

**The experiences of bisexual soccer fans in the UK: Inclusion, engagement, and digital  
lives**

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## **Abstract**

Although sport has traditionally been a toxic environment for sexual minorities, recent research has shown greater levels of inclusivity. Building on a growth of recent research on typically marginalized groups of sports fans – including women, racial minorities, and some sexual minorities – this research examines the experiences of English bisexual soccer fans. To do so, I draw on semi-structured interviews with 25 bisexual fans (14 cisgender men and 11 cisgender women) of a range of English soccer clubs. Findings indicate that English soccer stadia have become a more inclusive climate for bisexual fans. This was best evidenced by a growth of LGBT visibility through the formation of dedicated fan groups, as well as the general decline of anti-LGBT chanting. Despite the decline of abuse inside stadia, however, these fans spoke of how the proliferation of social media has provided an alternative platform for discrimination. Accordingly, these fans' experiences of consuming soccer through social media differ significantly from their experiences inside sports stadia.

**Keywords:** Sport; bisexuality; sexualities; LGBT; soccer; football; fandom

## **Introduction**

A significant range of recent research has documented how attitudes toward sexual minorities in English (men's) soccer have improved over the past decade (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland et al., 2021; Magrath, 2018). Curiously, however, the experiences of sexual minority fans remain almost entirely absent on scholarly work on sports fandom (see Magrath (2021) and Desjardins (2021) for notable exceptions). While sexual minority fans still comprise a minority of fans inside sports stadia (Allison & Knoester, 2021), hearing their voices remains a significant component of sports research—particularly given the broader context of increased cultural acceptance in Anglo-American cultures in recent years (e.g., Kranjac & Wagmiller, 2021; Watt & Elliot, 2019). The current research responds to House, Jarvis and Burdsey's (2021) recent call for a greater range of research on bisexuality in sport – and builds on other recent research on the experiences of traditionally marginalized sports fans (e.g., Pope, 2017) – and provides the first scholarly analysis of bisexual fans of English elite soccer. Drawing on 25 semi-structured interviews with cisgender bisexual soccer fans – 14 men and 11 women – I show that while these fans' experiences of English soccer stadia are overwhelmingly positive, their consumption of soccer through social media is typically overshadowed by abuse and discrimination.

## **Sport, Masculinity, and Sexuality**

For a century-and-a-half, competitive teamsports in most Western cultures have typically been acknowledged to be a cultural domain in which boys and men were able to establish and reaffirm hypermasculine identities (Dunning, 1999). Originating from the second Industrial Revolution, which took effect in Anglo-American cultures in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, competitive teamsports were thought to provide a solution to a supposed 'crisis of masculinity'; one in which men were supposedly 'going soft' (Filene, 1975). Accordingly, participation in teamsports were thought to instil a variety of idealized attributes, including

the repression of pain and concealment of feminine and same-sex desires, all the while committing acts of violence against oneself and others (Kimmel, 1994). It is, thus, unsurprising that early modern team sports were epitomized by high levels of violence (Young, 2019).

A century later, in the 1980s, sport found renewed cultural significance for masculinity in the West. Conservative socio-political responses to the emergence of the HIV epidemic, which disproportionately affected gay and bisexual men, elevated deleterious attitudes toward sexual minorities throughout the decade. In the UK, the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS) showed that, in 1983, 62% of the population believed that same-sex sex between consenting adults was ‘always wrong’ or ‘mostly wrong’; by the end of the decade, this figure had increased to 75% (Clements & Field, 2014). Similar hostile attitudes were also apparent in the US and Canada (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Biphobia also emerged as a greater social problem (than homophobia) around this time because bisexual people typically experienced hostility from straight and gay communities (Herek, 2002). Evidencing this, McCormack et al.’s (2014) research on the experiences of different generations of bisexual men found that the oldest cohort had experienced the greatest levels of marginalization and harassment from peers and family members.

