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Belonging to a community of European fans? European common in-group identity formation through football fandom

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This paper investigates the emergence of a new category of belonging in European football—a shared European fan identity. Drawing on theories of social identity and the Common In-Group Identity Model (CIIM), it conceptualises European football fandom as a potential site of collective identification beyond typical, more proximate identifications at the club or national levels. Using survey data from four European countries (Germany, Spain, Poland, Norway), the study examines identification with European fan communities in relation to demographic, attitudinal, and football-related factors. Results show that while club and national identifications remain relevant, a distinct European fan identity is present among a substantial share of fans. This identification is associated with younger age, higher education, stronger attachment to Europe, and greater interpersonal and particularised trust, as well as with internationalised football consumption habits, positive perceptions of other fans, and support for shared interest representation. These findings suggest that Europeanised fandom fosters a form of supranational belonging that may strengthen identifications across Europe, particularly valuable in a time marked by multiple overlapping crises.

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Introduction

Fostering stronger European identities, that is, feelings of belonging to and identification with a European collective, is a stated goal in strengthening social cohesion in the European Union (EU) (European Commission, 2019), but has come increasingly under pressure by an enduring polycrisis (Nicoli and Zeitlin, 2024) of the European project. The capacity to act effectively in response to these crises hinges not only on expertise and resources, but also on the perceived legitimacy of and support for supranational institutions (Schmidt, 2020). These must ultimately be grounded in an identified polity of Europeans: “there has to be a sense of community, a we-feeling, however ‘thinly’ expressed, for democracy to have any meaning” (Cederman, 2001: p. 145). The emergence of particularised, superordinate European identities might play a small part in strengthening a sense of community and solidarity across Europe.

Being a highly popular, ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, football¹ presents an interesting case for examining such communities. Far beyond mere entertainment, it reaches broad, non-elite segments of European society, provides structure, meaning, and emotional attachments to its fans (Brown et al., 2008; Stone, 2017), and plays an important role in their social identities (Porat, 2010). While fans are typically analysed as bounded communities around specific clubs, fandom is a complex and fluid phenomenon, with the intensities, modes of engagement, and objects of reference subject to change. Among the dynamics that change how fans relate to the sport, its actors, and other fans are globalisation (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009) and Europeanisation (Niemann et al., 2021). Both have extended the boundaries of football engagement beyond local and national scopes. Europeanisation, or the shaping of domestic institutions, practices, and identities through European-level pressures, is especially important, as the intersection between European integration and football has led to the emergence of a distinct, highly interconnected “European football sphere” (Biel et al., 2025b: p. 10). In this cultural and economic space, fans are frequently put into contact with Europe, extending constructions of belonging, community, in-/out-groups—in short, identity—onto the European level. Fans reorient their frames of reference and in-group delineations towards Europe (Weber, 2022), and form more inclusive European identities (Finger et al., 2024a; Biel et al., 2024). Consequently, their constructions of community might reach beyond the traditional confines of club allegiance and national borders towards a European fan community. This, in turn, would provide a building block towards strengthening social cohesion across Europe.

This article examines whether fans form cognitive, relational, and affective ties to fans from other European countries, thereby constructing a supranational in-group that transcends typical local or national boundaries of fan communities. This paper investigates this new category of belonging and identification using theories of social identity. Drawing on representative survey data from four European countries (Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain), it examines whether football fans across Europe come to identify with a broader, superordinate fan community. The results show the existence of a shared European fan identity, an expansion of fans’ social imaginaries beyond typical community categories. Although slightly weaker than national or club-based attachments, a significant segment of fans identifies strongly with a European fan community. This identification is not uniformly distributed but shaped by socio-demographic variables (such as age and education), general political attitudes (particularly attachment to Europe and levels of trust), and football-specific behaviours and orientations. Importantly, identification with the European fan community is associated with particularised trust in other European fans, support for common interest

representation, and positive perceptions of fellow fans. Together, these findings suggest that football fandom constitutes a significant, often overlooked arena in which a sense of belonging to a European collective can emerge and be (re-)negotiated. In a time of deep political uncertainty and social fragmentation, such identifications may help build a more connected citizenry.

Social identity in an integrated Europe

To assess the emergence of a superordinate European football fan identity, it is first necessary to define the concept of social identity and the layered nature of identifications in a highly integrated Europe. Social identities are “that part of the individual’s self-concept which derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group, together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1981: p. 255). It encompasses cognitive categorisations, affective judgments, relational positioning, and behavioural markers between the self and others (Ashmore et al., 2004). Social identities are inherently complex, adaptable, and varied in strength and salience, as “individuals will self-categorise themselves differently according to the contexts in which they find themselves and the contingencies with which they are faced” (Jenkins, 2008: p. 113). A key dimension of social identities is feelings of belonging, “an emotional (or even ontological) attachment, [...] feeling ‘at home’” (Yuval-Davis, 2011: p. 10) in a social group. These affective (and downstream symbolic and positional) attachments individuals form toward social groups, spaces, and value systems are a crucial component of identities and “independent of categorisation and evaluation [...], on its own, a strong predictor of important group outcomes” (Ashmore et al., 2004: p. 90).

Building on these conceptual foundations, the *Common In-Group Identity Model* (CIIM) offers a theoretical framework for understanding how such identities and attachments can adapt into broader, superordinate group identifications. Based on the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954), it postulates that intergroup contact reduces biases and stereotypes and builds common identifications. When conditions of equal status, interaction and cooperation, and common norms and goals are met, individuals from different groups reconceptualise themselves as members of a shared, superordinate group through mediating mechanisms that include cognitive, behavioural, and affective factors (Dovidio et al., 2003). Affective factors such as anxiety or threat reduction and empathy serve as particularly strong mediators and play a key role in this process (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). The CIIM is based on a dynamic, scalar understanding of identity and belonging along a continuum of social, cultural, spatial, and symbolic proximity and distance. It entails a reorientation from a narrower in-group affiliation to a broader, inclusive identity while allowing individuals to “maintain a ‘dual identity’ with their superordinate group and subgroup identities simultaneously salient” (Dovidio et al., 2003: p. 12).

As European integration has deepened and broadened, a new societal level has emerged at which social identities can be conceptualised. European integration entails dynamics of Europeanisation, meaning processes through which domestic institutions, practices, and, crucially, identities are shaped by European-level structures, norms, and policy measures (Exadaktylos and Radaelli, 2015). Europeanisation encompasses multiple directional dynamics: top-down processes whereby European-level decisions and regulations shape domestic institutions and practices (downloading); bottom-up processes through which national actors influence European-level policies and structures (uploading); and horizontal, transnational processes wherein societal actors respond to EU frameworks by constructing cross-border

spaces and practices (crossloading) (Niemann et al., 2024). In the context of European political integration, Europeanisation encompasses the establishment of supranational governance structures, the harmonisation of legal frameworks across member states, and the creation of institutional mechanisms that facilitate cross-border coordination and cooperation (Schmidt, 2002). A broader, not strictly political understanding of the term “anchors ‘Europeanisation’ less in policy change than in processes through which perceptions of people are transformed” (Brand et al., 2024: p. 310) with regard to Europe, and thus centres banal, lifeworldly phenomena.

