

# “*Chele Varakashi*”: English Premiere League viewership and the resurfacing of political public sphere in Zimbabwe’s Beer Halls

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the embedded political undertones produced and reproduced by English Premiership League (EPL) football viewers in Zimbabwe’s new political discursive spheres – Beer Halls. It explores the nexus of football fans viewership patterns, commentary and how these attitudes reflect on how football viewership reproduces underlying political fractures that exist in Zimbabwe. Largely credited to the Frankfurt theorist, Jurgen Habermas (1960) a public sphere is an imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space which is made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society. Often football viewership becomes an outlay of wider societal struggles. Beer halls offer space for the playing out of these power dynamics which manifest through football fans viewership and commentary. This article explores the authors’ ethnographic encounters with EPL viewers in beer halls. It explores how football commentary is not monolithic but has in it subtle undertones which speaks to the socio-political tensions in Zimbabwe. Football viewership and commentary in Zimbabwe’s beer halls is fraught with power undercurrents.

**Keywords:** football; public sphere; audience; commentary; political undertones; gender; Zimbabwe

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study demonstrates the nexus of EPL football fans viewership and the production of political sentiments in public spheres in Zimbabwe. Emanating from Frankfurt theorist Jurgen Habermas (1960), the concept of public sphere is made up of private people gathered together as a public while articulating the needs of society. More recent studies have however postulated the demise of a public sphere characterized with physical interaction with the emergence of social media which is the alternative audience centered public sphere (Papacharissi 2010). However, in acknowledgement of Papacharissi (2010) sentiments that the concept of public sphere has transformed into a more modern virtual approach with less physical interaction, it can still be argued that Habermas’ public sphere concept still stand the test of time though with a different context. Habermasian Bourgeois concept reports that the ‘public realm’ existed not as a sphere of interaction and debate but merely of representation (Anderson 1991). This made the whole concept elitist. Concurring with Anderson (1991) critique that the public sphere concept has elitist tendencies, Papacharissi (2010) notes that the new public sphere hinged on digital

participation is also elitist due to digital participation divide tendencies. This analysis shows that the concept of public sphere is omnipresent in political discussions, especially on how football viewership mirrors political status in Zimbabwe’s beer halls. As Ncube (2014) argues that football stadia and football teams rivalry is a site where politics and ethnic superiority is performed – not where football viewership is entertainment, but where football viewership explores political dominance and ethnicity superiorities. There is ample proof in epistemology showing that sports fandom especially football viewership remains an arena of power contestation (Ncube 2018). Gee (2009) further notes that football viewership in public spheres is a space where men can still perform and celebrate ideological versions of aggressive masculinity. This analysis is focused on the author’s ethnographic encounters with political undertones amongst football viewers in Zimbabwe beer halls over the course of almost one year from September 2020 to May 29 2021.

The study focuses particularly on the political comments drawn and equated to football teams, coaches and players. The presented argument is that football fandom commentaries and political undertones are sites and a manifestation of a mirrored political status quo in Zimbabwe. They are sites and manifestation where dominance is resented and challenged (Chirwa 2001). Therefore, viewers commentaries are not just expressions or emotional reactions and neither are they confined to cheering on athletes on the pitch. Popular culture scholars (Dolby 2006; Hall 1997) assert that it is in the realm of popular culture where the negotiation of race, gender, national, and other social identities and the play of power undercurrents take place. This article demonstrates those football viewers’ commentaries in beer halls, just like other social media commentaries and video skits across the world (see Chibwe and Ureke 2016) are interlaced with political discourses often. This shows that these commentaries are not monolithic but rather multiple as they encompass embedded and power undercurrents undertones. The study embraces assertions in football fandom studies, namely that “football talk” (Nylund 2004) and “football operates as a contested territory where spatial arrangements of domination are produced, maintained, and sometimes resisted through sports-specific practices such as ‘chanting’” (Caudwell 2011) (cited

in Spandler and McKeown 2012, 392). While political discourse is also rife in football fans songs and slogans, for feasibility sake this analysis is limited to commentaries and banter. First the study presents an overview of football fandom and the political ideology in Zimbabwe. An epistemology focusing on Habermas (1960) and Papacharissi (2010) follows locating the study in this discussion. The study then extends the literature review with more modern scholars showing how this study goes beyond previous submissions.

