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How do audiences of televised English football construct difference based on race/ethnicity?

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ABSTRACT

Our study analyses media audiences of football within the English context. The research question can be formulated as follows: How do young people at a Northern-England university interpret and (re)construct discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in men's televised football? Results from our focus groups with young football media audiences show how they take a relatively race-conscious perspective in comparison to most earlier studies. At the same time, football talk appears a complex space where racialized discourses are rejected as well as accepted and where meanings given to race and ethnicity intersect with other markers of difference such as culture and nationality.

In tegenstelling tot de meeste eerdere studies analyseert deze studie hoe het televisievoetbal-*publiek* betekenis geeft aan etniciteit en huidskleur. De onderzoeksvraag kan als volgt geformuleerd worden: Hoe interpreteren en (re)construeren jonge mensen aan een Noord-Engelse universiteit (18–26 jaar) discourses over huidskleur en etniciteit in mannenvoetbal op televisie? Bevindingen laten zien hoe veel van de geïnterviewde mediagebruikers reflexief zijn in hun betekenisgeving aan huidskleur/etniciteit. Tegelijk blijkt 'football talk' een complexe en tegenstrijdige plek te zijn waar raciale vertogen gereproduceerd en tegelijk afgewezen worden en waar betekenisgeving aan etniciteit en huidskleur samenhangt met andere constructies van verschil gebaseerd op cultuur en nationaliteit.

KEYWORDS

Race; ethnicity; football; television; cultural studies; Cultivation theory

Introduction

Men's televised football is a highly popular form of entertainment with the English Premier League as a global frontrunner (Dubber & Worne, 2015; UEFA, 2018). Given its massive popularity and omnipresence, various scholars have pointed toward English televised football as a key social power for the reproduction of hegemonic discourses in contemporary globalized societies (Hylton, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2003). One of the main characteristics of contemporary professional (men's) football is its display of racial/ethnic diversity of players. This also applies to the English Premier League that can be considered one of the most visible platforms of racial/ethnic diversity in the world. While some research has shown how football's diversity on the pitch may be a catalyst for increasing tolerance and social cohesion in multi-ethnic societies (although not unconditionally) (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019), research has also shown how televised football has exclusionary

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effects (e.g. Cox et al., 2015; Van Sterkenburg, 2020a). Most notably, research indicates how sport media tend to represent athletes of different racial/ethnic origins in a biased way thereby reproducing commonly held racial and ethnic stereotypes (Carrington, 2011). Black athletes are relatively often linked to ‘natural’ and ‘animalistic’ physical attributes (‘strong’, ‘fast’), whereas White players are relatively often represented as rational and as leaders (e.g. Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Ortega & Feagin, 2017).

While an emphasis on the natural athleticism of Black players may be seen as empowering, this also severely limits and essentializes Black athletes in terms of their bodily attributes. The constant repetition of such discourses may cultivate and ‘naturalize’ these meanings. As a result, they can easily become part of common-sense knowledge in wider society thereby reinforcing long standing racialized hierarchies (Müller et al., 2007; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019). Previous studies have shown how such racialized media discourses may have implications beyond sport participation as well, for example in hindering Black and minority ethnic footballers and athletes to reach leadership positions after their playing career (Bradbury, 2013).

Most studies in the area of sport media and race have focused on how athletes of diverse racial and ethnic origins are represented in sport media (Van Sterkenburg, 2020a). An important dimension that also deserves attention, however, is how everyday media *audiences* receive and interpret sport media content. While some notable attempts have been made into audience reception research (e.g. Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015; Lawrence, 2016; McCarthy et al., 2003), there is not a critical mass and the topic remains relatively under-researched. This is unfortunate as we know that media representations may be read differently by different audiences and that knowledge about media content should be supplemented with knowledge about audience interpretations if we want to gain more insights into the wider impact of mediated sport. This paper, therefore, addresses audience receptions of men’s televised football in the Premier League by young viewers. Focusing on young viewers makes sense as they are frequent consumers of football while they are also relatively susceptible to media impressions in the formation of their identity and opinions (Global Web Index, 2018; Lines, 2000). The period in which the study took place is particularly interesting as it overlapped with topical debates on the role of football media in perpetuating racism in the English context – debates in which celebrity football players such as Raheem Sterling and Romelu Lukaku had a clear voice and addressed the role of media as reproducing racial stereotypes and fuelling racism.