To explain the myriad of complex problems that bisexual individuals encounter, Anderson et al. (2016) present the notion of “bisexual burden.” In this work, they argue that this could be explained by a link to anti-gay attitudes, but biphobia is typically focused on behaviors, rather than identity. Another core component may be that, at the start of the HIV epidemic, bisexual men were erroneously thought to be responsible for the spread of the virus to heterosexual people (Stokes et al., 1996). Anderson and McCormack’s (2016) review of relevant literature illustrates 11 distinct kinds of biphobia, including neuroticism, confusion about sexual orientation, attention-seeking, holding on to heterosexual privilege, and

confusion about sexual orientation. While not an exhaustive list, Anderson and McCormack (2016) highlight the existence of how bisexual individuals are set apart from gay men and lesbians in the social processes that esteem heterosexuality in society.

Reflecting the broader cultural attitudes toward sexual minorities throughout the 1980s, most sexual minority individuals at this time tended to avoid participation in sport, hide their sexual identities (Pronger, 1990), or self-segregate into lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) sports teams and leagues (Elling et al., 2003). ‘Out’ LGB people who did participate in mainstream sport around this time were typically subjected to discrimination, exclusion, and social marginalization (e.g., Griffin, 1998). In elite men’s soccer, this is best evidenced by the British player, Justin Fashanu. When Fashanu came out – or was effectively outed by British tabloid media (Cleland, 2014) – as the world’s first elite gay male (active) soccer player in 1990, he suffered near-complete vilification and rejection from the industry, and, following allegations of sexual assault in the US, took his own life in 1998 (Gaston et al., 2018).

### **Sport and LG(B) Inclusion**

The last two decades have seen an improvement in cultural attitudes toward sexual minorities. In the UK, the most recent BSAS, in 2019, showed that only 16% of those sampled believed same-sex sex to be ‘always wrong’ or ‘mostly wrong’ (Watt & Elliot, 2019); this is a trend which has reflected across the entire Western world (e.g., Kranjac & Wagmiller, 2021). And while there remain ongoing claims that sport has been resistant to this social change, there is a significant body of evidence that documents its increased acceptance of sexual minority involvement. At the start of the millennium, Anderson’s (2002) research with ‘out’ gay male athletes in the US showed that despite fearing verbal and physical abuse, these concerns were not realized. Unsurprisingly, therefore, most of the sample instead regretted not coming out sooner. When Anderson (2011) replicated this research almost a

decade later, there were even greater levels of social inclusion, such as a reduction of the *don't ask, don't tell* culture and even more inclusion of gay athletes in social activities. While there is considerably less recent research on lesbians' experiences in sport, what has been published also documents a decline of homophobia, and more positive social experiences (Anderson et al., 2016; see also Davis-Delano, 2014).

Heterosexual individuals' attitudes toward the presence of sexual minority involvement in sport has also improved. In research on English rugby, for example, Anderson and McGuire (2010) show that the ostensibly heterosexual men in their sample exhibited a "more inclusive version of masculinity – one that they maintain is not predicated in opposition to femininity or homosexuality" (p. 257-8). Arguably of greater relevance to this article, research with heterosexual elite young soccer players in English Premier League (EPL) Academies<sup>1</sup> has found overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, including support of same-sex marriage, same-sex adoption, and (hypothetical) support of competing with an out gay teammate (Magrath, 2017a; Magrath et al., 2015). Even the fundamentally religious athletes on these soccer teams espoused near-unanimous support for sexual minorities (Magrath, 2017b). Accordingly, while there were no out gay players in these settings, these positive findings, according to Magrath (2017, p. 169), "serve as a roadmap for when one of their teammates does come out."

As well as athletes, research on sports fans in the UK has also shown increasingly liberal attitudes becoming commonplace—especially in soccer. Cashmore and Cleland's (2012) research on 3500 English soccer fans found that 93% were supportive of an out gay male elite player. A player's on-field performance was deemed to be the most significant factor. When this research was replicated a decade later, this figure had increased to 95% (of 2663 fans) (Cleland et al., 2021). Despite these findings, however, around a third had witnessed anti-LGB language at a soccer match, although most believed this to be 'banter',

rather than evidence of discrimination (see also Magrath, 2018; McCormack et al., 2016). Accordingly, they argue that “there exists a detachment from overwhelmingly inclusive attitudes in what has found to be a more progressive cultural context” (p. 11). Pearson (2012) argues that the prominence of this language in soccer “would be likely to discourage a gay or bisexual supporter from ‘coming out’ for fear of constant ridicule” (p. 168).

