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The Football Effect: Comparing European Identity Between Fans and Non-Fans

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ABSTRACT

The formation of European identities is a pivotal issue for the cohesion of the European community in times of multiple crises. Based on theories of identity formation through habituation, we posit that football fandom—a ubiquitous, emotional, strongly Europeanised activity in everyday life—holds unique potential for fostering a sense of a shared European identity. Football fandom provides habitual contact, interaction and experiences of Europe, shaping fans' European identity formations. We use new representative survey data from four European countries (Germany, Norway, Poland, and Spain) to examine the relationship between football fandom and various dimensions of European identity. The results largely support our hypotheses, demonstrating that football fans exhibit stronger attachments to Europe and the EU, greater support for European integration and a more positive assessment of EU membership than non-fans.

1 | Introduction

Europe and the European Union (EU) are facing a series of intersecting political, social, economic and ecological challenges (de Vries 2018; Riddervold, Trondal, and Newsome 2021) in an ongoing and evolving 'polycrisis' (Zeitlin, Nicoli, and Laffan 2019). An essential remedy for these overlapping crises lies in nurturing a European identity. This serves to enhance the legitimacy of the political community and strengthen the capacity to respond to collective challenges (e.g., Fuchs 2012; Schmidt 2013). Beyond the contentious and polarised realm of electoral and institutional politics, a shared European identity can be fostered by a variety of cultural, educational and leisurely pursuits. Examples include the Erasmus programme (Mitchell 2015), cultural fields such as music (Riethmüller 2017), especially the Eurovision Song Contest

(Baker 2017), cinema and film (Bondebjerg, Redvall, and Higson 2015) or theatre (Haus 2024).

However, those activities primarily engage citizens with higher formal education or socioeconomic status. In contrast, sports, and in particular football, with its passionate engagement appeals to people across all social groups. Fandom—a form of personal identification characterised by a strong sense of belonging and emotional attachment—constitutes a cultural practice that reaches a broad, socially diverse and distinctly nonelite audience (Weber et al. 2020), offering them an avenue for experiencing Europe through a popular pastime activity.

Professional club football¹ has undergone a substantial Europeanisation of its administrative structures and sporting practice in recent decades, leading to trans-European contact,

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regular exchanges and the establishment of networks between fans, clubs, officials and organisations. Through these tangible connections to Europe, football has the potential for shaping European identities among an integrated, though diverse, European community (Finger et al. 2023; Weber et al. 2022). Explanations for this effect centre on repeated and regular—habitualised—engagement with football ingraining feelings of similarity, a sense of belonging and mutual trust among individuals from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Football as a cultural space may become a point of convergence, contributing to the formation of a European identity.

Accordingly, this article explores the following central research question: do football fans identify more strongly with Europe than non-fans? To address this question, we first elaborate on the construction of European identity through habituation, as well as fandom within Europeanised football. We then lay out our research methodology, data collection, and operationalisation based on an online survey with a representative panel of 1760 respondents per country (Germany, Spain, Poland and Norway). Following this, we present the results of the quantitative analysis that indicate positive and significant effects of fandom on different measures of European identity, namely emotional attachment to the EU and Europe, support for European integration and EU membership. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for our understanding of football's role in shaping European identities and its potential for (re-)engaging citizens with Europe and the EU in an accessible, grassroots way.

With this article, we make a twofold contribution. We add to the growing literature on the formation of European identities through social practices and everyday experiences (Kuhn 2015; Recchi and Favell 2019). Whereas theories on identity formation through habituation have typically been explored within explicitly political contexts (Checkel 2005; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Juncos and Pomorska 2006; Risse 2015; Suvarierol, Busuioc, and Groenleer 2013), our work extends these theories' boundary conditions into the everyday lives of citizens (e.g., Recchi 2014; Sigalas 2010). Additionally, our research enhances the understanding of football's Europeanisation by presenting a quantitative analysis grounded in novel data, thus broadening the scope beyond the mainly qualitative and UK-centric studies in the field (FREE: Football Research in an Enlarged Europe 2015; King 2000, 2003; Millward 2006, 2009).

2 | European Identities and Football Fandom

2.1 | European Identity Formation Through Habituation

Lacking democratic legitimacy has been one of the EU's most important issues since the early 1990s (e.g., Featherstone 1994; Follesdal and Hix 2006) and has been ascribed to the lack of a cohesive polity providing support for the European project (Cederman 2001; Schmidt 2020). The social, cultural, historical and institutional diversity in the EU and in broader Europe as well as the multi-level political structures pose significant challenges to establishing a unified European identity

(Cerutti 2008). Still, a foundation of legitimacy for the EU requires some sense of European identity: 'there has to be a sense of community, a we-feeling, however "thinly" expressed, for democracy to have any meaning' (Cederman 2001: 145).

