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A Team Is Built on Trust: In-Group Trust Formation and Trust Generalisation in European Football Fans

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the association between football fandom, interpersonal trust and social cohesion across Europe. Drawing on a representative four-country survey (Germany, Norway, Poland, Spain) and employing structural equation modelling, the study examines whether and how identification as a fan contributes to trust in fellow citizens from other European countries. Building on theories of social cohesion and interpersonal trust, the analysis conceptualises fandom as a culturally embedded and Europeanised form of social identity capable of bridging national divides. The findings indicate that fandom is associated with trust in European citizens more broadly through a mediated pathway via trust in fans and in fans from other European countries. These effects are independent of generalised trust, European identification, and socio-demographic factors. The study thus reveals a layered process of identity-based trust generalisation rooted in fan culture. The paper contributes to the literature on trust, social cohesion, and the social dimension(s) of European integration, and demonstrates how shared cultural practices may serve as foundations for connectedness and exchanges across borders. It provides insights for policy and civil society actors seeking to harness the integrative potential of sport in times of political polarisation and social fragmentation in Europe.

1 | Introduction

The European Union (EU) and broader Europe are facing an ongoing ‘second deeper and wider polycrisis’ (Nicolini and Zeitlin 2024, 3012) of complex, intersecting challenges (Ferrara and Kriesi 2022) that threatens the social unity and political efficacy of the European community. Addressing these requires political measures and institutional reforms, but also identification, connectedness, solidarity, and cooperation among European citizens providing support and legitimacy for political action (Fuchs 2012; Schmidt 2020), that is, a certain degree of social cohesion. This term describes the ‘the quality of collective togetherness’ (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017, 592) within social groups, a condition for which, among other factors, *interpersonal trust* plays a crucial role. The degree to which members of the group trust each other shapes the willingness to cooperate, accept risks in social interactions, and uphold shared

norms and obligations in complex, heterogeneous societies. Of particular note in the European context are social, educational, or cultural pathways, which represent ‘more positive undercurrents to the gloom of contemporary national party politics in Europe’ (Favell and Recchi 2019, 23).

Men’s professional club football stands out in particular as a highly popular and culturally ubiquitous phenomenon that appeals to broad, non-elite sections of society. Football fandom is marked by intense affective attachments and diverse social interactions as well as strong in-group identifications between supporters. The shared passion presents a tangible link between otherwise unconnected individuals that forms a basis for interaction, cooperation, and trust formation. In addition, football is a highly Europeanised cultural sphere (Finger et al. 2023; Niemann et al. 2024; Biel et al. 2025b) in which European citizens encounter, engage, cooperate with, and

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develop attitudes towards others across national boundaries. Research suggests that the Europeanisation of men's elite club football has led to the development and perpetuation of European identities among fans (King 2003; Weber et al. 2022; Finger et al. 2024a) and to the nascent emergence of a European fan community (Biel et al. 2025b). Given the Europeanisation of football and the debordering of fandom, it may consequently build trust among European fans. This might in turn lead to stronger trust between European citizens at large, thus contributing to social cohesion in Europe.

This paper investigates the extent and mechanisms of football fandom's association with social cohesion in Europe through social trust between European citizens. It proposes a mechanism of trust generalisation whereby a shared fan identity may give rise to trust among fans, extend to fans from other European countries, and ultimately generalise to Europeans more broadly. To analyse this, it employs structural equation modelling (SEM) on a representative dataset of fans and non-fans from four European countries (Germany, Norway, Poland, Spain), tracing the pathways through which fandom may influence trust in other European citizens. The results point towards a modest, indirect and mediated, but distinct association between fandom and trust towards European citizens and therefore with broader social cohesion in Europe. By identifying a potential mechanism of specific trust formation and subsequent generalisation through which trust in fellow citizens may emerge on a European scale, the paper offers a micro-sociological perspective on the construction of social relations across the continent. In doing so, it contributes to the literature on social trust, social cohesion, and the social dimensions of European integration by providing quantitative evidence on how everyday cultural practices such as football fandom may be associated with interpersonal trust across national boundaries.

2 | Social Cohesion and Trust

2.1 | Social Cohesion and Interpersonal Trust the European Lifeworld

The concept of social cohesion has gained increasing importance as a tool to analyse the connectedness, solidarity, and cooperation between citizens. While sometimes deployed with considerable conceptual ambiguity (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017; Moustakas 2023), at its core it describes the 'glue that binds societies' (Moustakas 2023, 1028), 'the extent of connectedness and solidarity among groups in society' (Manca 2014, 6026), or the 'quality of social cooperation and togetherness of a collective' (Dragolov et al. 2016, 6). In their essentialist definition, Schiefer and van der Noll characterise a cohesive society as one marked by 'close social relations, pronounced emotional connectedness to the social entity, and a strong orientation towards the common good' (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017, 592). These three key components, mirrored in other definitions (Chan et al. 2006; Dragolov et al. 2016), encompass the quantity and quality of social interactions, attitudes towards other group members or the group itself (such as trust), civic and political engagement, feelings of identification and belonging, and values such as responsibility, solidarity and acceptance of and compliance with the social order (Schiefer and van der Noll 2017, 592ff). Social cohesion typically addresses intra/inter-group cohesion along

divisions of class, gender, ethnicity and/or religion (Chan et al. 2006), or on varying political-administrative levels ranging from the local (e.g., neighbourhoods or cities) to the national scale (Dragolov et al. 2016). The term subsumes other related concepts such as social capital (Putnam 2000) in a more 'holistic' (Chan et al. 2006, 292) attempt to capture a 'systemic property of society' (Dragolov et al. 2016, 12). While this conceptual breadth enables the application of social cohesion to a variety of policy and academic debates, it also invites critique for being overly expansive and insufficiently precise (Moustakas 2023).

