

11 Aside:
Gender Ideology in German Women's Soccer

by
Hannah Paula Selg

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Declaration of Committee

Name: Hannah Paula Selg
Degree: Master of Arts (Sociology)
Title: 11 Aside: Gender Ideology in German Women's Soccer
Committee: **Chair: Gary Teeple**
Professor, Sociology and Anthropology

Travers
Supervisor
Professor, Sociology and Anthropology

Dominique Falls
Committee Member
Chair and BPEC Coordinator, Sport Science
Douglas College

Amanda D. Watson
Committee Member
Senior Lecturer, Sociology and Anthropology

Rachel Fouladi
Examiner
Associate Professor, Psychology

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Abstract

Although women's soccer in Germany re-emerged after its ban from 1955-1970, the German soccer culture and system remain rooted in a restrictive gender ideology that privileges men. Using broader discussions around gender and sport as a point of departure, while also taking the historical background of women's soccer in Germany into consideration, I employ the theoretical framework of critical feminist sport studies alongside McDonald & Birrell's method of "reading sport critically" to examine how this ideological context is experienced by German women in the sport. The thesis is based on semi-structured interviews with 11 girls and women, ages 14-24, in recreational and elite soccer. Findings indicate that German soccer remains a male-dominated space wherein women are considered second-class players and strategically rendered invisible. Despite being viewed as failing to conform to hetero-patriarchal ideologies and gender being instrumentalized to police their participation, the interviewees show that stigmatization and empowerment can coexist.

Keywords: critical feminist sport studies; gender; sport; women's soccer; women's football; German soccer history

*For Germany's first (unofficial) women's national team
and all the girls and women in soccer:
YOU KICK ASS!*

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee.....	ii
Ethics Statement.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Acronyms.....	x
Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Background Information.....	1
1.2. Research Problem and Research Questions.....	2
1.3. Organization of the Thesis.....	3
Chapter 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
2.1. The Gender of Sport.....	4
2.2. Sport and Sexuality.....	6
2.3. German Soccer as an “Arena of Masculinity”.....	8
2.4. Soccer and National Identity in Germany.....	8
2.5. Historical Background of Women’s Soccer in Germany.....	11
2.5.1. Early Beginnings.....	11
2.5.2. The DFB’s Ban on Women’s Soccer (1955-1970).....	12
2.5.3. Re-Inclusion? Or Sex-Based Differentiation?.....	13
2.5.4. The 1981 “Miracle of Taipei”.....	14
2.6. Organizational Structure of the German Soccer System.....	15
2.7. Drop-Out Rate of Girls and Women in Soccer.....	17
Chapter 3. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS.....	18
Chapter 4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH.....	20
4.1. Data Collection Methods and Instruments.....	20
4.2. Purposeful Sampling and Recruitment.....	21
4.3. Code Names for Interviewees.....	23
4.4. Racial Diversity among Participants.....	24
4.5. Research Scope and Data Collection.....	25
Chapter 5. RESEARCH RESULTS.....	28
5.1. Placing the Research in Context: Framing the Results.....	28
5.1.1. 2022 UEFA European Women’s Soccer Championship.....	28
5.1.2. Gender Pay Gap in the German Soccer System.....	31

5.2. Presentation and Analysis	33
5.2.1. Soccer Socialization.....	33
5.2.2. The False Novelty of German Women’s Soccer	34
5.2.3. Soccer-Playing Girls and Women as “Abnormal”.....	36
5.2.4. Arbitrary Sex Segregation.....	38
5.2.5. Women’s Soccer as Second-Class Soccer	44
5.2.6. Soccer and Femininity	46
5.2.7. Gender and Assumptions around Talent.....	50
5.2.8. Between Historical Baggage and Activism	53
Chapter 6. CONCLUSION	56
Chapter 7. RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION	58
REFERENCES.....	59
Appendix A. Interview Guide.....	69
Appendix B. Interview Consent Form	73

List of Tables

Table 1:	Age Groups and Corresponding Age Ranges	15
Table 2:	Adult Leagues: Professional + Amateur	16
Table 3:	B-Jugend (U16/U17) Leagues: Professional + Amateur	16
Table 4:	Overview Interview Participants.....	22
Table 5:	Players of the First German Women's National Team	24

List of Acronyms

DFB	Deutscher Fußball Bund (German Soccer Association)
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association (International Association of Federation Football)
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations

Chapter 1.

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background Information

Sport has traditionally been considered and broadly remains a firm masculine institution (Allison 2021; Burstyn 1999; Dunning 1986; Fasting and Sisjord 1985; Hargreaves 1994, 2001; Kampmann 2011; Messner 1988, 2002, 2007; Messner and Sabo 1990; Pfister and Pope 2018; Ring 2008; Travers 2008; Travers and Berdahl 2021; Wachs 2005), with women's participation in sport constituting what Michael Messner (1988, 198) terms "contested ideological terrain." The gendered meanings attributed to particular sports are both situationally and globally determined (Connell 2000; Knoppers and Anthonissen 2003, 351). While soccer might now¹ be more closely linked to women and femininity in the USA, Canada, and China (Allison 2018, 25; Müller 2007, 114), the sport continues to be considered a predominantly masculine domain in Germany.

Contrary to popular belief, however, German men and women have played soccer both with and against each other for decades and German soccer did not become a men's game until fairly recently (Müller 2007). Likely in an attempt to restore the traditional gender order that got confounded during World War I and World War II (Diketmüller 2002, 206), increasingly disapproving voices were raised after both wars that emphasized the physical incomparability of "the sexes" and rejected women's soccer for aesthetic as well as medical reasons (Müller 2007, 126-131).

This sentiment resurfaced after West Germany's unexpected victory in the 1954 men's soccer World Cup and ultimately resulted in a formal ban on women's soccer in 1955.² Not until 15 years later did the German Football Association (DFB) lift the ban. Scholars have pointed to the women's rights movement, worldwide legal decrees to

¹ Note the increase in female participation in the USA, Canada, and China since the 1970s.

² As discussed in greater detail in a subsequent section, this development is in large parts due to the fact that – with the country's 1954 World Cup Championship – German national identity, and therefore masculinity, got strongly tied to soccer (Kaelberer 2016, 275) which consequently increased gatekeeping and boundary policing (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves 2001; Pelak 2005; Ring 2009, 45, 75).

promote women's sport, and the official recognition of women's soccer by FIFA and UEFA as an impetus for this change of course. Yet, women's "re-inclusion" in soccer was limited and couched in further separation and inequality. In an effort to "protect" female soccer players from the rigour of the sport, a series of special regulations were implemented, such as reduced playing time, a four-month winter break, lighter balls, the protective hand, and a prohibition against wearing cleats.³ Hence the re-emergence of women's soccer reflects sex-based "differentiation" rather than "re-inclusion." Soccer had already been established as an exclusively male domain during the ban on women's participation and the reintroduction of women's soccer as a separate sport conveniently legitimized the alleged incomparability of male and female physical ability (Müller 2007, 129-136). This laid the foundation for a German soccer culture and system rooted in a restrictive gender ideology that continues to center and privilege men and masculinity.

1.2. Research Problem and Research Questions

Applying my sociological imagination, my "vivid awareness of the relationship between personal experience and the wider society" (Mills 1959, 5), I am particularly interested in the lived experiences of German female soccer players today – more than 50 years after girls and women were banned from participating in the game. Using broader discussions around gender and sport as a point of departure, while also taking the unique historical background of women's soccer in Germany into consideration, I examine how this social and ideological context is experienced by German women who presently occupy and exist in the masculine space of German soccer.

In order to explore this central issue, my research will be structured by the following research questions: In which ways do gendered power dynamics operate in German women's soccer today? How do female players perceive and experience the supposed incompatibility between playing soccer and being women? Is women's participation in this masculine space (still) met with resistance? Do female players succeed in challenging and

³ Most of these regulations were abolished in the 1980s, only the so-called "protective hand" – which allows women to protect themselves from the ball with their hands – is still in place today (Müller 2007, 132-133).

transforming traditional gender norms or is their participation shaped by the overall male dominance of the sport?

1.3. Organization of the Thesis

The present thesis is organized in seven chapters: after the introductory chapter one, chapter two outlines the existing literature that informs my research – primarily focussing on larger conversations around gender, sexuality, and sport before honing in on soccer in relation to national identity in Germany, the country’s historical background of women’s soccer, and the organizational structure of the German soccer system. In chapter three, I lay out the theoretical framework of critical feminist sport studies and McDonald and Birrell’s (1999) method of “reading sport critically” that guide my analysis. Chapter four discusses the methodological approach of the study and chapter five both frames the findings by placing the research in context as well as analyzes the data in terms of eight key themes. Before detailing the ways in which my research contributes to the current body of knowledge in chapter seven, the concluding chapter six summarizes the key findings and gestures towards future research.

Chapter 2. **LITERATURE REVIEW**

2.1. The Gender of Sport

Sex segregation according to the two-sex system remains firmly anchored in modern sport – at a recreational, as well as a competitive level. Not only are sporting children sex-segregated at an early age, but some disciplines remain entirely reserved for one of the two sexes (Kampmann 2011, 21-22). Travers (2013), for instance, captures the gender bifurcated course of athletic development in baseball and softball at the Little League Baseball and youth levels. The coercive sex segregation of amateur, elite, and professional athletes perpetuates separate spheres for men and women which fundamentally contributes to gender inequality (McDonagh and Pappano 2007).

It is beyond question that the strongly gendered nature of contemporary sports organizations (Allison 2016, 239-240) integrally contributes to the maintenance of the gender binary: as an “anchor of socially defined roles and behaviours” (Samie 2013, 259), the sporting physical body acts as a site upon which the male-female dichotomy and thus the masculinity-femininity nexus and its gendered power relations are constantly (re)produced (ibid., 259-262; Hargreaves 1994, 6-12). “Doing sport” is therefore inevitably “doing gender⁴” (Pfister and Pope 2018, 43).

The construction of sex and gender as dichotomous, oppositional, and mutually exclusive is precisely what gender essentialist and gender categoriclist beliefs draw from and build on: while essentialists attribute physical capacity and ability to biological differences between the sexes, categoriclists hold the conviction that all men are distinct from all women. Acting in concert as what Michael Messner (2011, 154-156) terms “hard essentialism,” both ideologies regard male athletes’ physical superiority over sporting women as natural, inevitable, and unchanging. Bodily realities, in contrast, paint an entirely different picture, suggesting that men’s and women’s physical abilities are greatly diverse and rather range along an overlapping continuum of performance in which men are

⁴ See Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987); Judith Butler (1990).

routinely outperformed by women (Kane 1995, 193). Nevertheless, ostensibly grounded in the physical body and ergo perceived as a biologically verifiable truth (Kane 1995, 192), hard essentialist notions of hierarchically ordered gender differences in regard to performance appear more legitimate in the sporting context than in other areas of social life and hence maintain the gender binary and associated sex segregation in the institution of sport (Allison 2018, 9; Kane 1995, 192).⁵ As Faye Linda Wachs (2005, 536) puts it: “gender remain[s] a taken-for-granted assumption against which ability [is] assessed.” Rachel Allison (2021) was recently able to show that U.S. women’s professional soccer players recognize that gender essentialism devalues women’s athletic capabilities, yet they do not reject the physical superiority of men. Instead, they justify the value of women’s soccer with their perceived moral superiority, simply affirming the gender binary.

As a consequence, sport remains “among the most masculine of institutions” (Messner 2002, 66): in and through sport, dominant notions of hegemonic masculinity and male physical dominance are articulated – subsequently maintaining gender inequality and making sport a means created by men for men to assert themselves as such (Allison 2018, 7; Fasting and Sisjord 1985, 345; Hartmann-Tews 2003, 14; Kane 1995, 192; McDonagh and Pappano 2008; Travers 2008). It then comes barely as a surprise that girls’ and women’s access to and participation in sport has been systematically resisted, not least because “sporting activities associated with taking up space, self-determined action, effort, strength, competition, and rivalry [...] often did not [and do not] match the social expectations directed at [them]” (Hartmann-Tews 2003, 15).

In order to solidify this function of sport as a site of hegemonic masculinity and male superiority, any evidence of women’s involvement and success in sport must be suppressed or outright eliminated (Allison 2018, 9) – after all, their mere participation complicates conventional understandings of femininity and undermines the ideology of men’s physical dominance (Kane 1995, 197; Messner 1988).

⁵ Travers (2008) makes the argument that the male dominance and two-sex system normalized by sport legitimates and reinforces male dominance in other arenas.

In an effort to uphold sport as a “male preserve” (Dunning 1986) in the face of increased female participation, various tactics of “ideological repair work” (Wachs 2005, 536) are performed for the purpose of preventing negotiations or challenges to gender difference, sex segregation, and the associated hierarchy of physical ability in the institution of sport. While male athletes are presumed physically competent until proven otherwise, women’s demonstration of ability is repeatedly called into question and undermined. Their accomplishments are not only invalidated and disqualified as mere luck, denying their bodily performance recognition, but are predominantly situated outside of the male reference group – i.e., as “good for a girl” – to avoid immediate comparison to male performances. Further, although more often than not intended as a compliment, the designation of “extraordinarily” capable women as “naturals” attributes their athletic achievements to their genetic makeup (*biological determinism*) rather than acknowledging it as a product of extensive training (Wachs 2005, 536-539).

On that account, Scraton et al. (1999, 104-105) observed that due to the perceived incompatibility of sport and femininity, female athletes construct a sense of self in relation to what they perceive themselves *not* to be – that being female or feminine. Predominantly referring to themselves as “tomboys,” many female athletes conform to dominant expectations about femininity and reproduce the alleged naturalness of the gender dichotomy and sex segregation in sport.

2.2. Sport and Sexuality

Gendered meanings are not only attached to sport as a social institution but also to individual sports: engagement in “gender-typical/gender-appropriate” sports establishes athletes as heterosexual, whereas participation in “gender-atypical/gender-inappropriate” sports calls the very same into question (Allison 2018, 10; Koivula 2001). This is particularly thought-provoking considering gender’s inaccurate and yet persistent cultural conflation with sexuality. Rachel Allison (2018, 10) argues that the “deployment of a persistent homophobia in women’s sports is one way that women athletes are kept in check.” The positioning of female athletes as more masculine generates an association with

lesbianism and compromises their adherence to hegemonic femininity and “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980).

Although sport is defined by masculine standards (Hall 1996), women’s participation in sport has the potential to both reinforce and resist hetero-patriarchal ideologies. Many female athletes are walking a constant tightrope between displaying traits essential for athletic success and acceptance (i.e., assertiveness, competitiveness, physical strength – all associated with hegemonic masculinity) and actively professing their femininity to avoid heterosexist discrimination (Krane 2001, 115-122).

A common tactic employed by female athletes to assert their femininity and proclaim their heterosexuality is emphasizing their femininity apart from their athletic performance – the *female apologetic* (Eggeling 2010, 21; Kampmann 2011, 22; Krane 2001). In this regard, feminization practices, uber-femininity, and hetero-sexy performance (Samie 2013, 263) are strategies employed by many female athletes which further reinforce arbitrary constructions of sex and gender binaries fundamental to hetero-patriarchy.