It is, perhaps, because of this language that sexual minorities are typically less likely to identify as ‘strong’ sports fans (Allison & Knoester, 2021). However, research on the experiences of gay male soccer fans who *do* attend matches has documented a decline of discriminatory chanting (inside stadia) in recent years (Magrath, 2021; see also Magrath, 2018). This was a contributing factor to these fans feeling safe attending matches and that previous feelings of intimidation and anxiety had dissipated in recent years. Important to this process has been the emergence of LGBT Fan Groups, a recent social movement which have emerged over the past decade to provide a counterspace to English soccer’s traditionally hypermasculine and heteronormative atmosphere. They have also played a central role in providing gay male soccer fans with a greater sense of belonging and community (Magrath, 2021).

Outside of soccer stadia, discrimination, and abuse of all kinds – including racism, LGBT-phobia, and sexism – toward sports clubs, athletes, and fans has been prevalent on social media sites. Bennett and Jönsson (2016) estimated that EPL clubs receive nearly 20,000 abusive posts every month. This also connects with a broader rise of recent online hate crimes in the UK (ONS, 2022). In their analysis of English soccer’s institutional response to tackling online abuse (albeit in the context of racism), Kilvington and Price (2019, p. 64) conclude that:

There are a number of systematic failings undermining or hindering football’s [soccer] attempts to address this issue including poor coordination, a lack of clear

guidelines, ad hoc educational provision, a shortage of resources, and a culture of secrecy at many clubs.

Partly in response to these failures, as well as a general lack of action from social media organizations, elite soccer clubs and some media organizations in England boycotted all social media for four days, in April 2021 (Anderson & Magrath, 2022). This included providing no updates of matches – most elite clubs provide real-time text commentary – that were played during this time. While some social media companies – including Twitter and Facebook – met with key soccer organizations in January 2021 to discuss strategies to combat abuse (Morgan, 2021), progress has since been slow.

### ***Bisexuality, Sport, and Fandom***

While there is a significant body of research documenting the increasingly positive experiences of gay male and (to a lesser degree) lesbians in sport, there remains significantly less on sport and bisexuality, despite some notable exceptions. Anderson and Adams' (2011) research with three US soccer teams (and 60 heterosexual male participants) found that the vast majority of participants recognize bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation. Interestingly, many of their participants even challenge the traditionally rigid binary of human sexuality, and argued that it should be viewed as a broader spectrum. Despite these positive attitudes, however, Maddocks' (2013) research on 13 bisexuals' experiences of sport concluded that “to identify as bisexual places athletes in a disempowered position” (p. 143) and, perhaps not unreasonably, that “bisexuality occupies only a marginal space [in sport]” (p. 141).

On the sports field, though, the past decade has seen an increasing number of out elite male and female bisexual athletes. These include, for example, Nile Clark (tennis), Zach Sullivan (ice hockey), Nicola Adams (boxing), Levi Davis (rugby), Jessica Aguilar (MMA), and Piper Niven (WWE) (House et al., 2021). More recently, the delayed 2020 Olympic



Games in Tokyo also included bisexual athletes Jack Wooley (taekwondo) and Maarten Hurkmans (rowing) (as part of a record 186 out LGBTQ athletes at the Games, and 36 at the Paralympics). Despite only muted (but growing) coverage, media representation (of bisexual male athletes) has been largely positive (e.g., Ogilvie & McCormack, 2019), although in some cases has erased bisexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation (e.g., Magrath et al., 2017). Reflecting broader gender inequity of sports media coverage (e.g., Cooky et al., 2021), bisexual female athletes have received substantially less media coverage than their male counterparts. Accordingly, House et al. (2021) recommend that there is a greater need for research “regarding analyzing media content in relation to female athletes and bisexuality” (p. 16).

This suggestion is, according to House et al. (2021), one of numerous gaps in scholarly research regarding bisexuality and sport. These also include how bisexuality might intersect with race, ethnicity, age, and other core demographic factors; existing theoretical frameworks to further incorporate bisexuality; and a better overall understanding of attitudes toward bisexuality in sport. Thus, while there is a significant body of research which explores the experiences of gay males and lesbians in sport, research on bisexual male or female athletes and fans remains elusive (c.f. Maddocks, 2013). Accordingly, this article builds on a range of other recent research on traditionally marginalized sports fans, providing the first research explicitly focused on bisexual male and female fans’ experiences of English elite soccer.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Initially part of a broader project on the experiences of LGBT soccer fans in England, this article draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 25 cisgender bisexual soccer fans: 14 cisgender men and 11 cisgender women. In line with Worthen’s (2013) call for

separate analyses of attitudes toward LGBT individuals, as well as recognizing that sexual minorities face a broad range of different social exclusions (Formby, 2017), I focus on cisgender bisexual men and women's experiences in this article, and explore gay male, lesbian, and transgender fans' perspectives in other publications (e.g., Letts & Magrath, 2022; Magrath, 2021).