Within the framework of social cohesion, trust constitutes a central, at times definitional component. Chan et al. define social cohesion partly through trust (2006, 290), while Larsen posits that the 'most important aspect of social cohesion is that citizens believe they share the norm of not cheating each other' (2013, 11), that is, reciprocal trust. Trust can be conceptualised as 'a trustor A_i that trusts (judges the trustworthiness of) the trustee B_j with regard to some behaviour X_k ' (Bauer 2021, 19). This overarching idea is typically separated into horizontal, interpersonal, or social trust on the one hand, and vertical, institutional, or political trust on the other (Uslaner 2018). They differ in their reference objects (who is trusted), their stability, and their effects on citizens' behaviours, but are nonetheless interlinked (Newton et al. 2018). In this study, the focus lies on interpersonal trust.

Schiefer and van der Noll (2017) and Dragolov et al. (2016) position interpersonal trust as a subdimension of the 'social relations'-dimension of social cohesion. It can be further divided into *generalised* and *particularised trust* (Stolle 2002; Delhey et al. 2011; Uslaner 2018), or similarly into *general* and *knowledge-based* (Yamagishi and Yamagishi 1994) or *thin* and *thick* trust (Putnam 2000; Delhey et al. 2011). Generalised trust refers to a broad disposition to trust others in society, including strangers and those who are different from oneself (Kirby 2025) and serves a crucial function in modern society as the 'basis of reciprocity, social connectedness, peaceful collective action, inclusiveness, tolerance, gender equality, confidence in institutions, and democracy itself' (Delhey et al. 2011, 787). Particularised trust describes the trust relationship with known others or members of clearly defined in-groups (Freitag and Trauttmüller 2009), and is thus relational, affective, and reciprocal in nature. It is typically built upon familial ties or friendships, close acquaintances through neighbourhood or work (Freitag and Trauttmüller 2009), shared traits or identifications such as ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation, or social class, and/or an expectation of aligned interests (Hardin 2002). Among other relations of similarity, shared social identities (Tajfel and Turner 1986), where individuals categorise themselves and others into social groups and derive part of their self-understanding from these affiliations, can serve as a basis for increased trust. Group membership signals similarity, shared norms, and mutual understanding, thereby creating a cognitive shortcut for trust judgements. Group members 'are more likely to trust and respect fellow category members and more likely to cooperate with them' (Reicher et al. 2010). Following from the foundational (and at times definitional) importance of trust in the concept of social cohesion, any practice that builds trust, whether by enhancing interpersonal contact, promoting inclusive group identities, or facilitating cooperation, can be understood as contributing to a more cohesive society.

With widening and deepening European integration, and in particular with the emergence of the EU as a political-administrative entity, economic area, and cultural space, a new transnational level emerged on which social relations unfold and attitudinal patterns develop. Through mechanisms such as the Schengen Area, the single market, and a host of transnational programmes promoting economic, cultural, and educational exchange (e.g., Erasmus, the European Capital of Culture), as well as phenomena like intra-European migration and tourism, integration has created an interconnected European lifeworld for many European citizens. The resulting increased cross-border mobility, more frequent communication, and stronger social ties ultimately create shared identifications and a sense of collective belonging among Europeans (Bruter 2005; Risse 2015; Bergbauer 2018). In this way, political and economic integration dynamics have laid the groundwork for a parallel process of social integration. Given the emergence and intensification of social connectedness between European citizens, social cohesion increasingly becomes a relevant analytical framework at the European level, including cohesion through the development of social trust (Delhey 2007), and a stated policy goal of the EU itself (European Commission 2019).

2.2 | Community and Identifications in Europeanised Football Fandom

Football fandom constitutes one of the most popular and widespread forms of collective behaviour in contemporary Europe. It brings together individuals from diverse socio-economic, cultural, and national backgrounds in the shared passion for the game. Being a fan constitutes a key part of the everyday lives of many people, allowing them to 'feel belonging in the relative disorder of contemporary social formations' (Brown 2008, 308). Fandom initiates, reinforces, and challenges 'notions of self-identity, belonging and interpersonal relations [...] through the enactment, internalisation, embodiment, and contestation' of daily fan practices (Stone 2007, 170). Being a fan is inherently tied to collective social identities. Important and at times dominant (Porat 2010) aspects of a person's identity profile derive 'from membership in a community anchored around a sports team, based on the emotional value attached to that membership, and the knowledge of, engagement with, and evaluation of the community itself' (Heere 2016, 216). Through the use of a 'categorized we' (Sandvoss 2003, 37) fans project themselves in relation or opposition to others and mark their belonging to a defined community, to the members of which they form emotional and highly valued connections (Porat 2010). Fan communities constitute symbolic (Cohen 1985) and imagined (Anderson 1991) communities, where otherwise anonymous individuals are bound together through collective memories (Pyta 2015) and shared symbols (e.g., club colours, anthems, and rituals). The most prominent example of this is fan communities around specific clubs, with their routine interactions on matchdays, the use of common symbols (colours, badges, etc.), engagement in collective rituals (e.g., songs and chants) and the emotional attachment to the team and its larger community.