In contrast to the view that women are perpetually in a position of apologizing for taking up space in sport, Broad (2001, 181) argues that “women’s participation in sport can [rather] be understood as a site of ‘queer resistance’, albeit a gendered one.” Characteristics of this “queer resistance” are (1) the disruption of gender boundaries by unapologetically transgressing gender-normative behaviour, (2) the confrontation of normativity through a voluntary disclosure of one’s deviance, and (3) the assertion of sexual multiplicity, agency, and fluidity, thereby challenging heteronormativity. According to Broad (2001), women’s participation in sport constitutes a *female unapologetic* which complicates the notion of the female apologetic and emphasizes a tension in the conceptualization and experience of women’s sport.

Taking these larger conversations about gender, sexuality, and sport into consideration, I now look to the specific historical context of soccer in Germany and its implications for public discourse on gender and national identity.

2.3. German Soccer as an “Arena of Masculinity”

Canada, USA, Norway, and China aside (Allison 2018, 25; Müller 2007, 114), soccer is considered a male domain in much of the world – including Germany, where it is celebrated as the national sport. Kreisky and Spitaler (2007, 176) describe German soccer as an "arena of masculinity," Heißenberger (2008, 74) calls it a "men's covenant," and Walther (2006, 7) speaks of soccer as a "domain of heterosexual, monocultural masculinity." At the same time, Marschik (2003, 8) deems soccer “a preserve, a protective and retreat space for outdated ideas of masculinity” which may still be lived out here. It is striking that both interpretations contrast strongly: the "preserve" emphasizes men's defenselessness and need for protection, while the "arena of masculinity" conveys an image of superiority and control in the face of attacks from outside which are primarily female in nature (Sülzle 2005).

2.4. Soccer and National Identity in Germany

Not least through its role in reinforcing male domination and masculine privilege (Burstyn 1999, 60-61; McDonagh and Pappano 2007, 235-237), “the sport nexus plays a significant role in gendering citizenship as male (and white and heterosexual)” (Travers 2008, 81). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the closer a sport is tied to national identity and consequently a nation’s notion of masculinity, the more rigidly its gendered boundaries are policed (Hargreaves 1994; Hargreaves 2001; Pelak 2005; Ring 2009, 45, 75). According to Matthias Kaelberer (2016, 277), nationalism and national narratives are oftentimes displayed and constructed during international sports tournaments throughout which national symbolisms (e.g., national anthems, national flags) are omnipresent. In the specific case of Germany, national identity is “intensely intertwined” (ibid., 275) with soccer.

Prior to its 1954 World Cup victory in Switzerland, Germany’s collective self-understanding was burdened by its history of political fragmentation, failed democracy, and National Socialism, leading it to believe that it could not afford national pride (ibid.,

279-287). West Germany's⁶ 1954 World Cup Championship signified its post-WWII recovery and re-entry onto the global stage, allowing Germans from West and East for the first time in years to forge a positive identification with their country. In July of 1990, eight months after the fall of the Berlin Wall and three months before the political reunification of Germany, West Germany's third World Cup Championship⁷ was celebrated as an at least partially united German triumph. Germany's hitherto uneasy relationship with patriotism and national symbols disappeared further with the hosting of the 2006 men's World Cup (Heinrich 2003, 1493-1501; Kaelberer 2016, 278-287) and it seemed as though through soccer, "Germans had finally figured out a way to express their love for their country without being scary or grimly nationalistic" (Majer-O'Sickey 2006, 87).

In this respect, it is of utmost importance to shed light on the fact that, although soccer played a significant role in forging a common German national identity and is said to have an integrative force,⁸ it remains an exclusionary space. In 2021, more than one in four of Germany's 83.2 million inhabitants had a migration background,⁹ with people with a Turkish migration background being most frequently represented (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023a). Although the large majority (or rather their ancestors) first came to Germany during the second half of the 20th century as so-called "Gastarbeiter" (migrant workers) and, therefore, participated and continue to participate economically in the German market, their political and social participation remains limited due to the dominant notion of their non-integrability into German society (Mandel 2008, 206). In contrast to other, more easily integrable – or rather, assimilable – ethnic minorities such as Spaniards, Croatians, Greeks, and Italians, people with a Turkish migration background are racialized as non-white since they are deemed to have neither a common relationship to the European Union nor to share the same religious heritage as the largely Christian German majority

⁶ As a result of WWII, as well as the subsequent Cold War, the Berlin Wall divided Germany into West and East from 1949 until 1989. Until 1990, "Germany" internationally appeared as two separate nations: the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (East Germany).

⁷ The East German team had failed to qualify, and East German players were not yet allowed on the West German team (Kaelberer 2016, 284).

⁸ The Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung (2016) published a detailed synopsis explaining and historically tracing that claim.

⁹ A person has a migration background if they themselves or at least one parent was not born with German citizenship (Statistisches Bundesamt 2023b).

(ibid., 13). Because soccer is so closely tied to national identity, whiteness, and citizenship in Germany (Kaelberer 2016, 275), it comes hardly as a surprise that people with a Turkish migration background are underrepresented in German teams and overwhelmingly play in ethnic Turkish clubs (Metzger 2018). The implications this circumstance has on the present study are further reiterated in chapter 4.4.

According to Mandel (2008, 13), “the discursive place taken by the Turks in contemporary Germany bears troubling resemblance, though is far from identical, to the place occupied in German political rhetoric by the tropes of the unassimilable and nonconvertible Jew” (ibid.). Consequently, Germanness is largely denied to people with a Turkish migration background who are essentially considered non-white and, therefore, non-German (ibid., 217). Since “race” is a loaded term in Germany due to the connotations conjured up from the country’s Nazi past, it is frequently replaced with the supposedly neutral concept of ethnicity (ibid., 99).

The conflation of masculinity, citizenship, and national identity in and through soccer also manifests at a linguistic level. It is imperative to emphasize that the German language makes an explicit distinction between soccer played by men (“*Fußball*”=*soccer*) and soccer played by women (“*Frauenfußball*”=*women’s soccer*). Apparently, and in a manner consistent with sport in Canada and the USA,¹⁰ soccer only needs a gender attribution when played by women – further implying that male soccer players are the norm from which female soccer players deviate (Groll and Diehr 2012, 131; Kampmann 2011, 11; Müller 2007, 114). By situating “kicking women” in the realm of the abnormal, the male soccer world is put back in order (Brändle and Koller 2002, as cited in Kampmann 2011, 23) and the hegemonic status of men remains unchallenged (Hartmann-Tews 2003, 25). However, as emphasized in the introduction, German soccer did not become a male game until fairly recently – in 1955. “The supposed ‘newness’ factor of women’s interest in football is an invented tradition aimed to preserve an exclusively manly image” (Williams 2014, 72).

¹⁰ For instance, “hockey” vs. “female hockey” in Canada and the “National Basketball Association” vs. the “Women’s National Basketball Association” in the USA.

2.5. Historical Background of Women's Soccer in Germany

2.5.1. Early Beginnings

Towards the end of the 18th century, Germany was among the first countries on the European continent to adopt “the English game.” Since soccer was brought overseas by British tradesmen, businessmen, and engineers, it was initially played mainly in English colonies near commercial hubs (Collins 2013, 83; Koller 2006, 24; Schulze-Marmeling 2000, 65-66). By virtue of the supremacy of the imperial power of England, soccer's introduction into German society was fraught with difficulties as its origin aroused national prejudices (Koller 2006, 31-32; Schulze-Marmeling 2000, 65).

Konrad Koch, who was a teacher and credited with being the “father” of German soccer, however, was convinced of the game's pedagogical potential in both meaningfully channeling students' urge for activity and sociability as well as teaching them independence, teamwork, and discipline. Starting in 1874, Koch advocated on many levels for the implementation of soccer as a “German game” – both journalistically and scientifically as well as practically and organizationally at the Brunswick high school he taught at. Koch especially had to fight for the favor of the older students who dismissed soccer as an unmanly children's game at first. Not only was soccer at odds with the highly politicised gymnastics movement in Germany (Luh 2010, 189), but older students were strongly oriented toward a student ideal that discouraged them from physically exerting themselves in public (Hopf 1998, 68). In 1882, compulsory soccer was introduced in the lower grades to institutionalize it as a men's game via a bottom-up method of cultural change (Hopf 1998; Müller 2007, 124; Oberschelp 2010). Although at this point, systematic exclusion of girls and women from soccer had not yet taken place, this provides the first evidence of a gender-specific charging of the sport in Germany. As a result of the gender segregation of the educational system at the time and the fact that girls were generally denied access to higher education, soccer emerged in Germany as a sport predominantly played by boys and men (Müller 2007, 123-124).

For decades, women nevertheless managed to play soccer on workers' and mixed-sex teams (Hering 2002, 358) before World War I brought unprecedented popularity to

women's soccer as all men's play was suspended (Eggers 2002, 77). Beginning in the 1920s, however, and paralleling events in England, representatives of men's soccer clubs in Germany actively campaigned against women's participation in the sport. Their characterization of soccer as inappropriate for women was enriched with ethnic-nationalistic arguments that demanded distinction from England. In contrast to the English woman, the proper German woman was to know that the masculine character of the sport contradicted her nature (Müller 2007, 125-127). Marion Müller (2007, 127) interprets discourse that addresses medical as well as aesthetic concerns regarding women's involvement in this "rough" sport as an attempt to institutionalize polarizing gender norms. According to Müller – despite soccer being increasingly portrayed as a male affair from which girls and women were to be excluded – the public controversy around female participation in soccer proves that there was no self-evident answer about whether women should be allowed to play the sport.

2.5.2. The DFB's Ban on Women's Soccer (1955-1970)

Although the discussion persisted throughout the period of Nazi rule in Germany, no formal ban on women's soccer was implemented until the mid-1950s. The "Miracle of Bern" – West Germany's unexpected victory in the 1954 men's soccer World Cup in Switzerland – played a vital role in rebuilding national identity and self-confidence after Germany's defeat in World War II and plunged the entire nation into a soccer euphoria. In this context, questions about the appropriateness of women playing soccer re-emerged (Müller 2007, 129). Initially, the DFB refused to engage in serious discussions about supporting women's participation, claiming there was just no space – that is, the pitches were all used up by men (Hoffmann and Nendza 2005, 28). Eventually, and despite the increasing popularity of women's soccer, the DFB officially banned women's participation on July 30, 1955. Henceforth, soccer clubs under DFB rule were neither allowed to form women's teams nor provide women with infrastructure such as locker rooms, fields, or referees (Müller 2007, 130).¹¹

¹¹ The timing of the ban further alludes to the interference of German national identity, gender, and soccer described in the previous subchapter: In the post-war period, excluding women from soccer as the national

In light of the historical context of the ban, it makes sense to view women's exclusion from soccer as part of a larger attempt to restore the traditional gender order after WWI and WWII (Diketmüller 2002, 206). In face of not only the war's literal decimation of the German male population but also the emasculating effect that losing a war had on the nation (Kaelberer 2016), it stands to reason that Germany leveraged their 1954 victory to rebuild its national identity and, consequently, notion of masculinity. Restricting this campaign to men only might have further ensured its success.

2.5.3. Re-Inclusion? Or Sex-Based Differentiation?

Despite legal and logistical barriers to female participation in soccer, however, an estimate of 40,000-60,000 women continued to play in so-called "wild leagues" throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Emma 2020; Wörner and Holsten 2011), a time in which the DFB actively tried to denigrate women's soccer as a tasteless spectacle (Hoffmann and Nendza 2005, 40-42). Yet, despite the DFB's best efforts to stifle women's soccer altogether, it was eventually forced to capitulate. As a result of the women's rights movement, worldwide legal decrees to promote women's sport, and the official recognition of women's soccer by FIFA and UEFA in 1970, the DFB lifted its ban on women's soccer on October 30 of the same year – more than 15 years after it had been put into effect (Müller 2007, 131). It is not too far-fetched to assume that part of the reason for this rather sudden change of heart was to avoid the establishment of a competing women's soccer association. The DFB feared that the increasing number of women's teams intended to found their own women's soccer associations and independent match operations, which could potentially become undesirable competition for men's soccer. Likely in an effort to perform "damage control", the DFB took women's soccer under its wing (Hoffmann and Nendza 2005, 48).

What, at first glance, might appear to be a battle won for women's participation in soccer turned out to be a mere continuation of exclusion strategies (Wörner and Holsten 2011). After the alleged "re-inclusion" of women, a series of special regulations were

sport helped construct and secure masculinity and male dominance, as men sought to return to their former, pre-war position (Müller 2007, 135).

implemented purportedly to “protect” female soccer players (i.e., reduced playing time, lighter balls, no cleats, and a four-month winter break). Suggesting that soccer had already been established as a male sport during the ban of women’s soccer, Marion Müller (2007, 135-136) argues that the invention of women’s soccer as a new and separate discipline legitimizes the incomparability of male and female physical ability.

2.5.4. The 1981 “Miracle of Taipei”

During a 1980 visit to Taiwan, the DFB received an invitation to the unofficial Women’s World Cup¹² the following year. Even though the ban on women’s soccer had been lifted a decade ago, Germany did not have a women’s national team at the time. To conceal this failure, the DFB simply decided to send the reigning Bundesliga Champion *SSG 09 Bergisch Gladbach* to Taiwan (Emma 2020; Orbach 2020; Sturmberg 2021). Without any financial support from the DFB, the players had to rely on sponsors, private donors, and the city of Bergisch Gladbach to come up with the funds (Sturmberg 2021). The remainder of the expenses were covered by the team itself by waving their bonuses from the German Bundesliga Championship and selling waffles at the farmers market (Orbach 2020).

The German team emerged from the tournament as the (unofficial) World Champion on October 22, 1981, winning all nine games it played in the eleven-day tournament, in which it scored a total of 25 goals. Back home in Germany, however, hardly anyone noticed: The media did not care to send any reporters and so the only footage available today comes from Taiwanese television, the players themselves, and physiotherapist Ludwig Bonitz, who took two weeks off work to accompany the team. Further illuminating the extent to which women’s soccer was not taken seriously, the DFB was represented at the tournament by Heinrich Priester in an unofficial capacity only, who emphasized that his presence was purely private (Emma 2020; Sturmberg 2021).

¹² The Women's World Invitational Tournament, or Chunghua Cup, was a triennial tournament in women's association soccer that was held four times between 1978-1987 in Taipei, Taiwan. Thanks to its high-caliber lineup of national and club teams from all over the globe, it is often referred to as the “unofficial Women’s World Cup” (Orbach 2020).

It was not until 40 years later in 2019 – after Cologne filmmaker John David Seidler drew attention to the “Miracle of Taipei” in his eponymous movie – that the DFB honored the team with a dinner at the German Soccer Museum (Orbach 2020; Sturmberg 2021).