Demographically, participants in this research largely reflected traditional British soccer (e.g., Goldblatt, 2014). Indeed, all but one participant was White (with the exception being Mixed Race), aged between 18 and 60, and identified as either working-class or lower middle-class, as determined by occupation and/or educational status. The exception to this, however, was participants' gender. Indeed, although British soccer has typically been a male-dominated environment (Dunning, 1999), in this research there was a near-equal split of participants (14 cisgender men and 11 cisgender women). Participants in this research identified as 'fans' of 15 separate elite English clubs currently competing in the EPL or English Football League (EFL)<sup>ii</sup> and around half (12) held season-tickets for their respective clubs. The sample is not large enough to analyze any gendered differences (e.g., how bisexual males' experiences might differ from bisexual females' experiences), and instead focuses on cisgender bisexual experiences of English soccer more broadly.

### ***Participant Recruitment***

Participants were recruited through social media. The growth of the internet in recent years has provided researchers with a broader range of opportunities to engage with online cultures (Cleland et al., 2020). Of significance to this article, it has also become an important site for historically marginalized groups – such as LGBT communities – to create social networks. Accordingly, this has become a valuable resource through which contact can be made with potentially hard-to-reach participants. Given that Twitter has evolved into the most popular outlet through which LGBT soccer fans in England network – indeed, most

LGBT Fan Groups have a Twitter profile – most participants in the current research were located through this means. When this research project began, a new Twitter account was created – @LGBTFansProject – and an advert was posted with its aims. This was then shared via ‘retweets’ almost 100 times by various accounts, including key figures in sports media and a range of sport-focused equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) organizations.

The project then underwent two waves of participant recruitment, with two eligibility criteria. The first wave included self-identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender; those who supported a club who competed in either the EPL or EFL (at the time of data collection); and those who attended at least 50% of their club’s matches, either at ‘home’, ‘away’, or a combination of both (15 participants were recruited in this first wave; 9 men and 6 women). The final variable was then relaxed in the second wave of participant recruitment, to include those fans who attended five or more of their respective club’s matches per season (the remaining 10 participants were located in this second wave; 5 men and 5 women). While the “digital divide” may exclude a minority (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), adopting this approach to participant recruitment was an effective way of locating match-going fans to discuss their experiences of attending English soccer matches.

### ***Procedures***

To ensure consistency throughout the project, all interviews were conducted on the telephone and were recorded. Interviews took place over a nine-month period, between September 2018 and May 2019, and ranged from between 50 minutes and 2 hours (averaging an hour). Prior to interview, participants were emailed documentation outlining the overall aims of the research, in addition to researcher contact details. Each participant also electronically signed a consent form. Ethical approval was granted by my institution prior to data collection, and all ethical guidelines of the British Sociological Association (BSA) were followed. This included participants’ rights to view transcripts upon request (although none

did) and the right to withdraw without penalty (although none did). Additionally, confidentiality and anonymity were assured throughout the research process, as evidenced by the use of pseudonyms in the findings.

Interviews began with a general discussion of topical sports issues – such as the 2018 FIFA World Cup (men’s) and start of the new soccer season at the time. This “shop talk” has previously been documented as an effective way to build rapport with participants in sports-based interview research (e.g., Magrath, 2017a, 2021). The aims of the research were then reiterated to participants, before interviews then focused on four central themes: (1) attendance at English soccer matches; (2) soccer’s climate for LGBT fans; (3) chanting and discriminatory language in soccer; and (4) the role of governing bodies and clubs in tackling soccer-based discrimination.

