The Footy Girls of Tumblr: How Women Found Their Niche in the Online Football Fandom

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Abstract
This study examines how female football (soccer) fans use the social media platform Tumblr to interact and talk about their fandom, what purposes Tumblr serves for them, and why they prefer it to other social media platforms. As women are often marginalised in offline and online sports discourse, Tumblr's football fandom was chosen to investigate how women experience their fandom on a platform with a mostly female and young user population. The results of 14 in-depth qualitative interviews with heavily invested female Tumblr users show that the fandom's communication culture allows fans to interact in a variety of creative ways that involve the use of a specialist vocabulary. This Tumblr fandom is overwhelmingly female, which makes the interviewees feel that they can talk freely about football. Thus, Tumblr has the potential to serve as a safe space for female fans. Yet, its highly opinionated discussions and rivalries mirror those in the traditional football fandom. This study contributes to the literature that explores how women express their sports fandom online and demonstrates how they have found a niche in which to discuss their favourite sport on their own terms.

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Even though engaging with sports is a favoured pastime for both men and women, prior studies have shown that women feel marginalised as sports fans (e.g., Gosling, 2007; Pope, 2017; Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012b). Women generally feel unwelcome in both online and offline sports discussions (e.g., Hardin, Antunovic, Bien-Aimé, & Li, 2013), and indeed, women have often been unwanted at sports events since the beginning of modern spectator sports. Schultz and Linden (2014) demonstrate that women were only welcome as spectators to American sports under strict conditions—either as moral agents to calm down the unruly men or as consumers filling up the stands (Fink, Trail, & Anderson, 2002). Women have been met with suspicion when they deviated from these norms and claimed to be “fans” who went to see the sport of their own accord and have a “long-term, intensive emotional relationship” (Roose, Schäfer, & Schmidt-Lux, 2017, p. 4) with it rather than for family or social reasons (Cere, 2012; Crawford & Gosling, 2004; Davies, 1992; Dell, 1998; Montez de Oca & Cotner, 2018).

Domestic responsibilities may also keep some women from attending sports events, which may take several hours including travel time (Davies, 1992; Dworkin & Messner, 2002). Although the women in this study are teens (or, with one exception, in their 20s) and might not have domestic responsibilities yet, they may be kept from attending events due to other responsibilities such as school or university studies or not being allowed to go to events on their own.

Online platforms might be a practical yet enriching way for women to overcome such constraints in order to take part in sports fandom. Such platforms allow them to easily reach out to fans of their favourite team, and they can choose not to watch games at the stadium (see Coppa, 2014, p. 79; Rowe, 2015, p. 705). Yet the male-dominated offline discourse is replicated online, for example, on message boards (e.g., Hynes & Cook, 2013). Thus, female fans may need a safe online space to discuss their favourite sports without men taking over the conversation (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012, p. 157).

This article explores how female football (soccer) fans use the social media platform Tumblr to connect and talk about their fandom. Following previous research (e.g., Busse & Gray, 2014, pp. 439–440), the study takes a global and gender perspective on fandom, investigating what purposes Tumblr serves for female football fans, and what distinguishes their experiences from other online and offline platforms or forums. The research questions are as follows:

How do female football fans use Tumblr to connect and talk about their fandom?

a) What purposes does Tumblr serve for female fans?
b) Why do they prefer Tumblr to other social media platforms?
To study these questions, I look at how sports fans in general use digital media to talk about sports, and how women differ in these practices. I also discuss how Tumblr may serve as an interpretive community that not only connects like-minded people but also emphasises the preferences female fans may have in expressing their love for football.

I conducted semi-structured interviews that included a standard set of questions on fandom and also gave the interviewees space to discuss their own experiences (see Kelly, 2015, pp. 314–315).

The article begins with a literature review, setting out the digital fandom practices for sports fans and female fans in particular and the concept of interpretive communities. The methodology of the qualitative study follows, after which the results are presented and discussed. The final section concludes the article.

Theoretical Background

(Female) Sports Fans’ Use of Digital and Social Media

While individuals can be fans in private (Kelly, 2015, p. 314), they often regularly engage with their object of emotional affection (Sandvoss, 2005, p. 8) and with one another (Busse & Gray, 2014, p. 426). Sports fandom includes meeting with others to watch a game or going to an event (e.g., Dixon, 2014; Yoshida, Gordon, Heere, & James, 2015). Since the late 1990s, sports fans have also been able to meet online to talk about their favourite athletes and teams, for example, on club websites, blogs, or social media platforms (e.g., Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Lawrence & Crawford, 2018). Apart from interaction, online spaces are a place for content creation, whether it be multimedia or written contributions (Pegoraro, 2013, p. 254).

