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## RESEARCHING FOOTBALL, IDENTITY AND COHESION IN EUROPE

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### Abstract

Multiple crises are endangering the project of European integration, increasingly threatening social cohesion in Europe. Countering these dangers is necessary for the persistence of the European project. While international cooperation continues, it regularly remains in the sphere of political institutions, and interpersonal contact and exchange across Europe is often reserved for socio-economic elites. This conceptual paper argues that football, as a highly Europeanised mass leisure activity with fandom from socially diverse audiences all over Europe, has a strong potential to supplement existing exchange and cooperation, thus strengthening social cohesion in Europe. Based on a secondary analysis of the existing literature, the central concepts of football, (European) identity, and social cohesion are discussed, and their causalities and potential effects are described. A draft research strategy is outlined to analyse concrete football-based European stimuli, European expressions of fandom, and international practices of exchange. We conclude that football leads to the emergence of European identities among fans by exposing them to Europe and strengthens social cohesion through the establishment of international social relations utilised for reciprocal cooperation and action. Football could further be used as a blueprint for similarly Europeanised cultural phenomena, and the outlined research agenda adjusted accordingly to examine them.

**Keywords:** Football, Fandom, Europe, Europeanisation, Identity, European identity, Social cohesion.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past years and decades, multiple crises and developments have put enormous pressure on the project of European integration and stability. Challenges of political, social, economic, cultural, and ecological nature are increasingly threatening cohesion, peace, and prosperity in Europe. Anti-European attitudes and tendencies continue to grow, and their representatives are scoring wins all over the continent.<sup>1,2</sup> Rising Euroscepticism, Brexit, the indecisive fight against climate change, and conflicting positions on migration have exposed the fault lines of European unity. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has provided a valuable opportunity to demonstrate unity and stability in the face of external aggression, it has, at the same time, put additional strain on the European project by amplifying existing crises.

Various challenges faced by the European community might sometimes result in prioritisation of national interests, but highlight the importance of political cooperation, both in the scope of the European Union (EU) as well as bi- and multilateral coordination. In fact, with the high degree of economic interdependence between European countries, there remains an extensive ongoing cooperation and interaction among European countries as well as their citizens in a variety of fields, including education, science and research, arts and culture, tourism, and employment. Such forms of transnational exchange are essential as they can curb the divisive effects of anti-European tendencies and the reversion to the national frame through fostering a shared understanding of Europe and being European, which represents an important precondition for European cohesion. Still, there are decisive gaps in these networks of exchange. Firstly, while institutional(ised) cooperation remains a key dimension of mutually beneficial exchange and European integration, it rarely includes interpersonal exchange and contact on the individual level of regular citizens. Secondly, while such individual cross-border contact and mobility have proven to be decisive factors for European identification, they often remain limited to groups of higher formal education and socio-economic status,<sup>3</sup> exemplified by the Erasmus program<sup>4,5</sup> or touristic mobility,<sup>6,7</sup> or specific social groups as shown by the Eurovision Song Contest.<sup>8</sup> We propose that sports, and especially football, can serve to fill these gaps in the network of transnational exchange and cooperation, since it complements the institutional(ised), 'official' as well as more 'elitist' individual modes of exchange.

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1 Catherine E. de Vries, *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration* (Oxford, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198793380.001.0001>.

2 Marco Baldarassi et al., eds., *Anti-Europeanism* (Springer, 2020).

3 Justyna Salamonska and Ettore Recchi, "The Social Structure of Transnational Practices," in *Everyday Europe: Social Transnationalism in an Unsettled Continent*, ed. Ettore Recchi et al. (Bristol, Chicago, Ill.: Policy Press, 2019).

4 Adrian Favell, *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free Movement and Mobility in an Integrating Europe*, Studies in Urban and Social Change (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008).

5 Theresa Kuhn, *Experiencing European Integration: Transnational Lives and European Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

6 Per Gustafson, "Place Attachment and Mobility," in *Multiple Dwelling and Tourism: Negotiating Place, Home and Identity*, ed. N. McIntyre, D. R. Williams and K. E. McHugh (UK: CABI, 2006).

7 Per Gustafson, "Mobility and Territorial Belonging," *Environment and Behavior* 41, no. 4 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916508314478>.

8 Catherine Baker, "The 'Gay Olympics'? The Eurovision Song Contest and the Politics of LGBT/European Belonging," *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116633278>.

As a widely popular cultural phenomenon and a mass leisure activity, football<sup>9</sup> reaches a broad, socially diverse audience across Europe. Additionally, football has well-researched effects on identification and identities spanning across the local, regional, national, and – especially relevant here – European level.<sup>10,11,12,13,14,15,16</sup> These European identity effects emerge from a structural and administrative Europeanisation of football over the past decades, stemming from the intersection of its sporting and economic development with processes of European integration.<sup>17</sup> Due to its Europeanised nature, football promotes cross-border exchange and pan-European practices between individuals and collectives and thus enables regular and reliable connection and interaction between European citizens of all social strata. Based on football fans' strong emotional involvement and identification<sup>18</sup> with this highly Europeanised sport, football can potentially serve as a vehicle for European identification and directly impact cohesion across the continent. The relationship between identity and cohesion is a reciprocal one. While strengthened identifications positively affect social cohesion, active practices of cohesion can have a positive influence on shared identities. Football as both a carrier of identities and a field of action for practices of cohesion has the potential to positively influence both sides of a causal relationship. As such, it can complement governmental and other institutional programs or interactions taking place in segmented social contexts.

This paper aims to describe football's potentials in these respects, based on an analysis of the interrelations of fandom, European identity, and social cohesion. This football-identity-cohesion nexus will be analysed based on a literature review of the existing research on (European) identity and social cohesion, combined with an examination of the status quo of football's Europeanisation to identify the potentials of fandom and fan culture for shaping identities and promoting practices of social cohesion. The central questions the paper seeks to answer are therefore: How does football shape European identities? What European practices of cohesion does it promote? And how can the interrelations between football, identities, and cohesion, as well as their consequences be purposefully researched? To answer these questions, the paper firstly covers football and fandom as an identificatory phenomenon, describes the state of European football and how it shapes contemporary expressions of

9 Our focus here is exclusively on men's professional club football in Europe since the characteristics of a European mass leisure activity can mainly be ascribed to this dimension of the sport.

10 Anthony King, "Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe," *The British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 3 (2000), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2000.00419.x>.

11 Anthony King, "The New Symbols of European Football," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 39, no. 3 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690204045599>.

12 Roger Levermore and Peter Millward, "Official Policies and Informal Transversal Networks: Creating 'Pan-European Identifications' Through Sport?," *The Sociological Review* 55, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2007.00686.x>.

13 Henk E. Meier et al., "Fan Identification and National Identity," *Sport in Society* 22, no. 3 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1504771>.

14 Ramón Llopis Goig, "Identity, Nation State and Football in Spain: The Evolution of Nationalist Feelings in Spanish Football," *Soccer & Society* 9, no. 1 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970701616738>.

15 Regina Weber, "Banal Europeanism? Europeanisation of Football and the Enhabitation of a Europeanised Football Fandom," *Sport in Society* 24, no. 11 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2021.1893697>.

16 Regina Weber et al., "A European Mind? Europeanisation of Football Fan Discussions in Online Message Boards," *European Journal for Sport and Society* 19, no. 4 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/16138171.2021.1974220>.

17 Arne Niemann, Regina Weber, and Alexander Brand, "Football and European Integration(s)," in *The Routledge Handbook of European Integrations*, ed. Thomas Hörber, Gabriel Weber and Ignazio Cabras, Routledge International Handbooks (Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY: Routledge, 2021).

18 Jamie Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom: A Relational Sociological Approach* (Cham: Springer, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73141-4>.

fan culture. A subsequent secondary analysis based on a literature review of the concepts of identity and social cohesion provides the basis for a description of the causal connections between the three aspects. Based on the footballing context, the paper ends with an outline for a research agenda, highlighting relevant aspects of examination and providing starting points for a broader research program that might be applicable to Europeanised mass leisure activities beyond football.