A clear methodological section depicting my ethnographic approach is then presented. Findings are presented qualitatively and thematically using critical discourse analysis in four separate subsections. In conclusion, the study shows how the current analysis complements existing studies on sport, songs and power undercurrents in Zimbabwe.

## II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the nexus of EPL viewership in public spheres and the production and reproduction of political undertones, the study makes use of vast epistemologies on the concept of public sphere and active audience. Habermas (1960) framework highlights that people alternatively discuss social issues in certain public spheres. This means that aspects of various socio-economic and political discussions can take place in such smaller communities. The emergence of EPL viewers as a community in beer halls in Zimbabwe concurred with arguments by Habermas (1960) of the existence of political discursive spheres. Habermas (1960) notes that, coffee houses in London and “Table Societies” in German were informal public meeting places where open communication of private ideas were held latter giving bourgeoisie class social power. In this instance, in Zimbabwe, the dominant discourse that is discussed and venerated through presented realities whilst viewing EPL is of political undertones. Discourse can be defined from various standpoints. Bhatasara (2010) argues that discourse is related to power, ideology and can be understood in relation to social structural problems such as race, gender and class. Concurring with Bhatasara (2010), Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) argue that discourse can be a group of ideas or patterned way of thinking which can be identified in text, verbal communication or social structures or a form of social action that plays a part in producing and reproducing the social world. Although power struggles have been theorised in various ways in different epochs, this article makes use of Habermas (1960) framework.

Livingstone (2015) framework was also persuasive in assessing the viewership of EPL in Zimbabwe. The concept of active audiences has been extremely useful in TV content audience reception, interpretation and consumption through the emergence of ‘prosumers’ (Livingstone 2015). The production and reproduction of political discourse through commentaries and political sentiments shows the relevance of the argument that active audiences are prosumers. Similarly, sport also functions as a strategic vehicle through which

specific conceptions of politics are reproduced and manifested as commonsensical (Gee 2009). This article explores how football viewership in public spheres liberates audiences to produce and reproduce political discourse. The study explores how viewers’ commentaries conflate political discourse with power undercurrents. Football commentary in public spheres is an important analytical concept for identifying attitudes and practices among men. However, the public sphere concept cannot be exempted from criticism with the advent of new technologies which saw the emergence of imagined communities (Papacharissi 2010). Papacharissi (2010) further notes that public sphere, just like any other concept, changes over time and across context. Importantly, concurring sentiments by Habermas (1960) and Papacharissi (2010) on public sphere elitist tendencies marred with inclusion and exclusion tendencies in the existent imagined communities, this study reveals how Zimbabwean beer halls as public spheres are for the ordinary, powerless and subjects. Their only platform for socio-political commentary is the ordinary community beer hall.

The lacuna in football viewership and the production of political discourses in football fandom epistemologies inspired this research. A study done by Ncube (2014) is based on ethnic superiority and inferiority complexes traceable in football stadia where football teams rivalry is a site where ethnic superiority is performed – not where football viewership is entertainment, but where football viewership explores ethnic superiorities. He argues that Zimbabwe’s Premier Soccer League (PSL) top flight matches between Highlanders and Dynamos football teams are a contestation of ethnic superiority between the Shona and Ndebele speaking people in Zimbabwe. Chikafa and Chiweshe (2014) did a study looking at the masculinities shrouded in football. However, the study did not focus on football commentary and the embedded political undercurrents which this study will explore. The dearth of studies on the nexus of football viewership in Zimbabwe’s public areas and the production of underlying political discourses influenced this research. This research therefore focuses on embedded political undertones produced and reproduced by English Premiership League (EPL) football viewers in Zimbabwe’s new political discursive spheres – beer halls. Though football viewership has been researched before by different scholars, this study is mainly focusing on commentary with double meanings.