Identities entail continual processes of 'being' or 'becoming' (Jenkins 2008: 17), negotiating belonging and selfhood, distinguishing oneself from others based on internal and external categorisations, delineating members of a community from non-members and navigating levels of individuality and collectivity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Eder 2009; Jenkins 2008; Tajfel 1981). Identification with Europe can consequently be understood 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: 6). Throughout the process of European integration, the possibilities of identifying with Europe have increased. They are anchored in shared values, norms and opinions (Bruter 2003; Kantner 2006), the identifying potential of the EU, its institutions and symbols (Calligaro 2021; Mayer and Palmowski 2004), or an emerging European Public Sphere (Risse 2014). In general, European identities are shaped by the reception of Europe-related information and personal experiences of being part of a European community (Bergbauer 2018; Kuhn 2015; Verhaegen and Hooghe 2015), as well as discursively constructed (Eder 2009). Crucially, European identities can be divided into sub-dimensions, e.g. 'cultural' and 'civic' dimensions (Bruter 2003, 2005).

In the political science and sociology literature, collective identities and their formation are frequently connected to processes of (political) socialisation (Ceka and Sojka 2016; Recchi 2014; Risse 2005). Specifically, we identify habituation with Europe as the key mechanism driving identity formation. Habituation describes a process whereby repeated behaviours, (inter)actions or experiences become customary or routine—that is, habitual—over time, shaping individuals' perceptions, attitudes and social behaviour (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Early scholars of European integration suggested that transnational interactions may lead to greater 'mutual sympathy', 'we-feeling', 'trust' and 'mutual consideration' (Deutsch et al. 1957: 36) and to loyalty or identity transfer (Risse 2005: 294). Similarly, sustained interaction of national officials may socialise them into common cooperative European community norms and self-understandings (Lindberg 1963). The social psychology micro-foundation of habituation lies in the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), suggesting that under certain conditions contact among individuals from different groups creates mutual understanding and reduces negative outgroup attitudes. Cognitive mobilisation (Inglehart 1970) posits that greater understanding of and familiarisation with Europe or the EU from increased interactions likely reduces the perceived threat of the entity (Karp, Banducci, and Bowler 2003). The influence of repeated transnational interaction and exposure to Europe on European identities has been well documented (Fligstein 2009; Recchi and Favell 2009)—particularly in border regions (Díez Medrano 2003; Kuhn 2011), frequent travellers (Gustafson 2009), Erasmus participants (Kuhn 2012), and via symbols of European integration (Bruter 2003; Cram and Patrikios 2015).

We propose that identity construction through habituation occurs on two levels. First, we suggest a passive, subconscious

Europeanisation of identities, also described as ‘subliminal’ or ‘subjective Europeanisation’ through exposure to European stimuli (Weber 2022: 237). European signifiers such as flags, languages, anthems or other symbols constitute examples of ‘banal Europeanism’ (Weber 2021), building on the concept of banal nationalism (Billig 1995). Additionally, news coverage can serve as an important catalyst to shared identities by conveying information and mediated contact with Europe (Koopmans, Erbe, and Meyer 2012; Risse 2014, 2015). Sub-conscious identity work by individuals continually exposed to Europe leads to changing perceptions, imaginations and values towards a more positive stance on Europe.

Second, we posit an active, conscious and participatory identity formation, including personal contacts and interactions, the generation of shared narratives, and networks of exchange with other Europeans. This (re)produces, (re)aligns and normalises Europeanised frames of interpretation, values and perceptions. Decisive herein are in-group bias (i.e., the tendency to favour one’s own group members over those belonging to different groups), exposure to Europe through other Europeans, a sense of belonging to a greater collective or feelings of similarity and sameness (Bergbauer 2018; Levermore and Millward 2007; van Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins 2012).

A majority of the literature on European socialisation explicitly examines its political dimension (Checkel 2005; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Juncos and Pomorska 2006; Risse 2015; Suvarierol, Busuioc, and Groenleer 2013), focussing on the effects of concrete policies, EU institutions or EU-related news. However, additional pathways to socialisation with Europe and identity formation lie in cultural, educational and leisurely pursuits (Kuhn 2012; Recchi and Favell 2019). Since they represent ‘more positive undercurrents to the gloom of contemporary national party politics’ (Favell and Recchi 2019: 23), they might even be more effective than strictly political avenues. We therefore look past the political dimension and examine the importance of a particular social group in Europe that relates to Europe in a unique way: football fans.

2.2 | Fandom in a Europeanised Football Sphere

As one of the largest forms of collective behaviour in contemporary society, football fandom surpasses most cultural, leisurely, educational or occupational phenomena in its impact (Finger et al. 2023). It reaches all social strata, bringing together people across cultural and socioeconomic cleavages. Being a fan entails a high level of emotional involvement (Doidge, Kossakowski, and Mintert 2020), finding orientation and structure in the sport, the favourite club and other fans (Stone 2007), as well as practices that manifest in numerous social interactions (Cleland et al. 2018). Football connects ‘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: 183). Additionally, fans develop emotional connections to actors like players or coaches through para-social relationships (Sun and Wu 2012). Fandom consequently ‘contributes to an individual’s sense of identity with or belonging to a group or collectivity’ (Mason 1989: 118).

Thus, we define being a football fan as a form of personal identification characterised by a strong sense of belonging and emotional attachment to the sport itself, a specific team or individual players, thereby binding individuals to larger fan groups (see Cleland et al. 2018; Giulianotti 2002; Mason 1989). Being a fan provides bonding social capital, where a shared passion for the same team creates a sense of unity, loyalty and common purpose (Putnam 2000; Tucker 2016).