Social media platforms in particular offer a place for interaction since participants must usually set up a profile to actively take part; this gives them a permanent place in the community (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Young sports fans are drawn to Snapchat, where a seemingly personalised “temporarily heightened interaction” that soon automatically disappears is favoured over long-lasting types of information (Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017, p. 14). By contrast, messages are permanently archived on Twitter and Facebook. However, Twitter serves to immediately connect fans with each other and with athletes (Clavio & Frederick, 2014; Sanderson & Kassing, 2014). Fans and athletes share commentary and opinions, giving fans a deeper insight into the world of sports (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). As in the offline realm, such online communities serve as a place to discover information and opinions on the object of affection and to negotiate the fandom’s (shared) identity, and those of their participants, which is, in essence, not unlike what fans in the offline realm do (Baym, 2007; Jenkins, 2007, p. 363).

In theory, the online sphere is a convenient place for women to interact with fellow sports fans, as it can aide in “building alliances around issues facing women in sport, including gender stereotyping and lack of visibility” (Toffoletti, 2017, p.
Women may challenge dominant male readings of sports by building their own, even transnational community online (Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). However, women have felt uncomfortable and unwelcome in many online spaces that discuss sports, prompting the question whether female fans would feel more inclined to interact with other female fans in a safe space in which they would not feel belittled or unwelcome. For instance, sports discussion forums have been found to be largely male-dominated, exhibiting a discussion culture that belittles women’s sport and female contributors’ opinions (e.g., Hardin, Zhong, & Corrigan, 2011; Meân, 2012). Sexist, misogynist and racist behaviour as well as unwelcome advances if the female fan reveals her gender are more likely found on those forums dedicated to male-dominated sports such as men’s American football and football (Cleland, 2014; Hynes & Cook, 2013; Kian, Clavio, Vincent, & Shaw, 2011). Other sports feature more (overt) female voices that seem to moderate the conversation, such as in women’s basketball (Plymire & Forman, 2000). In contrast to discussion forums, blogs can lend a more effective voice to female fans than message boards, especially when discussing women’s sport (e.g., Antunovic & Hardin, 2015). On these blogs, women challenge the status quo of male-dominated spaces in writing in a narrative-driven and personalised manner and in creating a community for hitherto invisible but like-minded users (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012). Tanaka (2004) shows in an analysis of “feminised” fan practices during the 2002 football World Cup that such interaction with others—then via mobile phone or one’s own website—has been a priority for female fans. These interactions highlighted creative endeavours, such as fan art and fiction, one’s own jargon, and a celebrity discourse that resembles those in music or film fandom. Tanaka (2004, p. 54) calls these practices a “secret mode of communication,” as they happened within the women’s own networks rather than on publicly visible fan forums because these women felt that these practices differed significantly from “accepted” male fandom.

On social media, women form their own communities, in which they negotiate their identity as female sports fans among themselves and thus circumvent the aforementioned behaviour found in male-dominated discussion forums (Azizi & Tambunan, 2018; Heinecken, 2015; Toffoletti, 2017). However, these communities are not immune to sexualised comments, although the community itself challenges this behaviour (Frederick, Pegoraro, & Burch, 2017, p. 179). Overall, social media may help women in creating their own fan communities and understandings, in which they find a home away from masculine sports discourse (Pegoraro, Comeau, & Frederick, 2018).

**Online Groups as Interpretive Communities**

Users employ social media to create an interpretive community around their objects of affection. They interpret and negotiate “texts” (as in football matches and athletes), often with a degree of disagreement (Fiske, 1989), to create a shared meaning
that results in specific codes of understanding; as Jenkins (1992, p. 50) describes this process, the “texts become real” to the members of the community (Jensen, 1991; Lindlof, 1988). An example of these codes of understanding is how players’ actions on and off the field are evaluated, such as a gesture of fair play or players’ personal lives. Fans may also challenge the official “readings” (i.e., interpretations) of the clubs (Fiske, 1989), for example when evaluating the players’ actions. This ongoing negotiation of codes, which may be opaque to those outside the community, forms the basis of the community’s self-perception and continually reinforces it (Aden, Rahoi, & Beck, 1995). The more actively this process of interpreting “texts” takes place, the more community members develop a sense of belonging and a social identity (Anderson, 1991; Jenkins, 1992). In this negotiation process, fans can take on additional performative roles such as “writer[s], blogger[s], film-maker[s]” (Coppa, 2014, p. 78). Fans thus develop additional identities while engaging with their fandom, which, as Coppa emphasises, “impact her [the fan’s] sense of self and the way she engages with the world” (p. 78). In online fandom, these processes take place in an “imagined community,” in which people share a common sense of belonging even though they have never met each other (Anderson, 1991). Social media platforms, which let people easily connect from all over the world, foster this development (Kavoura, 2014).