The aim of this paper is to gain a more in-depth understanding of the discourses young people draw on when giving meaning to English men’s football and racial/ethnic diversity. We specifically set out to explore how young viewers’ ‘football talk’ at a Northern England university (re)constructs, reinforces and/or challenges wider racial/ethnic stereotypes and hierarchies (e.g. Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Hylton, 2009; McCarthy et al., 2003). The research question that will be addressed in this paper can now be formulated as follows: *How do young people at a Northern-England university (18–26 years old) interpret and (re)construct discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in men’s televised football?*

We will now first outline our theoretical framework which also includes a conceptualization of race and ethnicity and a reflection on our own (racialized) positionality. This will be followed by a methodological section and a Results section where we present and interpret the findings based on our focus group interviews. More specifically, the Results section provides an analysis of the discourses that participants in the focus groups draw on when giving meaning to race and ethnicity in (televised) football. Results indicate how many participants take a relatively reflexive and critical stance towards the football media and challenge racialized myths around the hegemonic Black Brawn – White Brain dichotomy. At the same time, however, interviewees regularly draw on hegemonic racialized discourses. It shows the shifting and sometimes contradictory character of racialized discourses. The empirical findings constitute the building blocks for a deeper analysis after which we come to a conclusion in the last section of the paper.

Theoretical lens

Substantially, this research is situated within the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies and cultivation theory supplemented with insights from sport scholars who employed Critical Race Theory (e.g. Carrington, 2011; Hylton, 2009, 2018; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015).

The special significance of the cultural studies approach for this study is that it considers sports and media as aspects of culture that people draw on for thinking about, and putting into action, ideas about race and ethnicity (Coakley & Pike, 2009). Race and ethnicity (alongside other intersecting social dimensions such as gender and social class) have always held a central place in the cultural studies tradition, and various scholars working within this tradition have discussed the particular challenges of conceptualizing race and ethnicity (McCarthy et al., 2003). We concur with Hall (2000) who considers race and ethnicity as conflated social constructs that gain meaning and are constantly negotiated in and through discourse. We realize that researchers have often distinguished between the constructs of race and ethnicity, with race usually referring to (meanings given to) biological characteristics such as skin colour and ethnicity referring to (meanings given to) cultural traits such as language, dress or religion (Hylton, 2009; Van Sterkenburg, 2020b). While we acknowledge that this distinction is useful for analytic purposes, research also shows how race and ethnicity are often used in conflated ways in everyday discourse, for instance when people distinguish between Black and White people by discussing how they are different in *cultural* terms (Morning, 2009) or when people speak of ethnicity and culture in racial terms, with a reference to skin colour and phenotypical characteristics (Hylton & Lawrence, 2015). We, therefore, use the terms race and ethnicity in a conflated manner in this paper ('race/ethnicity') (Van Sterkenburg, 2020b).

Televised football discourses

Hall (1995, 1997) speaks of media discourses as frames through which people talk (and then act) about a certain topic thereby constructing and defining that topic. Research shows how sport media discourses tend to reproduce a racialized framing of minority ethnic groups (Ortega & Feagin, 2017; Van Sterkenburg, 2020a). This applies, in particular, to televised football. Research by Repucom (2014, 2016) indicates that while linear traditional TV is supplemented with social media use, online streaming, and multiple screen viewing, television remains the most popular medium among young and old people across Europe to watch football (also Skey et al., 2018). Such football viewing is often a collective experience where people watch with others in a domestic context or in more public settings such as in a sports bar, a stadium, or fan zones in a city centre. While these settings are diverse, they are characterized by a 'physical co-presence' and a television set which acts as 'a primary motivation for attendance and a centerpiece of subsequent interactions' (Buffington, 2017, p. 937, 939). Cultivation theory emphasizes how television as the most popular medium cultivates ('reiterates, confirms and nourishes') particular ways of seeing the world for their viewers (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 49), thereby naturalizing (and legitimizing) specific normative perceptions of the social world, amongst others those related to race/ethnicity. Similarly, Happer and Philo (2013) argue how the recurrence of media discourses over a longer period of time may result in the normalization of such discourses. Televised football is powerful in that it portrays racial/ethnic diversity of football players on an almost daily basis to enormous audiences and, in so doing, cultivate specific discourses on race/ethnicity.