Interviews were transcribed and coded upon completion. An inductive framework was then adopted with a thematic analysis (TA) employed when analysing results (Charmaz, 2014). To ensure a consistent and accurate approach to TA, Braun, Clarke and Weate’s (2017) guidance list was followed throughout the analysis. This included a thorough and comprehensive approach to coding, in addition to a detailed interpretation of analytic claims. The coding process was also generated from themes documented in research notes following the conclusion of each interview. This ensured a “rigorous, *deliberative* and reflexive process for doing TA, that keeps ‘quality’ as a foregrounded concern” (Braun et al., 2017, p. 202). Although this does not typically include the process of inter-rater reliability, the nature of the project (one of the first to examine sexual minority fans’ experiences) meant that an academic colleague entirely separate from the project independently coded – and confirmed – almost half (12) of the final themes outlined in the results sections.

## **Results**

### **Stadium Climate**

English soccer has traditionally been an overwhelmingly hypermasculine space (Dunning, 1999). It is likely for this reason that when discussing the climate of English soccer stadia, all but six of the bisexual male and female fans in this research believed it to be an “unwelcoming environment” for sexual minorities. Michelle, for example, a Southampton fan, said, “It’s still quite a macho space, I think. I don’t think it can be a very pleasant place at times.” Similarly, Marlon a Tottenham Hotspur season-ticketholder, said, “Football [soccer] is really driven by toxic masculinity, and that affects the way people behave at matches.” And Terry, a self-employed Leicester City fan, said, “It can be a nasty place, a football [soccer] stadium...Especially if you’re not used to it, and things aren’t going your way.” Thus, for these fans, English soccer stadia’s heteromascuine space can often make them an uncomfortable space for sexual minority fans.

Despite these concerns, however – and consistent with recent research (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland *et al.*, 2021; Magrath, 2021) – all but four of the bisexual male fans (2) and bisexual female fans (2) interviewed for this research believed that English soccer stadia have become a more inclusive environment. For example, Abbie, a Norwich City season-ticketholder, said, “I think the culture is a lot more accepting these days...I don’t think there are many negative comments anymore.” Similarly, Wilfred, a retired Chelsea fan, said, “Things have progressed and got better in stadiums in the last few years.” Jerry, a Stoke City season-ticketholder, said, “Yes, I think there has been a real shift. Attitudes are just generally so much more positive nowadays.” And Emily, an Arsenal fan studying Law at university, said, “I think it’s a lot more acceptable to be LGBT at football [soccer] these days. I’ve seen a real improvement from when I first started going a few years ago.”

These positive narratives are further supported by the declining prevalence of anti-LGBT chanting inside English soccer stadia (e.g., Magrath, 2018). Queens Park Rangers fan, Alan, for example, said, “That sort of language was previously so normalized inside

stadiums, but now it's changing... You just don't hear it anymore." Similarly, Sophie, a Tottenham Hotspur season-ticketholder, said, "From what I've seen, football [soccer] fans don't really do that so much anymore... I think it might be a generational thing." Zach, an Arsenal season-ticketholder who follows the club all around the world, said, "I don't think I can remember a time at all recently where there's been a whole crowd shouting something [discriminatory]." And Amber, a Bournemouth fan who works in retail, said, "On the whole it's a lot better. I don't tend to hear much at all." A fifth of fans in this research (5), including Bridget (Southampton fan), Sean (Newcastle United fan), and Yvette (Manchester United fan), said that they had never witnessed any form of anti-LGB chanting at matches.

For around half of the participants in this research (12), the emergence of LGBT Fan Groups has, to some degree, influenced a culture of change in English soccer. Indeed, at the time of writing, more than half of the 92 clubs in the EPL and EFL had an LGBT Fan Group officially recognized by the club<sup>iii</sup>. Brett, a Norwich City fan and season-ticketholder, said, "I think the rise of LGBT groups means that people are more comfortable in going to matches now... It gives them that safety net." Similarly, Lucy, a Brighton and Hove Albion fan who has just finished studying at university, said, "They [LGBT Fan Groups] are becoming more common, and I think that's had a positive impact on people's attitudes." And Theresa, a Chelsea fan originally from Kent, said, "I think the groups are great for visibility... It reminds people [other LGBT fans] that they're not alone, and that they're safe." Accordingly, while LGBT Fan Groups have been integral to providing sexual minority fans with a sense of community and belonging (Magrath, 2021), they give bisexual soccer fans a greater feeling of safety in a traditionally hypermasculine environment.