The social and identity dimension of football has expanded with the globalisation (Giulianotti 2019) and Europeanisation of football. Globalisation has structurally transformed football into a global cultural industry, characterised by the intensified

transnational circulation of capital, labour, and media representations. This process has contributed to the decentring of previously dominant national reference frames. Europeanisation broadly refers to the process through which European integration dynamics, that is, political, economic, regulatory, and cultural integration processes, transform national structures, practices, and identities (Exadaktylos and Radaelli 2015). In the context of football, Europeanisation describes how competitions, fan practices, media consumption, and governance structures have been reshaped by European integration (Niemann et al. 2021; Brand et al. 2024). Its key tenets are the liberalisation of player markets following the 'Bosman ruling' (Duval and van 2016), the expansion and commercialisation of continental competitions like the UEFA Champions League (Niemann and Brand 2020), intensified transnational cooperation between stakeholders (Cleland et al. 2018; Mittag 2018), and the specific regulation of broadcasting rights distribution (Iñiguez 2025). The processes of globalisation and Europeanisation of football intersect and reinforce each other, but are conceptually distinct, insofar as the latter is rooted in the specific political, cultural, and institutional developments within Europe itself, driven by both EU integration processes and broader European political, social, and cultural dynamics. In contrast to rather diffuse globalisation processes, the Europeanisation of football occurs within a broader framework of political and cultural integration that renders the European level as particularly significant and provides distinct socialisation conditions for fans.

Namely, it resulted in the emergence of a distinct cultural and economic space—a 'European football sphere' (Finger et al. 2023, 137)—and has profoundly impacted the construction of community and identity among fans. Through regular engagement with different national and/or European competitions, exposure to Europeanised football media (Biel et al. 2025a), and increasing cross-border mobility and growing personal contacts with fans from other countries (Biel 2025), supporters are embedded in a Europeanised lifeworld (Brand et al. 2024). This has led to the nascent emergence of constructions of a European community of fans (Biel et al. 2025b). It manifests through shared practices, mutual recognition, and common narratives about what it means to be a football fan in Europe and in transnational supporter alliances such as Football Supporters Europe (Cleland et al. 2018), cooperative activism (e.g., against ticket price increases or commercialisation) (Turner and Millward 2024; Kossakowski and Ludvigsen 2025), fan friendships that transcend national boundaries (McDougall 2013; Alpan and Schwell 2015), and a growing sense of solidarity among European fans. As a consequence, the shared identity of being a fan is increasingly layered with European identifications (King 2003; Millward 2006; Weber 2021; Finger et al. 2024a).

While most typically coalescing around a specific (club) team, the construction of community and identity within football fandom is broad and complex, especially in modern, globalised and Europeanised, and largely debordered football. Rather than monolithic, isolated, localised fan communities, there are complex networks of identifications and overlapping allegiances. Especially through the rising importance of broadcast and social media (Rowe 2018), fandom has been largely uncoupled from geographic and temporal constraints. Examples include people supporting teams from outside their countries of residence (Cho and

Chiu 2024) or forming multiple allegiances to multiple clubs from different countries (Radmann et al. 2023), national team football often operating transversally to club-level allegiances, and fans forming parasocial relationships with individual players (Sun 2010) that shift club allegiances with their transfer movements (Merten et al. 2023). And while fandom is inherently adversarial, and still too often is a stage for exclusionary attitudes and practices such as racism, sexism, political extremism, and hooliganism (Cashmore and Cleland 2014; Kossakowski et al. 2019; Jakubowska et al. 2020), it is also serves a ubiquitous cultural touchpoint. Football extends 'into people's homes, workplaces and many spaces in between, connecting supporters within and across spatial 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' (Stone 2007, 181). Rather than individual, unconnected fan communities, there arguably is a superordinate *common in-group* (Gaertner and Dovidio 2000) of fans, in which the shared passion for football serves as a bridge across more particular subgroup identities and underlying social cleavages.

2.3 | Linking Fandom to Social Trust in Europe

Given the strong importance of community and shared identifications, as well as the debordering of fandom through globalisation and Europeanisation, fandom provides the conditions for the construction of trust between fans at different levels. Crucially, shared group membership increases expectations of norm compliance and prosociality (Tajfel and Turner 1986) in a 'system of generalised exchanges' (Yamagishi and Kiyonari 2000, 128) which increases interpersonal trust. It is thus to be expected that fans extend particularised trust towards other fans who are supporters of the same club (Wann et al. 2012). The same likely goes for national teams and fans who follow specific players, other possible points of reference for collective identification. As argued previously, the affective and symbolic aspects of fandom extend beyond the specific support of teams and players, as fans can recognise the shared pursuit of being a fan as a connective element with unknown others, and thus identify themselves and others as part of a broader cultural in-group of football fans in general. As such, it is plausible that individuals who identify as fans exhibit higher levels of (particularised) trust towards other fans in general, even when the specific object of allegiance differs, although contextual factors such as rivalries also play a role (Wann et al. 2012). The Europeanisation of football provides a wider geographical and social frame for the (hypothesised) increased trust between fans. Given the extension of the scope of fan practices, social relations, and identifications towards Europe, it can be expected that fandom-based particularised trust would also extend beyond national borders and explicitly include fans from other European countries.

If fans indeed express higher levels of trust toward other fans—and fans from other European countries in particular—this may have broader implications for their social attitudes beyond the context of football. The literature on trust generalisation suggests that particularised trust formed within specific communities can, under certain conditions, extend to more generalised forms of trust, especially when those communities are inclusive, diverse, and perceived as overlapping with wider social categories (Yamagishi and Kiyonari 2000; Stolle 2002; Freitag and

Trautmüller 2009; Delhey and Welzel 2012). As football fandom often entails encounters with a socially and nationally diverse range of people under conditions of a shared cultural pursuit, it can act as a 'bridging' context for trust to develop across national and cultural boundaries. Given the Europeanisation of fandom and the increasing salience of European identifications within the football sphere, trust developed within this arena might 'spill over' into more generalised trust toward European citizens as such. Taken together, this paper thus suggests a layered process in which a superordinate fan identity facilitates trust formation within the community of fans, which may then generalise stepwise to broader European out-groups.