While previous studies generally found that while young sport media users tend to accept and reproduce hegemonic media discourses surrounding race and ethnicity (e.g. Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Cranmer et al., 2017; Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004), media users *also*, in particular women and those of a minority background, sometimes challenge dominant racial perceptions (Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Azzarito & Harrison, 2008; Hermes, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2003; Morning, 2009). It shows how sport media is a domain where discourses surrounding

race are continuously contested and negotiated and where further study is required (Ash & Cranmer, 2020).

Whiteness

Of particular relevance for a study on meanings about race/ethnicity in football media is the concept of whiteness. Sport scholars employing Critical Race Theory such as Hylton (2009) and Hylton and Lawrence (2015) explain how whiteness can be seen as a powerful discourse that privileges white people, amongst other things by associating a white skin colour with desirable and normative characteristics such as leadership, rationality, commitment and mental toughness. At the same time, (a discourse of) whiteness tends to disadvantage and marginalize those of a non-White minority ethnic background (and those who are seen as being located in the periphery of whiteness) as 'strange', 'irrational', 'different' and the Other (Green et al., 2007; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015). The attention for the under-researched area of whiteness is useful for this study as we explore meanings given to players of various racial/ethnic backgrounds *including White players*. We will explore, for instance, the underlying racialized/ethnicized undertones ('sub-texts') when interviewees talk about football players. Such audience research can give more insights into how various audience groupings strengthen but may also challenge hegemonic media discourses and/or create alternative meanings in their everyday 'football talk'.

Racial/ethnic positionality of researchers

A reflection on whiteness also means we – as authors of this article – reflect on how we are racially/ethnically positioned and how that may have impacted our interpretation of findings. Being White, able-bodied Dutch and Italian males working within White-dominated societies, we are socialized into everyday hegemonic racialized discourses. Our 'default' experience of the social world around us is one in which White cultural practices are the (often invisible) norm and where we are not racially discriminated (Green et al., 2007). As we do not face racial discrimination ourselves, we may not always 'see' or recognize racialized stereotypes and processes of Othering that are part of a hegemonic (White-situated) discourse in society. To interrogate – as much as possible – white-situated hegemonic discourses including our own (and those of our respondents), we give primacy to our theoretical perspectives that informed us throughout the research and analysis. They are helpful in widening the reservoir of discourses at our disposal to explore and interpret racialized discourses in participants' narratives. As such, they provide a useful epistemological tool to come to a fuller, but situated, understanding of the narratives from the part of our White and non-White interviewees (Bradbury et al., 2018).

Methodology

Data collection

To understand how youth audiences make sense of race/ethnicity in televised men's Premier League football, the first author of this paper has conducted five focus group interviews in England in March 2019. Focus groups are interviews in a group setting that rely heavily on group interaction and discussion, with the interviewer taking a moderating role (Finch & Lewis, 2003; Peek & Fothergill, 2009). In practice, this meant that the interviewer asked questions based on a topic list to stimulate interaction between the interviewees but did not interfere much. The purpose was mainly to simulate an intimate setting in which televised men's football is regularly watched and talked about, thus reflecting a natural football 'sitting' with friends. We followed Peek and Fothergill's (2009) advice to include between three and seven participants in one focus group, the number of interviewees in our focus groups ranged from three to six persons.