## 2. FOOTBALL FAN CULTURE AND FAN IDENTITIES

Football fandom constitutes one of the largest forms of collective behaviour in contemporary society<sup>19,20</sup> with people from different backgrounds coming together on a regular basis to jointly engage with football. Being a leisure and lifeworld activity, many socially diverse Europeans participate in, the identification with a football club and fellow fans “often contributes to an individual’s sense of identity with or belonging to a group or collectivity.”<sup>21</sup> For many, “being a supporter is key part of their ‘real’ lives: a regular *structuring* part of their existence that enables them to feel belonging in the relative disorder of contemporary social formations.”<sup>22</sup> Doidge et al. go even further and view football fandom “as an extension of the self”, arguing that “[o]ntologically, the team becomes an extension of the individual”,<sup>23</sup> indicating a high level of identification and emotional involvement – potentially not only with the club, but other fans as well, since “individuals create emotional and highly valued connections with their identified group.”<sup>24</sup>

Inherent to football fandom as a leisure activity are many social (inter)actions, particularly among fans of the same club, fans from rival clubs, but also football fans more generally: “football fans identify themselves with similar members of a football community by attending matches, wearing club colours, and chanting alongside other fans.”<sup>25</sup> Cleland et al. also stress the significance of the social aspect accompanying football, namely the meeting with “friends, acquaintances, combined with passionate atmosphere”,<sup>26</sup> contributing to a sense of belonging among the individual supporters and keeping the group together. Football often becomes a part of everyday life through its discussions at people’s homes and workplaces as well as social media and other online spaces. It is this extension of football into people’s everyday lives and their relationships that is considered crucial for football culture’s perpetuation, expression, and experience.<sup>27</sup> Football fandom connects “supporters within and across spatial

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19 Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom*.

20 Ludovic Lestrelin, “Entering Into, Staying, and Being Active in a Group of Football Supporters: A Procedural Analysis of Engagement. The Case of Supporters of a French Football Club,” *International Review of Sociology* 22, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2012.730831>.

21 Tony Mason, *Sport in Britain: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 118.

22 Adam Brown, Tim Crabbe, and Gavin Mellor, “Introduction: Football and Community – Practical and Theoretical Considerations,” *Soccer & Society* 9, no. 3 (2008): 308, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970802008934>.

23 Mark Doidge, Radostaw Kossakowski and Svenja Mintert, *Ultras: The Passion and Performance of Contemporary Football Fandom* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526127631>.

24 Mathieu Winand et al., “Sports Fans and Innovation: An Analysis of Football Fans’ Satisfaction with Video Assistant Refereeing Through Social Identity and Argumentative Theories,” *Journal of Business Research* 136 (2021): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.07.029>.

25 Winand et al., “Sports Fans and Innovation,” 100.

26 Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom*, 86.

27 Chris Stone, “The Role of Football in Everyday Life,” *Soccer & Society* 8, no. 2-3 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970701224319>.

boundaries to one another, to the products, images and discursive renderings of football culture and to collective memories of embodied experiences across space and time”,<sup>28</sup> as well as to other actors of the sport like players or coaches through para-social relationships.<sup>29</sup>

This further underlines the potential of identification or a sense of belonging to a broader transnational community of football fans that transcends shared allegiance to a particular club. It is in this way that football fandom and the resulting exposure to related stimuli, interactions, relationships, and connections create group delineations, sense of belonging and identification, thus potentially connecting football fans *across* local, regional, and even national contexts. Following the concept of “transnationalization from below”,<sup>30</sup> we maintain that football provides an arena for the formation of a European identity away from the political context of consciously identifying with Europe or the European Union. The well-documented Europeanisation of men’s club football along various dimensions<sup>31,32,33</sup> provides opportunities to increase *identification with Europe* among fans and results in *Europeanisation of identities*, since football fans are increasingly exposed to European stimuli. While the transnational and European dimensions do not need to be congruent, the Europeanisation of professional men’s club football discussed below provides the backdrop for most transnational contact and therefore stimuli. Borrowing from Risse’s terminology, we can distinguish between two dimensions of contact with Europe: while the *vertical* dimension covers the distinctly European level, such as the participation in European competitions or the UEFA as the governing body of European football, the *horizontal* dimension represents contact with other countries in Europe, such as following a foreign national league or travelling to an international friendly match.<sup>34</sup> Both dimensions are transnational by their very nature. European identity, relevant European stimuli or even Europeanisation dynamics are oftentimes dependent on transnationalising processes. *Horizontal* European stimuli are necessarily transnational. An emerging European identity cannot be thought without the underlying transnational connections. However, after making these differentiations and clarifications, building upon existing works relating to transnational phenomena in European football,<sup>35,36</sup> and since the Europeanisation of club football affects the entirety of the transnational European football sphere (see below), we are confident to refer to *European* stimuli, identities,<sup>37,38</sup> or practices, while clearly recognising their transnational foundation and underlying processes.

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28 Stone, “The Role of Football in Everyday Life,” 181.

29 Niemann, Weber and Brand, “Football and European Integration(s).”

30 Steffen Mau, *Social Transnationalism: Lifeworlds Beyond the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 2010).

31 Niemann, Weber and Brand, “Football and European Integration(s).”

32 Alexander Brand, Arne Niemann, and Georg Spitaler, “The Two-Track Europeanization of Football: EU-Level Pressures, Transnational Dynamics and Their Repercussions Within Different National Contexts,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 5, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2012.665381>.

33 Arne Niemann, Borja García and Wyn Grant, eds., *The Transformation of European Football: Towards the Europeanisation of the National Game* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

34 Thomas Risse, *A Community of Europeans? Transnational Identities and Public Spheres* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

35 Michael Mutz, “Transnational Public Attention in European Club Football: Current Trends and Driving Forces,” *European Societies* 17, no. 5 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2015.1118519>.

36 Regina Weber et al., “Non-Elite Conceptions of Europe: Europe as a Reference Frame in English Football Fan Discussions,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 16, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v16i3.1089>.

37 Richard K. Herrmann, Thomas Risse and Marilyn B. Brewer, eds., *Transnational Identities: Becoming European in the EU, Governance in Europe* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

38 Kuhn, *Experiencing European Integration*.

### 3. THE STATE OF EUROPEAN CLUB FOOTBALL AND ITS EFFECTS ON FANDOM

Professional men's club football in Europe has been subject to an increasing Europeanisation, that is adjustments and transformations of its administrative structures, economic power, and cultural impact resulting from or taking place within the process of European integration. This includes pressures from regulatory bodies, the use of scopes of actions by private stakeholders, as well as cooperation and coordination between actors from the public and private sectors.<sup>39</sup> Four main developments can be observed:

1. the internationalisation of player markets. In 1995, the so-called "Bosman ruling"<sup>40</sup> of the European Court of Justice transformed the European player market by asserting that free movement of workers also applied to football players. Consequently, regulations that limited foreign players on teams' rosters were deemed discriminatory and were abolished. At the same time, the ruling allowed players to change clubs for free after their contract with their former clubs expired.<sup>41,42</sup>
2. the emergence and professionalisation of European competitions. The UEFA Champions League, the UEFA Europa League and the UEFA Europa Conference League represent an interconnected, multi-tier system of European competitions which are theoretically accessible for clubs from all 55 UEFA member associations. The emergence of the three competitions reflects the broader professionalisation and economic development of the game through its clubs and governing bodies.<sup>43,44</sup>
3. increased transnational cooperation between relevant stakeholders. Reacting to an increasingly professional and European orientation of the sport, different stakeholders have formed institutionalised advocacy coalitions to jointly represent their interests. This happened both on the level of clubs, originally with the G-14 and later with the European Club Association (ECA), as well as among fans, most famously Football Supporters Europe (FSE).<sup>45,46</sup>
4. economic and regulatory pressures affecting the distribution of broadcasting rights. These rights became increasingly important, and consequently expensive, through technical progress and rising interest in the game. Consequently, their distribution was partly regulated on the European level, resulting in partial exceptions from EU competition regulations for this domain.<sup>47,48</sup>

39 Niemann, Weber and Brand, "Football and European Integration(s)."

40 Judgment of 15 December 1995, *Union royale belge des sociétés de football association ASBL v Jean-Marc Bosman, Royal club liégeois SA v Jean-Marc Bosman and others and Union des associations européennes de football (UEFA) v Jean-Marc Bosman*, Case C-415/93, EU:C:1995:463

41 Richard Parrish, *Sports Law and Policy in the European Union* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719066061.001.0001>.