In addition to the potential influence of fandom on trust, other potential predictors of interpersonal trust are considered, in particular generalised social trust and European identification. Underlying generalised trust as a stable disposition to trust unknown others is likely to increase particularised trust both within and beyond fan communities and national borders. Similarly, European identification—understood as citizens' self-categorisation as European, evaluations of membership in the European collective, and affective attachment to Europe and fellow Europeans (Bergbauer 2018)—is likely to affect whether and how much other European citizens (both fans and non-fans) are trusted. In addition, underlying socio-demographic and socio-economic factors presumably affect whether fans in general, fans from other European countries, or Europeans in general are trusted. Although these attitudinal and socio-structural variables contribute to trust dynamics, the theorised process through which fandom builds particularised trust is hypothesised to function independently of these broader determinants.

The following hypotheses are thus derived from the preceding discussion:

- H1.** *fans exhibit higher levels of trust in fans in general than non-fans.*
- H2.** *fans exhibit higher levels of trust in fans from other European countries than non-fans.*
- H3.** *fans exhibit higher levels of trust in European citizens in general than non-fans.*
- H4.** *The effects of fandom on trust in (a) fans in general, (b) fans from other European countries, and (c) European citizens at large persist independently of individuals' levels of generalised social trust, European identification, and socio-demographic or socio-economic characteristics.*

3 | Research Design and Operationalisation

This study draws on original survey data collected in four European countries (Germany, Spain, Poland and Norway) between February and April of 2023. The survey was administered online via the commercial survey provider Dynata using a stratified quota sampling strategy to ensure representativeness across key demographic variables (age, gender, education and region). The resulting sample approximates the demographic structure of each country's adult population as benchmarked against recent ESS data (See Supporting Information S1: Table A1 in the Appendix). A total of 7040 respondents

completed the questionnaire (1740 per country) containing a set of items on football fandom, political and social attitudes, and socio-demographic markers (See Supporting Information S1: Table A2 in the Appendix). After non-response removal, 6460 are included in the analysis.

The four countries were selected to capture a broad and diverse set of social, political, economic, and football-related contexts. From a football perspective, the countries represent varied levels of sporting competitiveness. Germany and Spain feature highly successful, economically developed, and more strongly internationalised (in terms of player personnel) clubs and leagues, while Polish and Norwegian clubs are less internationally competitive, less economically developed, and less strongly internationalised. In political terms, the countries have distinct institutional relationships with Europe and the EU. Germany is a founding member of the European Coal and Steel Community, Spain joined in 1986, and Poland in 2004, while Norway, though not an EU member, maintains close affiliations through the European Economic Area and Schengen Agreement (Fossum 2019). Public attitudes towards the EU also vary across these countries. Geographically, the countries span different regions of Europe and differ in demographic and economic characteristics. These highly dissimilar cases along various dimensions serve to carve out overarching effects that apply to a variety of contexts.

Measures of trust are the key variables in the analysis. The most widely used question for generalised trust is whether ‘most people can be trusted’ (Robbins 2022). This item captures the broad, stable expectation that others are trustworthy and is often supplemented by additional items like ‘people try to be fair’ and ‘people try to be helpful’. Here, generalised social trust is modelled as a latent construct derived from two items scaled 0–10 that ask whether people are generally helpful or mostly look out for themselves, and whether they try to take advantage or be fair, adapted verbatim from European Social Survey (ESS) items A5 and A6 (European Social Survey 2020a). In contrast, particularised trust is commonly measured via items that measure trust in specific known others, such as family members, neighbours, colleagues, or members of shared social groups (Robbins 2022). The extensions of particularised trust are measured here using three items that ask the degree to which a respondent trusts someone because they are a fan in general, because they are a European fan not from the respondent’s home country, or because they are a European citizen not from the respondent’s home country, on a scale of 0–10. These items capture ordered stages of trust generalisation.

European identification is also included in the model as a latent construct built from four items. These items cover affective attachment to Europe and the EU, support for further European unification, and views on the benefits of EU membership, the latter adjusted to reflect actual or hypothetical membership status depending on the respondent’s country. These represent key dimensions of the conceptualisation of European identity laid out by Bergbauer (2018), and are adapted from ESS items C9, C10, and B37 (European Social Survey 2020a), as well as Eurobarometer items QA8a and QA8b (Eurobarometer 2023). Finally, the model includes a range of socio-demographic and socio-economic controls. Age is included as a continuous variable, and gender is operationalised as a binary indicator (male/female). Education is measured using a harmonised three-level

variable (low, medium, high) based on country-specific scales from the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2012). Household income is included as a relative measure based on country-specific income deciles based on income scales from ESS item F41 (European Social Survey 2020b). Living area is categorised into three types: rural, town, and city. Football fandom is the central explanatory variable used in the model. This is measured as a binary variable based on the item ‘Do you consider yourself a football fan?’, and as such represents self-reported fandom. This was chosen because the self-categorisation as a fan captures many of the underlying attitudinal and behavioural dynamics that distinguish fans from non-fans and thus allows for the broad categorisation of respondents into two groups for the purpose of this analysis.

To test the hypotheses, the study employs Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors is used to account for non-normality in the data. The sample size of 6460 provides adequate power to detect effects and ensure stable parameter estimates. Model fit is assessed using established fit indices (Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)). Two SEMs are estimated to examine the relationship between fandom and trust in European citizens. Model A tests a direct pathway from fandom to trust in Europeans, controlling for generalised trust, European identification, and socio-demographic variables. Model B extends this by introducing a mediated pathway through football-related trust, modelling sequential effects from fandom to trust in fans in general, to trust in fans from other European countries, and finally to trust in other Europeans. By comparing these models, the analysis distinguishes between a general attitudinal effect of fandom and the more specific mechanisms through which fandom may build trust across national borders.