Fandom’s association with various forms of identities, e.g., local and national (Meier et al. 2019), as well as religious or ethnic identities (Boyle 1994; Vaczi 2023), is well established. The connection between sports in general and national identification or nationalism is particularly strong, with many sporting events being highly expressive of national identity (Bairner 2001; Cronin and Mayall 1998). In contrast, an emerging strand of research noted the formation of common supranational, Europeanised identities among supporters in the context of increasing Europeanisation of football—a gradual transformation of administrative, organisational and governance structures resulting from European integration (FREE: Football Research in an Enlarged Europe 2015; King 2000; Millward 2009; Weber et al. 2020; Weber 2022). Four notable developments mark this transformation (Niemann, Weber, and Brand 2021): first, the liberalisation and internationalisation of player-markets following the Court of Justice of the European Union’s (CJEU) so-called Bosman Ruling (Duval and van Rompuy 2016); second, a Europe-wide, highly commercialised de-facto league system of competitions that includes all 55 UEFA member associations; third, the institutionalisation of transnational stakeholder associations on the European level, such as the European Club Association or Football Supporters Europe (Cleland et al. 2018; Kennedy and Kennedy 2014; Mittag 2018); fourth, regulatory measures by the European Commission specifying certain exceptions to EU competition law for the central marketing of broadcasting rights (Andreff and Bourg 2006).

In this superordinate ‘European football sphere’ (Finger et al. 2023: 137), fans are constantly exposed to Europe. They cheer on internationalised player squads and coaching staff. Continental competitions that transport the myth of the European Community (Niemann and Brand 2020) are widely broadcast across Europe with low material and technical barriers to entry. Flanked by more general developments of European integration—such as free movement or the common currency—opportunities for football-related transnational exchange and activities have increased.

2.3 | Fan-Specific Identification With Europe

The (un)conscious engagement with Europe resulting from the Europeanisation of football expands fans’ and identification beyond local, regional or national contexts. Mostly qualitative studies indicate that fans (re)arrange their frames of reference and constructions of community in Europeanised football, normalising Europe in their minds and influencing their identification patterns (King 2000, 2003; Levermore and Millward 2007; Millward 2006; Niemann, Brand, and Weber 2024). Given their socially diverse makeup and regular engagement with this emotional, highly Europeanised, leisurely cultural phenomenon,

fans likely experience a distinct, football-based habituation. We aim to determine whether fans exhibit a stronger European identification than non-fans, who remain outside this cultural sphere.

We focus on two distinct aspects of identification with Europe. Firstly, identification with Europe entails emotional attachments (Cram 2012). Considering the subdimensions of European identities (Bruter 2003, 2005), we assume that these attachments can (on the political-civic dimension) extend to both the EU and (on the cultural dimension) to broader definitions of Europe. While civic or political expressions of identity ‘can be shared only by the EU citizens [...], European ethnic/cultural identity can be measured outside the EU borders’ (Voicu and Ramia 2021: 861). In much of the literature, as well as colloquially, the terms ‘Europe’ and ‘EU’ are invoked interchangeably, especially regarding European identities (e.g., Favell and Recchi 2019; Kaina, Karolewski, and Kuhn 2015). We want to move beyond this conceptual and terminological overlap by directing our hypotheses, the selection of study countries, and the measurements of affective attachment towards both the EU as a political community and a broader ‘Europe’. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H1. *Football fans have a stronger emotional attachment to Europe than non-fans.*

H2. *Football fans have a stronger emotional attachment to the EU than non-fans.*

Secondly, European identities encompass evaluations of membership in the European collective. We assume that these evaluations are likely to unfold on the political dimension of identification with Europe, as the EU and its integration process constitute the most manifest expressions of European *groupness*. Consequently, preferences for further European integration as well as positive evaluations of EU membership indicate stronger identifications with Europe. Accordingly, we hypothesise:

H3. *Football fans are more supportive of further European integration than non-fans.*

H4. *Football fans evaluate their countries’ potential or actual EU membership more positively than non-fans.*

3 | Case Selection, Data, and Statistical Procedures

To test our hypotheses, we selected four countries—Germany, Spain, Norway, and Poland—that differ in, among other aspects, geographic, historical, cultural and socioeconomic aspects (see Table A1 in the Appendix). Crucially, these countries vary in both football and Europe-related socio-political characteristics. In terms of football, they differ in the competitiveness and player-market internationalisation of their domestic leagues, as well as in their traditions and fan cultures (Buarque de Hollanda and Busset 2023). The selected countries further exhibit variations in their affiliation with Europe and the EU. (West) Germany was a founding EU member, Spain joined in the 1980s and Poland acceded in the 2004 Eastern enlargement.

Norway ‘has opted for as close an EU association as is possible’ (Fossum 2019: 1) with, among others, membership in the European Economic Area (EEA) and the Schengen Agreement. Furthermore, attitudes towards the EU and Europe differ between these countries. By examining such heterogeneous cases, we aim to identify common dynamics and drawing broader inferences about football and its effects on European identities.

To study the effect of fandom on attitudes towards Europe and the EU, we constructed our own survey (see Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix) that captures demographic information, aspects of fandom, measures of cosmopolitanism and trust, and both general and Europe-specific political orientations. Where possible and especially for the socio-demographic and political questions, we relied on established survey items from Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey (ESS) to ensure their validity and reliability. We gathered the data in March and April 2023 using an online panel that used representative quotas for gender, age and education. The survey was deployed by a commercial survey provider (Dynata) that managed participant recruitment and ensured quota fulfilment and response quality. Our final data set comprised 7040 participants (1760 per country) of which 3718 (52.81%) identified as football fans, varying between 63.58% in Poland and 37.61% in Norway (see Table A4 in the Appendix).