The study was conducted utilizing a sample of 21 students between the age 18 and 26¹ who were enrolled at a Northern England university (a few interviewees had graduated already). The main criterion in our sampling was that the participants watch televised football on a regular basis. Recruitment of participants took place on campus and via ‘key informants’ (i.e. university lecturers within diverse disciplines who circulated the opportunity to participate in focus groups amongst students²). Participants all participated on a voluntary basis, but they did receive a 10 pound remuneration for their willingness to be interviewed in the focus groups. Interviewees were told that the interviews would be transcribed literally, they were offered anonymity and signed a consent form before the interview. The interviews took place in various rooms in the students’ university buildings and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Nineteen participants were male and two female. This gendered skewness is to some extent reflexive of the comparative underrepresentation of women in football consumption which is still very much a ‘male’ activity, with males predominantly watching it with other male friends. This seems to apply particularly to football consumption of regular mediated *club* football while coverage of national football teams usually attracts a more diverse audience, especially during major tournaments such as the World Cup (Van Sterkenburg, 2013). Still, however, we realize that the demographic of our sample is more skewed than actual football viewing in England which shows that men watch the Premier League approximately three times more (as very frequent viewers) than women (Lange, 2021). While some researchers favour a certain homogeneity in demographic of a sample in a qualitative study (which of course does not mean homogeneity in attitudes and opinions) (see Peek & Fothergill, 2009, for an overview), others have pointed out how gender or educational level may influence people’s knowledge and perceptions including racial knowledge and perceptions (Gaziano, 1983; Morning, 2009). Therefore, findings of this study cannot be generalized to the English population at large or to other young people in England. As a result, we consider our sample as a valuable empirical point of departure that further develops our understanding of young people’s audience receptions of race/ethnicity in televised football. At the same time, however, we consider the restricted sample in terms of gender and educational level a limitation and urge future studies to replicate and expand this study in diverse contexts and with more diverse social groups.

Our focus groups were relatively diverse in terms of their racial/ethnic background and nationality. Of the 21 participants in total, eight interviewees self-identified as ‘White-British’, one as ‘White’, one as ‘White-Caucasian’, one as ‘White-Asian’, one as ‘European – Asian’, one as ‘Black-British’, one as ‘Latino’ and seven respondents identified with their respective place of origin as ‘Portuguese’ (1), ‘Syrian’ (1), ‘Gibraltarian’ (1), ‘Vietnamese’ (1), ‘American-Lebanese’ (1), ‘US-American’ (1) and ‘Kenyan’ (1). In our results section, we use these labels for self-identification when we refer to specific interviewees. Ten interviewees were born in England while three others had lived in England for a substantial part of their lives (on average 12 years). Five interviewees had only arrived in England one to three years ago, usually to start their university education. Three interviewees did not mention number of years they had lived in England though one of them said ‘most of my life’.

Football played a relatively important part in (most) of the interviewees’ lives. They primarily watched English men’s club football (Premier League) on a frequent basis and sometimes international (men’s) games as well. Two respondents only watched occasionally, with their families. All interviewees watched football within a group setting in a pub or at home with others though most combine such collective football viewing with (occasionally) watching alone. Furthermore, some interviewees supplement *televised* football consumption (usually their primary source of football consumption) by watching football content on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or Twitter. This media usage reflects the current ways of football viewing in which a variety of mediated forms of communication are incorporated in young people’s everyday lives (Skey et al., 2018). Many participants were somewhat involved in football themselves with fifteen interviewees still playing actively and four others with previous playing experience. A few interviewees attended

matches of their favourite team in the football stadium, but the vast majority of interviewees followed football through media.

Topic list and video fragments

The interviews were based on a topic list that was structured according to the following main themes (1) Football on TV and context of watching (2) Meanings given to football players on TV (focus on race/ethnicity) and (3) Evaluation of mediated football coverage. Throughout the interviews, we used a few 'video-triggers' to stimulate the focus group discussions. More specifically, the interviewees were shown three football video fragments which were selected beforehand based on varying degrees of racial bias in the commentary. The first fragment was a highlight summary of the England – Croatia match played in London on 18 November 2018, as part of the UEFA Nations League group stage. The fragment lasted 7:26 minutes and was meant to be the first 'settle-in' video for the participants. The fragment does not explicitly talk about race/ethnicity but shows racial/ethnic diversity on the pitch and shows some subtle differential treatment of players by the commentator. The second video fragment was a pre-match televised pundit discussion about Romelu Lukaku from April 2017. Lukaku is a Black Belgian football player of Congolese descent who played for Manchester United at the time of the video. The pundits drew on the natural Black athleticism discourse in a rather overt manner describing Lukaku in terms of his physical attributes such as being 'quick', 'strong', a 'beast of a player'. At the same time, the pundits were critical about Lukaku's efforts and work ethic. This fragment was mainly used somewhat later on in the interview to confront interviewees directly with some of the racial/ethnic stereotyping in sports media language and explore how the participants discuss and evaluate that type of commentary.