As members of the interpretive community may change over time, so may the interpretations of the “texts” (Lindlof, 1988, 2015). Moreover, as Lindlof (2015, p. 30) argues, the “texts” themselves may change, which is especially true for football, as the structures of the sport (e.g., rules, competition formats) and its actors are in a continuous flux. A fan community is thus not a coherent entity but rather a “loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity” (Coppa, 2014; Hills, 2017, p. 860). In this array of subcultures, seemingly “wrong” versions of fandom are “subjected to the disapproval, discursive policing, othering, or more-or-less active neglect” (Hills, 2017, pp. 874–875), which has often happened to female sports fandom (see also Tanaka, 2004, p. 59).

This article argues that the female football fandom on Tumblr forms such a subculture, which continues to develop a community with shared understandings and codes (Coppa, 2014, p. 78), and which has a special situational makeup because it is almost exclusively female. I show below that while this particular fandom exhibits similar characteristics to other sports fandom, it also has special modes of the above-mentioned fan activity that set it apart as a subculture in football fandom.

**Method**

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore how female football fans use the social media platform Tumblr to talk about their fandom.
**Tumblr and its Football Fandom**

Tumblr, founded in 2007 and free of charge, is a microblogging social media platform with over 468 million blogs as of June 2019, a number that is rising steadily (Tumblr.com, 2019). As on other social media platforms, a range of functionalities such as “tagging,” sending “asks,” as well as “reblogging” and “liking” posts allows users to connect with each other via their blogposts and private messaging. Tumblr users are mainly female and young (McGrath, 2016), making it a sensible choice for this study.

While Tumblr is used for diverse content such as TV or movie fandom blogs (see, e.g., Misailidou, 2017), also marginalised groups have used the platform to form their own public sphere. For instance, a member of Tumblr’s asexual community describes it as one of the “only places where I can be myself . . . and speak my mind” (Renninger, 2014, p. 8), which according to Renninger (2014) is because users are not required to register their real name (see also McCracken, 2017, pp. 154–157). Fink and Miller (2014, p. 613) echo Renninger’s findings for homosexual and transgender people, adding that Tumblr has a “unique role as a particular digital forum for disseminating self-representations of trans experience beyond local contexts and spatial boundaries.” Thus, applying these findings to female sports fans, interacting on Tumblr may act as a “safe space,” where female fans can openly express their fandom (Hardin & Whiteside, 2012, pp. 156–157).

Football fandom was chosen as the focus of the study as it represents a sport that is attractive to a global audience; successful European teams are followed all over the world (DFL.de, 2019). It is not possible to say how many people participate in the fandom on Tumblr, as users do not have to specify what their blog is about during registration. Yet according to two surveys of the football blog StartingXI, the Tumblr football fandom is quite big. In 2014, over 2,400 Tumblr users from the football fandom took part (StartingXI, 2014), and over 400 in 2018 (StartingXI, 2018). Moreover, the fandom was shown to be overwhelmingly female—94% (n = 2,467) of the participants in 2014 and 92% (n = 432) in 2018. Of course, the links to the surveys were distributed via Tumblr, which points to self-selection because one had to stumble over the link while browsing the website, and the sample sizes differ quite heavily, possibly because more people were interested in football during the first wave of the survey after World Cup 2014. It also has to be noted here that this fandom is overwhelmingly related to men’s football. While most of the interviewees said they were interested to some degree in women’s football, only a few of them followed it regularly.

**Sampling**

A total of 14 women were interviewed by the researcher. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 27; one interviewee was 40 years old. They all self-identified as heavily invested football fans. The researcher, an active member of Tumblr since
2011, approached the interviewees via Tumblr’s messaging feature. While this approach represents less distance from the object of study than in usual social science research, fan studies highly encourage engagement with the studied fans (Booth, 2013; Jenkins, 1992, p. 6; Stein & Busse, 2009, p. 194). The identity of the researcher and the purpose of the study were disclosed during the initial contact. The participants were also assured that their information would remain anonymous and that their profile URL would not be published. Moreover, they were asked to choose a name with which they would be identified when quoted in publications. Many of the interviewees were selected because they exhibited different qualities in expressing their fandom, such as creating football fan art or leading discussions on players and clubs, both of which are typical characteristics of fandom. Of the 11 Tumblr users who were approached directly, one did not reply to the researcher’s message; all the others agreed to be interviewed. Additional interviewees asked to be part of the study after their acquaintances on the platform recommended it. One user had to be turned down because they were under 18.