2.6. Organizational Structure of the German Soccer System

Since the organizational structure of soccer in Germany is central to understanding numerous direct quotes as well as real-life examples pulled from the interviews and differs quite significantly from its counterparts in Canada and the USA, I outline how players are categorized according to gender, age, and performance below. After laying out how different age groups are organized within the German soccer system and revealing how central gender is in doing so (*Table 1*), I then delve deeper into the respective league system of the two age groups from which I drew interview participants for the present study (*Table 2* and *Table 3*).

Table 1: Age Groups and Corresponding Age Ranges

German Women’s Soccer	German Men’s Soccer
Women (17+)	Men (19+)
n/a	A-Jugend (U18/U19)
B-Jugend (U16/U17)	B-Jugend (U16/U17)
C-Jugend (U14/U15)	C-Jugend (U14/U15)
D-Jugend (U12/U13)	D-Jugend (U12/U13)
E-Jugend (U10/U11)	
F-Jugend (U8/U9)	
G-Jugend/Bambinis (U7)	

* Players from the highlighted age groups were interviewed for this study.

Table 2: Adult Leagues: Professional + Amateur

German Women's Soccer	German Men's Soccer
Champions League	Champions League
1. Bundesliga	1. Bundesliga
2. Bundesliga	2. Bundesliga
n/a	3. Bundesliga
Regionalliga	Regionalliga

Oberliga	Oberliga
Verbandsliga	Verbandsliga
Landesliga	Landesliga
Regionenliga	n/a
Bezirksliga	Bezirksliga
Kreisliga	Kreisliga

* Players from the highlighted leagues were interviewed for this study.

Table 3: B-Jugend (U16/U17) Leagues: Professional + Amateur

German Girls' Soccer	German Boys' Soccer
U17 Bundesliga	U17 Bundesliga
U17 Regionalliga	U17 Regionalliga

Oberliga	Oberliga
Verbandsstaffel	Verbandsstaffel
n/a	Landesstaffel
n/a	Regionenstaffel
Bezirksstaffel	Bezirksstaffel
n/a	Kreisleistungstaffel
Kreisstaffel	Kreisstaffel

* Players from the highlighted leagues were interviewed for this study.

2.7. Drop-Out Rate of Girls and Women in Soccer

The national membership statistics of the German sports associations show a continuing enthusiasm for club-based sports in general and for club soccer in particular. Nevertheless, a large number of sports associations and clubs are confronted with high drop-out rates from club memberships, especially in early adolescence (Löbig, Ehnold, and Schlesinger 2020). This is particularly the case with regard to female participation.

For quite some time, the decline in active female soccer players has been dramatic (Gartenschläger 2022), with German girls' and women's soccer clubs struggling to retain their members (DFB News 2020). Although there are no specific drop-out statistics available and the little existing information is either inconclusive or incomplete, the mere phenomenon of girls and women dropping out of organised soccer in Germany is cause for concern. It appears as though the drop-out is much more pronounced in teenage players (Landesfußballverband Mecklenburg-Vorpommern e. V. 2020) and the transition from C-Jugend (U14/U15) to B-Jugend (U16/U17) is particularly difficult (DFB News 2020). On that note, Christa Kleindienst-Cachay and Karolin Heckemeyer (2006) have found that the participation or withdrawal of girls and women from male-dominated sports depend largely on the appreciation of the chosen sport among friends and family – a circumstance that due to the male-dominated status of soccer in Germany needs to be taken seriously in the context of this study.

Chapter 3.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The theoretical framework of critical feminist sport studies (Hargreaves 1994; Messner and Sabo 1990; Kane 1995; Messner 2002; Travers 2008, 2013) will be used alongside Mary McDonald and Susan Birrell's (1999) method of "reading sport critically" to analyze the lived experiences of female soccer players in Germany. "Reading sport critically" treats particular sporting incidents or personalities as cultural texts which "offer unique points of access to the constitutive meanings and power relations of the larger worlds we inhabit" (McDonald and Birrell 1999, 283).

In keeping with McDonald and Birrell's emphasis on examining the interplay of several axes of power and critical feminist sport studies, I analyze gender and sport in the masculine domain of German soccer through an intersectional feminist lens to uncover articulations of gendered power dynamics as well as evidence of female agency in challenging and negotiating these structures.

Reading the lived experiences of female soccer players in Germany through an intersectional lens allows me to avoid running into the same limitations that characterize a more mainstream, liberal feminist, perspective on gender inequality. While liberal feminism effectively challenged gender-discriminatory practices and policies that prevented girls and women from participating in sport, this perspective has significant shortcomings. Liberal feminists oftentimes construe gender equality as women's access to male-defined spaces which, in turn, imposes already-dominant masculine norms and structures on women's sporting practices. In other words, although liberal feminist efforts may grant women access to previously inaccessible spaces, the exclusionary conditions at the root of the problem persist. Moreover, a liberal feminist approach conceptualizes female athletes as a homogenous group with similar experiences of gender discrimination – hence ignoring the multiplicity of women's social locations and associated experiences of oppression and marginalization (Allison 2018, 15-16; Hargreaves 1994; Pelak 2005, 54-55). While postfeminism's view of women as permanently oppressed also falls short according to Hargreaves (1994) and Messner (2000), critical feminist sport studies offers

a framework through which to acknowledge women's agency in shaping and co-designing their experiences (Allison 2018, 20; Travers 2008, 88). Rather than focus singularly on exclusion or marginalization, critical feminist sport studies recognizes that sport participation can be a way for girls and women to resist heteropatriarchal cultural norms and systems of inequality (Broad 2001).

Furthermore, instead of conceptualizing women's sport in relation to men's sport, critical feminist sport scholars aim to understand it on its own terms – beyond male-defined values (Hargreaves 1994). Drawing attention to the interplay of structural constraints and personal agency – like the sociological imagination – this approach considers both the role of sport in contributing to gender inequality by reinforcing male domination as well as women's resistance to this very ideology through sport. By bearing in mind the complexity and contradictions attached to athletes' lived experiences, critical feminist sport studies demonstrates that marginalization and empowerment can coexist in sport (Allison 2018, 20; Hargreaves 1994, 26; Pelak 2005, 54).

While focusing on how the contentious history of women's soccer in Germany impacts female soccer players' gendered sporting experiences today, this approach allows me to highlight both the ways in which gender inequality inevitably shapes experience and the ways in which girls and women push back against and transform preconceived notions of their participation in soccer.

Chapter 4.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

4.1. Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Previous research on women's soccer has largely centered discussions around gendered power dynamics in the sport (Allison 2016, 2018, 2021; Berg, Migliaccio, and Anzini-Varesio 2014; Cox and Thompson 2000; Eggeling 2010; Kaelberer 2019; Kampmann 2011; Knoppers and Anthonissen 2003; Müller 2007; Pfister and Pope 2018; Scraton et al. 1999). German scholars in the field of women's soccer, in particular, have focused mostly on its history (Heinrich 2003; Kampmann 2011; Müller 2007), media presence and reporting (Groll and Diehr 2012; Reißig 2019), and common stereotypes and prejudices against women in soccer (Eckes 2008; Kampmann 2011). In contrast to the existing research, this thesis centers the voices of adolescent female soccer players in making meaning of their gendered experiences while taking the specific ideological and historical context of women's soccer in Germany into account. To gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lived realities and perspectives of girls and women in the German soccer system, this study relied specifically on semi-structured Zoom-interviews as a data collection method with a supporting interview guide as a collection instrument. The interview guide that provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews, as well as the corresponding consent form, can be found in the appendix.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge that the present research is inevitably characterized by my own personal insight and perspective resulting from my membership in a German women's soccer team during the first half of my teenage years. While I believe that my quitting soccer was due to a culmination of reasons, I still vividly remember some of the gender-based injustices my teammates and I experienced. For instance, our biweekly soccer practice took place on a "pitch" that was littered with mole hills, in view of the brand-new stadium where the boys played. And while the boys' team was worried about the colour of their latest jerseys, we had to organize our own charity run in order to build a rudimentary changing room.

These personal experiences shaped and continue to shape my understanding and analysis of the data at hand (Bridel 2013) and “illuminate[d] taken for granted assumptions and beliefs that shape interpersonal dynamics in inequitable ways” (Travers and Berdahl 2021, 4). Since “doing and feeling first-hand is the best pathway to believing, knowing and theorizing sociologically” (Atkinson 2011, 32), my positionality as a researcher and former participant in the very structures I examine enabled me to treat my personal experience as evidence that allowed me to supplement the data gathered through the interviews. This is what Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner (2000) refer to as “reflexive ethnography,” suggesting that when a researcher has their own experience within the context of the social phenomenon under study, their perspective can help make sense of and illuminate its culture.

4.2. Purposeful Sampling and Recruitment

Due to the research interest, the phenomenon was examined from the perspective of current members of recreational and elite German women’s soccer teams to obtain information on their lived experiences as women athletes in a stereotypically masculine space. Eleven girls and women from teenagehood to early adulthood, between 14 and 24 years of age to be exact, were interviewed for the purpose of this study (*Table 4*). My participants started playing soccer as early as four years old or as late as twelve years old and played for a total of as short as four years to as long as twenty years. Players were either members of a B-Jugend Team (U16/U17) or a Women’s Team (17+) and played in the Bezirksstaffel, Bezirksliga, Regionenliga, Landesliga, Bundesliga, Champions League, or the National Team (U15-U19).¹³

¹³ Please see chapter 2.6 for further details on the organizational structure of the German soccer system.

Table 4: Overview Interview Participants

Code Name¹⁴	Age	Started playing soccer at...	Played Soccer for...
Brigitte	23	5 years old	18 years
Monika	23	5 years old	18 years
Hannelore	23	9 years old	14 years
Anne	24	4 years old	20 years
Doris	21	10 years old	11 years
Petra	15	12 years old	4 years
Ingrid	15	7 and 11 years old	5 years
Bettina	14	5 years old	9 years
Erika	16	6 years old	10 years
Angelika	19	6 and 10 years old	10 years
Manuela	20	8 years old	12 years

The recruitment of the interviewees was carried out by using existing private contacts and personal networks to reach out to soccer players in German women's clubs. Through "chain referral" or "snowball" sampling, I was able to establish additional contacts and was introduced to a larger pool of potential participants. Eligible interviewees (i.e., current members of a German women's soccer club and between the ages of 14-30 years old) were then contacted either directly in person or messaged on the personal communications platform WhatsApp.

¹⁴ Read more about the origin of the code names in chapter 4.3.

After confirming their intention to participate in the study, research participants were provided with a consent form that documented their consent through their signature. Once I received the signed and dated form, we scheduled the interview at our mutual convenience. The day of the interview, before jumping into the questions, I verbally reaffirmed the basic conditions of the consent form and made sure no questions were left unanswered. All participants had the capacity to give fully informed consent on their own behalf and were asked to reaffirm their consent after the completion of the interviews. Again, the interview guide that provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews, as well as the corresponding consent form, can be found in the appendix.

4.3. Code Names for Interviewees

My initial reaction to reading about Germany’s first women’s national team and their “Miracle of Taipei” was elation and pride, overshadowed shortly after by disappointment and anger: Why had I never heard their names? Seen their faces? Read their story? This could have been the generation of players I might have looked up to as a girl in soccer – had I only known about them.

To bring them in from the sidelines of German soccer history and give them a fraction of the recognition and visibility they were denied for so many years, I decided to incorporate their names into this thesis by using them as pseudonyms for the eleven girls and women I had the pleasure to interview. Is it a coincidence that I ended up with eleven interviews when soccer is played with eleven players a side? I don’t think so!

The puzzle pieces came together and there was now only one problem left to solve: I scoured the internet but could not, for the life of me, find a comprehensive list of their names.¹⁵ In a last instance, I decided to reach out to the DFB Archives – they would surely know. Afterall, “the DFB Archive documents the history of organized soccer in Germany since the late 19th century” and “is happy to answer inquiries about association and soccer history in order to support research and publication projects” (DFB Archive 2021). All I

¹⁵ Neither search results related to “German National Team 1981”, “First Women’s National Team” nor “SSG 09 Bergisch Gladbach” yielded any results.

ended up with after a rather frustrating email exchange was the names of the players that were entered for the finale of the 1980 German Bundesliga Championship: “Unfortunately, we cannot tell you whether all of the listed players travelled to Taipei, but presumably the composition of the team will not have differed significantly.”

After contrasting the DFB Archive’s list with the “Cast & Crew” list of Seidler’s 2019 movie,¹⁶ I singled out eleven names (*Table 5*) – to the best of my ability. The names I chose might still not be an accurate and comprehensive representation of the players that won the (unofficial) Women’s World Cup in 1981.

Table 5: Players of the First German Women's National Team

Email: DFB Archive	Movie (Seidler 2019): Cast & Crew
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Angelika Budny ✓ Monika Degwitz Gaby Dlugi Bärbel Domhoff ✓ Ingrid Gebauer ✓ Hannelore Geilen Andrea Haberlass ✓ Brigitte Klinz ✓ Manuela Kozany ✓ Doris Kresimon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Angelika Budny ✓ Monika Degwitz Hildegard Frauenrath ✓ Ingrid Gebauer ✓ Hannelore Geilen ✓ Brigitte Klinz ✓ Manuela Kozany ✓ Doris Kresimon ✓ Bettina Krug ✓ Petra Landers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Bettina Krug ✓ Erika Neuenfeldt Roswitha Pestel Gitta Schmoll ✓ Anne Trabant Lori Winkel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Erika Neuenfeldt Ursula Schulzke ✓ Anne Trabant

4.4. Racial Diversity among Participants

Since soccer in Germany is so tightly intertwined with national identity (Kaelberer 2016, 275) and consequently whiteness and citizenship,¹⁷ it is imperative to acknowledge the lack of racial diversity among the participants of this study. As shown in chapter 2.4,

¹⁶ Literally the only other source that listed some of their names (Seidler 2019).

¹⁷ As previously demonstrated in chapter 2.4.

when talking about women's soccer in Germany, it is critical to recognize that girls and women with a Turkish migration background, despite being part of a mass group, are rigidly gate-kept from and largely invisible in certain spaces, particularly soccer. In this regard, when looking at and generating meaning from the lived experiences of this study's exclusively white participants, the intersectionality of gender and race needs to be taken into serious account. Staying conscious of the fact that the following findings solely represent the perceptions of white girls and women in German soccer and, consequently, do not necessarily do the reality of less privileged groups in the same oppressive spaces justice, represents an integral limitation of the present study. At the same time, however, this circumstance presents an exciting opportunity for future research.

4.5. Research Scope and Data Collection

The scope of the empirical study was limited to 11 semi-structured interviews – a rather small number which, however, allowed for a more detailed analysis. Fieldwork was conducted via the video communications platform Zoom at the mutual convenience of both the researcher and the participants in the fall of 2022 – between October 5 and October 28 to be exact. Interviews ranged in length, with the shortest interview taking 41 minutes and the longest taking 107 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the German language and – after the explicit approval of the interviewee – audio-recorded for transcription. The sections that ended up being included in the present thesis, either as paraphrases or direct quotes, were then individually translated into English by the author. It is imperative to acknowledge that some meaning or certain nuances of what was said might have been lost in translation due to this process.