Four dependent variables measure the subdimensions of respondents’ identification with Europe: (1) emotional attachment to Europe, (2) emotional attachment to the European Union, (3) whether European unification should go further or not and (4) whether EU membership is or would be a good thing. These items are frequently used in research studying attitudes towards the EU (e.g., Kaina, Karolewski, and Kuhn 2015; Risse 2015) and represent the dimensions of ‘affective attachment to Europe’ as well as the ‘evaluations of their membership in the European collective’ (Bergbauer 2018). For the EU membership question, while comparability is somewhat limited due to the different phrasing and context of the question between Norway and the other countries, it reflects our aim to assess European identity formation across varying national settings and mirrors similar (sets of) questions in Eurobarometer and ESS². We measure these four variables via a 0–10 scale, ranging from the most negative to the most positive opinion of Europe or the EU.

Our main independent variable—football fandom—is based on self-identification as a football fan in accordance with our definition. We asked respondents ‘Do you consider yourself a football fan?’ with a yes/no-answer. This ensures that our measurement captures a direct expression of an individual’s identification as a fan, which in turn is directly tied to fan-specific attitudes and behaviours. As robustness checks for our fandom proxy, we vary the main independent variables to include interest in football measured on a 0–10 scale, as well as measures of the internationalisation of fandom through binary variables indicating whether a person follows a club outside their home country and whether their favourite club has recently played in international competitions.

As is standard for research on attitudes on Europe and the EU, we also control for several demographics including age and age

squared, gender, education, as well as household income—factors that are known determinants of European attitudes (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Gabel 1998; Kunst, Kuhn, and van de Werfhorst 2020). We further control for cosmopolitan values, and political ideology (Favell and Reimer 2021; Teperoglou and Belchior 2020) (see Table A4 in the Appendix for descriptive statistics of the control variables).

For our analysis, we first present descriptive statistics displaying the bivariate link between fandom and attitudes towards Europe and the EU (Table 1). Second, multiple linear OLS regression models (Tables 2 and 3) gauge whether (1) fans have a stronger emotional attachment to Europe than non-fans, (2) fans have a stronger emotional attachment to the EU than non-fans, (3) fans are more supportive of further European integration than non-fans and (4) fans evaluate their country's (potential) EU membership more positively than non-fans. For each set of models, we first run a pooled model, and then individual models for the specific countries. To control for unaccounted between-country variation, we also include country dummies in the pooled models.

4 | Results

The results support our main hypothesis that fans identify more strongly with Europe than non-fans. Table 1 shows that respondents identifying as fans exhibit consistently higher

measures of identification, both in the aggregate and at the country level. These descriptive results are confirmed by our multiple regression analyses shown in Table 2, with model summary statistics included in Table 3. Even when controlling for age, gender, education, household income, political ideology and cosmopolitan values, we find that fans are more embracing of Europe and the EU than non-fans. Model 1 shows that fans have a stronger attachment to Europe, predicted to be approximately 0.3 points higher overall than non-fans. This difference is strongest in Germany, moderate for Spain and Poland, and insignificant in Norway. Looking at the emotional attachment to the EU, the pooled model predicts higher levels for fans as compared to non-fans by 0.5 points. This effect is consistent for all countries, and rather strong in Germany (0.65) and Norway (0.64). Additionally, fans have more positive feelings towards further European integration than non-fans, both in the aggregate and at the country level. The effect is moderately strong, and most pronounced in Norway (0.84). Finally, fans evaluate their countries' (potential) EU membership more positively. These effects apply to the pooled model and the models for Germany and Spain, where the difference is moderate, and for Norway, where it reaches almost a full point (0.97).

Of the control variables included in the model, we find that age appears to reduce someone's attachment with Europe. Consistent with previous findings (e.g., Bruter 2005; Fligstein 2009), higher education levels seem to be associated with stronger

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics for measures of European identity by fan self-assessment and country.

Variable	Country	Nonfan		Fans	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Attachment to Europe	ALL	6.60	2.27	6.92	2.04
	ESP	6.54	2.12	6.83	1.94
	GER	6.18	2.29	6.67	2.12
	NOR	6.82	2.26	6.82	2.07
	POL	6.91	2.33	7.24	2.01
Attachment to the EU	ALL	5.49	2.73	6.29	2.44
	ESP	6.32	2.30	6.62	2.15
	GER	5.67	2.56	6.27	2.38
	NOR	4.41	2.74	5.19	2.62
	POL	6.24	2.77	6.62	2.46
European unification should go further	ALL	5.32	2.85	6.26	2.62
	ESP	5.91	2.67	6.45	2.52
	GER	5.53	2.95	6.25	2.70
	NOR	4.33	2.52	5.33	2.44
	POL	6.13	2.93	6.62	2.62
EU membership for [country] is or would be a good/bad thing	ALL	6.08	3.25	7.04	2.71
	ESP	7.11	2.43	7.50	2.29
	GER	6.83	2.85	7.14	2.52
	NOR	4.02	3.19	5.13	3.09
	POL	7.49	2.88	7.65	2.48

Note: Mean, mean variable score; SD, standard deviation.