This feeling of safety was further emphasized by the fact that 22 of the 25 fans interviewed for this research said that they felt safe attending soccer matches in England, and have never been deterred from attending due to their sexuality. Fabian, for example, an

Ipswich Town fan, said, “I’ve never really felt unsafe...Football [soccer] has only ever been great fun in the time that I’ve been to matches.” Similarly, Alan said, “I do feel safe...Or at least a lot safer now than I’ve ever done in the past, although maybe that’s just football [soccer] in general recently.” And Yvette said, “Personally, I feel safe...But I can only speak for myself, not others. Maybe for them it might be bad.” These fans’ experiences, then, counter ongoing perceptions that soccer stadia are unsafe for sexual minority fans (Golding, 2018).

Naturally, however, despite these overwhelming levels of positivity, there were some caveats – albeit mostly from the Brighton and Hove Albion fans in the sample. Given that the English city of Brighton and Hove is known for its large LGBT population, it is perhaps unsurprising that its soccer club typically receive a disproportionate amount of anti-LGBT chanting direct toward it (FFT, 2020). This was confirmed by Archie, a Brighton and Hove Albion season-ticketholder, who said, “We [Brighton and Hove Albion fans] tend to be on the receiving end an awful lot...It’s very tiresome because it’s been going on for a long time.” And Lucy said, “We always get more because we’re Brighton. It is a reminder that there is still a long way to go.” In addition to Brighton and Hove Albion fans’ experiences, four other participants, including Anna, a West Ham United season-ticketholder, Alan, and Sophie, named a small number of specific clubs where they had negative experiences—which led them to suggest that they would not attend matches there again. Such examples serve as a reminder that while English soccer stadia have become an increasingly safe space, this can often be dependent on spatiality, such as location of a club, where in the stadium fans might sit, or whether attending a home or away match (Magrath, 2018).

### **Online Experiences: Social Media**

Alongside discussing attendance at soccer matches, the bisexual fans interviewed for this research also spoke of the influence of social media. Over the past decade, the emergence

and evolution of social media has profoundly impacted fans' consumption of sport (Filo et al., 2015). Approximately half of the fans in this sample discussed how social media has had a positive effect on LGBT inclusion in soccer. Zach, for example, said, "Arsenal tweet regularly in support of the Gay Gooners [Arsenal's LGBT Fan Group] and also when the players wear rainbow laces." Similarly, Marlon said, "Generally I think that more clubs are more willing to post about it [support for LGBT inclusion...It's definitely going in the right direction." And Yvette said, "Their [Manchester United] support has been more visible, especially at certain points in the season." Accordingly, social media has been an important tool through which English clubs are able to demonstrate support for LGBT inclusion—an important process in ensuring greater visibility in English soccer (Letts & Magrath, 2022), even if these messages are sometimes critiqued as insincere or inauthentic.

Problematically, however, the growth of social media has also facilitated a significant increase of discrimination toward elite athletes – particularly in soccer – leading to a social media boycott by elite clubs in the spring of 2021. Corroborating the need for this boycott, each of the 25 bisexual fans interviewed for this research said that anti-LGBT discrimination was worse on social media than in soccer stadia. Malcolm, for example, a Chelsea season ticketholder and author, said, "There has been so much abuse on social media lately...It is still a minority, but the minority very 'loud' in their abuse." Similarly, Abbie said, "There are a lot of us who are becoming really concerned with comments and bullying on social media...It's becoming a problem that is spiralling out of control." Owen, a Brighton and Hove Albion fan, described social media abuse as "vitriolic" and that those who post these comments "don't care...they think it is funny." And Brett said, "The abuse [on social media] is awful...Keyboard warriors sometimes just take over."

Most of the comments to which participants referred were directed toward either the LGBT Fan Groups or clubs' support of these groups or related events. Abbie, for example,



said, “I remember when Proud Canaries [Norwich City’s LGBT Fan Group] launched, there were all sorts of negative and abusive comments directed at us.” Similarly, Cole, a Bournemouth fan, said, “When there are special Rainbow games during the season...the comments on social media are just horrendous. It’s a horrible place to be.” And Anna said, “When the club post support of Pride of Irons [West Ham United’s LGBT fan group], or anything else in support of LGBT, the comments are always there. It’s kind of predictable nowadays.” Such is the prevalence of discrimination on social media, of the 25 bisexual fans interviewed for this research, almost half had had abuse aimed at them directly, which they believed to be because of their sexuality. According to Amanda, these comments can be attributed “to fans from across the world, and not so much in the UK”—thus further suggesting that declining LGBT-phobia is an uneven social process (Anderson, 2009).