42 Antoine Duval and Ben van Rompuy, eds., *The Legacy of Bosman: Revisiting the Relationship Between EU Law and Sport*, ASSER International Sports Law Series (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016).

43 Arne Niemann and Alexander Brand, "The UEFA Champions League: A Political Myth?," *Soccer & Society* 21, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2019.1653859>.

44 Diána I. Fűrész and Pongrác Ács, "The Relation Between National Competition and International Competitiveness," *Problemy Zarządzania - Management Issues* 18, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7172/1644-9584.87.1>.

45 Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom*.

46 Jürgen Mittag, "Aufstieg und Auflösung der G14: Episode oder Paradebeispiel der Konfliktregulierung Europäischer Sportpolitik?," in *Europäische Sportpolitik: Zugänge - Akteure - Problemfelder*, ed. Jürgen Mittag (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2018).

47 Niemann, Weber and Brand, "Football and European Integration(s)."

48 Wladimir Andreff and Jean-François Bourg, "Broadcasting Rights and Competition in European Football," in *The Economics of Sport and the Media*, ed. Claude Jeanrenaud and Stefan Kesenne, New Horizons in the Economics

All four developments continue to have decisive impacts on men's professional club football in Europe. The liberalisation of player markets resulted in the internationalisation of player squads, with more and more Europeans joining teams in leagues outside of their home country. This Europeanisation is a two-way dynamic: foreign players coming to a specific league represent the outside-in perspective, while players from a specific country moving to leagues abroad can be regarded as the inside-out counterpart. This internationalisation has also reached the level of other personnel, such as coaches or club officials. The establishment and expansion of European competitions provide a great number of matches on a regular basis between European clubs that are widely broadcasted across the continent, while the barriers to access games of foreign national leagues have been dismantled due to the expansion of streaming services and the allocation of broadcasting rights. Additionally, the inception and professionalisation of actors' networks and increased international cooperation among stakeholders led to concerted lobbying efforts as well as collective action by interest groups across national borders and on the European level. Taken together, these developments have led to the establishment of a distinctly European football sphere.

Outside of football, developments of progressing European integration have transformed experiences and expressions of football fandom in Europe. Facilitation of cross-border mobility by the Schengen Convention, the introduction of a common currency with the Euro, the European single market guaranteeing 'four freedoms' (movement of goods, movement of capital, movement of persons, to establish and provide services), and other changes like the increase in internet-based communication, or the introduction of European Health Insurance Cards, played a role in making many European countries within and outside of the EU more accessible to football fans. This, in turn, provides opportunities for travel and exchange across Europe, turning football fans more 'European' in the process.

In their engagement with football, fans are regularly exposed to increasingly European influences. This holds true for players and coaching staff of their favourite club (outside-in) as well as other clubs they are exposed to. Additionally, home-grown players and other personnel might move abroad to a foreign national league (inside-out), drawing attention towards them. The emergence of the system of European competitions means that football fans can watch games between clubs from different European countries, either including their own club, or independently of club affiliation. Furthermore, qualifying for European competitions might become a benchmark for success.<sup>49</sup> Not only are matches between teams from different European countries a regular occurrence, but international live broadcasts are easily accessible, and information on football is virtually ubiquitous – a result of Europeanisation and mediatisation of the sport. This provides continued mediated exposure to European stimuli for fans. The expansion of the European match calendar through introduction of additional competitions, or widening the existing ones, extends travel opportunities to international away games, while travelling itself is simplified through lesser restrictions. This enables more fans to experience international away games and provides points of contact with Europe through other countries and local fans abroad.

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of Sports (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2006).

49 Weber et al., "Non-Elite Conceptions of Europe."

Consequently, it is now possible to become a fan of a foreign club and intensively follow it. This enables a previously uncommon decoupling of club fandom and location, additionally highlighting the change from place-based sports audiences towards dispersed national or international audiences that the mediatisation of football and the changes in the allocation of broadcasting rights have mandated.<sup>50,51</sup>

Lastly, the Europeanisation of club football has vastly increased opportunities for establishing coalitions and international networks. Intensified international exchange uncovered shared interests of fans from different national contexts, while the growing importance of the European level and greater frequency of international matches highlighted new, distinctly European issues. Increasingly professionalised networks represent fan interests on a broad range of issues<sup>52</sup> and serve as counterparts to the Europeanised cooperation of other stakeholders like the ECA. Fan friendships between two clubs might be formed around shared political, cultural, or religious traits, the sharing of which only became apparent through international contact.<sup>53</sup>

While the EU, its increased cooperation, enlargement, and policies have been both decisive drivers and the most salient results of the process of European integration, this process transcends the scope of the EU and encompasses states in geographic Europe that are not EU members or associated countries that are affected by the EU's foreign, economic, or cultural policy, as well as economic and social ties. In the realm of football, this is further amplified through UEFA, which consists of 55 member states that are not all EU members or necessarily even located on the European continent (e.g., Israel). However, EU legislation or regulatory measures that are binding for the EU member states do impact associated states. The union's trade policy and its market power might induce changes in other countries' production chains or their agriculture regulations to maintain positive trade relations with the EU. Regarding football, the ECJ's Bosman ruling prohibited UEFA and the associations in the EU countries from regulating the number of EU foreigners in its associated leagues. However, the regulations for UEFA competitions also directly affect the participating clubs from outside the EU, potentially impacting football-specific regulations in non-EU countries and, thus, fans' experiences.

This is just one example of EU policy affecting non-EU states' football leagues because of the multi-faceted cooperation with associated countries. In the case of football, these are especially influential, as UEFA governs associations from both the EU and non-EU countries. Since they are bound by common regulations, especially because they might face each other in UEFA club competitions and should, in theory, have equal access and opportunity, UEFA needs to implement EU regulations to avoid a breach of or conflict with EU legislation. This has contributed to the evolution of EU-UEFA relations from confrontation to a strategic

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50 David Rowe, "Sport and Its Audiences," in *The Handbook of Media Audiences*, ed. Virginia Nightingale (Chichester: Wiley, 2011).

51 FREE, "Football Research in an Enlarged Europe: Project Final Report" (2015), <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/290805/reporting/de>.

52 Cleland et al., *Collective Action and Football Fandom*.

53 Weber, "Banal Europeanism?"

partnership.<sup>54,55</sup> It is in this sense that UEFA's increasing engagement in EU policy cooperation has led to a furthering of EU policies' influence on non-EU UEFA members – and European integration of the footballing sphere includes more than the EU. This also applies to the concept of Europe employed throughout this paper, which is not limited to the scope of the EU. While football-related EU developments reach beyond the EU borders in the ways ascribed above, Europeanising identity effects can rebound on the EU: when it is positively connected to Europe, increased identification with Europe can strengthen trust in EU institutions,<sup>56</sup> although the strengthened identification might originate from the footballing context that is not congruent with the EU. However, this hinges upon fans' perceptions and definitions of Europe and their relation to the EU (uncovering which is part of the research agenda we propose).

Contrary to research that described football as a field of action for the performance of national or regional identities that reproduce exclusions and delineations,<sup>57,58</sup> other works have shone a light on the effects of football's Europeanisation on fan identities. In his research among fans of English Premier League club Manchester United, King found significant evidence for increased European identification, which is related to the results of football's Europeanisation in the sense of European competitions and resulting travels.<sup>59</sup> He also examined the effects of media coverage of foreign leagues, showing that its consumption leads to a decline in stereotypes and more positive connotations of foreign national entities.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, comparative research has proven that fans of those clubs who regularly participate in European competitions identify with European values and ideals more strongly than those of lower-league teams with a heavily regional focus.<sup>61</sup> Regarding European belonging, fans have proven to positively relate to Europe when they are accustomed to participation in European competitions. Also, club-related in-group definitions have shown to neglect national categories. Weber et al., therefore, conclude that while local connectedness remains important for identification, Europe is increasingly important for fan identities. The results of the interdisciplinary multi-national project Football Research in an Enlarged Europe (FREE) also delivered a variety of indications that changes in footballing structures towards a Europeanisation of the game generate a vast potential for identifying with Europe and the emergence of European identities among fans.<sup>62</sup> Levermore and Millward suggest that football fandom has a strong potential to contribute to a sense of belonging across national borders<sup>63</sup> – already hinting at the causalities at the centre of this paper.