TABLE 2 | Regression model estimates for fan self-assessment and measures of European identity.

	Term	ALL				ESP				GER				NOR				POL			
		Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P
Attachment to Europe	Intercept	3.65	0.25	14.35	0.00	3.65	0.50	7.32	0.00	4.92	0.53	9.29	0.00	4.59	0.52	8.89	.00	2.62	0.46	5.71	0.00
	Fan (self-assessment)	0.30	0.05	5.48	0.00	0.28	0.10	2.70	0.01	0.58	0.11	5.50	0.00	-0.06	0.12	-0.50	0.62	0.42	0.11	3.95	0.00
	Age	-0.00	0.01	-0.13	0.89	0.01	0.02	0.70	0.48	-0.09	0.02	-4.25	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.08	0.94	0.04	0.02	2.14	0.03
	Age ²	0.00	0.00	1.38	0.17	-0.00	0.00	-0.20	0.84	0.00	0.00	4.44	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.35	0.72	-0.00	0.00	-0.73	0.47
	Gender (male)	-0.27	0.05	-5.09	0.00	-0.35	0.10	-3.49	0.00	-0.25	0.11	-2.39	0.02	-0.20	0.12	-1.75	0.08	-0.23	0.10	-2.28	0.02
	Gender (other)	0.02	0.89	0.02	0.98	-2.01	1.90	-1.06	0.29	0.38	1.42	0.26	0.79	-0.16	2.09	-0.08	0.94	1.21	1.91	0.63	0.53
	Education (mid)	0.08	0.08	1.09	0.27	0.26	0.14	1.88	0.06	0.05	0.16	0.31	0.75	-0.09	0.16	-0.55	0.58	0.04	0.17	0.26	0.79
	Education (high)	0.23	0.08	2.79	0.01	0.41	0.15	2.68	0.01	0.23	0.18	1.22	0.22	-0.02	0.16	-0.12	0.90	0.20	0.18	1.12	0.26
	Household income	0.04	0.01	4.18	0.00	0.06	0.02	2.80	0.01	.05	0.02	2.55	0.01	0.03	0.02	1.29	0.20	0.04	0.02	2.03	0.04
	Cosmopolitanism	0.33	0.01	27.85	0.00	0.26	0.02	11.97	0.00	.39	0.02	16.98	0.00	0.27	0.03	10.61	0.00	0.35	0.02	15.02	0.00
Attachment to the EU	LR-scale (left)	-0.11	0.07	-1.52	0.13	-0.15	0.12	-1.21	0.23	-0.02	0.17	-0.10	0.92	-0.18	0.16	-1.14	0.25	-0.04	0.14	-0.27	0.79
	LR-scale (right)	0.17	0.07	2.47	0.01	0.38	0.12	3.09	0.00	-0.13	0.17	-0.78	0.44	0.46	0.14	3.36	0.00	-0.21	0.12	-1.81	0.07
	Country (GER)	-0.23	0.07	-3.30	0.00																
	Country (NOR)	0.18	0.07	2.43	0.02																
	Country (POL)	0.32	0.07	4.47	0.00																
	Intercept	4.23	0.30	13.99	0.00	3.30	0.55	6.00	0.00	4.26	0.59	7.17	.00	5.67	0.65	8.67	.00	1.96	0.55	3.57	0.00
	Fan (self-assessment)	0.50	0.06	7.75	0.00	0.23	0.12	2.01	0.04	0.65	0.12	5.42	0.00	0.64	0.15	4.30	0.00	0.53	0.13	4.19	0.00
	Age	-0.05	0.01	-3.75	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.63	0.53	-0.09	0.02	-3.63	0.00	-0.13	0.03	-4.90	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.59	0.56
	Age ²	0.00	0.00	4.23	0.00	-0.00	0.00	-0.18	0.86	0.00	0.00	3.42	0.00	0.00	0.00	4.86	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.28	0.78
	Gender (male)	-0.20	0.06	-3.25	0.00	-0.25	0.11	-2.31	0.02	-0.20	0.12	-1.67	0.10	-0.14	0.15	-0.98	0.33	-0.17	0.12	-1.47	0.14
Gender (other)	-0.34	1.06	-0.32	0.75	-1.76	2.09	-0.84	0.40	-0.91	1.60	-0.57	0.57	0.67	2.65	0.25	0.80	1.04	2.29	0.45	0.65	
Education (mid)	0.19	0.09	2.08	0.04	0.28	0.15	1.82	0.07	0.01	0.18	0.06	0.95	0.47	0.20	2.31	0.02	-0.03	0.20	-0.15	0.88	
Education (high)	0.44	0.10	4.39	0.00	0.62	0.17	3.70	0.00	0.31	0.21	1.48	0.14	0.46	0.20	2.25	0.02	0.20	0.22	0.94	0.35	
Household income	0.04	0.01	3.43	0.00	0.04	0.02	1.94	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.84	0.40	0.05	0.03	1.76	0.08	0.05	0.02	2.27	0.02	
Cosmopolitanism	0.35	0.01	24.74	0.00	0.29	0.02	12.01	0.00	0.46	0.03	17.67	0.00	0.15	0.03	4.83	0.00	0.44	0.03	15.93	0.00	
LR-scale (left)	-0.23	0.09	-2.67	0.01	-0.44	0.14	-3.24	0.00	0.12	0.19	0.65	0.51	-0.99	0.20	-4.86	0.00	0.45	0.16	2.75	0.01	
LR-scale (right)	-0.28	0.08	-3.56	0.00	0.15	0.13	1.13	0.26	-0.26	0.19	-1.33	0.18	0.15	0.17	0.85	0.39	-1.10	0.14	-7.78	0.00	