Integrated Europe is marked not only by economic and political interdependence (Fligstein, 2009), but also by increasingly dense networks of mobility, communication, and cultural production (Delhey et al., 2014). Examples include tourist activities (Gustafson, 2009), initiatives such as Erasmus (Sigalas, 2010), the Capital of Culture (Lähdesmäki et al., 2021), or the Eurovision Song Contest (Baker, 2017), or other transnational pursuits. These kinds of everyday phenomena (re)shape citizens’ perceptions towards Europe. In the supranational political, economic, and cultural sphere resulting from European integration, a European identity has developed that can be defined as “citizens’ self-categorisation as European together with their evaluations of their membership in the European collective and their affective attachment to Europe and other Europeans” (Bergbauer, 2018: p. 6). The development of such European identifications through engagement with transnational practices, institutions, and networks constitutes a Europeanisation of identities.

In line with the CIIM, European identity constitutes a superordinate identity that enables individuals from different countries to reconceptualise themselves as part of a broader collective while maintaining their national identities (Camia, 2010) in a “marble cake” structure (Risse, 2015: p. 25). It can further be divided into civic and cultural subdimensions (Bruter, 2005) with different anchors for individual identifications. The existence of this supranational identity on a European scale, its figuration and strength are key empirical indicators of European social cohesion (Dragolov et al., 2016; Schiefer and van der Noll, 2017). Consequently, strengthening feelings of belonging and groupness or the identification with European social collectives strengthens the cohesion of that particular social group. This is also reflected in efforts by the EU itself to strengthen cohesion through the promotion of shared identities (European Commission, 2019). In this study, the focus lies on constructions of belonging and identification on a European scale through the shared pursuit of football fandom.

Europeanised fandom as a site of belonging and identification

Football is among the most ubiquitous (pop-)cultural phenomena in Western societies, and it has a large, socioeconomically diverse, and internationalised fandom. A fan is an “enthusiastic devotee of some particular sports consumptive object” (Hunt et al., 1999: p. 440), who displays attachments to and behavioural engagement with a range of reference objects (a sport in general, team(s), player(s) or various personnel, or other fans) in the broader cultural, economic, and social contexts of the sport. Membership in a community of like-minded supporters and the highly valued affective connections to other members of the group, the group itself, or the referent of identification that serves as its anchor (Heere, 2016; Winand et al., 2021) constitute an important part of people’s self-conceptions (Porat, 2010). Fandom provides affective attachments of belonging to a specific football-related community—a tangible ‘feeling at home’ (Charleston, 2009)—and the additional cognitive and relational ties of social identities. A key marker of this is the use of a “categorised ‘we’” (Sandvoss, 2003: p.

37) that projects individual belonging to and identification with the community. Fan communities constitute imagined and symbolic communities (Cohen, 1985; Anderson, 1991; Blackshaw, 2008) of otherwise anonymous individuals that are constructed through shared symbols, practices, “invented” traditions (King, 2003), and collective memories (Pyta and Havemann, 2015). Given the decline of other mass social and cultural institutions such as churches or unions in many western societies (Loughlin and Lidström, 2010), the sport is a somewhat unique arena for mass collective identifications, social interactions, and shared practices that provides structure, meaning, and orientation (Stone, 2007) for many individuals “in the relative disorder of contemporary social formations” (Brown et al., 2008: p. 308).

The most common conception of football-related identifications is formed around individual football clubs (Blackshaw, 2008). There is a multitude of attitudes, behaviours, and symbols associated with being a fan of a specific club that is shared within the community. These include club colours, crests, jerseys, chants, anthems, banners, and other representations of the club, projections of norms and values of the club, and involve participation in ritualistic practices and social interactions with fellow community members (Ashmore, 2017; Winand et al., 2021). This both expresses and reinforces strong emotional bonds with the team, its players, and the surrounding community. However, club communities themselves are not monolithic. There are varying motivations, modes, and intensities of engaging with football that fans can be categorised along (Giulianotti, 2002; Grau et al., 2016; García and Llopis-Goig, 2020), and varying degrees of formal and informal organisation among fans. Football clubs often also represent and project geographic, cultural, ethnic, political, class, or other identities (Bradley, 2006; Bairner, 2015; Gómez-Bantel, 2016; Özkan, 2023), from which emerge complex patterns of solidarity and opposition with other fan communities, as exemplified by bitter rivalries or fan friendships. Despite often serving as reference points for geographically bounded identities, football clubs are non-spatial entities whose communities are not necessarily fixed in any specific location (Brown et al., 2008). With transformation processes such as globalisation (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2009) and mediatisation (Rowe and Miller, 2021), fans and their reference objects have become increasingly decoupled both spatially and temporally. Beyond these diverse and layered club communities, many supporters maintain multiple allegiances simultaneously by supporting (often to varying degrees) multiple teams (Radmann et al., 2023) or teams from other countries (Cho and Chiu, 2024), or they shift allegiances by following individual players’ careers across multiple clubs (Merten et al., 2023).

Crucially, fandom constitutes a space where “politics of belonging” (Yuval-Davis, 2011) unfold. There is a constant contestation and negotiation of inclusion and participation within the changing boundaries of fan communities. This is exemplified by still prevalent exclusionary attitudes and behaviours such as racism, sexism, homophobia, political extremism, and violence in some parts of football fandom (Cashmore and Cleland, 2014; Cleland, 2018; Brunssen et al., 2021), but also dynamics and projects of inclusion, empowerment, and changing patterns of participation in fan culture(s) (Lawrence and Davis, 2019; Jakubowska et al., 2020). These dynamics highlight how community and identity in football fandom are highly fluid and continuously reconstructed. As Brown et al. (2008, p. 309) note, “people come and go from football communities all the time, and their members are continually reflexive about who makes up ‘their community’ and what this means for how the group is perceived by its own members and others”. This reflexivity shows the centrality of questions of belonging, identity, and the scalar, dynamic nature of superordinate in-group constructions. As fans navigate the different layers and scopes of community within fandom, questions

of the strength and specific make-up of emotional and cognitive attachments and the constructions of the self, the categorical ‘we’, and of the ‘other(s)’ become pertinent. While football is inherently adversarial, and the most prominent division between fan communities is that of club allegiance (even more so when it comes to club rivalries), it can be argued that being a fan constitutes a collective identity and a referent for feelings of belonging in and of itself. Fandom, particularly one transformed by modernising processes, might function as a “common cultural language” (Stone, 2017: p. 452), and fans may find familiarity and recognition in other fans despite differences in club allegiance—a superordinate in-group identity of ‘being a football fan’ that subsumes smaller, club-centred or otherwise delineated communities.