As a robustness check, the core relationships are also estimated using multiple linear regression. Here, generalised trust and European identification are included as additive indices based on the respective items. This complementary approach ensures the robustness of the findings across different modelling strategies. Furthermore, the mediation model (Model B) was estimated separately for each country in the sample (Spain, Poland, Norway, and Germany). This allows assessing whether the proposed trust generalisation mechanism holds consistently across national contexts rather than being driven by the pooled data structure. The same model specification and estimation procedure were applied to each country subsample. The resulting country-specific parameter estimates and model fit statistics are reported in Supporting Information S1: Tables A4 and A5 in the Appendix.

4 | Results

Two SEMs were estimated to test the proposed pathways linking football fandom to interpersonal trust in Europeans (see Table 1 and Figure 1). Both models exhibit acceptable-to-good fit according to established SEM thresholds (Hu and Bentler 1999). Model A achieves a CFI of 0.934, TLI of 0.914, RMSEA of 0.054, and SRMR of 0.052; while Model B shows a CFI of 0.940, TLI of 0.924, RMSEA of 0.057 and SRMR of 0.056.

TABLE 1 | Estimated effects of European identification, generalised trust, and football fandom on trust in Europeans.

			Estimate	Std. Estimate	SE	z	p	
Model A								
Direct effect	Trust European	← Age	0.005	0.036	0.002	2.964	0.003**	
		← Education: High	0.091	0.020	0.087	1.051	0.293	
		← Education: Middle	0.079	0.018	0.082	0.973	0.331	
		← European identification	0.469	0.191	0.038	12.444	0.000***	
		← Fandom status: Fan	0.386	0.089	0.054	7.146	0.000***	
		← Gender: Female	−0.047	-0.011	0.052	−0.903	0.366	
		← Generalised trust	0.348	0.331	0.017	19.923	0.000***	
		← Income	0.028	0.035	0.010	2.773	0.006**	
		← Living area: City	0.128	0.028	0.064	1.993	0.046*	
		← Living area: Town	0.091	0.021	0.062	1.475	0.140	
Model B								
Direct effect	Trust: European	← Age	0.008	0.062	0.001	6.370	0.000***	
		← Education: High	0.096	0.021	0.069	1.389	0.165	
		← Education: Middle	0.010	0.002	0.065	0.160	0.873	
		← European identification	0.261	0.107	0.030	8.610	0.000***	
		← Fandom status: Fan	−0.321	−0.074	0.045	−7.166	0.000***	
		← Gender: Female	−0.017	−0.004	0.041	−0.409	0.682	
		← Generalised trust	0.167	0.159	0.015	10.826	0.000***	
		← Income	0.014	0.018	0.008	1.851	0.064	
		← Living area: City	0.173	0.037	0.051	3.406	0.001**	
		← Living area: Town	0.090	0.021	0.048	1.879	0.060	
	Trust: European fan	← Trust: European fan	0.549	0.607	0.013	43.708	0.000***	
		← European identification	0.241	0.089	0.023	10.450	0.000***	
		← Trust: Fan (general)	0.802	0.817	0.008	97.215	0.000***	
		Trust: Fan (general)	← Fandom status: Fan	1.600	0.329	0.056	28.721	0.000***
			← Generalised trust	0.402	0.341	0.019	21.725	0.000***
Indirect effect	Trust: European	← Trust: European fan ← European identification	0.132	0.054	0.013	10.199	0.000***	
		← Trust: European fan ← Trust: Fan (general) ← Fandom	0.704	0.163	0.030	23.353	0.000***	
		← Trust: European fan ← Trust: Fan (general) ← Generalised trust	0.177	0.169	0.009	19.335	0.000***	
		Total effect	Trust: European	← European identification	0.393	0.160	0.030	13.046
← Fandom status: Fan	0.384			0.089	0.053	7.230	0.000***	
← Generalised trust	0.344			0.328	0.018	18.667	0.000***	

Note: Estimate = unstandardised coefficients, Std. Estimate = standardised coefficients; Specifications for Model A: Sample size = 6460; Degrees of freedom = 59; $\chi^2 = 1179.84$; $p < 0.001$; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.934; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.914; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.054; Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.052; Specifications for Model B: Sample size = 6460; Degrees of freedom = 85; $\chi^2 = 1892.02$; $p < 0.001$; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.94; Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.924; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.057; Standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.056; Significance levels:

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

Model B does not uniformly improve model fit compared with Model A, but it more explicitly represents the theoretically proposed mechanism of sequential trust generalisation linking fandom, trust in fans, trust in European fans, and trust in Europeans. The measurement models for generalised trust and European identification are satisfactory and consistent across models, with standardised factor loadings ranging from 0.409 to 0.855 for European identification and 0.797 to 0.811 for

generalised trust (all $p < 0.001$), thus exceeding recommended thresholds for measurement adequacy (see Supporting Information S1: Table A3 in the Appendix). Exploratory analyses reveal that the three particularised trust variables are strongly correlated ($r = 0.67$ – 0.83 , $p < 0.001$), indicating substantial overlap between the measures. A simple one-factor model yields high standardised loadings (0.91, 0.92, 0.73), indicating a shared underlying disposition towards trusting different social