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Term	ALL			ESP			GER			NOR			POL		
	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.
Country (GER)	-0.50	0.08	-5.92	0.00											
Country (NOR)	-1.72	0.09	-20.06	0.00											
Country (POL)	-0.15	0.08	-1.74	0.08											
Intercept	3.50	0.31	11.22	0.00	2.49	0.60	4.17	0.00	3.30	0.65	5.08	.00	2.28	0.59	3.89
Fan (self-assessment)	0.62	0.07	9.26	0.00	0.42	0.13	3.32	0.00	0.66	0.13	5.04	0.00	0.61	0.13	4.58
Age	-0.05	0.01	-3.89	0.00	-0.03	0.02	-1.33	0.18	-0.07	0.03	-2.68	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.43
Age ²	0.00	0.00	2.87	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.02	0.31	0.00	0.00	1.97	0.05	-0.00	0.00	-0.67
Gender (male)	-0.06	0.06	-0.96	0.34	-0.16	0.12	-1.32	0.19	-0.06	0.13	-0.46	0.65	0.02	0.13	0.16
Gender (other)	0.91	1.09	0.84	0.40	2.78	2.27	1.23	0.22	-0.59	1.75	-0.34	0.73	1.74	2.44	0.71
Education (mid)	0.04	0.10	0.38	0.70	0.04	0.16	0.24	0.81	-0.14	0.20	-0.72	0.47	-0.22	0.22	-1.01
Education (high)	0.32	0.10	3.09	0.00	0.27	0.18	1.49	0.14	0.28	0.23	1.25	0.21	-0.16	0.23	-0.70
Household income	0.03	0.01	2.82	0.00	0.03	0.02	1.21	0.23	0.01	0.03	0.24	0.81	0.03	0.03	1.15
Cosmopolitanism	0.48	0.01	33.14	0.00	0.57	0.03	21.63	0.00	0.59	0.03	20.82	0.00	0.51	0.03	17.06
LR-scale (left)	0.31	0.09	3.47	0.00	0.32	0.15	2.20	0.03	0.47	0.20	2.30	0.02	0.99	0.18	5.62
LR-scale (right)	-0.34	0.08	-4.19	0.00	-0.10	0.15	-0.67	0.51	-0.13	0.21	-0.62	0.54	0.38	0.15	-7.26
Country (GER)	-0.21	0.09	-2.48	0.01											
Country (NOR)	-1.43	0.09	-16.19	0.00											
Country (POL)	0.01	0.09	0.09	0.92											
Intercept	5.04	0.32	15.74	0.00	4.41	0.55	8.05	0.00	3.47	0.59	5.87	.00	3.57	0.54	6.60
Fan (self-assessment)	0.42	0.07	6.15	0.00	0.30	0.12	2.57	0.01	0.32	0.12	2.67	0.01	0.22	0.12	1.76
Age	-0.09	0.01	-6.71	0.00	-0.07	0.02	-3.08	0.00	-0.07	0.02	-3.10	0.00	-0.02	0.02	-0.95
Age ²	0.00	0.00	6.78	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.58	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.19
Gender (male)	0.03	0.07	0.41	0.68	-0.09	0.11	-0.82	0.41	0.07	0.12	0.57	0.57	0.15	0.12	1.29
Gender (other)	-0.65	1.12	-0.58	0.56	-4.08	2.08	-1.96	0.05	-1.18	1.59	-0.74	0.46	1.06	2.25	0.47
Education (mid)	0.21	0.10	2.14	0.03	0.20	0.15	1.32	0.19	0.21	0.18	1.17	0.24	-0.18	0.20	-0.92
Education (high)	0.47	0.11	4.43	0.00	0.46	0.17	2.75	0.01	0.57	0.21	2.78	0.01	0.04	0.21	0.18
Household income	0.05	0.01	4.30	0.00	.06	0.02	2.67	0.01	0.02	0.02	1.09	0.28	0.01	0.04	1.78

(Continues)

TABLE 2 | (Continued)

Term	ALL			ESP			GER			NOR			POL		
	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	Stat.	P	Est.	SE	P
Cosmopolitanism	0.46	0.01	31.07	0.00	0.47	0.02	19.23	0.00	0.64	0.03	24.53	0.00	0.54	0.03	19.88
LR-scale (left)	-0.02	0.09	-0.19	0.85	-0.21	0.14	-1.56	0.12	0.38	0.19	2.05	0.04	0.86	0.16	5.30
LR-scale (right)	-0.31	0.08	-3.73	0.00	0.34	0.13	2.57	0.01	-0.70	0.19	-3.62	0.00	-1.09	0.14	-7.87
Country (GER)	-0.32	0.09	-3.61	0.00											
Country (NOR)	-2.84	0.09	-31.26	0.00											
Country (POL)	0.05	0.09	0.56	0.58											

Note: Est., estimated coefficient; SE, standard error; Stat., test statistic; P = P-value.