In Europe, one distinct transformation dynamic takes place that influences the construction of fan identities: the Europeanisation of football. Applied to football, the term “describes the changes in the institutions, structures, and processes of football that can be related directly to the framework of European integration” (Biel et al., 2025b: p. 66). The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) serves as the sport’s governing body in Europe and, among other things, oversees a system of interconnected continental competitions, “a de facto pan-European football league” (Niemann et al., 2021: p. 52), that theoretically allows clubs from all European member associations to compete with each other. Football has furthermore become subject to EU regulatory pressures, exemplified by the so-called “Bosman-Ruling” that asserted freedom of movement and non-discrimination of EU citizens in the football labour market (Duval and van Rompuy, 2016) or the regulation of broadcasting rights distribution by the European Commission (Andreff and Bourg, 2006). Finally, the European level has become a stage for transnational and supranational advocacy, where actors, including fans, organise across borders to influence football governance and policy (García and Zheng, 2017; Mittag, 2018). Thus, football exhibits all three directional dynamics of Europeanisation: top-down regulatory pressures (downloading), bottom-up advocacy and influence (uploading), and horizontal transnational organisation (crossloading) (Niemann et al., 2024).

From these multidimensional processes, a “European football sphere” (Biel et al., 2025b: p. 10) has emerged as a cultural, social, and economic space. This has transformed how fans construct community and identity. Through sustained engagement with national and European competitions, increased cross-border mobility and more frequent personal interactions with supporters from other countries (Biel, 2025), and growing exposure to Europeanised football media (Biel et al., 2025a), fans are increasingly embedded in a Europeanised football life-world (Niemann et al., 2024). Fans incorporate Europe into their identity profiles (King, 2000, 2003; Millward, 2006) by extending their frames of reference and constructions of in-/out-groups (Weber, 2022), and have been shown to exhibit more pronounced and inclusive European identities (Finger et al., 2024a; Biel et al., 2024). This extension of the scope of fandom is further evidenced by practices of exchange and collaboration: “Across national boundaries, particularly in Europe, fan friendship communities have a long and remarkably stable history” (Alpan and Schwell, 2015: p. 5) and form connections between different communities (McDougall, 2013; Baumann, 2024). Additionally, fans engage in joint activism and show solidarity with each other (García and Zheng, 2017; Kossakowski and Lee Ludvigsen, 2025), up to the establishment of institutionalised advocacy structures in the form of Football Supporters Europe (Cleland et al., 2018). To summarise, it can be said that “[t]he mental maps of football fandom [...] run transversal and cross,

sometimes also unexpectedly, national boundaries” (Alpan and Schwell 2015: p. 5).

Based on the underlying theories of identity and belonging, and the dynamics of Europeanisation that have reoriented European football governance, and consequently fan attitudes, behaviours, and organisational structures, the question of how community is constructed in the European football sphere emerges. It can be argued that the Europeanisation of football has led to the extension of constructions of fan community towards the European level, because fans come into more frequent and intense contact with other European fans through both direct, personal encounters and media exposure—a Europeanisation of fan identities. Since many of the conditions of CIIM intergroup contact (equal status, interaction and cooperation, common goals and norms) are present in the European football sphere, there is the potential for the construction of a broader collective identity of and feelings of belonging to a superordinate European fan community. While previous work has touched on this issue in a cursory manner (Biel et al., 2025b) the emergence, scope, and structure of such a community have not yet been systematically examined. The first research question thus asks: *Does a distinct superordinate European fan community exist?* (RQ1). Building on this, a second question addresses the factors that shape the degree to which fans identify with such a community: *Which demographic, attitudinal, and behavioural factors are associated with identification with a European fan community?* (RQ2). The existence and recognition of such a community would suggest an expansion of fans’ social imaginaries, and assessing associated demographic, political-attitudinal, and football-related influencing factors sheds light on the specific figuration of this proposed community of European fans.

Data and research design

This study draws on survey data collected in Germany, Spain, Poland, and Norway between February and April 2023. These countries were selected because they represent highly diverse cases in terms of socio-demographic and economic structures, their relationship with Europe and the EU (i.e., three member states of different accession phases, and one closely associated non-member state), and their football contexts, with two highly central, i.e., internationally successful and economically developed, football leagues (Germany, Spain) and two cases on the relative periphery of European football (Norway, Poland). The data were collected through an online panel using a commercial survey provider, with respondents selected using stratified quota sampling to ensure representativeness across gender, age, and education based on OECD population data quotas for the four selected countries. In total, the dataset contains 7040 respondents, 1760 per country.² Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and respondents gave informed consent to the processing of their data for research. The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, including football fandom, political and social attitudes, and standard socio-demographic indicators (see Table A1 in the Appendix). For this analysis, only respondents categorised as football fans were included. This subset contains (a) respondents who explicitly self-categorised as fans, and (b) respondents who did not self-categorise as fans but reported a football interest score of 7 or higher on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (“not at all”) to 10 (“absolutely”). The final dataset for the analysis includes 3685 cases.

The core variable is the perceived membership in a European football community (agreement on a scale of 0–10 to: “I consider myself a part of a bigger community of fans in Europe”). To distinguish this from other constructions of community, it is analysed together with two items on membership in fan

