disclosed that they would stop engaging in homosexually themed chants if they became consciously aware, or knew of, gay fans inside stadia. Problematically, however, their language can still be interpreted as pernicious, as they had the purpose of marginalising opposing teams' players. The existence of these chants may also have a detrimental effect on gay or closeted fans inside the stadium, who could interpret them negatively and, more importantly, as evidence of homophobia among those participating in them.

This is partial evidence of cultural lag: in this case, fans' language does not reflect their broader, more positive attitudes towards gay rights. Previous research has shown that sporting men have utilised homosexually themed language to bond with one another (McCormack and Anderson, 2010). In contrast, participants in this research use homosexually themed language to benefit their team – at the expense of opponents. Although this language is partly attributable to cultural lag, it also differs in that it is partly related to the general role of sport in reproducing such language. Adams et al. (2010: 293), for example, argue that there is 'increasing truth to the commonplace notion that the use of violent, homophobic, and sexist language is "just part of the game"'. Indeed, through negative chants, football can act as a breeding ground for potentially damaging notions of toxic language: chants are intended to wound, and the notion of intense club rivalry highlights the negative effect that football can have. In this instance, the use of language is not evidence of homophobia, but rather the organisation of elite football and its damaging presence of intense rivalry and competition. Thus, the problem of labelling football fans as homophobic for using these chants is that, locating the problem with fans, ignores the ways in which the cultural dynamics of structural organisation of sport encourages negative behaviours. It is the values of elite football which privilege competitiveness and winning over more egalitarian views of equality and inclusiveness that require further attention.

Naturally, there are limitations to this research. In this sample of 30 football fans, over 10 English football clubs from varying locations across the country are represented, overlooking potential geographical factors – such as differing dialect – which influence the semantics of homosexually themed chanting. Indeed, football chanting more generally can vary across numerous different clubs. Moreover, these findings are also dependent on spatiality: specifically, where these fans sit (or stand) inside stadia,[5] or whether attending a home or away match. English football stadia are made up of various official and unofficial sections, such as the 'family' section or even 'singing' section. These typically consist of varying demographics, and experiences of homosexually themed chanting may vary accordingly. Groups under-represented in academic research – such as female football fans (Pope, 2013), or gay football fans – may interpret such language differently. Similarly, fans of Brighton and Hove Albion, who contend with such chanting on a regular basis, may judge it more negatively. Thus, further research is required to investigate the variable nature of chanting in alternative settings and among varying demographics, including greater focus on those who espouse more conservative attitudes towards gay footballers.

Nevertheless, this research is a valuable addition to other sociological study of British football fans. It is the first research which seeks to critically interpret homosexually themed chanting among gay-friendly fans. In doing so, it advances our cultural understandings in this area, providing a point of departure for future research to further understand the complexity of football language and interrogate the structural organisation of elite sport. It also advances McCormack's model of homosexually themed language in that it develops a deeper understanding of language within a particular context – in this case, football stadia – and the shared norms within. Further research needs to interrogate how the dynamics and values of organisations and institutions foster or challenge inequality, rather than focus on the attitudes and behaviours of groups of individuals within

them. Doing so might help recognise the positive transition towards inclusivity which British football has undergone, and also enable this to consolidate and develop further in the future.

Funding

Notes

1. Originally known as Let's Kick Racism Out of Football, the organisation was renamed and rebranded as Kick it Out in 1997.
2. The national associations of Chile, Paraguay, Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Croatia were all reprimanded for the homophobic chanting of their supporters during matches.
3. While the decision was made to focus only on gay-friendly supporters, this was a post-hoc decision, and 30 out of 33 (e.g. 91%) of the original sample was gay-friendly.
4. Chants about a club's rivals are not restricted to matches against that particular club: they frequently occur at regular matches, too.
5. Football chanting does not just occur inside football stadia: it occurs in multiple settings, including journeys to and from the match and in pubs.

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Rory Magrath is the author of *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football: Men in the Beautiful Game* (Routledge, 2016) and co-author of *Out in Sport: The Experiences of Openly Gay and Lesbian Athletes in Competitive Sport* (Routledge, 2016). He is currently Senior Lecturer in the School of Sport, Health and Social Sciences at Southampton Solent University, UK. His research focuses on decreasing homophobia and the changing nature of contemporary masculinities, with a specific focus on professional football.