**Interview Themes, Conduction, and Coding**

The semi-structured interviews allowed a comparison of interviewees’ views on similar issues but also left room for additional aspects in order to create an in-depth picture of their experiences of Tumblr football fandom. All interview questions were based on the aforementioned theoretical background. The questions asked about the interviewees’ involvement in football fandom in general: What being a football fan means to them, and how they would describe their interactions with male football fans in both their home and their online environment. They were then asked in detail about how they use Tumblr as a source of sports content, such as how they look for information, and whether and what content they provide to others. They were explicitly asked for positive and negative experiences on Tumblr, establishing the types of interactions they have with others, for example with fans from rival clubs, in order to uncover information about group dynamics. A central question was how they perceived the gender ratio in their fandom on Tumblr, and why they estimated it the way they did. The interviewees were also asked about the emotional value of Tumblr for them, and about their other social media and offline fandom activities, to establish whether (and how) Tumblr can be seen as a safe space for female fans.

The interviews, conducted by the researcher and lasting 2–3 hr each, were held online. The interviewees could select the format (audio chat, video chat, or instant messaging); all but one chose instant messaging. Although textual interviews are often criticised as being of “limited value” (Bruckman, 2006, p. 87), in this context, this means of communication had several advantages. First, textual messaging is the primary form of communication on Tumblr and thus served as a natural form of communication on this topic. Second, this format allowed participants to use their
Tumblr slang (e.g., “this is so wild” to describe an especially great story) and forward links to posts that emphasised their points. Third, the interviewees for whom English is not the first language (7 of 14) said they would feel more comfortable typing their answers. Some interviewees also said they were quite shy and could express themselves better in writing (see Hillman, Forghani, Pang, Neustaedter, & Judge, 2014). The messages included emoticons and colloquial language, which suggests that the participants felt relaxed while doing the interview. It can thus be assumed that they conveyed all the information they wanted to and did not lie or hold back due to language problems. However, textual interviews have to be interpreted carefully because visual and other cues are missing (Kozinets, 2015, pp. 59–60). The researcher did not cross-check information provided by the interviewees with information on their blogs or elsewhere. The interviewees’ answers were copied from the chat, while the audio interview was fully transcribed.

The coding followed a systematic approach structured by deductive categories derived from the literature (see Mayring, 2010). Two new categories and codes were created inductively—“learning about the world via football” and “discussion of players’ looks and lives”—after being repeatedly mentioned during interviews but not covered by the guideline. Mayring’s (2010, pp. 56–57) approach allows the communicative context of the material to be addressed, which is important for this study for two main reasons. First, the interviewees are part of a complex interactive system (a social media platform) and do not act on their own. Second, the researcher is also a part of this system and cannot code the material without this inside knowledge.

**Limitations**

This study comes with three primary limitations. First, it only includes heavily invested fans, so I cannot draw any conclusions about how casual fans might interact in an online community—or if they would interact at all. Less invested fans might stay silent and “lurk” on the platform, thus pursuing their fandom in a quiet (but for them still satisfying) way instead of actively engaging in discussions with others (see Busse & Gray, 2014, p. 437). One interviewee said she only takes part in discussions if an issue is of high importance to her; otherwise, she does not actively seek interaction with others. Second, due to football’s global popularity, the interviewees were from all over the world—Mexico, Greece, Bulgaria, France, England (2), Germany (3), India, Guatemala, Poland, and the United States (2). The study’s limitation is therefore that the diversity in country contexts relegates it to explorative research as intervening issues such as national sports culture cannot be considered in-depth. Third, I study only one fandom. Further research could investigate more regional sports fandoms, such as Major League Baseball, to determine whether there are differences in fandom cultures.
**Results and Discussion**

The results of the qualitative interviews show that Tumblr serves three main purposes for these female football fans. First, social interaction (both positive and negative) plays a large role. Second, Tumblr represents a special communication culture for female fans: The interviewees report that it is a useful source of information, and they can discuss topics that would not be accepted in male-dominated contexts. The latter, as well as using the Tumblr football fandom to learn about the world, came up as new categories during the analysis. Third, Tumblr is a safe space for female football fans, which is shown in how the interviewees perceive Tumblr compared to other social media platforms, and what role male fans play in these cases.