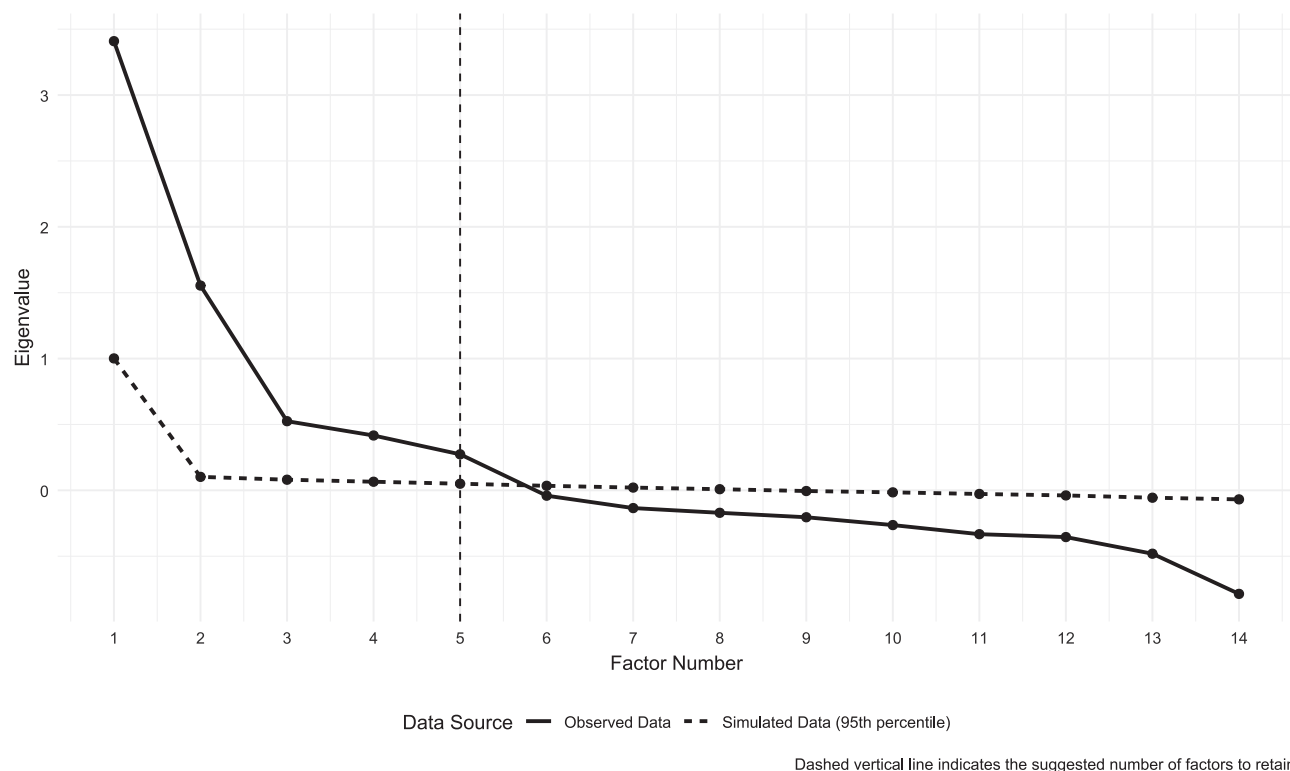


Fig. 1 Observed and simulated eigenvalues from parallel analysis.

communities around a respondent's favourite club and at the national level. Analysing the existence and distinctiveness of the European fan community entails first comparing the mean levels of agreement across these three items and second conducting an exploratory factor analysis examining their underlying dimensional structure. This allows for an assessment of whether identification with a European fan community constitutes a unique latent construct, or whether it is embedded within a broader continuum of fan identifications.

The second analytical step is a regression analysis aimed at identifying factors associated with identification with a European fan community. The dependent variable is the self-reported identification item. A set of independent demographic, socio-political, and football-related variables is used as predictors, including age, gender (female, male), education level (low, medium, high), household income (measured on country-specific decile scales), and country of residence (Germany, Spain, Poland, Norway). The measure of education follows the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012), while the income scales were taken from the European Social Survey (ESS) (European Social Survey 2020a, b). The socio-political variables (all on 0-10 scales) include two items measuring emotional attachment to the EU and to Europe more broadly, two items gauging whether people are generally fair and helpful, an item on the importance of intercultural exchange, and ideological orientation based on self-placement on a left-right scale. The items on European attachments and perceived fairness/helpfulness were aggregated into composite indices of European identification and social trust.

The football-related items include general interest in football (0-10 scale) and two items that gauge interest in football outside of a respondent's home country. One is a binary item asking whether a person watches European competition independently of club allegiance, and the other asks whether a person follows

foreign national league competitions aggregated into categories of "very often" (several times per week or more), "regularly" (once every two weeks or more), "occasionally" (a few times a year or more), "rarely/never" (once a year or less). One further item asks the level of (particularised) trust towards a hypothetical football fan that is a European citizen not from the respondent's home country (0-10 scale). Attitudes towards fans and football in general were included (all on 0-10 scales). Three items ask about fans in Europe sharing the same interests and articulating them jointly, and about the importance of European fan networks. A series of questions addresses general perceptions of fans regarding qualities of solidarity, helpfulness, trustworthiness, aggressiveness, and violence. Two items ask about agreement with statements on the overarching inclusiveness ("Football is for everyone") and connectivity of football ("Football connects people"). Finally, four items ask respondents to consider issues of exclusivity, financial inequalities, the importance of commercial interests, and corruption in European football governance.

Given that many of these football-related items are conceptually related and likely to exhibit multicollinearity, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to reduce dimensionality and identify latent constructs. The EFA was performed on the selected football-related items, and parallel analysis supported a five-factor structure (see Fig. 1), since the observed eigenvalues for the first five factors exceeded the 95th percentile of those from randomly generated data. The dominant factor loadings are reported in Table 1. The identified factors mapped clearly onto coherent thematic dimensions, and new factor constructs were built as composite indices of all items loading onto a factor. Correlations between the resulting indices and their respective constituent items confirm that they accurately capture the underlying constructs (see Table 2). These five indices are then included as predictors together with the other football-related, demographic, and attitudinal predictors in the regression analysis estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS).

Table 1 Factor loadings of football-related items in the 5-factor structure.

Variable	ML1	ML2	ML3	ML4	ML5
Importance of fan networks					0.500
Fans share interests					0.641
Fans should speak with a shared voice					0.772
Fan qualities: Solidary		0.662			
Fan qualities: Helpful		0.869			
Fan qualities: Trustworthy		0.790			
Fan qualities: Aggressive	0.766				
Fan qualities: Violent	1.005				
Football is for everyone				0.763	
Football connects people				0.777	
Governance issue: Exclusivity			0.445		
Governance issue: Inequalities			0.611		
Governance issue: Commercial interests			0.825		
Governance issue: Corruption			0.668		

ML1–ML5 represent maximum likelihood-estimated factors. Loadings <0.40 were excluded. Items are grouped by primary loading.

Table 2 Correlations between constructed factor indices and their underlying items.

Factor	Factor name	Item	Correlation
ML1	Negative fan perceptions	Fan qualities: Aggressive	0.941
ML1	Negative fan perceptions	Fan qualities: Violent	0.947
ML2	Positive fan perceptions	Fan qualities: Solidary	0.855
ML2	Positive fan perceptions	Fan qualities: Helpful	0.886
ML2	Positive fan perceptions	Fan qualities: Trustworthy	0.871
ML3	Governance critique	Governance issue: Exclusivity	0.692
ML3	Governance critique	Governance issue: Inequalities	0.778
ML3	Governance critique	Governance issue: Commercial interests	0.797
ML3	Governance critique	Governance issue: Corruption	0.732
ML4	Football universalism	Football is for everyone	0.920
ML4	Football universalism	Football connects people	0.878
ML5	Fan interest representation	Fans should speak with shared voice	0.830
ML5	Fan interest representation	Fans share interests	0.804
ML5	Fan interest representation	Importance of fan networks	0.767

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for identification with different levels of the fan community.

Variable	Correlation matrix				
	Mean	SD	Fan community identity: Club	Fan community identity: Nation	Fan community identity: Europe
Fan community identity: Club	6.130	2.502	1.000	0.688	0.583
Fan community identity: Nation	5.568	2.579	0.688	1.000	0.782
Fan community identity: Europe	5.293	2.610	0.583	0.782	1.000

SD standard deviation.

Results

Table 3 and Fig. 2 present the distribution of self-reported identification with football fan communities at the club, national, and European level. The results reveal moderate levels of identification across all three measures. Identification with one's club community is highest with a mean score of 6.13 (SD = 2.50). National-level identification shows a slightly lower mean of 5.57 (SD = 2.58), while identification with a European fan community exhibits a comparatively lower mean of 5.29 (SD = 2.61). In total, 1962 respondents (49.3%) report attachments to a European fan community equal to or greater than 6 on the 0–10 scale, and 833 (20.93%) report attachments equal to or greater than 8. While strong attachments are relatively rare, there is still a broad basis of identification with this superordinate fan group. The correlation matrix reveals strong positive correlations between these items,

with the strongest correlation between national and European identification ($r = 0.782$), followed by club and national identification ($r = 0.688$) and the weakest between club and European identification ($r = 0.583$).