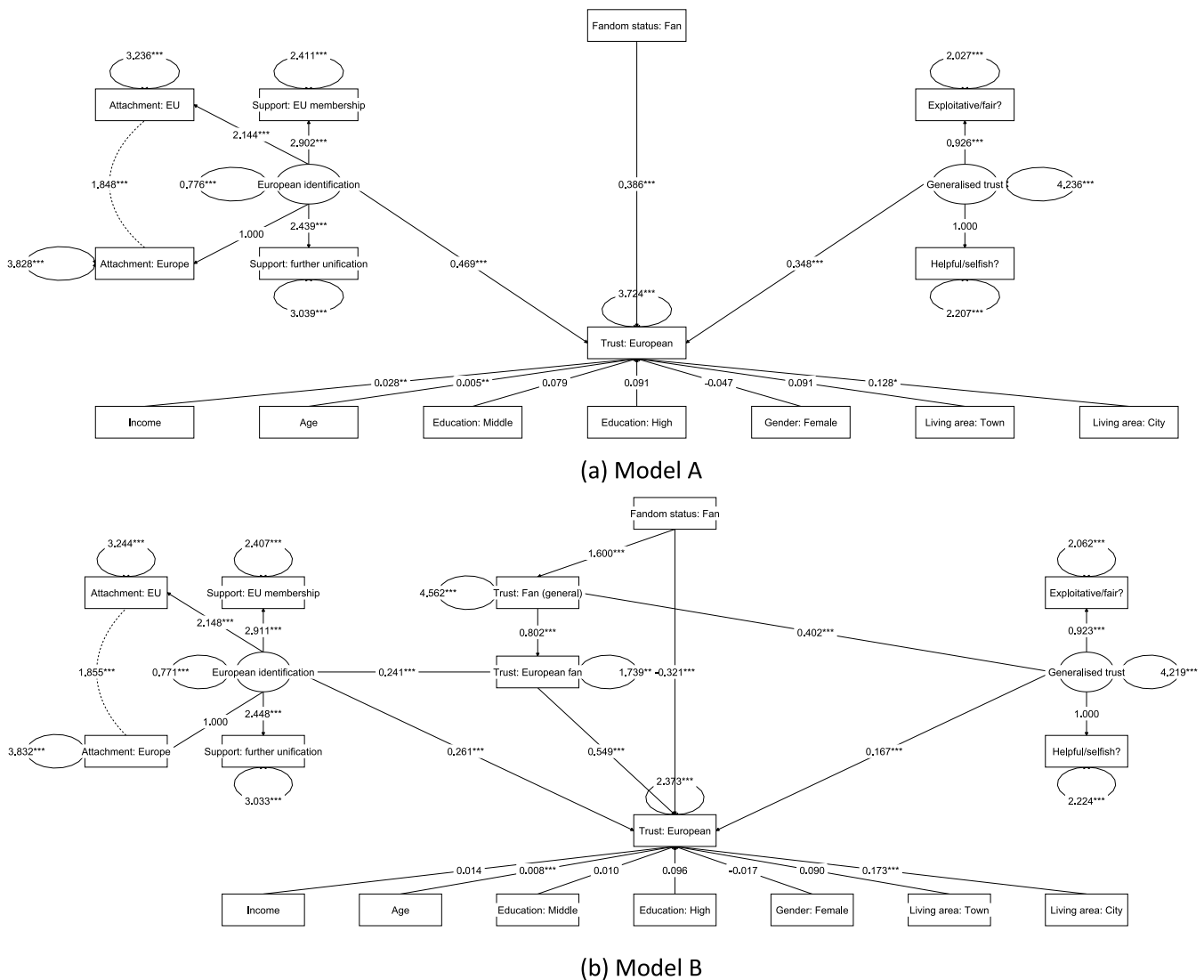


FIGURE 1 | Structural equation models of the relationship between football fandom and trust in European citizens. (a) Model A. (b) Model B.

groups. At the same time, the somewhat lower correlations with trust in Europeans suggest that trust decreases as the social distance from the immediate fan community increases, consistent with the proposed mechanism of trust generalisation.

In Model A, fandom shows a strong and statistically significant positive association with trust in Europeans ($b = 0.386$, $\beta = 0.089$, $p < 0.001$)¹, supporting the hypothesis that fans express greater interpersonal trust toward other European citizens. Generalised social trust ($b = 0.348$, $\beta = 0.331$, $p < 0.001$) and European identification ($b = 0.469$, $\beta = 0.191$, $p < 0.001$) also emerge as robust and substantive predictors. Among the control variables, age ($b = 0.005$, $\beta = 0.036$, $p = 0.003$), income ($b = 0.028$, $\beta = 0.035$, $p = 0.006$), and residence in a city ($b = 0.128$, $\beta = 0.028$, $p = 0.046$) are positively associated with trust, while gender and education do not yield significant effects. Model B extends the analysis by incorporating sequential pathways through football-specific trust mechanisms. In this model, the direct effect of fandom on trust in Europeans is negative ($b = -0.321$, $\beta = -0.074$, $p < 0.001$), but this is counterbalanced by a large, positive indirect effect through trust in fans overall and fans from other European countries ($b = 0.704$, $\beta = 0.163$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting a suppression effect. The total