In line with McCormack et al. (2016) call for scholars to understand the impact of ‘homosexually-themed’ language, participants in this research also discussed the effect that they think this had. Sophie, for example, said, “I think some [LGBT] people will see it and automatically be put off because they’ll see that kind of thing as the norm.” Similarly, Terry said, “It’s a shame that things are so bad, because even though the grounds [stadia] might be tough, they’re nowhere near as bad as Twitter.” Perhaps the most detailed response was provided by Lucy, who said:

Most LGBT Fan Groups connect on social media...Twitter. When you see the abuse that often comes their way, what kind of impression does that give? It sends a real message, both in general, but also in football [soccer]. Of course [LGBT] people are going to be a bit more conscious of getting involved when they see that.

This language, then, is pernicious in both its intent *and* its effect on bisexual soccer fans (McCormack et al., 2016).

Providing a solution to this social media abuse, Michelle said, “Yes, it’s damaging...But all that needs to happen is social media companies should be regulating people who use it...Keeping it anonymous is bound to cause more problems.” Attempting to better ‘regulate’ social media, by removing its anonymous element, was also suggested by Abbie, who said, “Most of the accounts who do it [engage in abuse] are hidden...anonymous anyway, so doing something to change that is obvious.” And for Alan, responsibility also fell elsewhere: “I think the clubs themselves should take ownership of this and attempt to show that they’re not going to stand for it...That would be a start.” For these fans, then, there is a clear and obvious need for increased regulation on social media to act as a deterrent for abuse.

## **Discussion**

While there has been a growing body of recent research that has documented how attitudes toward sexual minorities in English soccer have improved, their voices remain unheard in existing research (c.f., Desjardins, 2021; Magrath, 2021). Addressing this void, as well as responding to House et al.’s (2021) recent call for greater research on bisexuality in sport, this research draws on semi-structured interviews with 25 bisexual fans (14 cisgender men and 11 cisgender women) to explore their experiences of contemporary English soccer.

Congruent with previous research (e.g., Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Cleland et al., 2021; Magrath, 2018), findings indicate that for bisexual soccer fans, English stadia are increasingly inclusive of sexual minorities. This is best evidenced by the rise of LGBT Fan Groups, a decline of discriminatory chanting in stadia, and increased feeling of safety while attending soccer matches. Despite these findings, however, approximately four-fifths of the sample believed that English stadia remain overwhelmingly heteronormative environments, and, therefore, largely unwelcoming for sexual minority soccer fans. Interestingly, however, while previous research has shown that gay men attempt to temporarily erase their gay

identity by avoiding same-sex public displays of affection (e.g., Magrath, 2021), this was not the case with the bisexual fans in the present research. Overall, then – despite remaining cautious about attending certain away matches due to past negative experiences – English soccer stadia are, according to these fans, a safe space for bisexual fans.

In contrast, however, while stadia have become increasingly inclusive for sexual minorities, the bisexual fans in this research also discussed the problematic nature of social media. As it has evolved over the past decade, social media sites have become a staple feature of elite soccer—and indeed sport and broader society more generally. While there are numerous advantages to social media and its relationship with sport (e.g., Filo et al., 2015), there has also been an explosion of hate speech and discrimination. Indeed, aside from a modicum of positivity – such as clubs’ and organizations’ declaration of support for LGBT movements – participants in this research spoke of the prevalence of “vitriolic,” “toxic,” and “loud” abuse. This abuse was evident when clubs declared support for LGBT Fan Groups, or posts supporting these movements, as well as toward fans themselves. Indeed, approximately half of the sample had personally received abuse on social media. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, this language was shown to have pernicious intent and effect on these bisexual soccer fans (McCormack et al., 2016).