In general, interviews are a way of gathering information about matters that cannot be directly observed or happened previously (Kirby, Greaves, and Reid 2017, 149). Consequently, this methodological strategy was appropriate when wanting to learn about young women's experiences in the masculine space of German soccer, as the effects of gender ideology and history on girls' and women's experience in the sport are best addressed by the participants themselves. Moreover, interviews provide an opportunity for participants to share their personal narratives, which can be valuable in understanding the

meaning-making processes that shape social phenomena and can contribute to a more holistic understanding of the research topic. Providing young people with an opportunity to talk about their experiences and concerns “on their own terms and in their own words” (Heath et al. 2009, 2) granted them the freedom to explore themes, share insights, and make unanticipated connections. By mapping out broad topics to address during the encounter, the interview guide not only allowed me as the researcher to maintain a certain level of flexibility and therefore ability to respond individually to each interviewee, but also to remain open to new perspectives that presented themselves over the course of the interview.

I acted in accordance with the suggestion of Donna Eder and Laura Fingerson (2003, 36) to put an emphasis on non-directed, open, and inclusive questions to avoid what young people are all too familiar with when it comes to conversations with adults: the expectation of a “right” and “wrong” answer (Heath et al. 2009, 4). As Shulamit Reinharz (1992) puts it: the interviewer should be less concerned with getting their questions answered than with hearing what the people being interviewed have to say. In general, the aim was to pose questions as clearly and openly as possible to create narrative stimuli for the interviewee. After a few introductory questions were worked through to ensure the interviewee's general suitability and establish rapport and trust with the participant, utmost importance was placed on providing the interviewees with the opportunity to bring in discourse that is familiar and relevant to them without having to fear negative consequences.

In her 2017 dissertation, Dominique Falls found that “guiding topics, rather than structured questions, were particularly useful in interviews with young people because they allowed the interviewees to guide the discussion – something that does not happen very often” (Falls 2017, 68). To keep it fully transparent, after a few attempts at trying to create casual narrative stimuli for a younger participant that did not really come to fruition, I quickly realized that she required a little more of the traditional question-answer-structure to “surrender” to the conversation and get into the storytelling. However, apart from that exception, leaving it largely (or at least, seemingly) up to the interviewees to direct the conversation resulted in them getting more and more comfortable in the rather official

space of a Zoom-interview. I was under the impression that this approach led to a much more authentic and spontaneous interaction, as it more closely resembled a real-life dialogue with a friend or acquaintance. The power imbalance between the researcher and the researched that might have initially loomed over some of the conversations seemingly disappeared into thin air – I suppose because participants felt a sense of control, of “being in the driver’s seat.” This led to some of them going on and on for minutes at a time, revealing some very personal and vulnerable accounts of their experiences in German women’s soccer that tremendously enriched the data I was able to collect.

On top of that, since I could not have possibly gone into the interviews knowing everything about the research topic and what questions to ask, this approach left enough space for me to learn from the participants, listen to what mattered to them, and ask follow-up questions to obtain additional information. For instance, Brigitte, my very first interviewee, brought up the special regulations that allowed some girls to continue playing on boys’ teams, despite being over the official age limit – a policy that speaks volumes regarding the assumption of male physical superiority and the policing of girls’ participation in soccer, a policy that I might otherwise have overlooked. In addition to this general flexibility and openness, having guiding themes at the basis of the semi-structured interviews still ensured fundamental comparability between the individual interviews conducted. By employing this method, I was also able to avoid a "guideline bureaucracy" (Hopf 1978, 101), which gives absolute priority to the interview guide and ignores the actual course of the interview.

Chapter 5.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In this section, the research results are organized as follows: Firstly, to frame the findings, some additional context will be provided. The subsequent description and analysis of each finding is organized along eight inductively determined themes.

At this point it appears crucial to briefly restate the research objective underpinning the present study to adequately position the research findings. Carefully considering broader discussions around sport and gender, while also bearing in mind the unique historical background of women's soccer in Germany, the findings reveal how the resulting social and ideological context is experienced by German girls and women who presently occupy this masculine space. To explore this central issue, the interview questions were structured along research questions that specifically focused on the gendered power dynamics operating in German women's soccer, the players' perception of the supposed incompatibility between playing soccer and being women, and the resistance girls and women might encounter in this masculine space. At the same time, and in line with critical feminist sport studies, however, it was of utmost importance to highlight women's agency throughout and look at how my participants succeeded in challenging and transforming traditional gender norms and preconceived notions of their participation in soccer.

5.1. Placing the Research in Context: Framing the Results

To better understand the implications of the research results, it is necessary to first place the research in context – both in terms of time and space. This will allow me to further frame the results and provide a meaningful analysis.

5.1.1. 2022 UEFA European Women's Soccer Championship

All eleven interviews were conducted in the fall of 2022, between October 5 and October 28. To contextually frame the findings, it is important to acknowledge that the temporal proximity of the interviews to the 2022 UEFA European Women's Soccer

Championship, hosted by England in July, might have influenced the topics that came up during the interviews, such as the gender pay gap or the difference in media presence between men's and women's soccer.

But why, compared to previous women's soccer competitions, did the 2022 UEFA Women's EURO receive increased attention by the Germans and was ascribed greater societal significance? Having failed to translate prior victories of the German women's soccer team into progress and now struggling with problems in recruiting young players, the DFB was hopeful that the 2022 UEFA European Women's Soccer Championship would provide a much-needed boost to women's and girls' soccer in Germany (Gartenschläger 2022). On that note, what made supporting the women's national team increasingly appealing to German spectators was the dwindling enthusiasm for organised men's soccer in recent years. Common accusations include clubs progressively distancing themselves from their fans out of greed for money (Seidenfaden 2022), a lack of fair competition, with the same club, FC Bayern Munich, dominating the Bundesliga year after year, and a 2022 Men's World Cup taking place not only in winter but in a country that has no soccer tradition of its own, is climatically unsuitable and, above all, does not respect human rights (Heidböhmer 2022).

Apart from the growing mistrust in men's soccer, it is also their role as underdogs that made the women's national team so likeable. Although eight of the eleven European Championship titles went to Germany, other countries have caught up enormously over the past couple of years with the team's last UEFA Women's EURO title having been won in 2013 (Seidenfaden 2022). Despite the fact that the coaching staff and team had to answer absurd questions about their professionalism, their will to win, and their prospects for the title, they made it into the finale against the host country England (Schmied 2022).

As an effect of the Women's EURO 2022, numerous participants reported an increased sense of motivation, feeling seen and represented, and being hopeful for the future of women's soccer – not least because of the rising number of new members, as Brigitte and Erika remark:

“Up until the European Championship in England, fewer girls played soccer, there was a downwards trend [...]. I read in the newspaper that the trend of women's soccer or girls' soccer has grown again due to the European Championship” (Brigitte 2022).

“I know a lot of little girls, especially around my sister's age, around 10, 11 years old, who, after watching the European Women's Soccer Championship, said, ‘maybe soccer isn't that bad.’ [...] I do find, especially with women's soccer getting more attention, that many, especially younger girls, decide to give it a try” (Erika 2022).

The Women's EURO 2022 seems to not only have had a positive effect on the recruitment of new potential players, but also seemingly constituted a “decisive turning point” (Anne 2022) in the sentiment of existing female players:

“It's motivating. It doesn't change anything in terms of the game, for us, but yes, it's cool” (Petra 2022).

“The European Women's Championship has made women's soccer more attractive again, compared to recent years” (Monika 2022).

“I think it [women's soccer] is slowly picking up. I think the gap [between men's and women's soccer] is not quite as big anymore as it was before the European Championship” (Anne 2022).

“I believe and hope that it will go steadily uphill [...]. Germany played against France a week and a half ago, which was actually [...] just a test game and the stadium was still pretty full. And the girls were celebrated, the atmosphere was there, La-Ola-wave. [...] That was really really cool to see, and I think that this will continue now. So maybe there will be some sort of stagnation again, or rather, it will flatten out again, but I don't think it will ever be like before the European Championship again” (Anne 2022).

Mere months later, there is seemingly little left of the impact of the 2022 Women's EURO and the accompanying enthusiasm for the future of women's soccer that the interviewees spoke about. With no German TV station purchasing the broadcasting rights for the 2023 Women's World Cup in Australia and New Zealand before the tender period expired in February 2023 (Gottschalk 2023), the disaster of a total blackout of the tournament was only narrowly averted five weeks before the opening match. FIFA President Gianni Infantino accused European broadcasters of offering the women merely a fraction of the payments compared to the men, even though the audience figures were only slightly lower. While the two biggest public broadcasters in Germany were willing to pay 214 Million Euros for the broadcasting rights of the 2022 Men's World Cup in Qatar, they offered FIFA only five of the requested ten Million Euros for the 2023 Women's World Cup (Gerstenberger and Sturmberg 2023).

5.1.2. Gender Pay Gap in the German Soccer System

Another key theme that consistently came up during the interviews was the tremendous gender pay gap within the German soccer system. Although none of the interview questions or guiding topics specifically were aimed at the interviewees' opinions on this, pay inequality was brought up in every interview without fail.

The debate around unequal pay for women and men in soccer has been a reoccurring point of contention. In the USA, after years of litigation all the way to a U.S. federal court, the U.S. women's soccer team reached an agreement with the national federation in February of 2022 that guarantees equal pay for men's and women's teams. This increased the pressure on national soccer associations around the globe to follow suit: in Europe, eight of the 16 countries participating in the 2022 European Women's Championship have announced their intention to implement some form of equal pay: England, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Iceland, Spain, the Netherlands, and Switzerland (Rieger and Mixa 2022). But where is Germany in this conversation?

Unsurprisingly, the DFB is lagging far behind in terms of equal pay. While they did increase the bonus each player from the women's team would receive in the event of a European Championship triumph – from 37,500 € to 60,000 € – this higher-than-ever concession is still nowhere near the 400.000 € the DFB would have paid each male player had they won the 2021 European Men's Championship. Time and again, the "significant differences in sales and revenues" are cited as an explanation for the unequal pay by DFB officials.¹⁸ Simultaneously, however, other federations show that this need not be an obstacle (ibid.). The narrative of the insurmountable (and justified!) gender pay gap, however, succeeded in taking root in the public consensus, which is also mirrored by some of the research participants:

“Women earn way less. This is going to sound mean, but I actually think that's relatively justified, because there's just a lot more people watching men's soccer” (Erika 2022).

¹⁸ Between 1989 and 2022, the German women's national soccer team won two FIFA World Cups, eight UEFA European Championships (six of which in a row), and one Olympic Gold medal, making the team the second most successful in the world, after the U.S. (DFB 2020).

“This whole ‘Equal Pay’ thing, I don't think that’s always justified. Somehow, we also have to stay within dimensions that are realistic” (Manuela 2022).

Brigitte’s reasoning illustrates the perceived inevitability, logic, and fairness of the gender pay gap in soccer:

“Men's soccer is better known, because it's better known, more is broadcast on television, because of the broadcasting rights that are sold, men have more money, because of that they can expand the leagues and build bigger stadiums. Since a lot more people watch men’s soccer, there's simply more money and sponsors and things like that. And I think all that would have to change first, in order for women's soccer to become better known and in order to close the gap at some point. Honestly, I completely understand that men earn more, because they simply have a lot more people watching them which allows the clubs to pay them more money. The fact that not nearly as many people watch women’s soccer obviously results in less income. It makes no sense to pay a woman who makes much less revenue one million a year. That's simply a vicious cycle” (Brigitte 2022).

Unlike in the U.S. or Norway, German players and coaches are more reserved when it comes to demands for fairer wages. Above all, they appear to be more concerned about leveling the playing field first: professional training equipment, the number of coaches and analysts, more prominent kick-off times, and not having to work a full-time job in addition to playing soccer to make a living – everything that is taken for granted in men's soccer (ibid.). The same sentiment was reflected by the interviewees, which speaks to the cultural environment they find themselves in. For Monika, a fair wage – or rather, any wage at all – is not what she is after:

“I don’t expect to earn any money, that's not what it's all about for me. In the end, I just wish there was more interest and support from the club” (Monika 2022).

Out of the many necessary changes that Manuela names when dreaming about a brighter future for German women’s soccer, money is – interestingly enough – not one of them:

“What has to happen? A lot! More advertising, more spectators, bigger stadiums, better infrastructure, more quality in the players, more breadth of good players [...]. But this won't change overnight” (Manuela 2022).

Overall, the tremendous gender pay gap is still systemically anchored in the German soccer system, to a point where it is not only accepted, but justified by the very group of people most negatively affected by it. Simultaneously, money takes a backseat for women players who are more often than not after better access to infrastructure and resources first.

5.2. Presentation and Analysis

5.2.1. Soccer Socialization

Without exception, all participants were introduced to soccer through some male in their lives: be it their fathers, their brothers, their uncles, their cousins, their male classmates, or a neighbor who happened to also be the coach of the local girls' team. The fact that the participants' initial exposure to soccer was dependent on males acting as a "gateway" to accessing that space points towards the exclusive nature of the German soccer system. Not only does this reveal that girls and women are not considered a target group that is worth recruiting, but it also gives the impression that they have no self-determined, non-mediated by males, access to it. Furthermore, the quotes imply that girls and women do not necessarily envision themselves in these settings which might indicate that not only men, but they themselves play a part in their reluctance to take part in the sport. Manuela, Doris, and Anne all spoke to this:

"Through my uncle, who was a coach back then. His team was missing players and then I said, or then he asked me, and at first, I said, 'no, I don't want to', but yeah, then I just went along" (Doris 2022).

"My best friends at that time in my class, two boys, [...] we always played soccer in the schoolyard and one day, they went to my mom and asked if they could take me to soccer practice, 'I had talent'" (Manuela 2022).

"My father was in our town's sports club and also played soccer there, that's how I somehow slipped into it" (Anne 2022).

This becomes even more concerning given that soccer is regarded as the German national sport, making this gender inequality an integral part of the country's national identity. Ironically, Germany is generally considered a rather progressive player on the international stage: although the country has "historically been a laggard in adopting gender equality measures" (Ahrens, Ayoub, and Lang 2022, 2), the 2019 Gender Equality Index ranks Germany's progress towards gender equality higher than the European Union average (ibid., 2). Nevertheless, this does not seem to reflect the state of gender relations within German soccer and does not do girls' and women's gendered experiences on – and off – the pitch justice. Consequently, the oftentimes idealized image Germany enjoys internationally should be re-examined given the current state of gender relations within German soccer (and beyond!) wherein the status quo is anything but progressive.

The participation of girls and women is incompatible with the cultural practice of “soccer as a male domain”: accordingly, the soccer system is designed to NOT recruit, attract, or even remotely reach girls and women – if anything it overtly repels them. The overarching impression I gained from the interviews I conducted was that girls and women in soccer were more of an unwanted side effect, a byproduct, an unwelcome addition. Their participation in soccer is accidental, by chance and not really something that is at the center of the efforts of the various soccer clubs. Just how randomly the vast majority of my interlocuters “slipped into it [soccer]” (Anne 2022) is portrayed by the following comment:

“My mom took me to my brother's practice. And my brother ran off the field and said, ‘I don't want to go here anymore!’ As a joke, I then said that I wanted to go to soccer and somehow, one thing led to another, I went to soccer practice and have been playing ever since” (Brigitte 2022).

