
NEGOTIATING GAY FOOTBALL MASCULINITIES IN ICELAND: GLITTER(FOOT)BALL TACTICS

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Abstract

The Icelandic football club Sterken is a grassroots LGBT sport association whose motto is "role models, not stereotypes". Sterken propose an enlarged range of possible gay identities where playing football is just another channel through which young adults socialise and construct their legitimate gay selves. Sterken's practices fit with current discourses of sexuality and gender, which are put centre stage and normativised in the context of neoliberal politics.

Iceland provides an exceptional context to investigate discursive practices around gender and sexuality: in 2013 it has been rated first for gender equality by the World Economic Forum and until recently had a lesbian Prime Minister dedicated to introducing gender equality-led policy. At the same time, Iceland has long maintained a commitment to neoliberal ideology.

In this paper, we present the result of our recent ethnographic research investigating Sterken's discursive strategies and practices. Our data is drawn from a short immersion in the research field that involved a series of face-to-face and group interviews with key informants, extended engagement with the football club's public facing website, and activities with Sterken, including typical cultural spaces where traditional hegemonic masculinities are performed (e.g. playing football, going out for drinks).

Our analysis introduces the analytic of "glitter(foot)ball tactics:" the glitter representing gay identity politics, while the original shape of the football maintaining hegemonic concepts of masculinity (Connell 1995; McCormack and Anderson 2010). Drawing on the metaphor of glitter(foot)ball tactics, we show how masculinity in neoliberal, homo-friendly cultures was able to uphold male gender power through reconciling both sides of the glitter(foot)ball.

In our paper, we analyse how Sterken's ethos of "role models, not stereotypes" produced a tension between the club's endeavours towards a mainstream normative identity (e.g. "we are just like you") and their activist identity politics as a gay football club. Sterken's ethos aimed at presenting them as not explicitly political. The "we are just like you" rhetoric here acts as a depoliticized discursive tool in constructing these versions of gay male identities in the context of neoliberal politics.

However, the "we are typical football players" narrative of hegemonic masculinity was compromised by claims of being different from ordinary footballers. This was evident, for example, in Sterken's firm zero tolerance against foul and aggressive play, and their pursuit of inclusiveness, accepting all sexual orientations and levels of fitness/ability. Sterken also position themselves as helping young gay men to come to terms with internalised homophobia, in tandem with the main Icelandic LGBT association.

In a neoliberal context where sexuality is individualised and 'liberated', but at the same time normativised, attempts at political action became about challenging homophobia as an individual problem (Giddens 1991; Illouz 2007). Sterken's tactics effectively resolved the tension between traditional hegemonic masculinity and gay identities by framing coming-out stories within neoliberal individualism: and so avoiding questioning larger social structures in which homophobia in football might take place (Thorvaldsdottir 2011). While partly accurate, and welcome, the narrative of dwindling homophobia and total achievement of the goals of gay rights activism can be used to hide larger issues of social discrimination, especially in connection with gender, race and class inequalities.

We conclude that Sterken's glitter(foot)ball tactics constitute both a challenge to traditional hegemonic masculinities, while all the while feeding back into an equality discourse which was deemed palatable to the privileged mainstream, in the larger context of a neoliberal political discourse that leans toward normative social structures.

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