To further investigate the dimensional structure of fan community identifications, Table 4 compares the results of a one-factor and a two-factor exploratory factor analysis. The one-factor solution produces substantial loadings for all three items (0.716–0.961) and explains 70% of the shared variance. In a two-factor solution, the club and national items load primarily onto one factor, while the European item loads strongly and uniquely onto a second factor (loading = 0.931, $h^2 = 0.874$). This two-factor model explains a larger share of the overall variance (78%) and is thus better suited to the structure of the data. It reveals a conceptual distinction between more proximate (club/national)

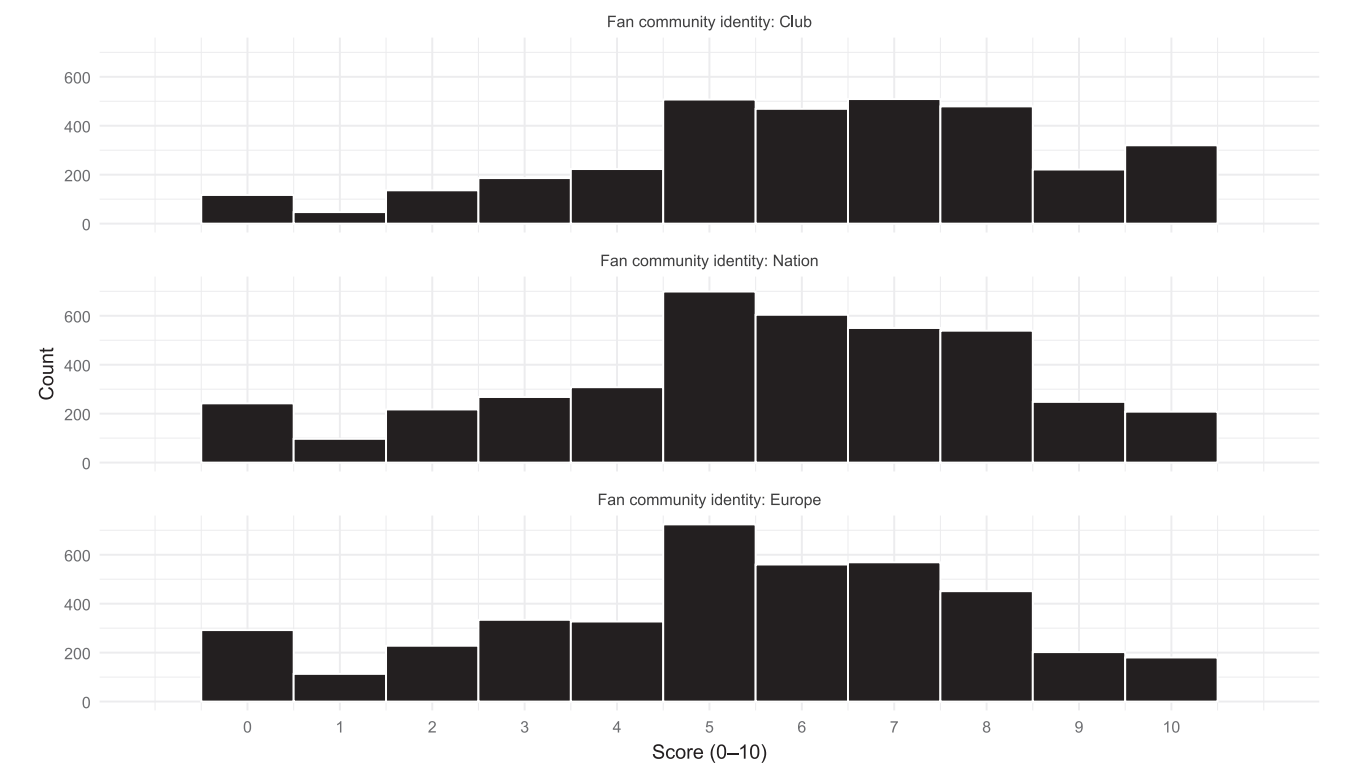


Fig. 2 Distribution of identification with different levels of fan community.

Table 4 Comparison of one-factor and two-factor solutions for fan community identification items.							
Variable	One-factor solution			Two-factor solution			
	Loading 1	<i>h</i> ²	<i>u</i> ²	Loading 1	Loading 2	<i>h</i> ²	<i>u</i> ²
Fan community identity: Club	0.716	0.513	0.487	0.585	0.127	0.485	0.515
Fan community identity: Nation	0.961	0.923	0.077	1.011	−0.020	0.988	0.012
Fan community identity: Europe	0.814	0.662	0.338	0.005	0.931	0.874	0.126

Loading 1 and Loading 2 refer to standardised factor loadings for each factor. *h*² = communality; *u*² = uniqueness.

and superordinate (European) fan community identifications. Moreover, a three-factor solution (not shown here) fails to provide additional explanatory value.

Table 5 presents the results of the OLS regression estimating the association between a range of demographic, attitudinal, and football-related predictors and the degree of identification with a European fan community. Among the demographic variables, several show significant effects. Male respondents report, on average, a 0.197-point lower level of identification with a European fan community than female respondents ($p = 0.010$). Age is negatively associated with identification, with each additional year of age corresponding to a 0.02-point decrease ($p < 0.001$). Education is positively associated: compared to respondents with low education, those with a medium level report 0.368 points higher identification ($p = 0.002$), and those with high education 0.27 points higher ($p = 0.031$). Household income is not significantly related to the dependent variable. At the country level, identification is significantly lower in Germany (-0.47 , $p < 0.001$) and Norway (-0.71 , $p < 0.001$) compared to the reference category (Spain), while Poland shows no statistically significant difference. For the socio-political variables, a stronger emotional attachment to Europe is associated with significantly greater identification with a European fan community, with a coefficient of 0.159 ($p < 0.001$). Higher interpersonal trust is also positively associated (0.04, $p = 0.024$). Interestingly, cosmopolitan values show a small

but significant negative association (-0.056 , $p = 0.004$). Left–right ideological placement is positively related to the outcome, with each unit increase corresponding to a 0.045-point increase in identification ($p = 0.002$).

Turning to football-related predictors, general interest in football shows a positive association (0.098, $p < 0.001$), as does watching European competitions independent of club allegiance (0.195, $p = 0.026$). Compared to respondents who do not or only very rarely engage with foreign leagues, those who watch occasionally report 0.551 points higher identification ($p < 0.001$), those who watch regularly report 0.80 points higher ($p < 0.001$), and those who watch very often report 1.19 points higher identification ($p < 0.001$). Trust in European fans presents a coefficient of 0.336 ($p < 0.001$). In addition, several of the factor-based composite index variables are positively and significantly associated with identification: attitudes on fan interest representation (0.112, $p < 0.001$) and positive perceptions of fans (0.231, $p < 0.001$). Negative fan perceptions, football universalism, and critical attitudes towards football governance are not significantly associated with identification with a European fan community.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper offer meaningful insights into how collective identifications are constructed and stratified

Table 5 Regression estimates for European fan community identification.