**Strong Ties Between Fans**

Even though Tumblr blogs have no restrictions on topics that users can post on, all interviewees claimed that they rarely post content on any other fandom than football, as they felt that their blog was for football fans only. One interviewee said that she keeps multiple blogs, each with separate topics and fandoms.

This separation of fandoms may be explained by the specific nature of the football blogs’ content. A popular type of interaction for eight of the interviewees is “liveblogging”—which involves engaging in commentary on football matches in real time—showing that users value Tumblr’s asynchronous nature as well as real-time interactions. These interviewees use it as an outlet to express their feelings during or after matches, as they post status updates on the game, along with happy or cynical comments. These posts, which are often picked up by other fans, make the expression of feelings a communal experience (Hillman, Procyk, & Neustaedter, 2014). Lena (27, Guatemala) gave a vivid example of how liveblogging works: “it’s mostly posting things like ‘WHAT?! THAT REF IS BLIND THAT WAS A CLEAR RED!’ or ‘OMG THAT GOAL’ *insert amazing reaction gif here* and people that agree reblog it or comment on the post and [it’s] also reblogging other posts that you see and agree with.” Julia (18, Germany) emphasised discussion of the matches: “exchanging views is important to me, for example how others saw a foul or whether a penalty kick was deserved.” In contrast, Merita (26, Germany) claimed that she does not engage in liveblogging, as she is “too antsy, especially during very important games,” and wants to concentrate fully on the game to ensure she is not missing anything. But for Lena and others, liveblogging deeply involves them in the matchday experience, a term previously reserved for attending a live game—even though they are online:

> My favourite thing is the matchday experience, the Arsenal fandom is big enough that at least some people are online during every match and most of us know each other and it’s a lot of fun to meme or liveblog together. (Malisa, 18, India)
All interviewees stated that this aspect of being a member of a community was a large part of why they became football fans, often starting with immediate family. Almost all interviewees mentioned that they then branched out to the internet and to Tumblr specifically because they are geographically remote from their favourite clubs and have a hard time finding like-minded people in their local environment (see Hillman et al., 2014, p. 783). All interviewees but one strongly identified with a club from across the country, or even across the world (Petersen-Wagner, 2017; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016). FC Bayern München (Football Club Bayern Munchen) was a particular favourite in this sample, as were the more successful English teams such as FC Arsenal. This finding mirrors Petersen-Wagner (2017) insofar that remote fans normalise online communication to fulfil their need to communicate with liked-minded people (see also Hognestad, 2012; Rowe, 2015). Nadia (21, Greece) explained her love for FC Bayern München with a feeling of communality:

They just felt like the right team for me, if that makes any sense. Because since I started following them I started supporting other clubs as well, but Bayern is always Number 1. I think it has to do with the fans...this feeling of family.

This need to interact with like-minded fans online is especially urgent when the club is not playing on the international level, as it is for Lena (27, Guatemala). She fervently supports FC Schalke 04, a German team with mixed results on the international stage. She has a hard time finding “Schalkers” at home and struggles more than fans of more popular teams to find English-speaking counterparts on Tumblr. She explained, “it’s kinda hard to find much information or you have to follow the right people to see it.” Morgane (26, France) echoed this sentiment for Atlético Madrid, claiming that this is because “we’re a really small group,” as she thinks that “you can actually count how many people are Atléti fans on Tumblr.” These findings show that these interviewees are “women [who] are active agents struggling creatively for better opportunities in sport” (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 188), even if this involves being a member of global football fandom rather than actively participating in the sport. The interviewees thus implicitly addressed transnational debates of sports feminism, which argue that globalization (of which social media is a part) affects women’s access to, and attitudes toward women in sport (Bandy, Gori, & Jinxia, 2012; Hargreaves, 2004, p. 189).

All interviewees mentioned that the social ties they developed on the platform were their favourite aspect of Tumblr football fandom, especially since these ties often developed into real-life friendships (see Busse & Gray, 2014, p. 437). These friendships are maintained on private chats, such as via WhatsApp. Anna (23, England) explains, “we talk every day on WhatsApp and we share things about our lives, our thoughts, feelings, happiness and sadness and everything in between.” These interactions sometimes lead to real-life meetings, with newfound friends attending matches together. Megan (21, England) recounted how she and another Tumblr user “talked a little about different Liverpool players then she put up a post
about being bored in Liverpool and we just decided to go to the under 23 games due to how cheap they were.”