effect remains significantly positive ($b = 0.384$, $\beta = 0.089$, $p < 0.001$), consistent with Model A and confirming the association between fandom and trust. The magnitude of this total effect is relatively modest compared with the considerably larger coefficients within the internal trust chain, particularly the strong relationships linking trust in fans, trust in European fans, and trust in Europeans. Within the trust pathway, fandom predicts higher trust in fans generally ($b = 1.600$, $\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$), and generalised trust also contributes to this relationship ($b = 0.402$, $\beta = 0.341$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in fans from other European countries is then shaped by both trust in general fans ($b = 0.802$, $\beta = 0.817$, $p < 0.001$) and European identification ($b = 0.241$, $\beta = 0.089$, $p < 0.001$). Trust in European citizens is strongly predicted by trust in fans from other European countries ($b = 0.549$, $\beta = 0.607$, $p < 0.001$), along with generalised trust ($b = 0.167$, $\beta = 0.159$, $p < 0.001$) and European identification ($b = 0.261$, $\beta = 0.107$, $p < 0.001$). Indirect effects show that European identification ($b = 0.132$, $\beta = 0.054$, $p < 0.001$) and generalised trust ($b = 0.177$, $\beta = 0.169$, $p < 0.001$) both exert additional mediated influence on trust in Europeans via the fan trust pathways. The total effects of fandom ($b = 0.384$, $\beta = 0.089$, $p < 0.001$), generalised trust

TABLE 2 | Linear regression model predicting trust in Europeans.

Term	Estimate	SE	Stat.	<i>p</i>
(Intercept)	1.596	0.137	11.653	0.000***
Fandom status: Fan	0.365	0.053	6.913	0.000***
Generalised trust	0.271	0.011	23.719	0.000***
European identification	0.244	0.012	19.788	0.000***
Age	0.004	0.002	2.588	0.010**
Gender: Female	−0.071	0.052	−1.379	0.168
Education: Middle	0.073	0.076	0.969	0.333
Education: High	0.072	0.083	0.876	0.381
Income	0.023	0.010	2.404	0.016*
Living area: Town	0.083	0.060	1.389	0.165
Living area: City	0.111	0.064	1.735	0.083

Note: Model specifications: Sample size = 6460; $R^2 = 0.202$; Adjusted $R^2 = 0.201$; F -statistic = 163.7; Degrees of freedom: 6449; Significance levels:

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$.

($b = 0.344$, $\beta = 0.328$, $p < 0.001$), and European identification ($b = 0.393$, $\beta = 0.160$, $p < 0.001$) are all strong and statistically significant, providing robust evidence for the theoretical mechanisms proposed in this study.

In sum, both models support the notion that football fandom can foster trust in other Europeans, but Model B reveals that this effect is not direct. Rather, it unfolds through a chain of trust relations rooted in fan identity and social perception. The findings thus validate the hypothesised mediation structure and underscore the importance of understanding how cultural identification shapes broader attitudes toward social cohesion in Europe. The regression model employed as a robustness check supports the prior findings (see Table 2): fandom ($b = 0.365$, $p < 0.001$), generalised trust ($b = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$), and European identification ($b = 0.244$, $p < 0.001$) are all positively associated with trust. Age and income are also significant, while gender and education remain non-significant. The consistency of results across modelling strategies strengthens the credibility of the findings and supports the proposed theoretical mechanisms. Estimating the model separately for each country (Supporting Information S1: Tables A4 and A5 in the Appendix) shows substantively similar results to those obtained from the main model. The sequential trust pathway linking fandom, trust in fans, trust in European fans, and trust in Europeans is consistently observed across all four national subsamples. In particular, the negative direct association between fandom and trust in Europeans is replicated in each country, while the indirect pathway through fan-specific trust relations remains positive and statistically significant. Overall, the robustness tests confirm that the proposed mediation mechanism is stable across the different national contexts examined in this study.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical results offer substantive support for the hypotheses formulated in this paper. Firstly, football fandom is strongly and positively associated with trust in fans more broadly in line with H1. The effect is not only statistically significant but substantively large, reinforcing the notion that shared group membership and identity in the football sphere

constitutes a robust basis for interpersonal trust. This confirms long-standing assumptions in social psychology regarding in-group trust formation via shared affective and symbolic identifications. H2 is likewise strongly supported. The results show a robust relationship between general fan trust and trust in fans from other European countries, suggesting that the shared identity of being a fan extends across national boundaries within Europe. This is particularly relevant in the context of the Europeanisation of football, where structural and cultural dynamics have created a transnational space of identification. Here, fandom appears to operate as a bridging identity that facilitates trust in a geographically and socially broader in-group.

With regard to H3, while both the total effects in Models A and B and the positive association in the linear regression model support the general association between fandom and trust in Europeans, the direct effect of fandom in Model B is negative. Only through the sequential mediation of fan-specific trust relationships does the total effect become positive. This indicates the presence of a suppression effect: fandom is associated with lower trust in Europeans when measured directly, but this is counteracted by the indirect effect that operates via trust in general fans and fans from other European countries. One possible interpretation of the negative direct effect is that football fandom contains both integrative and divisive elements. While the shared identity of being a fan can constitute a superordinate identity that bridges national boundaries, football cultures are also structured by rivalry, strong in-group identification, and occasionally politicised or nationalised forms of belonging. The results suggest that such parochial elements may reduce trust in Europeans when fandom is considered in isolation, but that this tendency is offset when a superordinate fan identity becomes salient and trust develops within the broader community of fans. Thus, fandom appears to be associated with greater trust in Europeans only insofar as trust first emerges within the community of fans and subsequently extends to fans from other European countries. The effect is contingent on the emergence of trust within the cultural boundaries of fandom. Thus, while H3 can be upheld in terms of the total effect, it must be understood as a conditional or mediated process of relatively modest effect size.

Finally, H4 is supported by the findings across models and modelling strategies. The inclusion of European identification and generalised trust, as well as socio-demographic and socio-economic controls, does not alter the core relationships, and both SEMs and the regression model produce consistent estimates. Taken together, the findings provide support for the proposed mechanism of trust generalisation whereby a shared fan identity is associated with trust formation within the community of fans, which may extend to fans from other European countries and ultimately to Europeans more broadly.