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54 Borja García, "UEFA and the European Union: From Confrontation to Co-Operation?," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 3, no. 3 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v3i3.52>.

55 Arnout Geeraert and Edith Drieskens, "The EU Controls FIFA and UEFA: A Principal-Agent Perspective," *Journal of European Public Policy* 22, no. 10 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2015.1022206>.

56 Soetkin Verhaegen, "The Relationship Between National and European Identification, and Trust in EU Institutions," *CERGU's Working Paper Series* 2018, no. 4 (2018).

57 Meier et al., "Fan Identification and National Identity."

58 Mateusz Grodecki, "Performative Nationalism in Polish Football Stadiums and Fans' Views and Attitudes: Evidence from Quantitative Research," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902221121499>.

59 Anthony King, *The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

60 King, "Football Fandom and Post-National Identity in the New Europe."

61 Peter Millward, "We've All Got the Bug for Euro-Aways': What Fans Say About European Football Club Competition," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 41, no. 3-4 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690207077706>.

62 FREE, "Football Research in an Enlarged Europe."

63 Levermore and Millward, "Official Policies and Informal Transversal Networks."

Based on the above, we can maintain that European integration in general, and its football-specific developments and regulatory measures, have affected Europeanised men's professional club football, and – consequently – its fandom and fan culture. It has increased exposure to and points of contact with Europe and European stimuli, as well as opportunities for interpersonal contact, informal and formal cooperation, and coordinated action. As such, both the lived experience of fandom, as well as its individual and collective practices have been reoriented towards Europe. This reorientation entails significant consequences for processes of identity formation and dynamics of social cohesion associated with football.

#### 4. IDENTIFICATION WITH EUROPE & EUROPEANISATION OF IDENTITIES

Identity is a complex phenomenon, entailing various aspects of self-understanding, belonging, selfhood, similarity and difference, or interactivity, finding expression on levels of the individual and the collective.<sup>64,65</sup> Furthermore, identity is never fixed, it always remains processual and must be negotiated, as it “can only be understood as a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming.’”<sup>66</sup> This is described by ‘identification’, the “systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between individuals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference.”<sup>67</sup> Identity thus serves the purpose of distinguishing oneself from others. The internal and the external are crucial dimensions of understanding and analysing identity: “identifications are to be found and negotiated at their boundaries, in the encounter between internal and external.”<sup>68</sup> This distinction is mirrored by Brubaker and Cooper, who maintain that “self-identification takes place in dialectical interplay with external identification, and the two need not converge.”<sup>69</sup> In addition to the differentiation of in- and outside, we can distinguish between *nominal* and *lived*<sup>70</sup> identity, that is: “between the *name* and the *experience* of an identity.”<sup>71</sup> For example, while two individuals can share the *nominal* identity as a ‘football fan’, the meaning they ascribe to ‘being a football fan’ as well as the consequences for their lives can differ vastly.

All these distinctions and comparisons apply to the parallel importance of *in-* and *out-*groups for identification processes.<sup>72,73</sup> Not only does the sense of belonging to a group affect individual identity, but group membership represents an explicitly social form of belonging: when distinguishing one's own group from another, a *collective* identity represents the link between individuals and social groups, since it presupposes a sameness among members of one group in comparison to another. The development of an individual's sense of belonging to a collective signals the transition from a personal identity towards a social or collective identity. The perception of oneself, as well as connections to collectives, is additionally important to examine processes of group identification, i.e., the internal sense of one's collective belonging,

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64 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000).

65 Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 3. ed. (London: Routledge, 2008).

66 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 17.

67 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 17.

68 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 44.

69 Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 15.

70 Jenkins (2008, 44) distinguishes between *nominal* and *virtual* identity. For definitional clarity especially regarding the study of football fans' identification and identity, we employ the terms suggested here.

71 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 44 (emphasis original).

72 Jenkins, *Social Identity*.

73 Winand et al., “Sports Fans and Innovation.”

and categorisation, the externally ascribed belonging.<sup>74</sup> Risse views “collective identities as the psychological link between individuals and social groups”,<sup>75</sup> drawing on Tajfel’s understanding of social identity as “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.”<sup>76</sup> Arguably, these concepts cannot be completely separated as an individual does not exist independently of their social context, yet while “collective identity is explicitly connected to a[n experience of belonging to a] group of people outside the self, personal identity typically refers to characteristics of the self.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, “[t]he private self contains knowledge of one’s own attitudes, traits, feelings, and behaviour. The collective self contains affiliations, group memberships, and connections to collectives of all types.”<sup>78</sup> It is worth highlighting the emotional component of a collective identity, since it adds an additional layer of positive evaluation of one’s membership in a group.<sup>79</sup> However, it is not just sameness regarding individual attributes or emotional attachment that create connections among an in-group. Shared narratives and experiences are furthermore central to the formation of collective identities, a “particular we”,<sup>80</sup> and to bind individuals together through sharing of the resulting identity, strengthening their sense of belonging. Narratives in this regard are “generalized emotions that are built into the object, into images or texts”,<sup>81</sup> which replace social interactions where they become less tangible or possible – for example, on the scale of Europe.

In the case of Europe, European integration and the resulting emergence of transnational networks, shared symbols of identification and narratives, sense of belonging, and attachment to Europe have contributed to the possibility of identification with Europe and the emergence of European identities. Identification with Europe by its citizens has been described as essential for structural European integration’s maintenance.<sup>82</sup> Since individuals always belong to more than one social group, this identification can exist in parallel to local, regional, or national identities, while it complements and sometimes contradicts them, as survey data shows.<sup>83</sup> Bringing together these insights with the deliberations on football fandom and the Europeanisation of club football, we maintain that the Europeanisation of club football, through its consequences for fandom and fan experiences, can effectively contribute to the formation of European identities and identification with Europe. We can understand a European identity based on (individual) identification with Europe as “citizens’ self-categorisation as

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74 Jenkins, *Social Identity*, 43.

75 Risse, *A Community of Europeans?*, 22.

76 Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 255.

77 Richard D. Ashmore, Kay Deaux, and Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, “An Organizing Framework for Collective Identity: Articulation and Significance of Multidimensionality,” *Psychological Bulletin* 130, no. 1 (2004): 82, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.1.80>.

78 Dominic Abrams and Michael A. Hogg, “Collective Identity: Group Membership and Self Conception,” in *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology Group Processes*, ed. Michael A. Hogg and Scott Tindale, Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology (Malden, Mass: Wiley, 2001), 432.

79 Risse, *A Community of Europeans?*, 22.

80 Klaus Eder, “A Theory of Collective Identity: Making Sense of the Debate on a ‘European Identity,’” *European Journal of Social Theory* 12, no. 4 (2009): 432.

81 Eder, “A Theory of Collective Identity,” 431.

82 Valeria Camia, “Normative Discussions on European Identity: A Puzzle for Social Science?,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 11, no. 1 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15705850903553737>.

83 Risse, *A Community of Europeans?*

European together with their evaluations of their membership in the European collective and their affective attachment to Europe and other Europeans.”<sup>84</sup> This can be understood as the emergence of a ‘sense of belonging’ to Europe and a European collective. Levermore and Millward suggest that “it is increasing interaction on unofficial, informal, and transnational levels (...) that is helping shape and strengthen transversal dimensions of ‘belonging’ within Europe.”<sup>85</sup> And a strong sense of belonging or community is said to positively impact a group’s cohesion by promoting “mutual sympathy and loyalty.”<sup>86</sup>

Several empirical studies have examined the effects of different aspects of Europeanised football on identity formation. The evidence found for the emergence of increasingly European identities, identification with Europe, and a sense of belonging, ranges from European competitions as the main frame of reference for success among fans of Manchester United,<sup>87</sup> to football as the foundation for a shared communicative European public sphere<sup>88</sup> and proving subconscious effects of Europeanised football for the Europeanisation of identities.<sup>89</sup> These empirical results can serve as a point of departure for intensified and continued research into the connection between football, Europeanisation, and formation of identities. However, the mechanisms and effects identified in this paper reach beyond existing empirical research, and therefore, require further scrutiny and systematic examination: while some aspects’ impact on identity formation has been proven, others remain conceptual for the time being.