In summary, boys and men seem to play a key role in granting girls and women access to the exclusionary space of soccer, although they are not the sole reason girls and women might be reluctant to join a soccer team.

5.2.2. The False Novelty of German Women’s Soccer

Although initially¹⁹ in Germany, soccer was neither a particularly male nor female sport and its gender-specific charging did not take place until much later,²⁰ the vast majority of participants in this study interestingly date the beginning of women's soccer in Germany to around the time of the lifting of the ban in 1970 – roughly two centuries too late. When asked about the early days of women’s soccer, participants seem “caught” uninformed, making it evident that this topic is likely not one that has been brought up around them beforehand, let alone one they had ever given thought to previously.

“Phew, I have no clue about that at all. I don’t think [women started playing soccer] that early because with all the prejudice and everything... Maybe in the 1970s?” (Petra 2022).

“In the past, women did not play soccer in any way” (Erika 2022).

¹⁹ Germany adopted “the English game” towards the end of the 18th century (Collins 2013, 83; Koller 2006, 24; Schulze-Marmeling 2000, 65-66).

²⁰ Towards the end of the 19th century under Konrad Koch (Müller 2007, 123-124) and then again with the DFB’s ban of women’s soccer from 1955-1970.

“I know it was illegal for the longest time and it hasn’t been legal for that long, which is very scary. I think it’s only been around 40 years or so, so probably around 1975 or 1980?” (Manuela 2022).

In contrast to the historical facts, women’s soccer is perceived as something rather novel that only recently emerged on the sidelines of the tried and tested original – boys’ and men’s soccer. Simply blaming this conception on the ignorance and unawareness of the individual interviewees, however, overlooks the myriad ways in which cultural context shapes knowledge. In keeping with C. Wright Mills’ sociological imagination and critical feminist sport studies, personal experiences are rooted in history and social structure (Mills 1959, 5; Quan-Haase and Tepperman 2021, 5). As has been revealed so far in this research, women have been deliberately and strategically rendered invisible in the German soccer landscape. It is, therefore, likely not just the girls and women who are ignorant of the history of women’s soccer, but rather most of German society. The absence of women in Germany’s soccer history is perhaps so taken for granted that it does not require articulation. Erasing the history of German women’s soccer leading up to its ban in 1955 and, in lieu, portraying it as something novel further enables the narrative that soccer is – and always was – a masculine domain (Müller 2007, 114). Moreover, this perception frames girls and women as intruders trying to appropriate something that has never been rightfully theirs; as rookies trying to get involved in a sport they “historically” neither belong in nor understand anything about. On top of that, it conveniently lets the real culprit, the DFB and its decision to ban women’s soccer in the first place, off the hook.

Weighing “only” the 15 years that women’s soccer was banned in Germany from 1955 to 1970 against the now over two centuries in total that it has been around and allowed, it is bewildering that this comparatively short amount of time had the ability to virtually wipe out everything prior. Once again, history has been intentionally erased to emphasize the “abnormality” of soccer-playing women and their deviation from the norm. This goes hand in hand with Mary Jo Kane’s argument that sport deliberately renders overlaps between male and female physical performance invisible which, in turn, forces a polarization between the sexes where “differences are systemically emphasized whereas similarities are ignored” (Kane 1995, 191). In a way, this false novelty of German women’s soccer parallels what Courtney Stzo (2021) describes regarding the erasure of Black Canadians, Asian Canadians, and Indigenous peoples in the hockey narrative.

5.2.3. Soccer-Playing Girls and Women as “Abnormal”

Although at this point,²¹ the reintroduction of women’s soccer in Germany lies more than 50 years in the past and female membership has increased from roughly 40,000-60,000 players in 1970 (Wörner and Holsten 2011) to over one million DFB members in 2022 (Statista 2022b), girls and women in soccer are still far from being considered the norm. Taking into account that a country’s national sport is closely tied to national identity and, therefore, to its notion of masculinity (Hargreaves 1994; Ring 2009, 45, 75), the rigid policing of soccer in Germany simply ensures that citizenship continues to be gendered “as male (and white and heterosexual)” (Travers 2008, 81) and that male dominance and privilege within the soccer system and beyond are maintained (Burstyn 1999, 60-61; McDonagh and Pappano 2007, 235-237).

Acknowledging the long history of female participation in soccer and deliberate efforts to push them out of the sport would undermine the normalcy of hegemonic masculinity and heteropatriarchal ideologies, which is why a central aspect of the adamant boundary-policing of German soccer as a male and white and heterosexual sport is the continuous effort to keep girls and women out of soccer: by not only failing to actively recruit them but also by conveying to them their ineptitude for the sport. If this enterprise fails – which it evidently has given the increased female participation in soccer (Statista 2022b; Wörner and Holsten 2011) – what remains for the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity is the power to frame female participation in soccer as abnormal and special. As Doris puts it: soccer “is a sport for everyone, but you still expect a man to play soccer rather than a woman.” This impression is shared by the public as well as the players themselves, as some of my participants state:

“Somehow, it’s still in people’s minds that it is rather special when a woman plays soccer. Just now on vacation in Italy, there were also many boys from different countries [...]. For the most part, they were pretty shocked that there are girls playing soccer. It’s like a different world for them” (Anne 2022).

“It is rather the exception that there are girls who play soccer, but I think that’s a cultural or a natural thing, the fact that it’s considered something special when women play soccer” (Anne 2022).

²¹ In 2023, when the present thesis was published.

The fact that in the previous quote, Anne describes the abnormality of women's participation in soccer as both "cultural" and "natural," reveals that, on the one hand, she is aware of the invented, socially constructed character of this specific statement, but on the other hand, she not only accepts but expects it as immutable and impervious to challenge. Their violation of the German norm is drilled into soccer-playing girls from an early age to a point where they internalize their nonconformity and reproduce hetero-patriarchal assumptions around gender-appropriate sports and belonging, as Hannelore and Angelika demonstrate:

"I'm not like the classical woman who dances or does ballet [...], I don't conform to the norm, that's what they say [*laughs*]" (Hannelore 2022).

"Because so few girls play soccer, I actually feel like an outlier" (Angelika 2022).

This consciousness accompanies girls and women in everyday situations, to a point where they would rather not overtly admit they play soccer out of fear of negative reactions and further stigmatization. Doris kept her soccer "hobby" largely to herself to avoid confrontation and potential challenges to her femininity:

"Especially when I was younger and mentioned that I played soccer, I always thought twice about whether I should mention it at all. The inhibition threshold was so great to stand up and say that I play soccer and that doesn't mean that it has anything to do with masculinity or anything else, but simply because I enjoy it. I can do that nowadays, but if you had asked me that seven years ago, it would have been a completely different story" (Doris 2022).

Others, however, like to use this deviation from the norm to their advantage. Ingrid, for instance, felt specifically drawn to soccer because for her, the sport acted as an outlet for her energy and a space where she could distance herself from more hegemonic representations of femininity:

"With soccer, it's simply that you can completely exhaust yourself, that you always have to give everything. I also think the good thing about soccer is that it's a bit of a rougher sport, where you can really go for it" (Ingrid 2022).

"Somehow, I thought soccer was cool because it was something that not many of the other girls did" (Ingrid 2022).

Further feeding into the tomboy-narrative²² and consequently reenacting the supposed naturalness of the gender dichotomy (Scraton et al. 1999, 104-105) and the abnormality of soccer-playing women, Anne recalls what drew her to soccer:

“I’ve always [...] been the one who had guy friends rather than girlfriends. [...] Instead of playing Barbies with the other girls, I joined all the boys on the soccer pitch. And there, you somehow articulate yourself and somehow identify more with boys [...] I used to enjoy having a larger circle of male friends, because I could simply identify more with them, because they simply had the same interests as opposed to girls who tend to play Barbies. That was never my thing” (Anne 2022).

To recapitulate, framing girls’ and women’s participation in soccer as abnormal, special, and deviant ensures that Germany’s national sport of soccer and, therefore, the country’s notion of citizenship remains “male (and white and heterosexual)” (Travers 2008, 81). Although aware of the socially constructed practice of “soccer as a male domain,” girls and women in the sport internalize their nonconformity and might keep their hobby to themselves out of fear of stigmatization. Some participants, however, who do engage in soccer with pride, feel the need to label themselves as tomboys – further feeding into the gender binary and the myth of gender (in)appropriate sports.

5.2.4. Arbitrary Sex Segregation

The deliberate misconception of girls and women being the exception in German soccer is also reflected on a systemic level. Up until the D-Jugend, where players are between 11 and 13 years of age, boys and girls play soccer together in what are technically mixed-gendered teams. At first glance, this peculiarity of the German system might be read as progressive, especially considering the scholarly push to challenge sex segregation and go towards integrated teams (McDonagh and Pappano 2007; Travers 2008; Travers 2018). Since sport is tailored towards boys and men, it stands to reason that girls and women need to play with boys and men to reap the benefits of the system and develop their skills. Just like integrating students with disabilities with their abled peers, integrating female athletes with male athletes is an important step towards equality of opportunity (McDonagh and

²² “Tomboys” are girls who challenge gender norms by exhibiting behaviours and engaging in activities that are typically associated with masculinity and, therefore, considered outside the boundaries of femininity. Deviating from societal expectations and traditional gender boundaries, tomboys often face stigmatization (Thorne 1993).

Pappano 2007, 149). Taking a closer look, however, reveals that the approach of the German soccer system is not integration, but rather subject to conditions such as age or talent that further frame soccer-playing girls as abnormal.

First off, the fact that girls and boys are playing in integrated teams starting in the G-Jugend (U7) up to and including the E-Jugend (U10/U11) is not what is outwardly communicated. Instead, girls (and their caregivers) are told they are joining “the boys’ team” – a perception that is probably amplified by the fact each girl is more often than not “the only girl” (Angelika 2022) on their – officially mixed-gendered – team. This experience was reported by most of the interviewees:

“Officially, it was a mixed team, but I was still the only girl there” (Bettina 2022).

“I started out quite typically in my village’s boys’ team and then, at some point, I joined a girls’ team. But first, I played with the boys. [...] I was the only girl, the whole time, no other girl ever joined” (Manuela 2022).

“I was actually always the only girl, at all times” (Erika 2022).

This common parlance illustrates the widespread belief that soccer in Germany belonged, belongs, and will belong to men and that girls and women are merely trespassing. For some, potentially being the only girl on an all-boys team disguised as a mixed-gendered team might very well be a dealbreaker, as Bettina and Angelika show:

“Many girls simply don’t play soccer because they don’t want to play in a boys’ team” (Bettina 2022).

“I actually was on a soccer team once before, but I didn’t tell you that because I quit [...] at around 5 or 6 years old. [...] I played for a year and then I did not want to be the only girl anymore, so I just stopped [...] because back then, I was really one of the worst players and was also a bit ostracized, according to the motto ‘that’s a girl, we do not play with her, she’s not as good as us’ and I think that’s why I quit” (Angelika 2022).

Although officially, kids’ teams up until the D-Jugend (U12/U13) are mixed-gendered, the organizational culture and the modus operandi in German soccer remains geared towards boys which manifests in a systematic failure to recruit, include, and retain girls:

“For girls it’s like, there’s no girls team, so you either play with the boys or you don’t play at all” (Bettina 2022).

Just how embedded male dominance and hetero-patriarchal ideologies are in the German soccer system is further reflected in respect to basic infrastructure, such as coaches. Coaching soccer is a man's job – regardless of who is playing:

“In the men's Bundesliga there is no female coach, in the women's Bundesliga there is one female coach” (Manuela 2022).

“[I had a woman]. Well, not as the actual head coach, but as an advisor for the second team. But not as a real coach, no. [...] Most of us just don't know it any other way” (Doris 2022).

This can sometimes come to the detriment of the players and at the expense of sound coaching practice, as Doris recalls from personal experience:

“You could tell that she was more responsive to us female players. With a man, there's a bit of an inhibition threshold, like 'how do I deal with a female player?' For example, we now have a new coach and when he started, he always said, 'this is something completely new for me, I've never been in a women's team and so far I've only ever trained the boys.' And then you simply noticed that he had a certain inhibition threshold. But when you have a woman coach, it's like nothing happened” (Doris 2022).

Come the D-Jugend (U12/U13), children are systematically separated into their gender-respective teams. While most sports clubs have boys' teams across various age groups, girls' teams are more infrequent (Statista 2022a). As a result, it is not uncommon for girls to have to go to the next nearest village to be able to join a girls' team.

“Every village and every town has a boys' team [...], but not all of them have a girls' team, only a few” (Bettina 2022).

“Generally, there are just a lot more boys' teams than girls' teams” (Erika 2022).

“Many girls don't have the opportunity to play in a girls' team because there aren't that many anymore, and that's why they have to play with the boys. But with the boys, there are boys' teams in every village [...], they have that opportunity. And women often don't have the choice” (Angelika 2022).

As the case of Ingrid makes evident, the lack of access to an age-appropriate girls' team resulted in her temporarily quitting soccer all together:

“I only quit soccer because there was no girls team for my age group. [...] I've always liked soccer and it was stupid to have to stop playing just because there wasn't one for girls my age” (Ingrid 2022).

“For some reason, it was no longer possible [for me to play with the boys], I would have had to join the girls' team. And at that time, there was only one girls' team with 14- or 15-year-olds and since I was still really small, that obviously really sucked. [...] I still went to practice a few times, but it was pretty scary for me” (Ingrid 2022).

Depending on how talented a female soccer player is deemed at the point of systematic gender segregation, however, they might be “allowed” to either fully continue playing for the boys’ team or to play for both the girls’ and boys’ team by obtaining special permission.²³ As Anne and Erika show, this right is reserved only for the best:

“I’ve actually completely exhausted playing with boys – until it was no longer possible, that is, until the second year B-Jugend, to be exact. Actually, as a girl you can only play up to the C-Jugend with the boys, however, I was still in the national team at the time, with the DFB, so I still had secondary playing rights, so I played with the girls and with the boys until the end of the B-Jugend” (Anne 2022).

“You need a special permit. I also got a special permit, which you get if you’re either in the provincial talent squad or play in the Bundesliga. [My team] was in the Bundesliga, and I was also in the provincial talent squad for a while, so that was no problem” (Erika 2022).

This not only indicates that boys’ soccer is generally perceived to be superior, but also demonstrates that gender is being used to police girls’ participation in soccer. Hetero-patriarchal assumptions of male physical superiority consequently not only frame capable soccer-playing girls as an exception but also impede the athletic development of everybody that does not fall within the male or exceptional female category. While it is likewise implied that girls are inferior in the Canadian system, this rigid policing only takes place on the national level – not the amateur level as is the case in Germany. These lower expectations for girls not only determine their relationship with soccer from that moment on, but also manifest in internalized sexism and the justification of problematic discourse around sex segregation:

“The separation of the sexes is necessary in certain respects because of performance. It’s normal that a woman can’t keep up with a man in sprinting, for example, and that’s simply a physical condition” (Doris 2022).