European identification. Household income also appears to have a positive impact on European attachment, reflecting the known link between socioeconomic status and support for integration (Gabel 1998). We also find that respondents with right-wing views appear to express lower levels of support. Cosmopolitanism, measured as the importance of international cultural exchange, consistently shows a strong, positive association with attachment to Europe and the EU. Finally, gender differences emerge, with male respondents generally displaying slightly lower European attachment levels than other gender groups.

We performed robustness checks for our analysis by replicating the regression models using variations of the fandom variable (Tables A5 to A10 in the Appendix). First, we used interest in football instead of the self-categorisation as a fan. Additionally, we included two measures that capture the internationalisation of fandom, namely the binary variable measuring whether someone follows a club based outside of the respondent's home country and the dummy variable for following a club that has recently played in international competitions. Results show that the general direction of the effects remains consistent with our main analysis. Both fan self-assessment and football interest show similar patterns to the main models regarding the directionality, strength, and significance of the effects. When adding measures on the internationalisation of fandom to the models, the additional predictors are mostly insignificant, while the main effect of football fandom remains. While there are slight variations in the magnitude of effects across different model specifications, these differences are not substantial enough to alter the primary conclusions drawn from our main analysis. The robustness checks thus provide confidence in the validity and stability of our main findings.

5 | Discussion

The evidence from our study largely confirms our hypotheses. Fandom triggers stronger attachments to Europe and the EU, more robust support for further European integration, and a more positive evaluation of EU membership. The results show consistently significant, positive relationships between fandom and these measures of European identification with moderate to strong effect sizes. Crucially, the directionality of the effect is rather clear because the reverse assumption—that people who identify more strongly with Europe and the EU would become more avid football fans—is implausible.

Notably, two specific relationships deviate from this general trend. We find no differences between fans and non-fans in their attachment to Europe in Norway and their evaluation of EU membership in Poland. These differences suggest that country-specific contexts influence the relationship between fandom and European identification, as fans embedded in specific political and social environments might orient themselves, relate to and ultimately identify with Europe in unique ways.

Specifically, the divergence between European and EU attachment and the pronounced strength of the effects in Norway might be explained by a widely positive view of Europe as an abstract concept and close relations to other European countries on the one hand, and polarisation of public opinion on EU membership on the

TABLE 3 | Summary stats for regression models for fan self-assessment and measures of European identity.

	Country	N	R ²	Adj. R ²	Stat.	P	AIC	BIC
Attachment to Europe	ALL	6465	0.15	0.15	81.07	0.00	27,198.82	27,307.21
	ESP	1664	0.12	0.12	20.88	0.00	6,849.96	6,920.38
	GER	1627	0.20	0.20	37.03	0.00	6,889.02	6,959.15
	NOR	1531	0.09	0.08	13.50	0.00	6,600.10	6,669.43
	POL	1643	0.20	0.19	35.98	0.00	6,779.65	6,849.91
Attachment to the EU	ALL	6465	0.18	0.18	103.85	0.00	29,457.05	29,565.44
	ESP	1664	0.12	0.11	20.24	0.00	7,179.83	7,250.25
	GER	1627	0.21	0.20	38.22	0.00	7,265.24	7,335.37
	NOR	1531	0.07	0.06	10.11	0.00	7,323.76	7,393.10
	POL	1643	0.23	0.22	43.72	0.00	7,372.56	7,442.81
European unification should go further	ALL	6465	0.23	0.23	137.74	0.00	29,844.70	29,953.09
	ESP	1664	0.25	0.24	49.15	0.00	7,451.12	7,521.54
	GER	1627	0.26	0.26	51.68	0.00	7,553.25	7,623.37
	NOR	1531	0.11	0.10	16.64	0.00	7,043.83	7,113.17
	POL	1643	0.24	0.23	45.75	0.00	7,581.82	7,652.07
EU membership for [country] is or would be a good/bad thing	ALL	6465	0.30	0.30	201.76	0.00	30,192.86	30,301.24
	ESP	1664	0.23	0.22	44.10	0.00	7,165.58	7,236.00
	GER	1627	0.32	0.32	69.64	0.00	7,251.71	7,321.84
	NOR	1531	0.08	0.07	11.73	0.00	7,810.41	7,879.75
	POL	1643	0.28	0.28	58.63	0.00	7,310.86	7,381.11

Note: Adj. R², Adjusted R-squared; AIC, akaike information criterion; BIC, Bayesian information criterion; N, sample size; P, P-value; R², R-squared; Stat., test statistic.

other. Norway has close relations with the EU, especially through the EEA, and adopts most EU directives into national law. Still, a potential Norwegian EU membership is one of the most controversial political issues (Fossum 2019). Given this polarisation, Norwegian fans—who, through their engagement with football, might be more immersed in an internationalised and specifically *EU-ised* life world—could consequently hold more positive opinions on and stronger attachments to the EU.