## III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Beyond doubt, there is wide range of literature across the world, especially in the UK, the USA, and of late Africa, showing the connection between sport and power undercurrents (see Giulianotti 2002; Jones 2008; Savedra 2003; Ncube and Chawana 2018). These scholars concur that sport is a fandom entangled with power struggles (Jones 2008; Ncube 2014; Ncube and Chawana 2018). From a gender lens, sport is a space where boys and men learn masculine values, relations, and rituals (Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). McKeown (2012) further asserts that through sport, sexism is

deeply rooted in football. From political and ethnicity lenses Ncube (2014) in his published PHD thesis “The Interface Between Football And Ethnic Identity Discourse In Zimbabwe” asserts that popular culture (including football) is a formative site where power is contested in people’s everyday lives. The world of the EPL fans is organised around typically male-oriented social spaces: pubs, bars, and large-scale sports betting arenas. These are expressive places. In such spaces, men express their thoughts, emotions and passions. Cited in Ncube (2014) sport is an avenue for both men and women to express their emotions though at times these expressions and emotions target to undermine one gender” (Burton Nelson 1994, 120). This also shows how such public spheres are zones where power struggles discourse is produced and reproduced. The game provides an arena for legitimate political commentary through various fandom activities which reinforce the political undertones and power undercurrents.

Studies on football and power undercurrents in Zimbabwe (Chikafa 2014; Chiweshe 2014; Ncube 2014) indicate that football fandom in this country is masculine, as elsewhere. Zimbabwe’s stadia have therefore become arenas for the display of machismo, resulting in most Zimbabwean women avoiding attending matches in stadia (Daimon 2010). This has qualified Zimbabwe’s stadia as mainly male zones. Like these stadia, purposively selected beer halls are also ‘male spheres’ where politics is discussed. Ncube’s (2014) study is more closely related to the current research, and shows that EPL football viewers in beer halls, through sport produces and reproduces political discourse through commentary. While Ncube’s (2014) study is welcome, it is limited to ethnicity analysis of Shona and Ndebele fans in Zimbabwean stadia contesting for national political dominance and is not specifically confined to the analysis of fans commentary embedded with political undertones and their intersections with Zimbabwean politics. Building on previous research, this article utilises the core-relation of Habermasian concept of public sphere and Livingstone (2015) active audiences to show how EPL viewership and commentary in beer halls is utilised to express political undertones.

The concept of active audiences has been extremely useful in TV content audience reception, interpretation and consumption through the emergence of ‘prosumers’ (Livingstone 2015). Livingstone (2015) argues that media audiences have long been hotly contested regarding their supposed power to construct shared meanings, to mitigate or moderate media influences, or to complete or resist the circuit of culture. The presented arguments are that audiences can either be active or passive. This study focuses on the active nature of audiences and their ability to consume and produce political discourses by watching and commenting during EPL football games. This qualifies the sample targeted audiences in this research as “prosumers”. The article notes that the audiences’ ability to change and produce different meanings from what has been presented by the media reflects how

media content is not monolithic since audiences can produce and reproduce content to match their expectations. In these instance EPL viewers in Zimbabwe’s beer halls apart from just commenting football games, they unearth political discourses and engage in public debates. Therefore, on a lighter note this study also calls for rethinking “audiencing” since their ability to also create meaning out of media texts and products classifies them as active audiences challenging earlier epistemologies of passive audiences purported in Cultivation Theory and Agenda Setting Theory. After reflecting on the possibility that the general assumptions are that audiences are passive, the article observes that one benefit of active audiences is that they can manage to produce and reproduce meanings on presented media products whilst relating to their contexts.

The Habermasian concept of a public sphere dates back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Habermas (1960) defined the public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space. Habermas (1960) further notes that the concept of the public sphere is a realm within social life in which public opinion can be formed and which is accessible to all. This concept is applicable in this study which classifies a group of EPL viewers in beer halls as a society. The concept of a public sphere also shows how these societies are for public engagement, debates and safe communities for political discussions in repressive states. In its ideal form, the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas 1960). Likewise, EPL viewers in Zimbabwe’s beer halls as a community also articulate political issues and engage in political debates which are stimulated by football commentary. Habermas (1960) further notes that the engagement within the public sphere is blind to class positions and the connections. Likewise, a beer hall is a classless environment which accommodates all people regardless of their backgrounds, race, ethnicity and professional positions. Integrating the two concepts, this study traces how active football viewers in Zimbabwe are using the existent public sphere formed in beer halls to engage in political discussions freely and with less censorship.

#### IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is an ethnographic research on the nexus of football viewership and resurfacing of political public sphere in Zimbabwe’s beer halls, specifically focusing on fans commentary, for the 2020 to 2021 EPL Season. Atkinson (1983) notes that ethnography refers to a particular set of qualitative methods used in both cultural studies and the social sciences to learn about people’s lives and elucidate certain cultural phenomena and meanings. The specific communities studied produce accounts of their worlds that can be a microcosm of a macrocosm pertinent in explaining broader social and cultural topographies. It was critical to “tell it as it is”, as Geertz (1973) emphasises, regarding the need to understand from the local person’s point of view. Throughout the research process the researcher acted as observer

participant in purposively high density suburbs located beer halls. Observant participation refers to active membership that encourages bodily immersion (Ochs 2015). Participant observation is a critical and fruitful methodology for researching power undercurrents in Zimbabwean football commentary and fandom. Ncube, L and F. Chawana (2018) recent study *'What Is in a Song? Constructions of Hegemonic Masculinity by Zimbabwean Football Fans,'* used the same ethnographic encounters and participant observation to explore the construction of masculinities by football fans in Zimbabwe's stadia. Participant observation calls for self-reflexivity in order to undo the researcher's bias (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). This was critical throughout the research, as corporeal reflexivity was necessary. This refers to awareness of one's body as an experiencing subject and a physical object accessible to the gaze of others (Wacquant 2004).

However, more recent approaches to ethnography argue against the possibility of "unbiased" scholarship, and view reflexivity as "a tool to enhance awareness of our situatedness and, subsequently, to be more receptive to perspectives that approach the world from a different position" (Saukko 2003, 62). The researcher was aware of his political perceptions on ZANU PF and MDC Alliance the main political parties in Zimbabwe could affect observation analysis and the interpretation of commentaries. Moreover, the research sites (beer halls) are also gendered. Some of the chants and commentaries are misogynistic. Due to the "intimidating" nature of the drunken viewers, the researcher was at first terrified to be alone, fearing violence from the "louts". However, with time, the researcher became accustomed to and comfortable in the beer halls. Carrying out the research alone worked to his disadvantage considering Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2002) assertion that male and female researchers have access to different information, as they have access to different people, settings, and bodies of knowledge. If the researcher had a female researcher, it was going to be easier too. The researcher tried his best to deal with bias in the interpretation of observations.

The research considered ethical principles of informed consent and confidentiality. The researcher took all these ethical consideration seriously so as to abide to the academic research requirements of being ethical. Having been granted consent by the beer halls owners, the formal "gatekeepers" of happenings in these spheres, the researcher embarked on fieldwork starting 2020. He also managed to get consent from the sampled 150 viewers and 50 viewers gave audio consent following the structured commitment statement and the other 100 agreed to sign consent forms with the same commitment statement. Some audiences requested anonymity and the researcher remained ethical by abiding to their expectations of not releasing their identity. For the one-year period, the beer halls of Acid in Chikanga high density suburb, Makhaya Complex in Chikanga High density suburb and Villa Sport in Dangamvura high density suburb all in Chikanga-

Dangamvura Constituency were his key research sites. Due to prior knowledge, the researcher knew that high-profile matches—especially those involving EPL top five teams: Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, Manchester City and Liverpool would provide rich data. This is mainly because of the enmity between these clubs and also their huge fan bases. Being a passionate football fan, the researcher found the research experience both exciting and insightful. He attended a total of 10 popular derbies, FA Cup Final, UEFA semi-finals qualifier matches and the final match in 2021. He participated in the chanting, dancing and singing as a way of immersing himself in the situation with participants. However, the researcher refrained from violent activities, such as violence against other fans, bar attendant and policemen. Although in most cases football viewers' songs, comments and dances are embedded with political statements, for feasibility purposes he confined his study to commentary. He used his mobile phone to record most of the "commentary" and "discussions" for analysis and he also captured some of the celebration pictures. This is because fandom commentary and semiotics are contextual. The commentary is shaped by specific events on the pitch. More than 15 political phrases deemed relevant to the research were recorded, but not all the commentaries were analysed for the purpose of the study. Purposive sampling was used to select commentaries for analysis. Purposive sampling is selecting groups or categories to study on the basis of their relevance to the research questions, the theoretical position, and, most importantly, the explanation or account which one is developing (Yin 2011). The undertones and embedded political connotations of the commentaries were analysed in relation to the broader sociopolitical gender context. Critical discourse analysis was used to analyse the selected commentaries. The commentaries are in Shona, but the researcher translated the undertones to English for accessibility by a diverse audience. However, he admits that at times some meaning is lost during the translation process. The findings are presented in the section that follows, according to theme. The first theme shows the nexus of football commentary and hegemonic sentiments produced.