“After a certain age, women simply can’t keep up with men. [...] Especially when it comes to physical aspects, boys have a completely different approach to the ball or tackling. I think women would have a hard time with that” (Monika 2022).

“Performance is the problem. As a woman, you don’t always want to be seen as the bad one, and when you play against a physically strong man, as a woman, you simply don’t stand a chance. As

²³ Generally, girls can play in teams with boys up to and including the B-Jugend (U16/U17). “Under special circumstances” and in case they play in a national team, girls can keep playing in boys’ teams up to and including the A-Jugend (U18/U19). From the 2022/2023 season onwards, there will be pilot projects enabling female players in the U18/U19 age range to obtain eligibility to play in boys’ A-Jugend (U18/U19) or B-Jugend (U16/U17) teams – regardless of the division they play in. These regulations can be found in §5 of the DFB Youth Regulations, however, they are only optional regulations which the provincial associations can decide on autonomously (Fußball.de 2022).

much as I'd like to, if there's a ball in front of me, I just know from the start that I won't be able to get to it because they are faster than us anyway" (Doris 2022).

Further demonstrating that the German soccer system is, by definition, designed and centered around male physical superiority, are the examples of Ingrid and Bettina:

"Last year, I was too old for the C-Jugend and so I filed an application to still be able to play with my C-Jugend team, although I was two months too old. That request was rejected, and instead, I was offered to play with the C-Jugend boys' team, which I didn't quite understand [...] Long story short, they told me because I am physically inferior, I could play with the C-boys but not the C-girls" (Ingrid 2022).

"With one of those special permits you can play two years below your own age as a girl [...] because they just say that the physical difference is too big and that way, it's easier for the girls" (Bettina 2022).

These cases are powerful symbols of the assumptions around gender that are underlying these decisions. Firstly, that girls are physically inferior and therefore cannot "do any damage" on boys' teams. Secondly, that girls and women must obtain permission, in one way or another, to exist in a system that is framing them as an exception because it was never designed for them. And thirdly, that these sexist rules are biologically justified and exist to protect girls and do them a favour. Ironically, however, in the same breath, talent development organizations and the DFB advise girls to play with boys as long as possible to reach their full potential – an unspoken assumption that is mirrored by my interviewees:

"No matter whether it is in the national team or the [provincial] talent squad, they always say, 'play with the boys as long as you can,' not because women's soccer is bad, but because boys simply are more physical, you learn to defend yourself. You just learn this fast game with the boys, it doesn't have to be in a high league at all, but the second-lowest boys' league is actually enough to learn these basics" (Anne 2022).

"A woman's performance is challenged when she plays with boys. And at the same time, it's more of a disadvantage for a boy to play with the girls. Because if you play as a woman with the boys, you learn to better use your body, simply to have a different presence. Also, the way of playing is simply something completely different" (Monika 2022).

When it comes to her athletic development, one of Bettina's biggest regrets is not having completely exhausted the option of playing with the boys:

"I would definitely tell my younger self to stay with the boys as long as possible, because I feel like that was actually one of my biggest mistakes in soccer. I like my team and I also like to play with them but with the boys, I was simply more challenged. It wasn't necessarily more strenuous, but it was more exciting in a way. I just learned more" (Bettina 2022).

Apparently, it is obvious which girls used to play in boys' teams and which did not:

“Many have started with boys and now they just have a different practice. [...] Anyone can see that. They have way more experience, especially because they've been playing longer” (Petra 2022).

“If you play with the boys, unfortunately, you learn the basics better. It's a fact that the girls who played with boys [...] are also better in terms of performance and quality” (Anne 2022).

In this context, many also report experiencing major changes when switching to an all-girls team. While they find that practices are not as intense, they realize that women's soccer was not as bad as they were led to believe. Professing that women's soccer is “a different kind of soccer” (Anne 2022), they also emphasize that that does not mean less “real” (Ingrid 2022) or “worse”, “just different” (Anne 2022):

“With the girls it was a lot slower [*laughs*]. You know, they just didn't go for it in the same way” (Monika 2022).

“In terms of soccer, it was completely different, because there was nothing physical about it anymore. With the boys, you really had to keep up physically [...]. But I got used to it pretty quickly [*laughs*]. Yes, I also had to settle into the team at first, but otherwise, I didn't think it was as bad as they always say” (Erika 2022).

“In terms of playing, if you consider the tactics and speed of the game, it was of course a change, because girls are more technical and tactical, and boys are more physical. They are simply more dynamic and faster, so you had to rethink a little” (Anne 2022).

As the above-mentioned quotes illustrate and as Müller (2007) has ably shown, men's and women's soccer are oftentimes considered two different disciplines. The linguistic distinction between “soccer” and “women's soccer” does not only indicate the incomparability of the two and the periphery of women's soccer, but is also associated with the generally low esteem in which women's soccer is held:

“If you talk about ‘normal’ soccer, then you talk about men's soccer. And if you say women's soccer, only then do you include women [...]. That shows that women's soccer is perhaps not as recognized as men's soccer, that it is still marginalized, in a way” (Hannelore 2022).

“Same with the ‘women's’ national team or THE national team. I think that's where it starts, that you notice that there's still massive differentiations” (Brigitte 2022).

“I think the mistake is simply to compare men's and women's soccer” (Manuela 2022).

“Simply saying ‘women's soccer’ is already a downgrade because it's perceived and treated as inferior” (Monika 2022).

Overall, the rigid policing of girls' participation in soccer at the amateur level is based on gender essentialist claims and the assumptions of male physical superiority. Although the DFB and its various talent development organizations advise girls to play with the boys to reach their full potential, they limit this opportunity to high-division female

players – artificially putting up a barrier for everybody else and, consequently, impeding their athletic development.

5.2.5. Women’s Soccer as Second-Class Soccer

By and large, women’s soccer is deemed second-class soccer that is not taken seriously and sometimes even outright ridiculed. Again, women feel lumped together as incapable and inferior players. Angelika summarizes her perception of people’s general sentiment towards women’s soccer as follows: “Men's soccer is men's soccer; it's smart soccer and they are capable. And women's soccer, that's wishy-washy, they try, but whether they succeed...” Instead of understanding and conceptualizing women’s soccer on its own terms, beyond male-defined values, the two are constantly placed in juxtaposition:

“I would definitely say that men's soccer is considered superior to women's soccer in Germany” (Ingrid 2022).

“A lot of people talk shit about women's soccer and say they can’t watch it because it's much slower in terms of speed than men's soccer” (Hannelore 2022).

“There is always this underlying ‘women can't play soccer at all, what are they even doing in this sport, I don't watch it, it's way too slow, nobody is watching, it's a waste of my time’” (Anne 2022).

This assumption is communicated to the players not only by general society, but also more tangibly by the behaviour of referees, spectators, and club officials. The preferential treatment of men’s teams is deeply embedded in German soccer culture and manifests on a smaller scale on the club level in the following ways:

“Referees are not as quick to whistle for men as they are for women. If a woman just gives somebody a shove, they whistle right away, and with the men it's not like that, they just get up again. And that even annoys me sometimes, that they whistle for every bullshit” (Angelika 2022).

“The infrastructure in some clubs, the pitches are so bad, not even third league men’s teams play on them, while us women play Bundesliga on them” (Manuela 2022).

“Gender plays a key role, especially if you look at how men are treated compared to women. Personally, I would say that they tend to be treated preferentially and that women are downgraded a bit more. [...] Men are always given first priority and women second [*laughs*]. [...] In the worst-case scenario, they [the clubs] just let the girls fall down behind” (Brigitte 2022).

“Maybe, sometimes, if we’re lucky, somebody has some jerseys left over for the women. But if you compare that with the men, it’s a different world” (Monika 2022).

This perception is further reinforced by the presence – or rather absence – of spectators and the general conditions under which the games are played:

“Few want to watch the women. The men’s games are always well attended” (Angelika 2022).

“You just can’t help but notice that, at our games, there are just significantly less spectators than when the boys play. When the boys play at the same age, or even a Jugend underneath, there’s always someone at the clubhouse who sells drinks and there’s a kind of grandstand set up where people can sit and watch the game. But with the girls, we are lucky if anybody besides our coach is there. Today we had three spectators, including our coach, and that’s already a lot for us” (Bettina 2022).

“Women’s soccer is not as boring as everybody always says and believes. But it already starts with the fact that you pay admission for the men’s games and not for ours, because nobody wants to watch it and because otherwise, we probably wouldn’t have any spectators at all [*laughs*]” (Monika 2022).

Equally, some players report not only a lack in external encouragement, but also experiencing next to no internal support from the men’s teams of their respective clubs:

“We had this talk internally, within the team quite a bit, about the fact that we find it a great pity, because we watch them [the men’s team] and want to support them however we can. It would be nice if they would come to our games as well. More often than not, our games are right before theirs, so they could definitely make it work. That’s why it’s a pity, because the team spirit and cohesion in the club are somehow lost because of that” (Monika 2022).

When it comes to finances and how to distribute them, the overarching impression I gained from the interviews was that the women’s teams lose out and must make do with the leftovers:

“It is painfully obvious that men’s soccer is subsidised more than women’s soccer, that’s just a fact” (Anne 2022).

“It is crystal clear that men’s soccer takes precedence over women’s soccer in every respect. I think, no matter which area you look at in soccer, it’s evident that one would first strengthen men’s soccer, before committing to women’s soccer [...]. If, for instance, the financial aspect plays a role in a club, everybody would agree to put the financial resources that remain in men’s soccer. And what happens to women’s soccer, whether it falls by the wayside or whether it is left to bleed out if you have nothing left financially, doesn’t matter. The main thing is that men’s soccer can continue” (Doris 2022).

“As a player, you just feel that not that much value is placed on women’s soccer. You can feel that in the smallest clubs, you can feel that in our club because in terms of resources, everything has always gone into men’s soccer, no matter what you do, and women’s soccer has just been running alongside or not, that was of secondary concern. And if someone hadn’t made an effort to keep women’s soccer going, it would have just fizzled out” (Doris 2022).

In that regard, participants also brought up the tremendous gender pay gap in women’s soccer – be it on a professional or an amateur level. Financially, women – even in Germany’s pro leagues – are not necessarily taken care of and it is up to them to diversify their income. They are not only unable to make a career in soccer the way men can, but playing soccer is actually an obstacle to their socioeconomic security as an adult:

“Many women who play in the Bundesliga have to work a second job because they can't live off of it otherwise. And at the same time, the men get all the money shoved up their asses, millions of euros” (Hannelore 2022).

“I play in the Regionalliga, which is the third-highest German league [for women], and I don't even get gas money to go to practice. Simultaneously, a man in the Regionalliga [...] gets 5,000 € or 6,000 € a month. My brother plays in the Oberliga, that's one league below the Regionalliga, and even he earns 800 € to 1,000 € just by playing soccer. And then, of course he gets bonuses on top and so on. And as I said, I get zero, so I actually have expenses and lose money on the road” (Anne 2022).

“I wouldn't earn that much in any club in Germany. As a young goalkeeper, that's impossible. It's a pity, Germany is really lagging behind. You have to be exceptional and play in Bayern, Wolfsburg, or Frankfurt, those are the clubs that really still pay well. I mean, if I went to the 2. Bundesliga I'd get 200 € as an expense allowance” (Manuela 2022).

“Most often, men start earning money as soon as they get to the Landesliga. Once they are in the Verbandsliga, it's pretty certain. In the women's league... I don't know, I'll have to pass. I don't even know, we have a Regionalliga team here in the area and I can't even say whether they get any money” (Brigitte 2022).

In short, instead of seeing the value of women's soccer and understanding it on its own terms, it is constantly measured against men's soccer and male defined values. Dismissing women's soccer as second-class-soccer, the German soccer system centers and privileges men which manifests on the club level regarding not only finances, but also basic infrastructure, referees, coaches, and a lack of spectators.

5.2.6. Soccer and Femininity

As previously established in Chapter 2.3., soccer is considered a masculine domain in German society with the general (but historically inaccurate) consensus being that “soccer has always belonged to men” (Anne 2022). Many of the girls and women in soccer I had the pleasure to interview believe they encounter such rigid resistance and gatekeeping because they are trespassing into “male territory,” triggering a defense response from the “rightful” occupiers of that space – men and boys:

“Many men or boys see soccer as THEIR sport, because it's a sport that a lot of men and boys do. And they see it more as a rough sport that has nothing feminine about it and that is automatically more suitable for men, which of course is not true” (Ingrid 2022).

“Men always want to show their point of view and say ‘we're here too’ or ‘that's actually our thing, why do you have to get involved now, is it not enough that you already get involved everywhere else? Because soccer is one of the few things that's still just our thing and not the women's thing.’ [...] They need an area where only men are among themselves” (Doris 2022).

The latter quote illustrates what Michael Messner (1988) and others have argued: organized sport perpetuates the ideology of male superiority and dominance and is, therefore, a particularly powerful tool and institution for hegemonic masculinity. Some of the direct quotes of the interviewees demonstrate once again how closely intertwined the German national sport is with masculinity and how entitled men feel to “their game”:

“Boys might also feel a bit threatened by girls, they are afraid that girls are better, that they will somehow lose their masculinity if women now also play soccer and then maybe play better, surpass the boys” (Ingrid 2022).

“If a guy plays soccer, for example, and plays in a rather low league, and then his girlfriend plays in the national league or regional league, that they might feel their ego is a bit bruised” (Anne 2022).

“Many men feel intimidated [by a woman that plays soccer]. [...] Probably because of the masculinity that is associated with soccer” (Monika 2022).

“On the one hand, they're not used to it and just want to hold on to the old and on the other hand, they don't want to admit that women can do it just as well as men and can be just as successful” (Bettina 2022).

According to the interviewees, this threat to masculinity, male dominance, and exclusive access to the sport might be part of the motive behind what leads men to insult soccer-playing women as “bitches”, “dykes”, and “lesbians”:

“Whenever we had any preparatory games against boys, they were always jealous if we played just as well as them or, God forbid, won. They are often pretty impulsive and make stupid statements [...] in order to also somehow let out the frustration” (Anne 2022).

“Sometimes you get the impression that they have to defend their territory and hype themselves up in a way” (Angelika 2022).

Behaviour like this does not always leave the players unscathed, as Erika’s experience demonstrates:

“Especially at the age of 12 or 13, when you're slipping into puberty and you already drown in self-doubt and then you hear something like that, it doesn't really help. And I was a person who never wore a dress or anything like that anyway, so sometimes I really took it to heart. [...] I usually just cried and left” (Erika 2022).

Instead of taking it to heart, Manuela was able to detect and point out the oddity of the conflation of gender and sexuality that soccer-playing women are regularly confronted with:

“Funny story on the side, my mum was asked in our village whether I was a lesbian now that I play soccer. Bizarre!” (Manuela 2022).

In general, women's soccer seems to be systematically devalued in German society, not least by instilling in young women a belief that soccer is a sport for boys and men and that girls and women are unsuited for the sport:

“A woman, even today, is portrayed as anything but a soccer player. Those are two stark contrasts” (Brigitte 2022).