For Poland, the absence of a significant difference between fans and non-fans in the evaluation of EU membership along otherwise clearly differentiated European identity measures can likely be attributed to the country's polarisation in institutional trust and acceptance of the cultural modernisation brought on by the EU. While concrete EU membership, especially regarding its economic benefits, is highly popular among Polish citizens, abstract orientations towards Europe and the EU as well as the issue of further EU integration are more politically contested (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2021). Habitual contact with Europe through football might consequently increase attachments and support for further integration, while the high abstract support for concrete membership persists among both fans and non-fans.

6 | Conclusion

Grounded in the theoretical framework of European identity formation through habitualisation, we show that football fans

identify more strongly with Europe and the EU than non-fans, demonstrated by stronger attachment to Europe and the EU, support for further European integration, and a positive evaluation of their countries' (potential) EU membership. The general consistency of the effects across a diverse set of countries and their persistence in the models with multiple control variables, as well as in our robustness checks, point to a distinct effect of fandom on European identifications.

These results contribute to the literature on European identities and specifically innovate the literature concerning the formation of European identities through social practices and everyday experiences (Kuhn 2015; Mau 2010; Recchi and Favell 2019). While cultural, artistic, educational, or leisure-time phenomena are often limited to specific social groups with advanced formal education and higher socioeconomic standing (Salamonska and Recchi 2019), football is a broadly popular and distinctly nonelite phenomenon (Weber et al. 2020). As such, it could particularly be used to engage those who are typically less inclined to support European integration—citizens with lower educational and/or economic status, as well as men, as football fandom is still a predominantly male phenomenon.

Our analysis adds to previous research on the link between the Europeanisation of football and fans' identities (FREE: Football Research in an Enlarged Europe 2015; King 2000, 2003; Levermore and Millward 2007; Millward 2006, 2009; Niemann, Brand, and Weber 2024). Moreover, theories of identity formation through habitual socialisation have mostly been applied

to and tested within explicitly political contexts (Checkel 2005; Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Juncos and Pomorska 2006; Risse 2015; Suvarierol, Busuioc, and Groenleer 2013), whereas we expand the boundary conditions of these theories into citizens' everyday lives (e.g., Recchi 2014; Sigalas 2010).

These results emerge at a transformative moment for European football. Rising inequalities and reforms of competition structures, most prominently the Super League endeavour (Meier et al. 2024), have led to growing fan dissatisfaction and disengagement that calls into question the established model of football governance with demands for regulatory interventions. As European football becomes more stratified both between and within countries, and the divide between the centre and the periphery becomes more pronounced (Biel et al. 2023), the unifying effects of football might be curtailed. There is an interesting dynamic at play here, where EU regulation and jurisprudence—most prominently the Bosman ruling—have induced both a distinct Europeanisation as well as stronger commercialisation of the game, with the latter now threatening the cohesive and unifying effects of football. Recent landmark rulings by the CJEU take a rather liberal approach to the sports market, but also emphasise—among others—principles of solidarity and redistribution, as well as sport's 'social and educational importance [...] for the Union and for its citizens' (García 2024: 2). These rulings might be a precursor to broader sports legislation at the EU level (Zgliniski 2024).

Our findings connect to the idea of using sport as tool for *internal* or *domestic* soft power (Arnold 2021). In contrast to strategies to bolster the international prestige and recognition of a nation hosting a sporting event, this idea encapsulates using these occasions to influence attitudes and collective identifications within the host nation. Unlike countries such as Russia (Arnold 2021; Wolfe 2020), which have deliberately used sport as an internal soft-power instrument, the effect of football on European attitudes within the EU is largely an incidental result of individual regulatory measures rather than an intentional programme. However, our results suggest that through football, the EU could effectively leverage internal soft power to foster a sense of belonging and positive attitudes toward European integration. Questions about the EU's effectiveness in promoting its values and identity to citizens continue to be raised, particularly in the wake of Brexit (Leruth, Gänzle, and Trondal 2019). Football presents a promising pathway for EU institutions to engage citizens more directly, reinforcing European values and identification in a way that feels accessible and organic. A more strategic, intentional approach to regulating and legislating football and similar cultural phenomena as soft-power tools may therefore present an untapped opportunity for the EU to strengthen European identity.

Future research can enhance and build on our analyses. Further analysis could establish the specific mechanisms behind the link between fandom and more positive attitudes towards Europe. Examining different types of fans based on the degree and specific orientation of their fandom could also help elucidate further influencing factors. Extending the scope of the study to non-European referents in football (e.g., players from outside of Europe) would account for broader patterns of globalisation in European football (Velema 2021), allow for

contrasting analyses with the Europeanisation dimension, and shed light on the formation of attitudes on toward frequently 'otherised' groups. Pioneering efforts, such as a study by Alrababa'h et al. (2021), show the integrative potential of football in this regard. In addition, the results from Norway and Poland highlight the need for further individual and comparative country studies that incorporate the unique contextual conditions that apply to fans. While the heterogeneity of our country selection allows us to deduce overarching trends, more fine-grained analyses could complement the rather broad scope of this study, examining the specific economic, political, and social conditions or historical pathways in each country.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data and code of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Endnotes

¹Here, 'football' specifically refers to men's professional European club football. While we recognise the significance of other branches of football, including national teams, youth football, and women's football, we focus on men's club football due to its popularity and prominence.

²ESS asks respondents to consider hypothetical referendums on EU membership; Eurobarometer contains several questions about potential membership for respondents from non-EU countries.

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Supporting Information

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