## V. RESEARCH DESIGN

The study made use of qualitative research as a method since the research objectives requires interpretative data. Barbour (2014) notes that a qualitative research approach canvasses focus group interviews, telephone, personal or mail interviews and document analysis. This study made use of interviews through ethnographic encounters. The interviews provided appropriate information towards the study which seeks to deduce commentary meanings passed by different football viewers. This is because the research objectives of the study yield unquantifiable data hence the use of qualitative methods precisely answers the questions of the study. Additionally, in essence of this study, qualitative research method had enough advantages to the researcher since it gives depth and detail of issues covered. Interviews for instance are not limited to particular question but rather can be directed or redirected by

researcher in real time and the direction and framework of research is quickly revisable as soon as fresh information and findings emerge (Yin 2014). Significantly as well, the researcher blended well with the viewer's hence making use of participant observation. Ethnographic encounters helped the researcher to actually be part of the viewers who consciously and unconsciously expressed their emotions, comments and feelings.

#### *Population and Unit of Analysis*

This study used a target population of 150 viewers from three main public beer halls in Chikanga - Dangamvura Constituency. With the assistance of beer hall attendees of the selected beer halls, the researcher used snowballing sampling technique to identify football fanatics who frequent these spots. The researcher identified 50 viewers at Acid beer hall and 50 viewers at Makhaya Complex beer hall and 50 at Villa Spot in Dangamvura all in Chikanga-Dangamvura Constituency. The selection of these viewers was made easy with the support from the beer hall attendees and owners who would quickly identify those who are real football fanatics. The researcher community targeted these beer halls which are common in the highly political constituency. Horrocks (2010) argue that unit of analysis might be families, communities, organization, groups, programmes, articles, or a theme. In this study, the researcher used three main beer halls. However, two of the beer halls are too big that the researcher would not focus on it as a whole and using just 50 viewers could have not showed the perceptions of the majority. Therefore only identified football fanatics were observed and selected using non-random sampling. The beer halls were selected on the basis of being part of the popular spots where in most cases men visit to watch EPL games.

### VI. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

#### *Participant observation*

Participant observation was one of the methods of data collection used by the researcher. The researcher would watch the football games with the viewers and he managed to blend well with the viewers and beer hall owners. The researcher observed how viewers conduct themselves during football matches. He also analysed their commentary, dances and gestures at the same time observing how they produce political discourses. The researcher also observed the expressions of viewers who in this case were the study's audience who were involved in the production and reproduction of political discourses all through football commentary. Participant observation is "when you not only observe people doing things, but you participate to some extent in these activities as well" (Horrocks 2010). Apart from participation, the researcher also had interviews so as to verify the observed behaviour and to avoid generalisation of facts on early judgements made by just observing.

#### *Interviews*

This research used In-depth interviews and personal interviews. King and Horrocks (2010) argue that, interview method involves presentation of verbal incitements and reply in terms of verbal replies. The researcher used semi-structured interviews which included both strictly predetermined order and at times enabling a free-flowing conversation. With the viewers, the researcher used personal interviews basically by engaging in a face-to-face contact. Personal interviews as Barbour (2014) notes can be direct personal verbal investigations or it may be indirect verbal enquiries. The researcher used direct personal interviews to collect information from 100 football viewers. Probing technique was essentially used to extract in-depth data by the researcher. Gray (2009) suggests that probing interview technique is whereby the researcher uses verbal and non-verbal means to encourage a respondent to continue speaking.