“Many girls don’t come again after the first trial practice because... often, it's the parents, because the parents say ‘that's not for you’ or ‘you’ll always get dirty.’ And often the boys say, ‘you're a girl, you've got no business here,’ which also acts as a deterrent” (Erika 2022).

The incompatibility of being a woman and playing soccer is regularly justified with hegemonic notions of femininity and attractiveness.

“On the soccer field, you're rebellious, you're loud, you're strong, and that's not really part of the typical image of a woman. But why can't a woman be loud or scream on the soccer field or shove her body into an opponent?”(Doris 2022).

“It's just a bit more rough sometimes, you mob or foul each other, or even just hitting the ball would theoretically be considered more of a man's thing [...] After the game, when you're going to the dressing room and get ready, you're more likely to come out as a ‘woman’ if you've done your hair and put on makeup. More than on the soccer field, where you just don't look or act as feminine as many people probably expect a woman to be” (Brigitte 2022).

Although they do not buy into the incompatibility of soccer and femininity, some players play into this masculinizing effect of soccer and find themselves more “feminine” off the soccer field. In keeping with the spirit of the female apologetic (Eggeling 2010, 21; Kampmann 2011, 22; Krane 2001), they stress their femininity off the pitch:

“Outside, you might be more of a woman, outside of soccer, but it's already compatible with each other nevertheless” (Brigitte 2022).

“You first have to think about what femininity actually means to you. Is being just female femininity or do you have to dress beautifully, put on makeup, all kinds of things to be feminine? Well, I think that you definitely don't lose your femininity through soccer because you can still be feminine outside of the soccer field” (Ingrid 2022).

There seems to be no right way for women to exist in this space: soccer-playing women oftentimes find themselves juggling the opposing expectations placed upon them as women, on the one hand, and soccer players, on the other:

“As a girl in soccer, you just have to prove yourself all the time. That you play well enough to be able to play soccer and that you are not male just because you play soccer” (Ingrid 2022).

“That's the typical ‘if you're a girl, you can't play soccer because otherwise you're not feminine, and if you play soccer, you have to act masculine in order to be good.’ That's just not true, because you can live out your femininity outside of the soccer field and on the soccer field, you can also win the

ball through feminine means, for example, technically. It doesn't always have to be directly physical, although it is often physical, women's soccer" (Ingrid 2022).

In that regard, many report feeling masculine or having to display behaviour typically associated to masculinity in certain situations, specifically related to soccer:

"When I get upset. Because when it's a stupid referee, you get upset and then you get so angry that you think, somehow this doesn't suit me at all, that's not me. And then you're also somehow, yes, I wouldn't call it masculine, but yes, these are more masculine character traits than usual" (Monika 2022).

"Especially when I yell a bit on the field. Because I'm captain of the second team and I have to yell a lot. Especially now, on Saturday, during a game where a lot of people were pretty much asleep or something, I yell a lot and sometimes feel a bit 'oh, that's not so ladylike when I'm yelling like that.' Or when I really hit one right off the soles, that's not exactly feminine, but it's just part of soccer" (Angelika 2022).

"When playing with guys, you have to show that you're present, you can't hide somewhere in the back, because otherwise everyone knows 'that's where I need to attack, it's easy to get by.' You have to have a bit of presence and make yourself a bit more masculine" (Erika 2022).

As discussed above, a common strategy employed by female athletes is the female apologetic: Through feminization practices, they assert their femininity and proclaim their heterosexuality, which, in turn, feeds into hetero-patriarchal binaries. However, only some of my interlocutors reported employing certain tactics (e.g., well-fitting jerseys, sleek ponytails, a little make-up) to feel more feminine – the majority could not care less. Instead, they assume their womanhood and femininity on the field and unapologetically (Broad 2001) embrace the complexity and contradiction attached to their participation in soccer, showing that stigmatization and empowerment can coexist:

"On the pitch, masculine or feminine is neither an option nor a concern, because you play, and everyone concentrates on the game. It just doesn't matter whether you're one or the other, because the focus is actually on soccer" (Hannelore 2022).

"I actually enjoy the fact that I can be girly, but when I'm playing soccer, I can also kind of not give a damn and do whatever the hell I want" (Angelika 2022).

"Especially when you're in a duel and you just pushed somebody or something, you feel stronger and more masculine, that kind of thing. But I don't think that's bad, you actually feel a bit better, so to speak" (Erika 2022).

"I always feel feminine, even if I'm lying on the ground in a dirty jersey. [...] The point is that you play well, not how you look doing it" (Ingrid 2022).

Some research participants even overtly criticized overly feminine behaviour. There seems to be such a thing as displaying "too much femininity" on the soccer field, as Anne notes, for instance, in regard to certain jerseys:

“When I think about the U.S., I find it almost borderline. Or now also during the European Championship with the English players, they had white jerseys and there was also, I don't know if you noticed, a problem when they got their period [...]. But especially in the U.S., they sometimes have really short shorts and I would say for me, for example, that would be too much femininity. Or just too much of a good thing. I think you don't give up a part of your femininity, but I think that our jerseys actually look just like the men's jerseys, I think that's totally okay, so that you don't make an exception and put the female gender even more in the spotlight because it's women's soccer, I don't think that's necessary” (Anne 2022).

Ultimately, the practice of pointing out the incompatibility of being women and playing soccer, insulting women in soccer as “butches” or “dykes,” and denying them their femininity is merely an attempt at legitimizing and diminishing their participation in the “male” sport of soccer. This ensures that soccer, as Germany’s national sport, remains a firmly masculine institution. Nevertheless, women players unapologetically assume their womanhood on the field and embrace the complexity attached to their participation.

5.2.7. Gender and Assumptions around Talent

When it comes to talent, different expectations are placed on female and male players: While for boys and men, it is not only assumed that they play soccer, but that they do so well (“capable until proven otherwise”), girls and women need to prove their talent and know-how before being considered soccer players (“incapable until proven otherwise”). As athletes, women feel underestimated in their abilities from the get-go and oftentimes, they are even accused of not taking soccer seriously or doing it merely for male attention:

“Especially in soccer, it [gender] does play a big role. Of course, you can see that there are different expectations of the genders in terms of talent. Especially in soccer, it's obvious that not as much is expected of women's soccer as it is of men's soccer” (Ingrid 2022).

“I sometimes feel like for boys it's automatically assumed that they can play and that's the status quo. And for girls, it's first assumed that they can't play and that's why they always have to prove themselves first” (Monika 2022).

“When you talk to boys about soccer or when you play with them, you are always automatically below them or they say, ‘YOU play soccer?’ But with every boy, it is just assumed he plays soccer. But as soon as a girl plays soccer, they are like ‘really, are you sure?’ They just don't think girls play soccer and then they question that or ask stupid test questions like ‘what is offside, do you even know?’ They test you to see if you really play soccer or if you just say that to be well received by the boys” (Bettina 2022).

To be granted basic respect and experience legitimation as participants in the sport, girls and women in soccer need to demonstrate their athletic abilities and technical know-

how of the game. The following comments illustrate that especially the boys and men who occupy this space police girls' and women's participation through gender essentialist claims, in an effort to uphold soccer as an arena of masculinity:

"I just think that you have to show that you are genuinely interested in soccer and also show that you really know things about soccer and that you like to play it and that you CAN play it. [...] Otherwise, people claim you play so badly because you are a girl" (Bettina 2022).

"There is more resistance from boys who also play soccer and then just say, 'there is no way you really play soccer, that's just a bit of kicking the ball around'" (Ingrid 2022).

As Bettina experienced in recreational soccer, having "the girl" on the team is considered a crucial disadvantage, which – in true sportsman fashion – needs to be compensated. In turn, this dissuades other players from picking girls and repeats the cycle of exclusion, or at the very least, apathy regarding their inclusion. Accordingly, losing a duel against "the girl" brings about shame and humiliation for male players, since they are usually the ones who determined her talent – or rather, lack thereof – beforehand:

"If you're on the soccer field in your free time and end up forming teams, it's like 'you have the girl on the team, you get an extra player' or 'you get the better player because you have the girl on the team' and you just think to yourself that that's actually not a disadvantage... You also notice that the boys play completely differently towards you because they want to prove themselves and do even more tricks. And if somebody gets the ball taken away, nothing would happen if it was by anybody else, but if it's you, then they're like 'oh my God, you got the ball taken away by a girl, how embarrassing'" (Bettina 2022).

The fact that performance is the yardstick that is applied when deciding if a girl or woman deserves to be accorded basic respect and acceptance in the masculine domain of German soccer leaves no space for young female soccer players just wanting to participate in the sport without necessarily being exceptional.²⁴ According to Hannelore, some even "quit because they think they are not good enough." This circumstance might specifically aggravate in the lower leagues, since this is usually where girls and women experience the most resistance to their participation.

"Especially the top players from the first division, they don't pick on them or say anything to them, they already have, well, they tend to get respect. With us in the second division, there are some that are just not as good, also because they just started playing later. They are physically just not as fit and are then rather ridiculed and disrespected. Because they can't do it, according to men" (Angelika 2022).

²⁴ In this respect, toxic hierarchies among boys and men in regard to ability need to be, likewise, acknowledged, since very few actually thrive in these contexts.

In contrast to that, female players in higher recreational, or even professional leagues seem to be somewhat shaded from derogatory comments and overt disrespect:

“If you perform well, for instance, if you play in the Bundesliga, you're more accepted than if you kick around a bit in the Kreisliga B. I think you will be more accepted if you play at a higher level and are perhaps better” (Brigitte 2022).

“Especially in our leagues, further down, I sometimes find it difficult whether we are accepted. Well, they have to accept it, we don't care, but they tend to pick on it. When it comes to Bundesliga players or so, they say nothing, because they can obviously all play, otherwise they would not play in the Bundesliga, but just with us in the lower divisions, more often than not they say something against it” (Angelika 2022).

An important dynamic to point out in this context is the likelihood of male soccer players in lower divisions or recreational leagues feeling an increased need to defend “their space,” as they are, per definition, less masculine men, which already threatens their masculinity. Ingrid, for instance, had to suddenly join her younger brother’s team in a tournament as they did not realize until the last minute that they did not have enough players. “They didn’t thank me for helping them out, but instead, were actually really angry that I was allowed to play” (Ingrid 2022).

Ingrid also recalled being more accepted when dressing in a more masculine way. This might be due to the fact that granting talent to a “masculine girl/woman” does not openly confound male dominance and superiority in soccer as much as granting talent to a “feminine girl/woman” would:

“Boys expect you to adapt to them more, to behave in a more masculine way. Then you are actually accepted more. For example, in the past I always wore boys' clothing in my boys' phase, and I was much more accepted by boys in soccer than I am now, because now I dress in a totally feminine way. And girls who dress more masculine are also much more accepted in soccer than girls who dress more feminine [...]. If you play soccer as a girl and dress normally in a more feminine way, for example, put on dresses and such, then boys tend to think that you don't play soccer so well. And those who dress more masculine are expected to be more like boys and therefore play better soccer. So, I think that is often related to the clothing, how you are evaluated in terms of talent in sports” (Ingrid 2022).

While the interviewees did acknowledge that people automatically associated their gender with lesser soccer talent, many could not care less for that external, male validation of their soccer practice and are all the happier to prove them wrong:

“It's definitely exhausting because you have to prove yourself all the time, [...] but you also feel good about it because you know you can do it just as well as the boys and you show them and prove them wrong” (Ingrid 2022).

“When I was still playing with the boys, whenever a new guy joined our team and saw me, they had instant prejudices [...]. And then, once I kick the ball, they look and swallow and say, ‘okay, she is not that bad after all’” (Anne 2022).

“When I play on the campsite, it's really only with boys, and at the beginning of the vacation [...] you're always chosen last, you're always the last one in line, because no one wants you on their team. But on the second or third day you are one of the first ones to be chosen” (Anne 2022).

“There was a French girls' team, I think C-Jugend, and they played against the boys' C-Jugend there and they were just as good as them or even better in parts. Our team actually lost pretty high against them. And they won against the guys! [...] I'm always a bit pleased because when you hear the parents on the sidelines, ‘this can't be happening, they're all girls, what are you doing?’ I find it funny that the parents get even more upset about it” (Bettina 2022).

Oftentimes, in trying to justify the value of women's soccer as “underestimated” (Bettina 2022) or “not as boring as everybody always says and believes” (Monika 2022), they still use men's soccer as a reference point. Occasionally, this results in a critique of masculinity which, however, remains based on gender essentialist claims:

“Men's soccer is faster because they're different, they're just built differently. But I'll put it this way, women aren't like men, who get poked once and fall straight to the ground and cry. It's not like that with women, they're much tougher. That sounds really stupid, but they continue to play even if they have a bloody nose and don't immediately cry at every shit. And because they're not as strong, they have to be able to do a lot more with the ball than a guy” (Hannelore 2022).

“Girls' teams, they play so much harder, really. There's so much more physical play. With the boys, they fall after two seconds, with the girls, you don't think that at all, you think they would be much more delicate, much more cautious, but it's actually the complete opposite” (Bettina 2022).

In conclusion, girls and women in soccer need to demonstrate their athletic abilities and technical know-how to legitimate their mere existence and participation in soccer and be accorded basic respect. Since women are assumed to be “unfit” for soccer, they are not afforded any misstep or weakness, or else they would merely confirm limiting assumptions about their physical ability. An intriguing aspect emerges from this: men's soccer is characterized by frequent stoppages, dives, and theatrics but such tendencies are generally absent from women's soccer.

5.2.8. Between Historical Baggage and Activism

Although the history of women's soccer is heavily loaded with gender ideology, it seems as though most interviewees do not connect this circumstance to their lived experiences of marginalization and stigmatization in soccer. In contrast, they deem themselves lucky to be playing in this day and age and express true appreciation, as the following comments illustrate:

“I started playing nowadays, not 20 years ago, so it doesn't matter to me. Because I was allowed to play soccer from the beginning” (Brigitte 2022).

“I feel relatively lucky that I play in this day and age. I have teammates who are 35. They played in the national team 10 years ago and didn't get a cent for it. They keep reminding me that I'm still so young and I'm so lucky that it's all happening now and that more is being invested into women's soccer. It's hard to imagine how it must have been in the past because they had such a small platform. What a pity” (Manuela 2022).

When asked about the impact the ban of women's soccer from 1955-1970 had on their personal relationship with soccer, roughly half of my interlocutors did not deem it relevant to their experiences today, as some of their comments on the matter show:

“That doesn't change anything about the soccer itself, just because they weren't allowed to play for 15 years” (Angelika 2022).

“Of course, the women who played back then and then weren't allowed to play for 15 years, of course it hurt them. But in itself, nowadays, that is not that relevant” (Bettina 2022).

“Personally, I don't feel that at all, I would say no, not in any respect” (Anne 2022).

Others, however, seem to be more aware of the interrelation of history, the larger social structure, and their lived experiences today and point out a direct connection between the ban on women's soccer, the general status of women's soccer in German society, and their personal experience in the sport more than 50 years later:

“Maybe if women's soccer had ‘grown up’ just like men's soccer, it would be the case today that everyone would watch women's soccer and not just men's soccer” (Erika 2022).