Arguably, there are two ways of identification with Europe: “first, identification based on exposure to Europe-related information; second, identification based on personal contacts and direct experiences with the European community and other Europeans.”<sup>90</sup> Identification based on exposure to Europe-related information represents what we want to call (continued) subconscious *exposure to European stimuli* through fans navigating the sphere of football as an objectively highly Europeanised mass cultural phenomenon. This exposure results in what Weber et al. have defined as “subjective Europeanisation”, which describes the process of “subconscious identity work among football fans within this increasingly Europeanised setting”,<sup>91</sup> leading to changes in perceptions, imaginations, and values, since “subtle and subliminal identification opportunities for fans are ubiquitous.”<sup>92</sup> Thus, fans are exposed to European stimuli independent of their conscious choices. This process becomes especially relevant since exposure to European stimuli happens continuously and over long periods of time. Even if the degree of exposure is small, based on football’s extension into fans’ everyday lives, it might lead to significant Europeanisation effects in identification processes.

Identification based on personal contacts and direct experiences “holds that citizens will identify with Europe to the extent that they come into contact with other Europeans and/or European institutions and directly perceive the consequences of EU integration and

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84 Stephanie Bergbauer, *Explaining European Identity Formation: Citizens’ Attachment from Maastricht Treaty to Crisis* (Cham: Springer, 2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67708-8>.

85 Levermore and Millward, “Official Policies and Informal Transversal Networks,” 149.

86 Bergbauer, *Explaining European Identity Formation*, 24.

87 Weber et al., “Non-Elite Conceptions of Europe.”

88 FREE, “Football Research in an Enlarged Europe.”

89 Weber, “Banal Europeanism?”

90 Bergbauer, *Explaining European Identity Formation*, 26.

91 Weber et al., “Non-Elite Conceptions of Europe,” 296.

92 Weber, “Banal Europeanism?,” 1904.

European communalities in their daily lives.”<sup>93</sup> This second way depends on fans’ individual agency since it requires deliberate choices to act. It represents a more active Europeanisation through intentionally seeking contact with(in) the European context, for example, travelling to international away games. The two ways to increased identification with Europe and potentially European identities can be distinguished conceptually, while acknowledging that they are interrelated, as changes in each might be consequential to the other.<sup>94</sup>

To sum up, we assume a two-fold route to potentially Europeanising effects of football on fans’ identities: (1) a *subjective* Europeanisation through continuous, everyday exposure to European(ised) elements and dimensions of the sport, subconsciously shaping identities and (2) a more active way of Europeanisation of identification and identities through intentional contact with and practices aiming at the European dimensions of the sport. Both result in a (re)alignment of interpretation frames, perceptions, and values towards a more European perspective.

Building on this, we maintain that fans’ exposure to Europeanised football happens not only around the match day. This holds true for both processes of Europeanisation. While matchday experience includes fans’ identification with their team, but also with fellow fans, thus socialising with other fans of their own or the opposition club, exposure to European stimuli is virtually ubiquitous, and the active practices transcend matchday experience in socialising, contacts, exchanges and more.

A central point of contact for fans with structurally Europeanised football in their everyday life, outside of matchday experience, is represented through what Rowe described as the *media sports cultural complex*.<sup>95</sup> Football and its consumption have experienced an increasing medialisation, which has placed media coverage of the sport at the centre of the informational context of fans. It shapes their perceptions, knowledge, and experience of football.<sup>96,97</sup> Since the media puts fans into contact with the highly Europeanised cultural space of football,<sup>98</sup> i.e., exposes them to European stimuli in the footballing sphere, it contributes to their identification related to the sport in the scope of the subconscious, subjective Europeanisation.

However, fans’ exposure to European stimuli is obviously not limited to atomised and locally dispersed media consumption. Fans’ contact with Europe transpires in a variety of ways besides that and can include, among others, European travel, live match experience abroad or with European away teams, contact with other European fans in the scope of their international travels to away games, or participation and exchange in European fan networks.

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93 Bergbauer, *Explaining European Identity Formation*, 30.

94 Bergbauer, *Explaining European Identity Formation*, 30.

95 David Rowe, *Sport, Culture & Media* (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003).

96 Jamie Cleland, “The Media and Football Supporters: A Changing Relationship,” *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443710393866>.

97 Walter Gantz and Nicky Lewis, “Fanship Differences Between Traditional and Newer Media,” in *Routledge Handbook of Sport and New Media*, ed. Andrew Billings and Marie Hardin (Routledge, 2014).

98 FREE, “Football Research in an Enlarged Europe.”

These represent the practices, active expressions of football fandom or being a fan.<sup>99,100,101</sup> Since fans not only identify themselves with other fans by matchday experience, wearing of certain distinguishable markers or mutual cultural practices,<sup>102</sup> but football is “such a part of the current Zeitgeist that it pervades institutions, cultural practices and personal interactions across many different domains”,<sup>103</sup> it is vital to include both in an analysis of football’s potential to foster European identities.

We can thus contend that the transformation of many aspects of football towards Europe, through its Europeanisation, has transformed all aspects of fans’ reality when engaging with football. Exposure to European stimuli that contributes to subconscious Europeanisation has increased since the European level of football has become more and more important for the sport. Likewise, the opportunities of international contact and interactions that enable potentials for active Europeanisation have increased. In- and out-group definitions and demarcations can also be realigned with the European level. Transnational contact between fans might lead to a widening of perceptions of in-groups. Fans might categorise international players, coaches, or officials from teams they follow as being ‘one of us’ based on European or national markers<sup>104</sup> stemming from increasingly European teams due to the Europeanisation of player markets – all affecting identification and identities. While the levels of exposure and exchange vary between fans based on the intensity and frequency with which they engage with football, even ‘passive’, consumption-oriented fans receive at least some European stimuli because the European level has permeated football as a mass leisure activity. Thus, football in its Europeanised state has vast potential to affect fans’ identification with Europe and foster European identities.

## 5. SOCIAL COHESION AND PRACTICES OF EXCHANGE

Much like identity, social cohesion is a multifaceted phenomenon. We follow the definition of social cohesion as “the strength of social relations, networks and associations; a sense of belonging to the same community and the ties that bind, in terms of shared values, a common identity and trust among members; equal opportunities; the extent of disparities, social cleavages and social exclusion in a society”.<sup>105</sup> Two things become clear in this broad definition. First, social cohesion is comprised of a variety of different but potentially interconnected elements. Second, social cohesion partly hinges upon a sense of belonging and a shared identity, resulting in complex interrelations between the concepts of cohesion and identity. Drawing on the theorised impact of Europeanised football structures on football fans’ identities and identification with Europe, it follows that football can function as a tool to foster cohesion in Europe. For this, we will identify three main components, or dimensions, of cohesion, and describe them in closer detail below, namely values, identification (and

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99 Richard Giulianotti, “Supporters, Followers, Fans, and Flaneurs: A Taxonomy of Spectator Identities in Football,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 26, no. 1 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723502261003>.

100 Amir B. Porat, “Football Fandom: A Bounded Identification,” *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 3 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660971003619594>.

101 Stone, “The Role of Football in Everyday Life.”

102 Winand et al., “Sports Fans and Innovation.”

103 Stone, “The Role of Football in Everyday Life,” 177.

104 Niemann, Weber and Brand, “Football and European Integration(s).”

105 Regina Berger-Schmitt, “Considering Social Cohesion in Quality of Life Assessments: Concept and Measurement,” *Social Indicators Research* 58, no. 1-3 (2002): 406, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015752320935>.

belonging), and social relations or social capital. These allow us to examine football, identities and identifications with Europe, and European social cohesion as interconnected and partially interdependent phenomena. Values and identification can be located on the individual level, but they collectively amount to expressions of cohesion, while social relations and social capital manifest on the interpersonal level. We will also address the intersection of cohesion with the concept of identity laid out in Chapter 4, detailing identities' impact on social cohesion and vice versa.