Half of the interviewees became interested in foreign cultures through their fandom; in a few cases, they travelled to their favourite club’s country and home ground. Three interviewees even set out to learn German in order to understand the local media coverage of their favourite clubs. Rumyana (19, Bulgaria) reported, “At first, I hated Germany [National Team] because I learned German at school and didn’t like it at all (what a stupid reason lmao [laughing my ass off]), but then I basically fell in love with Bastian Schweinsteiger and then the whole team.” While speaking German is not necessary to follow the team, Ruymana, Carly (18, Mexico), and An (27, USA) used FC Bayern München as a vehicle to learn German and thus to fully engage with their team, which is similar to how the Brazilian and Swiss Liverpool FC fans in Petersen-Wagner’s (2017, p. 140) study strived to learn English.

However, the experiences of the interviewees are not always positive on Tumblr. Ten reported that they stay away from heated discussions to avoid conflict, either by ignoring them or “blacklisting” a tag. The main reason for intense discussions are ongoing rivalries between clubs, such as between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, mirroring discussion patterns found offline, which are “part and parcel” (Benkwitz & Molnar, 2012, p. 481) of football. Malisa (18, India) reported that rivalries are indeed a part of her fandom experience but should not be taken personally: “Real Madrid and Barcelona fans especially take everything to be a personal attack and their fights are long angry essays which are just a headache for the rest of the fandom”. Often both of the respective teams are tagged in these highly opinionated and subjective posts, so the fans of the team that is attacked also see the content, a practice that the interviewees generally dislike.

Traditional explanations of football rivalries, which tend to be based on nationality, ethnic identity, or territory (Benkwitz & Molnar, 2012; Dmowski, 2013), do not apply to many of the interviewees: At least nine of them either do not live in their favourite club’s country or do not have the same nationality. However, they still distinguish themselves and their club (their in-group) from other club(s), the out-group (Berendt & Uhrich, 2016, p. 626). For instance, they take part in pre- and post-game rituals (e.g., through banter or “chanting” for their team in liveblogging), thus acting as members of their “imagined community,” even though they are not present at the stadium or even in the country (Anderson, 1991). One might dismiss this taking part in rivalries as a form of entertainment (Benkwitz & Molnar, 2012, p. 483), but all interviewees reported that heavily opinionated discussions, and especially personal attacks on users and players, detract from their fandom experience and are not fun at all. Daria (21, Poland) said:

I’m reading this stuff but I don’t understand the need people have to diminish other clubs or players. So I just read and laugh or I shake my head. When it gets too tiring and annoying then I unfollow someone or I blacklist a tag.
This strategy of avoidance extends to a tendency not to interact with fans of other clubs. Although there are examples of “cross-club” friendships, An (27, USA) explained that this is “unusual on Tumblr”; the interviewees generally felt they would have little in common with fans from other clubs. Morgane (26, France) said that people should simply unfollow rival tags and stay in their own club’s space, as “the football fandom isn’t really ‘the football fandom,’ it’s different fandoms of different teams who co-exist on the same website.” This hard stance tracks with Hills (2017) who defines fandom as different subcultures coexisting with each other; in the Tumblr fandom context, the line is drawn at the level of individual clubs.

However, if a rival fan approached them in an offensive way, often anonymously as permitted by Tumblr (i.e., without a link to a profile), 10 of them said they would indeed engage in conversation to convey their opinion. Daria (21, Poland) explained: “I try to be nice and not get into a pointless discussion but I will defend my favs.”

Yet, the positive aspects of living their fandom on Tumblr outweigh the negative effects of any heated discussions, especially since they can simply blacklist or unfollow particular users. All of them said they would stay on Tumblr, mainly because of the friends they had made.

**A Different Communication Culture**

When the interviewees were asked why they prefer Tumblr to other social media platforms, they all replied that they appreciate its communication culture, which they mainly attribute to the mostly female Tumblr football fandom. According to Morgane (26, France):

[Tumblr] offers you the opportunity to really talk and develop your arguments, which fanboys don’t really do. What I have seen from Twitter is how they post a few tweets about a game, and tell others their opinions are wrong, but will never post 2,000 words about the inherent misogyny of some fan chant for instance.