Term	Estimate	SE	Stat.	p	CI	
					Low	High
(Intercept)	0.003	0.290	0.012	0.991	−0.566	0.572
Gender: Male	−0.197	0.077	−2.562	0.010*	−0.348	−0.046
Age	−0.020	0.002	−8.447	0.000***	−0.024	−0.015
Education: Medium	0.368	0.117	3.152	0.002**	0.139	0.598
Education: High	0.270	0.125	2.161	0.031*	0.025	0.515
Income	0.001	0.014	0.068	0.945	−0.027	0.029
Country: GER	−0.465	0.096	−4.835	0.000***	−0.654	−0.277
Country: NOR	−0.708	0.107	−6.587	0.000***	−0.918	−0.497
Country: POL	−0.123	0.094	−1.300	0.194	−0.307	0.062
Composite: European Attachment	0.159	0.019	8.187	0.000***	0.121	0.198
Composite: Interpersonal Trust	0.040	0.018	2.257	0.024*	0.005	0.075
Cosmopolitan values	−0.056	0.019	−2.887	0.004**	−0.094	−0.018
Left-right-scale	0.045	0.015	3.087	0.002**	0.016	0.073
Football interest	0.098	0.022	4.474	0.000***	0.055	0.141
Watch European competitions: Yes	0.195	0.088	2.223	0.026*	0.023	0.368
Watch foreign leagues: occasionally	0.551	0.124	4.437	0.000***	0.308	0.795
Watch foreign leagues: regularly	0.799	0.126	6.357	0.000***	0.552	1.045
Watch foreign leagues: very often	1.185	0.139	8.547	0.000***	0.913	1.456
Trust: European fan	0.336	0.018	18.837	0.000***	0.301	0.371
Composite: Fan interest representation	0.112	0.023	4.839	0.000***	0.066	0.157
Composite: Positive fan perceptions	0.231	0.025	9.293	0.000***	0.182	0.280
Composite: Negative fan perceptions	0.010	0.016	0.624	0.533	−0.021	0.040
Composite: Football universalism	−0.032	0.021	−1.495	0.135	−0.073	0.010
Composite: Critique of football governance	−0.018	0.023	−0.775	0.439	−0.062	0.027

Model summary: $R^2 = 0.369$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.365$, Residual standard error (σ) = 2.06, F-statistic = 93.2, $p < 0.001$, observations (n) = 3685. SE standard error, Stat. test statistic, p p-value (* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$), CI confidence interval.

within the European football context. The first analytical step demonstrates that fans do not identify exclusively with a singular, bounded community such as their local club. Instead, they report substantial levels of identification with fan communities at multiple levels: club, nation, and Europe. This shows that (a) superordinate fan communities exist beyond the narrow scope of club-centred identifications, and (b) that these include a distinct European fan community. The distributions and mean comparisons reveal that identification with one's club remains the strongest attachment, which is consistent with conceptualisations of football fandom as primarily anchored in local, and often historically, culturally, or otherwise substantiated allegiances. However, the notable and comparably strong levels of reported identification with national and particularly European fan communities suggest that fans' reference frames extend beyond individual club communities. While identification with the European fan community is slightly lower on average than with national or club communities, it is still pronounced and broadly distributed across the sample. Crucially, the dimensionality revealed by the analysis suggests that identification with a European fan community is not simply an additive extension of local or national attachments, but that it constitutes a related, but qualitatively distinct form of belonging. This supports theoretical expectations grounded in the Common In-Group Identity Model (CIIM), which posits that psychologically and socially meaningful superordinate identifications can emerge beyond narrower, more proximately bounded in-groups. Furthermore, the observation that fans report identification with club-related, national, and European fan communities at the same time aligns with theoretical assumptions that collective identities at different spatial or social scales are not mutually exclusive but complementary and overlapping, allowing for a "dual identity" (Dovidio et al., 2003: p. 12) in a "marble cake" structure (Risse, 2015: p. 25).

The second analytical step, the regression analysis, integrates and extends these findings. It reveals that identification with a European fan community is associated with a broad range of demographic, political, and football-related factors. Firstly, the analysis shows specific patterns across socio-demographic categories. The lower degree of identification for male respondents suggests a modest gendered dimension in how fan identifications are constructed that runs contrary to research that shows lower levels of European identification and EU support in women (Nelsen and Guth, 2000; Foster and Frieden, 2021). The negative age effect may reflect differences in political and cultural socialisation within a more integrated and interconnected Europe. Previous research has consistently shown that younger cohorts are more strongly socialised in cosmopolitan and globalised life-worlds (Thorpe and Inglis, 2019), are more mobile across national borders (Jamal and Newbold, 2020), and are more likely to express positive attitudes towards the EU (Rekker, 2018). The comparatively higher levels of European fan community identification for more highly educated individuals indicate that greater cultural capital facilitates the formation of broader, more inclusive forms of identification, which aligns with a long-standing pattern in European integration studies: individuals with lower levels of formal education are generally more sceptical of the EU and less likely to hold positive attitudes towards European integration (Kunst et al., 2020).

Among the socio-political factors, emotional attachment to Europe and the EU is strongly and positively associated with identification with a European fan community. This suggests that a strong affective orientation toward Europe constitutes a facilitating condition for developing an identification with a particularised community of Europeans (Bruter, 2005; Risse, 2015). A similarly particularised form of supranational belonging has been observed in the LGBTQI+ community through identifications

formed in the context of the Eurovision Song Contest, where shared cultural engagement allows for the construction of a European identity through inclusion, recognition, and representation (Baker, 2017). This European identity dimension may also account for the distinctiveness of European fan community identification observed in the exploratory factor analysis in the first analytical step, as it constitutes a layer of supranational belonging different from more proximate forms of fan community identification. Prior research has shown that fans report moderately but significantly higher degrees of general European identification compared to non-fans (Finger et al., 2024a). The findings here link to observations in showing that fans not only identify more strongly with Europe in general but also construct particularised community identifications at the European level. In addition, the effect of interpersonal trust implies that a general disposition towards trust may support the formation of affective ties and perceived membership within broader, more anonymous collectives (Uslaner, 2018). The rather surprisingly small but statistically significant negative association of cosmopolitan values with identification with a European fan community stands in partial contrast to theoretical expectations that link greater openness and tolerance to stronger supranational belonging. However, since variables such as education, interpersonal trust, and European attachment might themselves be correlated with cosmopolitan values, this negative association may reflect a suppressor effect or statistical artefact. Alternatively, it may indicate that abstract universalist values are less relevant to the emergence of fan community identifications than more concrete cultural practices and shared orientations specifically anchored in the European football context. Finally, the observation of more right-leaning respondents reporting higher levels of identification with the European fan community seems counterintuitive in light of the generally more Eurosceptical attitudes associated with right-leaning citizens (Van Elsas and Van Der Brug, 2015), but may reflect characteristics of football fandom itself. Prior research has noted that fans are, on average, slightly more conservative in orientation (Biel et al., 2025b). It is also plausible that more right-leaning individuals are more attuned to strong group-based identities and value collective belonging more explicitly, both of which may increase the likelihood of adopting a shared European fan community identification.