## 5.1. VALUES AND IDENTIFICATION

Investigating the effects of identity on social cohesion, Holtug calls the assertion "that sharing an identity tends to promote social cohesion"<sup>106</sup> the identity thesis. In this understanding, shared identity as fostering social cohesion is focused on the sharing of values, which includes both explicit values that are "accepted as such",<sup>107</sup> but also those that are implicitly expressed through practices. Holtug demonstrates that sharing of values can not only strengthen social cohesion, but the content of certain values and their impact on an individual's behaviour as well:

Indeed, suppose it turns out that it has a positive impact on, say, trust if people share a commitment to equality of opportunity. This may be because sharing this value has a causal impact, where causal efficacy is attributed to the very fact of sharing, say because it generates positive identification with members of the in-group. But it may also simply be because people become more trusting insofar as they have this value, and so if many people share it this will increase the overall level of trust.<sup>108</sup>

A similar perspective to that of Holtug is reflected in Schiefer and Noll's<sup>109</sup> review of prior research on the dimensions of social cohesion. The authors describe communities of shared values as an essential part of social cohesion, and, in turn, define a cohesive society as dependent on the degree of shared common values among its members. Potentially, football and fandom provide a mutual basis for these communities of shared values. Any consequences for social cohesion originating from football then depend on the sharing of values among football fans, as well as the content of those values. Therefore, if football fans in Europe are aligned regarding accepted sets of explicit values based on them being football fans (i.e., football as a sport mediating certain values), or based on their continued contact with Europe through football (i.e., shared European values), this will strengthen social cohesion. And, if football fans value solidarity, equal opportunity, or a level playing field based on their football fandom, it also strengthens cohesion because these values, in turn, find implicit expression in their practices and behaviour.

Secondly, and in line with the identity thesis, identification and belonging positively affect social cohesion because of the "importance of feeling attached to or identify with the social entity (a

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106 Nils Holtug, "Identity, Causality and Social Cohesion," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 7 (2017): 1084, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2016.1227697>.

107 Holtug, "Identity, Causality and Social Cohesion," 1085.

108 Holtug, "Identity, Causality and Social Cohesion," 1086.

109 David Schiefer and Jolanda van der Noll, "The Essentials of Social Cohesion: A Literature Review," *Social Indicators Research* 132, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1314-5>.

group, region, country, or a trans-national entity such as the European Union)".<sup>110</sup> As values can also serve as a basis for identifications and identities, these two aspects are intrinsically linked. At the same time, identity and identifications go beyond the value dimension, and are thus distinct parts of social cohesion. Identification can delineate the boundaries of cohesion, provide security, and induce participation.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, the various identity-forming elements of football, such as exposure to European stimuli, mutual emotional involvement with the sport, or shared narratives and experiences, would directly contribute to stronger social cohesion, which in turn creates new points of contact with Europe and provides additional opportunities for interpersonal and intergroup connections, which can serve as new references for European identification.

Based on the Common Ingroup Identity model,<sup>112,113</sup> we maintain that social cohesion in Europe is additionally strengthened when members of different smaller in-groups consider themselves parts of the same larger group. A common in-group contributes to a shared identity and thus social cohesion. Given the "fluidity of social categorisation processes and the reality that people simultaneously can conceive of themselves as belonging to multiple groups",<sup>114</sup> the continued contact with European stimuli and other Europeans can lead to identification with a superordinate common in-group that is less exclusive than the original in-group. Football fans of a local or regional club, therefore, do not have to abandon their fan identity, but instead widen their in-group perception to potentially include other European fans, creating a superordinate, common in-group of European football fans. Shared identification within this in-group then contributes to social cohesion based on in-group bias that favours other members of a respective in-group, leading to more positive attitudes and behaviours towards them.

## 5.2. SOCIAL RELATIONS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The third component of social cohesion to be considered is that of social relations. In contrast to values or identification and belonging, social relations and social capital are found on a collective, supra-individual level and manifest in concrete, observable practices of interactions between individuals. Still, both, shared values as well as generalised identification patterns, can facilitate manifest social relations. Consequently, these aspects of cohesion are also linked and partly interdependent. Social capital is the dimension of cohesion that "concerns the goal of strengthening social relations, interactions and ties."<sup>115</sup> It represents the practical, manifest side of cohesion by maintaining and strengthening relations through development of and exchange in social networks, as well as active participation in public life reflecting "sense of belonging, solidarity and the readiness for mutual cooperation in the pursuit of common goals."<sup>116</sup> Social capital describes the extent and intensity of social relations and the norms of

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110 Schiefer and van der Noll, "The Essentials of Social Cohesion," 588.

111 Schiefer and van der Noll, "The Essentials of Social Cohesion," 588.

112 Samuel L. Gaertner and John F. Dovidio, "The Common Ingroup Identity Model," in *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, ed. Paul van Lange, Arie Kruglanski and E. Higgins (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012).

113 We use the original spelling of the model's name here, while the rest of the paper employs hyphenation for 'in-group' and 'out-group'. In our opinion, the latter spelling, which has also been employed by other authors referring to the same concepts, provides a clearer distinction and conceptual clarity.

114 Gaertner and Dovidio, "The Common Ingroup Identity Model," 4.

115 Berger-Schmitt, "Considering Social Cohesion in Quality of Life Assessments," 406.

116 Schiefer and van der Noll, "The Essentials of Social Cohesion," 588.

reciprocity and trust embedded in them,<sup>117</sup> from which concrete resources and opportunities for individual and collective action emerge. In this sense, manifest interpersonal relations are further strengthened through shared values, like trust and solidarity provide social capital to the respective community. Crucially, while shared values and trust positively impact social relations and social capital, they are not a precondition for them. Rather, there is a potential for “commitment to common values and norms, a common identity, a sense of belonging and, finally, the trust between people growing out of” social capital.<sup>118</sup>

So, while shared values, identification and identity require some degree of sameness or common traits between individuals, social relations and social capital allow for construction of cohesion from diversity. Social cohesion therefore does not necessarily require assimilation, which is in line with our conception that considers football as a common denominator and a connecting element among socially diverse and nationally dispersed audiences in Europe. Providing a mutual basis for concrete practices of connections, football strengthens cohesion through interpersonal relations among fans and could, in turn, contribute to the emergence of shared values or more general collective identities. While the full realisation of this potential might remain elusive, Europeanisation of football has increased the number of opportunities for active practices of exchange and interaction between fans.

The regularity, intensity, and degree of professionalisation of such social relations manifest in institutionalised exchange in the shape of fan friendships between fan groups of clubs from different countries, or international fan networks such as FSE.

## **6. (RESEARCHING) THE FOOTBALL-IDENTITY-COHESION-NEXUS**

In the following section, we will highlight the relevant overlap and interrelations between (Europeanised) football, identity, and cohesion. Additionally, we will map out possibilities and approaches for a broad research strategy that aims to examine concrete manifestations and potentials of football’s impact on identification with Europe, European identities, and social cohesion in Europe. The foundation of the agenda rests partly on existing empirical research into the impact of certain aspects of Europeanised club football on identity formation (as described above). However, the empirical evidence so far does not cover the extent of the effects, mechanisms and interrelations laid out in this paper, which, therefore, require a systematic examination to provide an empirical basis for the conceptualised causal relations in the scope of the paper.

As we have shown, football fandom and fan culture entail both subconscious and conscious contact with Europe, as well as practices in the field of action that is European football, flowing from Europeanisation of men’s professional club football. Both, contact and active practices affect the emergence of European identities and maintenance of social cohesion in Europe. Regarding identities and cohesion, we have demonstrated that some components of identity and cohesion are closely related. Namely, in- and out-group evaluations and belonging are central elements of identities, with values and identification as dimensions of cohesion.