### VII. DATA ANALYSIS METHODS

#### *Critical discourse analysis (CDA)*

The researcher used critical discourse analysis in examining political commentaries and any forms of speech that may be used in manipulating the impression given by the viewers. Data retrieved from what now seems to be 'universal' football commentary in Zimbabwe's public spheres was analysed through CDA. CDA stems from a critical theory language which sees the use of language as a form of social practice (King and Horrocks 2010). Language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication reveal power dominance. The first dimension is the object analysis dimension that includes analysing verbal and visual texts. The second dimension is the analysis to which the object is produced and received. The last one is the socio-historical conditions which govern all the above processes. The researcher made an analysis of spoken commentary, political signs made during the game and expressions. Discourse analysis studies the way that people communicate with each other through language within a social setting. Football commentary as language is not seen as a neutral medium for transmitting information, it is bedded in our social situation and helps to create and recreate. The researcher makes an assessment of the expressed commentary.

### VIII. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

An analysis made on the sampled commentaries revealed hegemonic themes emerged which outline how popular commentaries made in Zimbabwe's beer halls present political realities in a [variety of] political dominance and masculinity ways. What is clear is that popular commentaries are a medium through which political hegemony is being populated, cemented and passed to future generations. The emergent themes are explained below.

#### *Football Commentary, Power Undertones and Hegemonic Views*

Fandom commentaries cover a range of themes. These include politics, gender and religion. In most cases, the political undertones are drawn from comments passed in Shona a

vernacular language popular in Manicaland Region. Public spheres are the dominant medium of expression and it appears to be the norm; Habermas (1960) contends that these expressions are meant to either attack or stir debate and in some instances they will be expressions of power. These expressions which can be nationally accepted have clear sources though one cannot claim with certainty that certain comments are passed by people from a particular political party. There are no instances where people from all political divides agree on some political commentaries, and thus it is not always easily discernible whether a certain commentary is passed by either a ZANU PF or MDC Alliance supporter since most comments evolve on these two political parties. It is beyond the scope of this article to attribute any commentary to a specific political party discourse. The article is restricted to the analysis of the commentary and its undertones in relation to hegemony. The comments blend political undertones, hegemonic discourse, misogynistic expressions and emotions from different supporters. Football viewers appropriate and repurpose these comments or expressions to suit their intentions, in humorous and embedded ways. This in a way becomes a way of discussing deep politics on a lighter note which is difficult to do on more formal platforms. Construction of commentaries such as “Chele Varakashi”, “General Kante Chiwenga” and “Chibhakera Mudenga, Chinhu Chedu Ichi” all to be elaborated below depicts how politics is being discussed on a lighter note in less formal platforms.

#### *Hegemonic Views:*

“Chele Varakashi” (Football Teams Dominance and Political Hegemony)

This is one football commentary acceptable in many parts of Zimbabwe. It is commonly expressed during Chelsea matches and it is appropriated and bastardized to “ZANU PF Varakashi” (ZANU PF the dominant political party in Zimbabwe). As EPL games will be played, football fans will be mirroring the political events in Zimbabwe and relate without fear of victimization in beer halls which are free spheres for political discussions. “Varakashi” in Shona literally means (Group of powerful men of political and social domination who raids the weaker groups). Discourse of hegemony and political dominance coming to play. One of the comments passed by a Chelsea supporter during the 2020-2021 UEFA final match, “Chele tinorakasha, wanonyarara nhasi maCitizens, wanongowukura” (Manchester City fans are too talkative but during this final they will be left silent since Chelsea has proved to be the destroyer and stronger team). The embedded undertones of the same comment were drawn from President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s old public statement, “Vanongowukura, vachingowukura isu tichingotonga” (They complain and complain but we continue leading them). This was in relation to MDC Alliance efforts to challenge the 2018 Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) results which declared ZANU PF as the winning party of the polls. Manchester City fans were reduced to mere complainers and