Interestingly, while social media sites have “garnered a great deal of attention from academics and practitioners due to their pervasiveness and cultural impacts” (Filo et al., 2015, p. 166), this has not currently extended to the experiences of sexual minority sports fans on these platforms (or, indeed, other minority groups). Further research is therefore required to better understand both sexual minorities’ experiences, and minority groups in general, of social media discrimination, but also potential solutions to this issue. Although some social media companies met with key soccer organizations earlier in 2021 to discuss strategies for tackling social media abuse<sup>iv</sup> (Morgan, 2021), further progress has been slow.

While there have been a small number of recent criminal convictions for this abuse (see Boshier, 2021), discrimination on these social media platforms continues seemingly unregulated and unabated. Further academic scrutiny is therefore required.

Recognizing the experiences of bisexual sports fans is a valuable addition to existing work. Despite this, however, the present research should act as a point of departure for further analyses of sport and bisexuality, particularly given we still know relatively little about cisgender bisexual athletes' or fans' experiences in this setting (c.f., Maddocks, 2013). We also know nothing of transgender or nonbinary bisexuals' experiences of sport, either. Thus, expanding existing work on sport and sexuality to incorporate the complex challenges that bisexual participants encounter – both on the sports field (as an athlete at any level of sport) and off it (as a fan or, perhaps, administrator) – is important. Thus, I echo House et al.'s (2021) call for an extension to better integrate bisexuality into theoretical and attitudinal research on sport. Finally, I also extend this call to also include research on the role of sports governing bodies—particularly given that previous research (Magrath & Stott, 2019) has critiqued them for failing to recognize – and even conflating – the complexity of sexual prejudice.

Alongside these recommendations, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of the present research. First, the sample lacked racial diversity; indeed, of the 25 participants, all but one identified as White British (the exception being Mixed Race). Accordingly, while English soccer stadia remain predominantly White (male) spaces (Kilvington, 2016), non-White fans do still attend matches regularly, and there is a need to hear their voices in future research. Second, this research focuses only on cisgender bisexual soccer fans, and these findings are, therefore, not generalizable to all LGBT people, including transgender or nonbinary bisexuals. Because of the broader challenges they may face, other

sexual and gender minorities' experiences may be more complex; further research is thus required.

Other limitations of this research may include the “digital divide,” as briefly acknowledged earlier in this article, of recruiting participants via the internet and social media (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 114)—although this is perhaps offset by the fact that, according to the UK’s Office for National Statistics (ONS) currently estimate that 96% of the population have internet access. Nevertheless, this point presumes that all sexual minority fans frequently engage with social media. Finally, fans of only 15 clubs from the EPL or EFL were represented in this research. While these clubs covered most of the main areas of England, it is also important to acknowledge that sexual minorities’ experiences can be influenced by geographical location. Moreover, because of the increased “sanitization” of these levels of elite English soccer (Cleland & Cashmore, 2016), experiences could also differ lower down the soccer structure, both at elite and recreational levels.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, this research is a valuable contribution to existing work on sports fandom, and is the first to focus – explicitly – on soccer’s climate for cisgender bisexual soccer fans in England. In doing so, it advances existing research on the growing acceptance of LGBT communities’ place in a traditionally hypermasculine institution – and cisgender bisexuals’ consumption of sport, in particular – as well as the effect on social media abuse on cisgender bisexual male and female soccer fans. Additionally, it allows us to better understand cisgender bisexual fans’ sense of place in this context. This research should, therefore, act as a precursor to more research into bisexual individuals’ experiences of sport.

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<sup>i</sup> Most elite soccer clubs have an 'Academy' aligned to them. This is typically where the most talented soccer players within a geographical region are recruited from a young age, before being trained with the intention of one day appearing for the club's main men's team (i.e., the team that competes in the EPL or EFL in front of thousands of spectators).

<sup>ii</sup> In English soccer, the vast majority of elite clubs compete either in the EPL (one division with 20 clubs) or EFL (three divisions, each with 24 clubs). Annual promotion or relegation occurs in each of these divisions, based on clubs' success during the respective season.

<sup>iii</sup> This figure has grown rapidly since Arsenal became the first elite English club to recognize its LGBT Fan Group, the Gay Gooners (a play on words of the club's nickname).

<sup>iv</sup> This included representatives from core organizations such as the EPL, EFL, the FA (English soccer's national governing body), Twitter, and Facebook.