This comment suggests that these female fans like to discuss issues without character restrictions and that different topics are on the agenda, such as misogyny in football. Thus, being a football fan means more to them than discussing the score; it is a diverse experience of supporting their team. Discussing players’ lives is a big part of that (Andrews & Clift, 2017; Smart, 2005, pp. 144–190). This practice has been condemned in traditional male sports fandom contexts (e.g., Toffoletti & Mewett, 2012a) and by some women (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016, p. 15). On Tumblr, discussing the score and the players’ lives coexist peacefully, which resembles what Tanaka (2004) found for Japanese female fans. However, all interviewees fiercely rejected the notion that their fandom consisted primarily of these celebrity discussions and emphasised that they are indeed fans of the sport:
Women get judged by men because they think we mostly are here for the looks of a player while a lot of people in here have to look through bad [video] streams where you can luckily identify the ball. (Lena, 27, Guatemala)

The interviewees also noted that they often use Tumblr to find specific club or player information that is hard to find in the mass media, for example, criticism of players or clubs, which are discussed in detail. Three interviewees summarise information, such as press conferences or foreign media coverage, for those who lack the time to go into detail like this or do not speak the language—essentially forming a “necessary intelligence community” (McCarthy, 2014, p. 73) that delivers information that is hard to find elsewhere (see also Jenkins, 2007). These interviewees collect this information themselves, as teams and players generally do not have official Tumblr profiles, unlike on Twitter or Facebook. However, none of the interviewees considers Tumblr as an exclusive source of information. They are highly critical of opinionated posts and would rather verify information with other sources.

The language users employ on Tumblr is also different from how football is discussed on other platforms. The interviewees use fandom vocabulary as a shorthand that would not be understood elsewhere (see Hillman et al., 2014, for other fandoms). For instance, they usually use first names to refer to players and also often coaches (e.g., “Niko” for FC Bayern coach Niko Kovac, “Per” for FC Arsenal player Per Mertesacker), a convention that was observed in all the interviews. By doing so, these fans set themselves apart by making sense of their fan objects in new ways as an interpretive community (Jensen, 1991; Lindlof, 1988). These ways may challenge both the official readings (i.e., interpretations) of the clubs (see Fiske, 1989; Hardin & Whiteside, 2012, p. 153), insofar as first names imply an intimacy that is not there, and the established “male” and media readings, in which players are usually referred to by their last names. Over half of the interviewees emphasised, as Megan (21, England) did, that “here [on Tumblr] personality and relationships between players is a big part of how people feel about them. That doesn’t happen in fandom so much. . . . [In football fandom outside of Tumblr] it’s more about how they play.”

Fandom vocabulary may also come in other textual or image forms. Eleven interviewees appreciated that Tumblr offers a platform to let them showcase their creative endeavours such as by posting football art or fanfiction (see Baym, 2007). Others take photographs and edit them into banners, birthday cards, or even valentine cards, which are sent to other users—behaviour that strengthens fandom community bonds (Turk, 2014). Anna (23, England) said, “I enjoy building a page where people can come and share the things that Arsenal are up to, the things I have made, and hopefully that is useful to people and makes people happy.” Again, the community aspect plays a paramount role (Jenkins, 1992, p. 154). An (27, USA) draws pictures of footballers interacting with other popular fandoms, thus creating vastly different interpretations of the “source text” (Stein & Busse, 2009, p. 196). In this role as a fan artist, she finds that she is more lenient towards fans of clubs she...
dislikes than she normally would be: “I may not like Real Madrid, but if a Madridista [a fan of Real Madrid] comes into my askbox and asks me politely for art of their fave, the chances that I’ll oblige them are pretty good.” Fan fiction reading and writing also play a role for a few interviewees, but this work is mostly posted on other platforms. This shows that different fan identities may come in different intensities depending on the subcultural context in which they are lived. This practice of expressing oneself creatively in football fandom is also found in Tanaka’s (2004) work, in which a deep creative engagement with the players plays a big role for female fans. Again, these forms of art rely on shared interpretation of the interpretive community that outsiders would not understand (Busse & Gray, 2014, p. 433).

**A Safe Space for Female Fans?**

All interviewees attributed Tumblr’s different communication culture to its absence of men; only one interviewee reported having had contact with a male user in the platform’s football fandom. All interviewees generally felt that they cannot speak out as freely on other social media platforms as they can on Tumblr, as they see Twitter and Facebook as the domains of men (see Dworkin & Messner, 2002, p. 17). Carly (18, Mexico) pointed out: “I think it [Tumblr] is our own little thing? Twitter fandom is mostly men, and here [us] women, we talk to people who understand us better.” Mary (40, USA) had a strong opinion about why so few men are part of the Tumblr football fandom, saying that “men are threatened anytime women show interest in something that is perceived as ‘manly.’ Women aren’t supposed to have an opinion on sports. The fact that so many women on Tumblr do, scares them.”