the political undercurrents equating the fans to MDC Alliance supporters. Chelsea 2020-2021 UEFA final win over Manchester City on March 29 2021 with a 1-0 narrow victory was again likened to Zimbabwe’s presidential polls where ZANU PF candidate Emmerson Mnangagwa won the 2018 election with a narrow margin of 50.8% against 44.3% by his closest challenger Nelson Chamisa of MDC Alliance. Often, both football fans from all teams take a leading role in the commentary, but winning teams’ fans generally outnumber their counterparts. It is, however, problematic to say that the fans belong to a certain political party. Not all of these fans have inclination to political parties they will be either directly or indirectly supporting through commentary with some political connotations. Football matches viewership and commenting during EPL games does not make one belong to a certain political party. Merely commenting football using political statements, quotes and political figures in praise does not make one a supporter. In fact, some of the men who regularly attend matches are mahwindi (touts or vendors). However, through commentaries, these men express their political thoughts. Most of the commentary as analysed conflates hegemony of ZANU PF with political dominance and aggression. Such comments express hegemonic discourse.

“General Kante Chiwenga” (Football and Political Frames)

Fandom commentaries are not monolithic as they are riddled with power undercurrents showing political dominance and male masculinity. Stephen Whitehead (2002) asserts that masculinity is connected to dominance. This may explain why fans’ popular framing of Chelsea’s Ngolo Kante as “General Kante Chiwenga” openly brags on masculinity. “General wedu Ngolo Kante haisi ndonda iyo” (Our Army General Ngolo Kante is strong and not a weak sickling man). It is also plausible that “General” reflects a top army position in any country. “General Kante Chiwenga” may in that regard symbolise dominance, authority and source of power. While Ngolo Kante is known for his outstanding stamina and midfield dominance, an army general is also ideally known for ensuring state security, but in this context, the connotations of the term General in Zimbabwe symbolizes power and authority since Zimbabwe’s Vice President is a Retired General who engineered the ouster of Robert Mugabe as President and ZANU PF’s secretary. What drives such comments and likening a football player to a prominent politician is a way of commenting deep politics though humor and metaphors. Ngolo Kante playing a pivotal role for Chelsea’s UEFA victory, Zimbabwe’s Vice President Retired Constantino, Guvheya, Nyikadzino Chiwenga also played a strategic role in a disguised coup to ouster Zimbabwean President Mugabe and pave way for then Zimbabwean President Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa. Sports centrality in political discourse saw the Vice President Chiwenga commenting the 2018 elections using football jargon in a published article by The Chronicle Newspaper headlined, “No to bhora musango, VP Chiwenga tells ZANU PF” (No to political sabotage) and using direct translation (Do

not fail to score deliberately by missing the goal post). Like Ngolo Kante an invincible midfielder, Zimbabwe's Vice President is also known as a strategic pillar in ZANU PF's politics with his political milestone merited on his ability to end the 47 year Mugabe leadership. Ngolo Kante's complexion as a black man and his midfield dominance has also brought to scrutiny through commentary as the quote goes "Mwanamutema haisi Ndonda" (Revolutionary black man is not weak and sickling). This commentary also says something about masculinities in a Zimbabwean political context. Miller (2014), notes that there is a common tendency to exaggerate the manhood of black people. In the commentary, football fans brag of the revolutionary black man's complexion which is attached to its dominance and strength as equated to 'mwanawemutema haisi ndonda', a black man is not weak and sickling. This version of masculinity tends to affirm that blackness is manliness. As alluded to earlier, the assumption is that "real men" must be able to crash their opponents in the field of play. As Ngolo Kante dominates Chelsea's midfield, Zimbabwe's Vice President General Chiwenga is also perceived to be dominant in ZANU PF political field and Zimbabwe's political landscape. Even beyond beer halls commentary, it is common to hear people interpreting sport with a political lens. The commentary analysed also show that, in football contexts, sexual dexterities are celebrated as ways of performing hegemonic masculinities. This concurs with Miller's (2014) assertion, discussed earlier.