Regarding the specific context of football, some, but not all, football-related items constitute relevant predictors of identification with the European fan community. The positive associations for greater general interest in football, watching European competitions independently of club allegiance, and regular engagement with foreign national leagues are unsurprising. Increased interest and a higher degree of involvement in the international dimension of football facilitate exposure to foreign clubs, players, and fan cultures, thereby reinforcing constructions of community that transcend local or national boundaries. These practices provide information and (mediated) contact (Finger et al., 2024a; Biel et al., 2025a) with all facets of European football, including representations of other fan groups and their practices. In this sense, internationally oriented consumption habits connect to relational and symbolic dimensions of belonging to a shared superordinate fan community. One of the strongest associations is observed in relation to trust in European fans. This particularised form of trust, which is not directed toward institutions or generalised others but toward a defined in-group (Newton et al., 2018), emerges as a key marker of European fan community identification. That this specific trust measure has a much stronger association than the generalised interpersonal trust variable suggests that identification with a European fan community is rooted not merely in diffuse social trust, but in the specific recognition of fellow fans as members of a shared

collective. This further substantiates the importance of belonging as an affective and relational process that underpins collective identity formation. The effect for the composite measure of fan interest representation shows an institutional and normative embeddedness in shaping community constructions, suggesting that superordinate identification is not only cultural or emotional but also linked to common political advocacy and agency. This also connects to the conditions of contact and cooperation, as well as common norms and goals that are important in the construction of superordinate in-groups according to the CIIM. The association between identification and positive perceptions of fans more generally appears to function as an affective basis for broader identifications, supporting the interpretation that fan community attachment also relies on the mutual recognition of prosocial dispositions. Interestingly, not all football-related attitudes show a meaningful association with supranational fan identification. Negative perceptions of fans and critical attitudes toward the governance of European football do not significantly affect levels of identification with the European fan community. This suggests two important distinctions. First, that negative stereotypes of fans do not necessarily inhibit the formation of a supranational collective identity, indicating that fans can hold critical views of fan behaviour without rejecting the broader category of fan community. Second, the lack of association with governance critiques points toward a conceptual separation between the community of fans and the institutions that regulate football. In other words, fans may distinguish between their identification with fellow supporters and their perceptions of European football governance structures.

Finally, the country effects illustrate that national context plays a crucial role in shaping supranational fan attachments. In the case of Norway, the country's more distant institutional relationship with the EU and more limited participation in political and social integration processes (Fossum, 2019), together with the rather peripheral sporting position of the league and its teams, may offer an explanation for the weaker identification. In Germany, by contrast, the negative association may reflect the comparatively strong national structures of fan organisation and community-building, which may reduce the perceived need or appeal of a superordinate European identity among fans (Winands and Grau, 2016).

While the findings support the existence of a distinct European fan identity, alternative interpretations warrant consideration. First, it might be argued that given the worldwide popularity and the increasingly international character of elite football, fans might construct global, cosmopolitan fan communities rather than specifically European identifications. However, several factors support a specifically European reading. The strong positive association between European fan identity and European attachments, as well as the negative association with cosmopolitan values, indicates that this identification is specifically linked to the European dimension rather than more generalised cosmopolitanism. Moreover, the specific boundedness of European football through UEFA's governance and integrated European media markets (Biel et al., 2025a) creates conditions for a distinctly European identity formation. Second, the presence of cross-national variation might be interpreted as undermining claims about a shared European identity. European fan identity is not uniformly distributed but likely shaped by both the institutional context of European integration and the specific characteristics of national football cultures. Here, it can be argued that this variation does not preclude the existence of shared identity but rather indicates its complex, differentiated nature. European identity is theoretically conceptualised not as replacing national identities but as nested within them (Camia, 2010; Risse, 2015), and as such, we expect variation in how it is experienced across

contexts. Importantly, despite cross-national differences, the fundamental structure of European fan identification in its existence as a distinct dimension, its association with transnational football practices, and its link to broader European orientations appears consistent. This suggests an unevenly distributed, but stable and meaningful form of identification across country borders. Third, it is important to acknowledge that European fan identification, as observed here, may reflect a relatively privileged form of fandom. The positive associations with education and the importance of practices like attending away matches suggest that access to this identity dimension may be facilitated by socio-economic resources. This aligns with broader research showing European identity is often stronger among more privileged groups (Fligstein, 2009; Kuhn, 2012), suggesting that the European fan community, while real, may not be equally accessible to all fans, and its development reflects broader inequalities in who benefits from European integration.

Crucially, the analysis speaks of associations rather than causal effects, first because the cross-sectional regression design does not permit causal inference, and second because the relationship between the predictors and the outcome variable is likely complex and reciprocal. For the demographic and socio-political measures, the causality is arguably relatively clear and flows from these underlying constructs towards fan community identification. Football fandom has been theorised to affect a person's European identifications (Weber, 2022; Finger et al., 2024a). In this three-way interaction between fandom, general European identity constructions, and specific fan community attachments, the directionality or causality is unclear and cannot be disentangled using cross-sectional designs. The football-related items are likely part of an interdependent web of effects and causal influences. It is difficult to determine whether stronger identification with a European fan community strengthens interest in football, consumption habits, support for collective representation, or positive fan perceptions, or whether these predictors heighten identification. Rather, it is likely that both dynamics operate in parallel. What can be said is that those respondents who identify strongly with a European community of fans are primarily fans who are younger, more highly educated, more strongly attached to Europe, exhibit both general as well as particularised trust, are more interested in football (particularly international football), and who assert common interests and their representation and articulation as well as hold positive attitudes of fans in general.