These opinions replicate myriads of research on how men see women in sports fandom (e.g., Meân, 2012) and suggests that Tumblr may be a safe space for women online. Whereas real-life interactions with male football fans are of a mixed nature for the interviewees, all of them recounted having had negative experiences on social media. Those who had mixed or bad interactions with male football fans in their offline environment claim that without Tumblr, they would have no other outlet for their fandom. According to Rumyana (19, Bulgaria), “us girls don’t have anywhere else to express our love towards football. Nobody takes us seriously in the real world when we say we love this sport.”

They also say that they would be belittled on other social media platforms for the topics they discuss, which, as previously mentioned, go beyond the score, or for the creative elements they like to employ to show their fandom. Thus, almost all interviewees deliberately stay away from other social media platforms for football discussions and prefer Tumblr, as Nadia (21, Greece) does: “I think as a platform Tumblr is more ‘tolerant’ than... Facebook or Twitter.” The interviewees did not mention online spaces such as fan forums or discussion boards, but they were only asked about their other social media activities regarding football. However, it can be assumed that these women do not use other fan forums, as all of them mentioned that
they mostly use other social media to gather information and not for discussion or interacting with others.

Although Tumblr provides a place where users can be themselves and freely discuss the content they like, satisfying their need for social belonging, it is not a one-size-fits-all approach for all fans. As Tumblr’s user population is global, many users focus on popular teams with international followings; those who favour a less popular or minor league team may only meet a few counterparts.

In addition, opinionated discussions and rivalries between “subcultures” of the fandom demonstrate negative aspects of the platform. However, there are attempts to bring the fandom together. Carly (18, Mexico) said that she urged fans not to be intimidated by other users or to be made to feel they support the wrong team. Thus, toxic discussions can take place even when gender is not an issue, just like on other platforms or in the offline world.

**Conclusions**

This study sheds new light on how female sports fans interact with each other online, and how they form an interpretive community in their fandom (Lindlof, 1988). It highlights the communication culture of the young and mostly female football fandom on Tumblr and investigates whether Tumblr may be classified as a safe space for female football fans.

The results show that the one of the purposes of Tumblr the interviewees value the most is the community aspect, which is illustrated by the formation of real-life friendships through interactions on the platform. However, they also experience highly opinionated discussions, mostly due to rivalries, which detract from the fandom experience for many of the interviewees. Moreover, the interviewees prefer Tumblr to other social media platforms because of its different communication culture, which is exemplified in the diverse ways in which they can express their fandom. They can discuss teams and players at length but also be creative and show their crafts and use of fandom vocabulary, a combination that no other social media platform offers them. This sentiment echoes Tanaka’s (2004, p. 56) assessment of feminised fan practices, as women were found to pursue their own modes of fandom, including creativity and celebrity discourse, while not “competing over the amount of knowledge, the authenticity of spectatorship or the absolute empiricism of ‘you need to play in order to know.’” Tumblr thus seems to serve a similar purpose as a “secret mode of communication” for the interviewees that the exchange of illustrations and match reports via mobile phones had for Japanese women during World Cup 2002. Moreover, their fandom has other positive effects such as being encouraged to learn about new cultures or even a new language.

The interviewees also prefer Tumblr to other social media platforms because the fandom is overwhelmingly female and thus differs from what they consider to be male-dominated platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This prompts an examination of whether Tumblr may be regarded as a safe space for female football fans. But
although they feel they can speak more freely on Tumblr than on other platforms, it still contains toxic discussions that mirror those found elsewhere, even if gender does not play a role. Sandrina (27, Germany) summed up the fandom’s communication culture by likening Tumblr to a “separate universe”:

The football fandom on Tumblr . . . sometimes feels like a separate universe from the ‘mainstream football universe’. [. . .] because I can look at things from a different point of view, for example criticism on players, clubs, behaviour, culture. Here, we can talk about things here in a more casual matter, also about trivial, not so serious topics like a player’s haircut, things we would be sneered at, as women, on Twitter, Facebook, or in real life.

As these female fans have found their own niche in online football fandom, one might ask whether clubs missed out on a group of heavily invested female fans by not welcoming them into official club platforms. But, since clubs’ attempts to lure female sports fans are rarely geared towards women as fans in their own right (Schultz & Linden, 2014, pp. 168–172), it is unclear whether these fans would be interested in an official platform that treats them in a way they may feel is condescending. One interviewee even said that she “hates” the pink clothing her team offers—another hint that there might be miscommunication between female fans and clubs (Sveinson & Hoeber, 2016).

But on Tumblr, the interviewees feel they are understood—for instance, as one interviewee said, wearing a team jersey in public is “not done” by women in her country. But on Tumblr, showing her colours is warmly welcomed, empowering her to be the football supporter she wants to be, with no need to attend games or even live near her favoured club.

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