“I don't think that women's soccer is only missing the 15 years, but much more: The support and the appreciation, all kinds of things that can be traced back to the [German] state. You can't pin it down to just those 15 years now. [...] Because they simply made a cut and from then on, clearly built up a separation” (Doris 2022).

Among the participants, playing soccer as a woman is not necessarily seen as an act of resistance against hetero-patriarchal norms. In the face of hegemonic ideologies, some participants feel rather powerless and defeated:

“I play soccer because I enjoy it and not because I can change anything. Because I believe that you can't change the opinion of those who think like that anyway. So, yes, they have that way of thinking and are hard to convince. [...] I also don't really question traditional gender norms or stereotypes through soccer, I don't think I can change that much. Sure, you can show that you can also play soccer as a woman, but fundamentally I can't change anything” (Monika 2022).

At the same time, however, they do believe that their participation in soccer is beyond just them and actually does make a difference in the bigger picture:

“I think my participation in itself, that I go to practice or participate in games or something, that doesn't help anybody. But yeah, maybe more on the collective level” (Brigitte 2022).

“I'm just one of many, but if three million women didn't play soccer anymore all of a sudden, it would be noticeable” (Manuela 2022).

“I don't think it's resistance in the sense that you go out on the street and demonstrate and say that it can't go on like this, but I think it could definitely be a help” (Brigitte 2022).

“I don't see myself as having set anything in motion, but I think it's all a small piece of the big puzzle” (Manuela 2022).

It quickly becomes evident that girls and women in Germany do not play soccer out of some imposed activist duty or pragmatism, but simply because it is their passion. Although at first glance, the following comments could be interpreted as apolitical, this is not entirely the case: activism against gender inequality is just not their motive behind playing – and it does not have to be:

“I don't play soccer so that I can somehow convince people to no longer have these stereotypes” (Anne 2022).

“Because many women around me play soccer, maybe I just don't perceive it [women's soccer] that way [as an act of resistance] because it's become the norm for me that women play soccer. [...] My friend, who has nothing whatsoever to do with soccer, would perhaps see it quite differently. She would say that what we are doing is resistance against the male-dominated world” (Doris 2022).

“I play soccer because I enjoy it and not because I can change anything” (Monika 2022).

Overall, the interviewees in this study do not explicitly link the historical context of women's soccer in Germany to their current experiences of marginalization and stigmatization in soccer. Instead, they express gratitude for the opportunity to play in the present era and appreciate the progress being made. While their motivations for playing vary, they are generally driven by enjoyment and passion for the game rather than a specific intention to change societal perceptions.

Chapter 6.

CONCLUSION

The fascination with the topic of the present thesis has emerged from my time as a teenage girl in the German soccer system. I was never able to pinpoint exactly why I decided to quit soccer after only a handful of seasons, which made it all the more meaningful for me to explore and get to the bottom of this question – years later and equipped with the language and tools from my training in Sociology.

Using broader discussions around gender and sport as a point of departure, while also taking the unique historical background of women's soccer in Germany into consideration, I examined how this social and ideological context is experienced by German girls and women who presently occupy and exist in the masculine space of German soccer. I did so by applying my sociological imagination (Mills 1959) in conjunction with the theoretical framework of critical feminist sport studies and McDonald and Birrell's (1999) method of "reading sport critically."

The empirical results of the study clearly indicate that soccer, despite – or rather, due to – its image as the German national sport, remains a male-dominated space that views women as intruders and denies them self-determined access. In order to push the narrative of soccer as a continuously masculine domain, which stands in stark contrast to the historical facts, the history of women's participation in the sport is deliberately and strategically rendered invisible. Emphasizing soccer-playing women's abnormality and deviation from the norm, their nonconformity to hetero-patriarchal ideologies is drilled into them from a young age on. Moreover, the organizational culture and the *modus operandi* in German soccer remain geared towards boys and men, which results in significant structural disadvantages for girls and women with gender being instrumentalized to police their participation in soccer. On the premise of male physical superiority, women's soccer is regarded as second-class soccer. The conceptualization of their sporting-practice as "lesser than" also manifests in the preferential treatment of men's teams regarding referees, coaches, spectators, infrastructure, and financial support – on both recreational and professional levels. Although they are constantly reminded of the supposed incompatibility

of soccer and femininity, the girls and women I had the pleasure of interviewing unapologetically embrace the complexity and contradiction attached to their participation in soccer, showing that stigmatization and empowerment can coexist. While performance remains the yardstick that is applied when deciding whether a girl or woman deserves to be accorded basic respect in the masculine domain of German soccer, leaving little space for non-exceptional players to exist, my interlocutors know and show the value of women's soccer. Although there is discord about the impact of the historical background of German women's soccer on their contemporary experiences, they do believe in the collective power their participation adds up to. After all, gender equality in "soccer is just a small step towards the greater good" (Doris 2022).

An integral limitation of the present study is the lack of racial diversity among the research participants which requires that the findings be examined through the lens of white privilege. Simultaneously, however, this shortcoming presents an exciting opportunity for future research on German women's soccer that centers the intersectionality of gender and race. Likewise, focusing on how the experiences of women players in rural vs. urban soccer clubs or amateur vs. professional leagues differ, might further enhance our understanding of gender ideology in German women's soccer.

Chapter 7.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

My research contributes to the current body of knowledge by not only centering the voices and lived experiences of female soccer players in organized soccer in Germany but also taking into account the country-specific historical context of the sport. Since German soccer – in stark contrast to soccer in Canada and the USA – is a stereotypically masculine domain, this study complicates the Anglo-American literature on women’s experience in soccer and highlights the unique challenges female soccer players encounter in one of the biggest soccer nations of the globe. Scholarly claims produced within a Canadian or American context cannot simply be transferred onto the experiences of women that play soccer in parts of the world where it is considered the pinnacle of masculinity.

On that account, my findings might enable current as well as former female players to attribute their gendered experiences within organized soccer to larger sociological power structures and consequently shift their focus away from personal shortcomings.

In recent years, especially rural German soccer clubs have been struggling with dwindling youth membership – a concerning development that has already been sufficiently investigated along the axes of rigid organizational structures, life upheavals, lack of interest, poor coaches, and time pressure (Salamon 2020). However, as the findings suggest, the gendered experiences of female soccer players, not least in light of the unique historical context of German women’s soccer, might possibly be an additional contributor to girls’ and women’s drop-out of soccer.

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Appendix A.

Interview Guide



INTERVIEW SCRIPT – Semi-structured interviews

Study Title: Contemporary Experiences of Female Soccer Players in Germany

Study Number: 30001160

Department: Sociology and Anthropology

Student Lead: Hannah Selg

Principal Investigator: Travers

Co-Investigator: Dominique Falls

INTRODUCTION + WELCOMING REMARKS

Hello, my name is Hannah, and I'll be leading today's interview. I am a Master's student in Sociology at SFU and as part of my Master's thesis, I am currently interviewing young women about their experience as females in the rather masculine space of German soccer.

I'd like to start by thanking you for taking the time to speak with me. Just to confirm, the interview will take between 60-90min. Does that still work for you? If you need a break at any time, please do not hesitate to let me know.

During this interview, I'll ask you questions about your experience as a female soccer player in Germany. I'd like to note at the outset that I used to play soccer myself during my teens, so I am no stranger to the topic. However, I am excited to hear things from your perspective so please be aware that there are no wrong answers — you're the expert of your own experiences!

With your permission, I'd like to record this call. Recording helps me with transcribing the interview later and allows me to focus on our conversation instead of taking notes. No one except for me and my supervisory committee will have access to this recording.

CONSENT

Finally, I would like to ask for your consent: *Read "[Interview Consent Form](#)".* Do you have any questions or concerns?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND GUIDING TOPICS

INITIAL QUESTIONS – Verifying inclusion criteria

- How old are you?
- How long have you been playing soccer?
- How did you get into soccer? Why did you start playing soccer? What were your motivations?
- Does your village/town/city have a girls'/women's soccer team at all?
 - › Starting what age?
- Did you start playing in a girls' team? What did your path look like?
 - › When did you switch to a boys' team?
- Have you ever quit soccer?
 - › For what reasons?
- Did you ever contemplate quitting soccer?
 - › For what reasons?
- Which league does your team currently play in?
- How often do you go to practice? How often do you have matches?
- What percentage of your life is taken up by soccer? To what extent does your life revolve around soccer?
 - › Has it always been like that or is this a recent development?

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN SPORT

- What role does gender play in sports today? How important is it?
- Are there gender stereotypes in sports?
- Can physical performances of men and women be compared?
- What determines an athlete's performance?
- Do you perceive any power dynamics (related to gender) in German soccer?
- What is your opinion on the linguistic distinction between "soccer" and "women's soccer"?
- What is a "feminine" sport? Why?
- What is a "male" sport? Why?

SOCCKER AS A „MALE SPORT“

- „Soccer is a male sport“
 - › Have you already heard this yourself? From whom?
 - › Assessment/attitude towards this?
- Is playing soccer compatible with "being a woman"?
- Can you be accepted as a woman in this "man's sport"?

- › What do you have to do to be accepted?
 - › What does this acceptance look like?
 - › Is it really acceptance? Alternative description?
- What are stereotypes of female soccer players?
- Have you experienced such stereotypes yourself?
- What did it trigger in you? How did it make you feel?

IDEOLOGICAL REPAIR WORK

- *"You are good for a girl!" and "you have exceptional talent"*
 - › Have you already heard this yourself? From whom?
 - › Assessment/attitude towards this?
 - › Is this a compliment?

SEXUALITY

- *"Female soccer players are combat lesbians"*
 - › Have you already heard this yourself? From whom?
 - › Assessment/attitude towards this?
- Has your sexuality ever been questioned because you play soccer?
- Would the same happen to you if you played a "typically female" sport?

MASCULINIZING POWER OF SOCCER

- *"Female soccer players are ball busters and lesbians"*
 - › Have you already heard this yourself? From whom?
 - › Assessment/attitude towards this?
- Does playing soccer affect a woman's attractiveness?
- Does playing soccer make you less/more attractive?
 - › To whom?
 - › Why?
- Is it possible to be "feminine" and play soccer?
- Is playing soccer "feminine"? Are you more "feminine" if you don't play soccer?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

- Have you ever felt particularly masculine as a female player?
- Have you ever felt particularly feminine as a player?
- Have you made an effort to look more feminine on the field?
 - › Why (not)?
 - › How? Strategies? What about teammates/opponents?

- Have there ever been comments that questioned your femininity?
 - › By whom?
 - › Why?
 - › How did you receive and feel about these comments?
- To what extent is your participation in the sport of soccer met with resistance?
 - › From whom?
 - › How do you respond to resistance?
- Would you consider the fact that you play soccer a kind of resistance against stereotypes?
- To what extent do you succeed in challenging traditional gender norms?
 - › How does this make you feel?
- To what extent does your participation in soccer change gender power relations?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND APPRECIATION OF WOMEN'S SOCCER

- What role does (women's) soccer play in Germany?
- Were you aware that women's soccer was banned in Germany from 1955 to 1970?
 - › Do you have any idea why that might have been?
 - › Why do you think the ban was lifted? What are some possible reasons?
- Can you compare women's soccer and men's soccer today? What do you think are the differences?
- How does this historical background of German women's soccer affect your experience in the sport?
- Do you know how many European Championship and World Cup titles the German men's and women's national teams have won?
- Do you feel valued/appreciated/seen as a woman in soccer?
 - › How is this (non-)appreciation expressed?

REAFFIRMATION OF CONSENT + CLOSING REMARKS

We have now reached the end of the interview. Now that you have answered all the questions, are you still consenting to your information being used for my Master's thesis?

Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today, your experiences and insights are very valuable!

Appendix B.

Interview Consent Form



WRITTEN CONSENT FORM – Interviews

Study Title: Contemporary Experiences of Female Soccer Players in Germany

Study Number: 30001160

Department: Sociology and Anthropology

Student Lead: Hannah Selg

Principal Investigator: Travers

Co-Investigator: Dominique Falls

INVITATION AND STUDY PURPOSE: Why should you take part in this study?

The findings of this study will be used for the completion of a master's thesis in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at SFU. You are invited to participate in an interview that examines the experiences of female soccer players in Germany. This study will take into account both broader discussions around gender and sport, as well as the unique historical background of women's soccer in Germany. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are member of a German women's soccer club and you are over the age of 13.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. Even if you initially decide to participate, you may still choose to withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reason or any negative consequences for you. Likewise, your withdrawal from the study will not result in negative consequences to the student lead's master's thesis. By consenting, you also have not waived any rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm. To withdraw, please contact either the student lead, principal investigator, or co-investigator via the above indicated email addresses or any other means that might be at your disposition.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Here is what will happen exactly if you decide to participate in the study:

1. Depending on our mutual convenience, we will meet either in person at a location of your choosing or remotely via Zoom for one time only over a period of 60-90min to conduct a semi-structured interview on the above indicated topic. Semi-structured means that the interview has a specific direction and purpose but is intended to feel more like a conversation.
2. During the interview, I will ask you about your thoughts, experiences, behaviours, and observations surrounding your membership in a German women's soccer club.
3. Granted your permission, I will be taking notes of the interview and audio-record the conversation using Zoom recording. Only the student lead, the principal investigator, and the co-investigator will have access to these recordings.
4. You are free to refuse answering certain questions and have the right to withdraw from the interview at any given point in time – even after it started.

POTENTIAL RISKS OF THE STUDY

There are no foreseeable risks to you in participating in this study and it is unlikely that any of the questions asked might upset you. However, please let the student lead know if you have any concerns and keep in mind that you can refuse to answer certain questions without negative consequences for you or others.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF THE STUDY

I do not believe you will directly benefit from participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

To respect your privacy and ensure the confidentiality of the material, the information I collect will be coded, thereby having direct identifiers removed from the information and replaced with a code. Depending on access to the code, it may be possible to re-identify you as a participant of this study. The student lead retains a list that links the participants' code names with their actual names so data can be re-linked if necessary. Only the principal investigator and the co-investigator will have access to this code.

Nevertheless, it is non-negligible to mention that due to the small recruitment population, participants could identify you and other participants of the study. While we encourage them not to share this information with anyone, we cannot control what they do with it.

Furthermore, only the student lead, the principal investigator, and the co-investigator have access to the interview notes, audio-recording, and transcription of your interview. The

materials will be stored on secure SFU storage servers such as Canvas or SFU Vault. 5 years after the dissemination of the study results, the data will be deleted.

Any data you provide may be transmitted and stored in countries outside of Canada, as well as in Canada. It is important to remember that privacy laws vary in different countries and may not be the same as in Canada.

STUDY RESULTS

The results of this study will be used for the completion of a master's thesis in the department of Sociology and Anthropology at SFU. All files are stripped of any information that could identify you as a participant to ensure confidentiality.

CONTACT FOR COMPLAINTS AND CONCERNS

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, please contact the Director, SFU Office of Research Ethics.

WRITTEN CONSENT

Date

Signature