"Chibhakera Mudenga, Chinhu Chedu Ichi" (Semiotic Analysis and Political Discourses)

Concurring with Ferdinand de Saussure (1972) key notions on the theory of signs, Leeds (1993) notes that the study of signs is part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology. Psychologist speaks of conscious and subconscious behaviors of people. These behaviors manifest during football viewership with emotions driving football fans to consciously and unconsciously build different signs open for numerous interpretations and meanings. The commentary, "Chibhakera Mudenga Rapinda" (Raise your fists it's a score) as a way of celebrating a goal has in it political undertones as it is related to ZANU PF's party slogan with the same chant and visual expression. Football viewers in beer halls are seen with right hand fists in the air as a way of expressing happiness and emotions. "Rapinda, pamberi nekupinza" (It has been scored, continue scoring) is common commentary and in most cases the commentary is accompanied with fists raised in the air. The same chant "Pamberi" is also used by ZANU PF political figures as they raise their right hand fist in the air and use the slogan "Pamberi neZANU PF" (Continue supporting ZANU PF). Consciously or unconsciously one football fan after Chelsea scored the golden goal in the UEFA final match made a commentary with his right hand fist in the air "Pamberi ne Chele, Chinhu Chedu Ichi seZANU PF" (Continue supporting Chelsea, this thing relating to trophy is ours, just like how ZANU PF has the political grip). The

hoarse voiced dreadlocked fan received same chanting responses leaving the entire beer hall with echoes of "Chinhu Chedu." "Chinhu Chedu" (Our thing) was a post 2017 disguised coup political discourse in reference to ZANU PF's new dispensation which was calling shots for unity and ownership of ZANU PF and political grip without exclusion tendencies. An article published in The Herald newspaper of Zimbabwe on 27 November 2017 headlined "Of 'Chinhu chedu' and political economy . . . unpacking Operation Restore Legacy" set the tone of the new political discourse which has stood the test of time in Zimbabwe. ZANU PF and Zimbabwe's President Mnangagwa has consistently used the "Chinhu Chedu" (Our Thing) in reference to political grip and ZANU PF political party.

"The war veterans as did others, who supported the silent ascendance of the crocodile (then Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa) to the throne as a major shareholder by virtue of seniority in Zanu-PF, saw the revolutionary party as Chinhu Chedu. So did the ZDF whose hierarchy is manned by veterans of the nation's struggle. Naturally, it came as no surprise when the ZDF repeated the Chinhu Chedu mantra albeit in another terminology. The ZDF Commander Gen Chiwenga used the words "we are stockholders of the country. Some are stakeholders. Stakeholders come and go, but stockholders have nowhere to go, so we are stockholders, we came with it (Zimbabwe)." He made the remarks in an interview with The Herald on April 18, 2016. Note the words "we came with it" and its relationship to Zanu-PF and the liberation struggle."

The same political discourse is mirrored in sport through the lenses of fandom commentary whilst viewing EPL games. Beer halls have become informal liberating public sphere of political discussions and commentary.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This study has established that football commentary in public spheres is an important transmitter of political hegemony, hegemonic masculinity and social ideas about political discourses and narratives. Popular commentaries accepted nationwide like 'Chele Varakashi', 'General Kante Chiwenga' and 'Chinhu Chedu' are highly political. Football viewers produce and reproduce political discourse by creating and recreating political meanings. The scope under study certainly cries out for attention and offers insights into the jocular performance of politics in public spaces. These performances and commentaries are sanitized with power undercurrents. Fandom commentaries are not monolithic nor are they confined to mere cheering, but they speak to issues of politics, power and dominance in Zimbabwe, as elsewhere. Using concepts of public sphere and active audiences, the paper has highlighted how meanings are created and re-created by the powerful nature of media audiences. I complemented earlier arguments on public sphere, such as those put forward by J.

Habermas (1987, 1995, 2012) and Papacharissi (2010). Public sphere and active audience concepts are relevant to the exploration of political commentary in sporting sites. By deploying public sphere as a concept in the analysis of football commentary, the study irradiates how political undertones are produced and reproduced in political discourses. Indeed, from my analysis, for most Zimbabwean football fans who regularly watch EPL matches in beer halls, the commentary is more of expressed political discourse. The commentary conflates ZANU PF's hegemony and dominance. Football teams and players are mirrored as political frames. This reinforces the argument that football is a specific "political regime" that justifies dominant political relations and inequalities through the reproduction of dominance (Ncube 2014). The commentaries analysed point to specific nature of political discourse on hegemony. An example of this discourse is of "Chinhu Chedu" popular ZANU PF mantra. Finally, football commentary addresses a range of themes which could not be exhausted by this study. Future research on Zimbabwean football commentary could focus on their intersections with gender and religion discourse among other issues.

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