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117 Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, 1st ed. (London: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

118 Berger-Schmitt, “Considering Social Cohesion in Quality of Life Assessments,” 409.

Looking at the component of identification, its effects on cohesion and identity are conceptually overlapping. As identification with a certain social entity is itself an aspect of social cohesion, any European identification emanating from football and its fandom consequently strengthens social cohesion. Football thus becomes a basis of social cohesion in Europe. Similarly, values can be a central object of positive identification with an entity based on sharing a specific set of values as well as their content. This leads to positive identification with an in-group, while at the same time increasing in-group cohesion. As such, values are a precursor for both, cohesion and identity. Any values derived from football fandom thus strengthen cohesion and identities simultaneously. In turn, this leads to a further convergence and amplification of values through a realignment of individual perceptions and values within an in-group of European football fans.

Lived experiences of Europe can be regarded as practices that foster European identities and consequently social cohesion. This happens through participation and exchange between socially diverse groups across Europe, the experience of which then has secondary effects on identification with Europe. The performance of football fan identity on a European level (international match attendance, occupation with European competitions, re-orientation towards the European level of the sport as a point of reference for success) fosters social cohesion through the sharing of football fan identities and respective values. These, in turn, can increase identification with Europe through further exposure to European stimuli, a transnational re-definition of in- and out-groups, and further construction of shared narratives and experiences on a European level. When the ensuing social relations are employed for regular exchange, collective action, and recurring interactions among fans and between fans or fan groups from different national contexts in Europe, they represent reciprocal or mutual practices of cohesion. These strengthen social cohesion among fans and have the potential to transcend the footballing sphere in two ways.

First, through football's nature of a mass leisure activity for many socially diverse audiences that are not only football fans but also Europeans (multiple identities), Europeanisation through football permeates into their life even outside of it. Second, when (intentionally or unintentionally) European activities and practices of cohesion among fans are viewed positively by others who do not have a relation to football, they serve as an example of the upsides of European interaction. Social relations thus entail a complementary dynamic between identity and cohesion, since the establishment of such networks of exchange and cooperation results in increased contact with other Europeans, again reifying shared identifications. At the same time, shared identifications, and perceived membership in the sense of belonging to the same in-group could serve as a catalyst for the establishment of manifest relations, for example, mutual efforts aimed towards the realisation of common interests or goals within a broader community of European fans. The resulting reciprocal, mutual practices of cohesion intentionally draw upon resources in the form of social relations and social capital, with the aim of strengthening interactions and ties to serve common goals. The element of intentional cooperation under the premise of existing relations and networks, and for the sake of shared interests, is what delineates these practices of cohesion from conscious practices of exposure, like travelling to away games, with the latter being a precondition for the emergence of networks based on the necessity of international contacts between fans.

We, therefore, employ an understanding of social cohesion that focuses not on the aspect

of assimilation as the primary means and effect of cohesion. Instead, we emphasise values, identifications, and concrete practices in the scope of social relations as constitutive elements of social cohesion. In this sense, Europeanised football does not simply carry the potential for bridging cleavages between socially (and nationally) diverse publics, but also serves as the basis for distinct manifestations of social cohesion in the shape of transnational networks, actors' coalitions, and other institutionalised relationships. If strong cohesion in Europe results from strong networks across national (and other) boundaries, we can draw conclusions about social cohesion by analysing these networks.

Adding to the "strong conceptual overlap between [the identification] dimension and the dimension of social relations"<sup>119</sup> and based on the deliberations of European identities and (European) identification processes, we propose that there are mutual effects between identification and social relations regarding their role for social cohesion. According to this understanding, there are two co-existing causal relations between football fandom, European identity, and social cohesion that we can examine:

First, football fandom leads to increased identification with Europe and the emergence of European identities, thus fostering social cohesion. Fans are exposed to European stimuli which shape their knowledge, perception, and experience of Europe, leading them to realign their values, as well as self-identification. This increases the identification with Europe, creating in-group belonging among European football fans. Sharing of this identification with Europe and the values associated with it serve as bonding agents for social cohesion in Europe.

Second, football fandom affects social cohesion in Europe and, thus, leads to identification with Europe and the emergence of European identities. Because fans experience and create active practices of social cohesion in Europe across national borders by performing their fan identity through intentional and reciprocal exchanges, networks, or solidarity, they are, in turn, exposed to more European stimuli, generate shared narratives and experiences which strengthens their identification with Europe and a shared European identity.

If one were to research the above interrelations and causalities to analyse the potential and concrete effects that football as a European mass leisure activity has on social cohesion in Europe, it is necessary to examine the observable, manifest elements, underlying the different components of the causal relations presented above. Broadly summarised, these consist of

1. football-related European stimuli. These provide the basis for any effects of subconscious and active Europeanisation and are a result of the Europeanisation of football.
2. exposure to these stimuli. The stimuli themselves do not have a Europeanising effect by their mere existence. Instead, fans need to be exposed to them in one way or another.
3. existing exchange relations. As manifestations of social relations, mutual exchange, interaction, and cooperation represent active practices of social cohesion in Europe.
4. Europeanisation effects. They are a measure of the actual realisation of football's potential to affect European identity and social cohesion in Europe.

The examination of football-related European stimuli refers to the effects of football's

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119 Schiefer and van der Noll, "The Essentials of Social Cohesion," 589.

structural Europeanisation and expressions found in football-specific information that fans are potentially exposed to. While some consequences, like the expansion of European competitions, more international encounters between clubs, an internationalisation of squads and coaching staff, are more obvious and salient for fans, all parts of the Europeanisation of the game can have effects of subconscious Europeanisation, potentially leading to a realignment of in-group definition, adoption of values, and identification with Europe – resulting in European identities. As such, studying the nature and presence of symbols, narratives, and persons that represent Europeanisation of football is beneficial to establish which European stimuli exist in football and its surroundings.

Due to the increasing availability of live broadcasts and football news, contemporary experiences of fandom go far beyond matchday. When the actual, regular live experience of games in the stadium is reserved for a minority of football fans, Rowe's media sports cultural complex<sup>120</sup> takes centre stage. Since a lot of information on (Europeanised) football is mediated through news outlets, examining patterns and mechanisms of news coverage on football sheds light on the type and intensity of European stimuli presented to fans. This could be done through a media content analysis of football coverage focussing on its European references. Additionally, since representations of Europe might vary from country to country based on the national footballing context, a comparative analysis might provide deeper insight and uncover differences or similarities in reporting, the latter of which can be assumed to have additional effects on cohesion through a potential emergence of *European public spheres*.<sup>121,122</sup> Since the media coverage of football is a low barrier to entry phenomenon and provides the informational context for fans and since information on football is virtually ubiquitous, we can assume broad exposure to European stimuli through football media.

In contrast to simple exposure through mere consumption of matches and football-related media, there are other components of exposure that cannot simply be assumed as applicable to all fans, namely variations of lived experiences of football fandom. Although the Europeanisation of football in combination with eased travel restrictions in Europe has increased opportunities to travel to international fixtures, not all fans have the resources or wish to do so. Also, fans might not pay attention to European competitions at all, so this aspect of Europeanised football does not primarily affect them. Therefore, when looking at the exposure to European stimuli, we are suggesting an examination of the mode, intensity, and frequency of contact with Europe induced by football fandom. This includes lived experiences and the generation of shared European narratives, what we call the active way of Europeanisation, intentionally seeking out exposure to Europe, resulting in realignments of in-group definitions and out-group demarcations, increased identification with Europe, and an adoption of values. An analysis of the actual exposure to European stimuli, also through intentional action, could be conducted in the scope of a survey study among fans to gain data on the prevalence of, e.g., international travel to away games of one's favourite club, to understand what expressions of fandom lead to the exposure to Europe, and their frequency and intensity. Potentially, depending on the sample size, this would also allow for a deeper analysis of certain types of fans based on their practices and behaviours. And, related to

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120 Rowe, *Sport, Culture & Media*.

121 Thomas Risse, ed., *European Public Spheres: Politics Is Back*, Contemporary European Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

122 Risse, *A Community of Europeans?*

mediated exposure, it would allow for checking the fans' media consumption. Importantly, it is necessary to study not only the externally provided stimuli (tangible empirical markers of Europeanisation such as the number and distribution of foreign players, viewership numbers for international matches, data on travel and mobility related to football), but also their processing and internalisation by fans to examine the actual degree of exposure and consequent identity and cohesion effects.