By outlining a potential mechanism of specific trust construction and subsequent generalisation through which trust in fellow citizens may be cultivated on a European scale, the paper offers a grounded, micro-sociological view on the construction social relations across the continent. This contributes to the literature on social trust, social cohesion, and the social dimension(s) of European integration. The results offer initial empirical evidence for the construction of interpersonal trust across national boundaries, thereby providing a novel perspective on cohesion in an increasingly integrated Europe. They show a potential process of trust generalisation towards broader, more abstract categories such as Europeans that is contingent on prior trust in the community of fans, supporting recent work that emphasises the conditional nature of in-group trust and its role as a scaffold for generalised social trust. As the concept of social cohesion is often measured in particular communities or on local or national scales (Dragolov et al. 2016; Schiefer and van der Noll 2017), assessing and explaining European social cohesion complements the existing literature. The results further contribute to the growing literature on the role of everyday cultural practices across Europe (Kuhn 2015; Recchi and Favell 2019; Brand et al. 2024) for the development of shared identifications (Bruter 2005; Risse 2015), which constitute a key dimension of social cohesion. Crucially, the social trust that emerges from football fandom may make a small, but tangible contribution to the European 'sense of community, a we-feeling, however "thinly" expressed' that is important 'for democracy to have any meaning' (Cederman 2001, 145), thus giving legitimacy and support to the European project. While inter-group attitudes directed at non-citizens arguably constitute some of the most visible and politically salient sources of tension in contemporary European societies, understanding how trust develops within the European citizenry remains an important research endeavour for analysing the micro-foundations of cohesion across national boundaries.

Furthermore, this study addresses two key literature gaps in the study of social cohesion through leisure and sports (Moustakas and Robrade 2023) by providing rare quantitative evidence of direct, tangible expressions of social cohesion, while also hypothesising the transfer of sports-related cohesive practices to broader society. Beyond academic contributions, the findings may also hold implications for policymakers and stakeholders in football. The sport and its fandom appear to hold unique potential for inclusive identity-building and everyday Europeanisation. The results suggest that initiatives like cross-border fan exchanges, anti-discrimination campaigns, or transnational supporter networks may be leveraged as tools of cross-cultural community integration. Particularly given the polarising tendencies of contemporary politics, cultural spheres like football may offer entry points for rebuilding trust in and across European societies, but

only if they become or remain safe, inclusive, and accessible cultural spaces (Finger et al. 2024b, 2024c; Exner et al. 2025).

Some limitations to the study must be considered. While the use of SEM allows for the modelling of complex relationships, including indirect and layered effects, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow for inferences about the causal mechanisms and temporal dynamics of trust development. The operationalisation of the key explanatory variable fandom as binary simplifies the complex social and psychological dynamics of being a fan, including identity mechanics, political orientations, and modes of engagement with football. Some limitations also arise from the measurement of the trust variables themselves. The key independent variable of trust in European citizens is relatively broad and unspecific and does not account for the cultural diversity across Europe. The particularised trust items (trust in fans, trust in European fans, trust in European citizens) may evoke relatively broad (and possibly varying) evaluative orientations towards different groups rather than clearly distinct stages of trust generalisation. It is furthermore unclear whether all respondents follow the same mental imagery when asked about fans, European fans, or other European citizens. Crucially, football has been shown to be associated with broader constructions of Europe (Biel et al. 2024). Moreover, the high correlations between these items indicate that they likely represent a common underlying disposition towards outgroups.

Future research could address these limitations through panel studies or experimental interventions that might shed more light on the causal mechanisms involved. It should employ more differentiated measures of particularised trust or alternative item formulations to more clearly distinguish between different levels of trust generalisation and to better disentangle distinct stages of these processes. Regarding its country selection, this work could be extended in two directions: by examining country-specific effects within the four-country sample used here to account for contextual variation, or by expanding the geographic scope to include additional countries for broader generalisability. For instance, cases such as the United Kingdom or Turkey might constitute particularly interesting candidates given their prominent (and in the UK/England's case, dominant) role in European football alongside their strained political relationship with the European Union. Moreover, it may be valuable to disaggregate fans by club affiliation, intensity of fandom, or behavioural markers to account for the complexity of the underlying phenomenon, as well as ask more specific questions about the extension of social trust beyond the simple measure employed here.

In sum, the paper demonstrates that fandom can foster trust in Europeans, but crucially, this effect depends on a layered sequence of identity-based trust generalisation, rather than direct attitudinal change. The effect structure suggests that fandom firstly connects individuals through affective attachments to clubs, players, or teams, mutual recognition, shared identification as fans, and networks of cooperation, but secondly also cultivates a broader sense of belonging and recognition that transcends immediate group boundaries. The findings show that fandom plays a significant and complex role in shaping interpersonal trust and ultimately contributes to the of construction social cohesion across Europe in a distinct and measurable way. Social trust is 'essential for social cohesion,

integration and stability, qualities that are especially crucial for modern, large-scale, multicultural societies under pressure from rapid social and economic change, mass migration, and ethnic and religious conflict' (Newton et al. 2018, 38). In a continent marked by intersecting crises and challenges, building trust through the shared cultural pursuit of football fandom provides a pathway towards a more connected and cohesive community.

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Ethics Statement

Data collection was conducted in accordance with the ESOMAR guidelines for ethical research.

Consent

Participants were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous, with no personally identifiable data collected.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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/zwufr/overview?view_only=8876ebab465441f4a5f60f6174c78c71.

Endnotes

¹*b* denotes an unstandardised coefficient, β denotes a standardised coefficient.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.
Appendix_revisions_2.