These findings connect back to the theorised layered construction of collective identities and belonging in a Europeanised football sphere. The analysis shows that identification with a European fan community not only exists, but it presents as a complex, multidimensional, demographically and attitudinally patterned layer of identification. It constitutes a key expansion of fans' social imaginaries beyond the more proximate communities around clubs or at the country level. It reflects a form of collective identity that is at once highly particular, rooted in the shared cultural practice of football fandom, and broad in scope, encompassing individuals across different countries and socio-demographic backgrounds. This superordinate identification is grounded in shared practices, the recognition of mutual interests and political agency, trust, and positive perceptions of other fans. It encompasses the cognitive categorisations of the self and others, the relational positioning, and the affective component of feelings of belonging that are central to collective identities. Arguably, this European fan community has emerged from the process of Europeanisation of the governance structures of football and its consequent debordering of how fans engage with the game, and the subsequent reorientation of community resulting from more frequent and intense contact between European football fans. In line with the logic of the CIIM, the results suggest

that football fan identities have been partially reoriented from narrower, localised identifications to a shared, superordinate European fan identity. These then influence social cohesion in Europe. The strength and prevalence of this fan community identification are tangible signs of social cohesion among fans across Europe. While this is a particularised collective identity constructed based on a shared leisure-time pursuit, it is (potentially) extremely broad in its societal scope. In the representative survey used here, between 40% and 65% of all respondents were categorised as fans in each country, with 56.6% across the whole sample of over 7000 respondents. While not all of them identify strongly with a European fan community, the observed segments of fans who report medium-to-strong identifications mean that this imagined community still encompasses a large number of European citizens. Although there is some socio-demographic and attitudinal patterning, this shared identification is not confined to marginal or elite segments of society but extends across demographic, social, and national cleavages and might be thought of as one of the "thinly" expressed" (Cederman, 2001: p. 145) identifications that might support the idea of a collective Europe in the minds of its citizens. Football sets itself apart in its scope and social reach from other initiatives and programmes that are more limited to specific groups or segments of society, such as Erasmus (Kuhn, 2012; Mitchell, 2015), the European Capital of Culture (Lähdesmäki, 2021), or touristic mobility (Gustafson, 2009), and presents a more bottom-up counterpoint to elite-driven and mostly elite-targeted top-down discourses on European integration (Risse, 2015).

Conclusion

This study has examined the emergence and characteristics of a shared European football fan identity. The findings indicate that such an identification, an expansion of fans' social imaginaries towards Europe, does indeed exist. While it is generally weaker than more proximate attachments to club or national fan communities, it is nonetheless meaningfully expressed by a substantial subset of European football fans. Crucially, this shared fan identity is not simply an extension of other identifications but emerges as a dimensionally distinct construct that operates in parallel to other layers of identity. Its formation is structured by socio-demographic factors and significantly influenced by attitudinal variables such as interpersonal trust and general identification with Europe. The results further suggest that cross-border consumption patterns, particularised trust in other European fans, belief in shared fan interests, and positive perceptions of fellow supporters are all positively associated with a stronger sense of European fan identity. Although the directionality of the effects is unclear.

These findings connect directly with existing literature on the Europeanisation of football (Niemann et al., 2011; Niemann et al., 2024; Biel et al., 2025b) and supranational fan organisation and mobilisation (Kennedy and Kennedy, 2014; García and Zheng, 2017). They further contribute to research on the emergence of European identity (Bruter, 2005; Kaina et al., 2015; Kuhn, 2015; Risse, 2015). Importantly, the results add to work on how European identifications can emerge in particularised, culturally embedded domains (Baker, 2017), and align with perspectives on "doing Europe" (Wodak, 2007), banal Europeanism (Weber, 2021), and everyday transnational practices (Recchi and Favell, 2019; Brand et al., 2024). They also substantiate calls for policy measures and structural reforms in European football (Finger et al., 2024b, c; Zglinski, 2024).

The analysis is not without its limitations and can possibly be further substantiated and extended. Most notably, the cross-sectional nature of the data precludes causal inference. It remains

unclear to what extent football-related attitudes and identifications are the drivers or outcomes of the shared fan identity. Furthermore, the study focuses on four countries only and lacks direct measures of interpersonal contact between fans from different national backgrounds. Future research might expand on these findings by incorporating more diverse cases, exploring the role of direct transnational interaction, or using structural models to disentangle the directionality of effects. Nevertheless, this study has shown that the Europeanisation of football not only restructures competitions, institutions, media productions, or markets, but also fosters the emergence of particularised superordinate identifications rooted in everyday cultural practices. The European fan community represents a socially broad but contextually specific collective identity that contributes to strengthening the affective dimension of social cohesion in Europe. In times of political and societal fragmentation amid the enduring polycrisis, such identifications may prove valuable resources for fostering solidarity and integration across borders and for strengthening the legitimacy and efficacy of political measures. The emergence of a widely shared, affectively grounded European fan identity thus carries substantial integrative potential, contributing to a more cohesive and resilient European social fabric.

Data availability

All materials necessary to reproduce the analyses are publicly available via a stable repository on the Open Science Framework. The repository contains (1) the full anonymised survey dataset in multiple formats, (2) the survey codebook detailing all items, answer scales, and variable constructions, and (3) the complete R scripts required for replication, including data processing, statistical analyses, and the generation of results reported in the manuscript. The repository can be found here: <https://osf.io/e9z8v>.

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Notes

- 1 Here, 'football' refers specifically to men's professional club football.
- 2 For a comprehensive descriptive overview of the data see Biel et al. 2025.
- 3 Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Fachbereich 02 Sozialwissenschaften, Medien und Sport, Ethikantrag Checkliste: <https://www.sozialwissenschaften.uni-mainz.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/77/2025/09/2025-FB-02-Checkliste-Ethikantrag.docx>.
- 4 Dynata Statement on ESOMAR Guidelines: https://www.dynata.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Dynata_ESOMAR37-Questions_April-2024.pdf Dynata Statement on Information Security: <https://www.dynata.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Dynata-Information-Security-Overview-2024.pdf>.

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Author contributions

JB conceived the study, developed the theoretical framework, conducted the statistical analyses, and interpreted the results. JB wrote the manuscript and created all visualisations and tables. The underlying dataset was collected as part of the FANZinE project, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) under grant number 01UG2119. JB is responsible for the final manuscript and accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The study was assessed during the planning stage under the institutional ethics guidelines of the Faculty of Social Sciences, Media and Sport (FB02) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz (JGU), using the official JGU FB02 ethics checklist³. On 27th January 2023, it was determined in accordance with these institutional guidelines that the study did not require submission to, or review by, a formal institutional ethics committee and therefore qualified for automatic exemption from ethics committee approval. No separate application to an institutional review board was required under JGU regulations for research

meeting these criteria. The exemption applied because the study involved an anonymous online survey of adult participants only; no personally identifiable data were collected; no sensitive personal data were processed; and the study did not involve any intervention, deception, clinical procedures, or psychological or physical risks beyond those encountered in everyday life. The research was conducted in full conformity with the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), ESOMAR standards for social and market research, and all applicable national regulations in the countries of data collection (Germany, Spain, Norway, and Poland). The commercial survey provider Dynata carried out the recruitment and data collection in accordance with these ethical and legal frameworks⁴.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained electronically from all participants prior to participation in the study on 15th February 2023 and 15th April 2023. The sample ($N = 7040$) consisted of adult respondents registered as panel participants with the commercial survey provider Dynata. Only individuals aged 18 years or older were eligible to participate. Before accessing the online questionnaire, participants were informed of the research's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to discontinue participation at any time without consequences, and the intended use of the data for academic research and publication. Responses were processed anonymously, no personally identifiable information was collected, and no risks beyond those ordinarily associated with completing an online survey were anticipated. No vulnerable populations or minors were involved in the study. Full anonymity was ensured throughout data collection, storage, and analysis.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-026-07782-z>.

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