The next step is the analysis of existing exchange relations, the basis for which is provided by the original contact between fans. Mutual relations of exchange, reciprocal action, and intentional practices are viewed as practices of social cohesion. To inquire about their potential to strengthen social cohesion, it is essential to examine the existing structures and dynamics of international exchange based on football, and the coordinated efforts originating from it. We suggest that expert interviews with fan representatives are an effective way of doing this. It might be important to cover the extent of the existing networks, contrast the involvement of grassroots members with that of the institutional elites, ask about self-efficacy in these networks, or how in- or exclusive the existing structures and networks are regarding fans from different leagues and clubs of competitive levels. This approach would enable researchers to analyse manifestations of practices of social cohesion and their effects. Additionally, it opens possibilities to identify shortcomings of these networks and their realisation in practices, which might be another insightful subject for further research.

Lastly, to complete the transfer from the assumption of football's potential to foster European identities and strengthen social cohesion in Europe to social reality, it is imperative to cover the actual Europeanisation effects, that is the effect of football-based contact with Europe and European relations on European identities. For this step, we suggest the expansion of the survey study proposed above to a comparative survey among fans and non-fans. Only from this comparison can we draw conclusions on football's distinct effects. When football fans display differing perceptions of Europe, values, in- and out-group definitions, and identification with Europe, compared to those who are not fans, under otherwise equal conditions, we can attribute the differences to football fandom. One obstacle to this approach, or virtually any approach aiming at analysing identities, needs to be addressed. While identity might be temporarily stable, it is never essential or fixed, but remains mutable and continually negotiated. Therefore, while identity can be used to describe (inter)relations with football and social cohesion, it can hardly be observed in full. Identity remains a black box that we never manage to fully open. It is thus important to resort to the factors mentioned above that contribute to identity formation processes, allowing to describe and subsequently measure concrete and observable objects, elements, or attitudes.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

Based on the deliberations and the outlined causalities above, we conclude that football and football fandom have the potential to address some of the crises and challenges facing the EU and the whole European community. This is because football provides an avenue for regular, peaceful, rule-bound contact, interaction, and exchange between socially diverse European citizens. The intersection of football's sporting and economic development with the dynamics of European and EU integration has led to the emergence of a somewhat homogenous, interconnected football sphere, with international matches and competitions,

cross-border mobility of personnel, broad media coverage, and increasingly institutionalised and professionalised transnational cooperation. This highly Europeanised cultural space has the potential to fill the gaps and reach citizens that other, more formal political, social, and economic exchanges cannot. Football promotes both conscious and unconscious exposure to European stimuli (e.g., symbols, narratives, persons) as well as active practices of exchange (e.g., football-related travel, fan friendships, interest coalitions). As a result, football leads to the emergence of European identities among fans by exposing them to Europe, while also directly strengthening social cohesion through the establishment of social relations across borders that are intentionally drawn upon for reciprocal cooperation and action. Consequently, Europeanisation of fan identities impacts cohesion, since it can itself be considered a cohesive property, by aligning values and perceptions, and by fostering potentials for cohesive practices. The latter, in turn, not only strengthen social cohesion by establishing regular exchange and interaction in the scope of social relations, but ensuing interpersonal contacts lead to the Europeanisation of identities. This interconnected, partly interdependent football-identity-cohesion nexus is at the heart of the theorised impact football can have on Europe, its citizens and cohesion in the face of multiple crises.

To analyse football's potentials to affect identities and social cohesion in Europe, we propose examining four aspects: (1) which explicit and implicit, salient and concealed European stimuli follow from the Europeanisation of football; (2) how are fans consciously and unconsciously exposed to these stimuli, and how are they processed and internalised; (3) which exchange relations and practices of cohesion exist in the scope of European football; (4) how these factors impact European identity and social cohesion in Europe. This could include, among other approaches, an analysis of football media, surveys of fans and non-fans and interviews with experts, which would examine the football-identity-cohesion nexus with variation, both on the side of research methods, as well as regarding the subjects of the research. Such research based on the conceptual framework laid out in this paper might provide starting points to develop concrete pathways towards purposefully employing football as a basis for social cohesion in Europe and strengthening its positive effects on the stated phenomenon. In a first step towards this, we conducted a quantitative text analysis of the German football news media to assess how European football is covered and, in turn, perceived and internalised by football fans.<sup>123</sup> In a large dataset of online news texts, we found extensive, but selective coverage of European football. Media discourses were focused almost exclusively on high profile leagues and competitions from Central and Western Europe, as well as the Champions League, while leaving other leagues and countries on the margins. This limited scope of media attention is especially relevant regarding the connection between transnational and European identities of fans, since contact with a broad concept of Europe becomes elusive when its exposure is limited to an exclusive set of countries.

It is important to notice that the proposed agenda has its limitations. On the football-specific side, an important question is where to draw the line between professional and amateur club football. Moreover, not all professional football reaches the level of European competitions. On the contrary, the increasing stratification of European club football and more exclusive qualification rules for European competitions limit the variety of teams and, therefore,

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123 Jonas Biel et al., "Becoming European Through Football Media? Representations of Europe in German Football News Coverage," *International Journal of Sport Communication* 16 (forthcoming).

fanbases that have the opportunity to experience Europe and all the resulting phenomena outlined on this level. It remains important not to lose sight of expressions of the sport apart from the minority at the top of the men's game: football as a recreational game that enables mutual experiences, grassroots clubs transporting values of solidarity and trust, or women's football gaining increasing attention and potentially developing a different type of fan culture. All of these are not accounted for in the outlined agenda, and it poses an interesting and valuable challenge to incorporate them or to find additional ways to research these fields. Also, and this might apply to other Europeanised cultural phenomena, contact with Europe does not necessarily translate to positive images. Coverage of football or other phenomena might transport prejudice and negative stereotypes that are potentially adopted into individual perceptions. Furthermore, clearly delineating football-specific effects in identification with Europe of individuals that relate to Europe in a variety of ways, and through a variety of phenomena, poses an additional difficulty. However, while it is important to keep these reflections on limitations in mind when applying the conceptual propositions of this paper, they do not diminish the relevance of the agenda that puts social research of mass leisure activities at the centre of European studies. Football could be regarded as a blueprint for a variety of Europeanised cultural phenomena, the potentials of which might be analysed based on slightly adapted versions of the research agenda suggested.

To close on a critical contemporary observation that potentially has vast ramifications for the research outlined in this paper, we acknowledge that the postulated causalities and interrelations hinge upon the status quo of the European footballing sphere. Ongoing developments in men's club football – increased stratification within and across European leagues,<sup>124,125</sup> commodification and commercialisation, exclusive European competitions culminating in the plans for a European Super League<sup>126,127</sup> – might silence fan voices and eliminate opportunities for international exchange and contact by providing more selective representations and contacts with Europe. It is, therefore, unabatedly important to monitor developments in the European footballing sphere that influence the mechanisms outlined in this paper at the same time as those in the political sphere. Interestingly, while recent developments on the political level have been hypothesised as a 're-nationalisation', their footballing counterparts are largely connected to a shift in focus from the European to a global scale, with relevant actors in the sport seeking out fast-growing and valuable markets abroad, away from the long-standing connection with locally based fans and towards an easily consumable product for a globalised public. In this sense, these pressures are metaphorically tearing the European dimension apart because their forces work in diametrically opposite directions, thus endangering European cohesion, cooperation, and unity in all areas, thwarting the tapping of the full cohesive potentials of – not just, but also – football.

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124 Steve Bullough, "UEFA Champions League Revenues, Performance and Participation 2003–2004 to 2016–2017," *Managing Sport and Leisure* 23, no. 1–2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2018.1513341>.

125 Girish Ramchandani et al., "A Longitudinal and Comparative Analysis of Competitive Balance in Five European Football Leagues," *Team Performance Management* 24, no. 5–6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1108/TPM-09-2017-0055>.

126 Paul M. Brannagan et al., "The 2021 European Super League Attempt: Motivation, Outcome, and the Future of Football," *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 14, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2021.2013926>.

127 Henk E. Meier et al., "The Short Life of the European Super League: A Case Study on Institutional Tensions in Sport Industries," *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2022.2058071>.

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