The third fragment connects with the previous one and shows a minute-long video interview with Lukaku mentioning racially biased media outlets in the UK. He speaks about local newspapers that tend to criticize him ('But it was always "Yes but ... Yes but ... Yes but ...". I would never get my respect'). This video reflects the wider English context at the time of the research when professional football players raised their voices against racism in the media. This was also a 'trigger' to explore group discussions, both during the viewing portion of the video and in the focus group afterwards, on the role of the media in (re)producing (or challenging) discourses about race/ethnicity in men's football.

Data analysis

We used a bottom up procedure in our data collection and data analysis.³ It meant, for instance, that the interviewer tried to avoid predefining race/ethnicity in terms of predetermined categories in the questions he asked in the interviews. This squares with an inductive approach to research where a-priori concepts or definitions of race and ethnicity will not define the analysis (Boeije, 2010; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This left much space for respondents to use their own conceptualizations and categorizations of race/ethnicity (Morning, 2009). This way of working allowed us to investigate how audiences themselves talk about race/ethnicity in the British football media context. The bottom-up procedure also meant that the group interviews were all recorded and then transcribed word for word, followed by a thematic analysis that used insights from grounded theory in its exploration of how audience interpretations incorporate implicit meanings and wider discourses surrounding race/ethnicity (Boeije, 2010). The first step in the analysis was open coding in which the raw data (the transcription of verbal commentary) was broken down into a great variety of different labels that we used to get a first overview of audience meanings of race/ethnicity based on televised football. The result of this open coding process was 'a list of different codes' (labels) (Boeije, 2010, p. 98; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Subsequently, we grouped together those codes/labels that had more or less similar meanings to 'reduce the number of units which we have to work with' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 65). After that, we explored dominant themes

(and subthemes) in the data (Boeije, 2010). This axial coding process resulted in the construction of a limited number of dominant themes and subthemes. In the final selective coding step, the core themes and the wider narratives and discourses that underlie these themes – and how these discourses relate to relations of power – were further examined (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout the analytic process, themes were compared to each other to explore their interrelations and we searched for evidence and counter evidence in the data. Both authors discussed the development of the core themes to check with each other which ones were the dominant ones and how they ‘indicate the nature of the data’ (Boeije, 2010, p. 111).

The following section will present the two main themes and the subthemes that resulted from our analysis. We will discuss these findings in more detail and place them in a wider academic and societal perspective. We end the paper with a Conclusion where we focus on the knowledge contribution this paper makes and suggest avenues for future research.

Results

Awareness and use of stereotypes

Our findings show that around a quarter of the interviewees draw on a ‘natural physicality discourse’ to give meaning to Black football players. These interviewees state that Black footballers are naturally stronger, faster, and more physically gifted than other players.

But generally, let’s be honest. Black people are physically, not advanced ... but they are more, they have better genetics, than every other person. They are faster, stronger, quicker. (23-year-old Gibraltar male)

For some interviewees, there is a thin line between awareness of such racial stereotypes on the one hand and acceptance of these stereotypes on the other (McCarthy et al., 2003). For example, some interviewees, while being somewhat critical of the football pundits’ emphasis on the strength and power of Black player Lukaku and pointing out the stereotypical character of these attributions, *also* argue that this stereotype may be true:

I do think it’s true, like generally speaking. Lukaku he is quick, he is massive, he is strong. He fits the stereotype of a big black player I suppose. (20-year-old White-British male)

Being physically gifted was singled out as a very important trait for a professional football player, generally. Therefore, respondents did not always consider the Black ‘natural’ physicality discourse problematic.

A second stream of reasoning, *which was more dominant in the interviews*, shows that relatively many interviewees are aware and critical of racial/ethnic stereotypes used in English televised men’s football, in particular, the common idea that Black players are ‘natural’ athletes. This is evident not only from the way the interviewees talk about players but also in their reflexive argumentation about stereotypes themselves, e.g. when they challenge specific stereotypes. Most interviewees consider racial stereotypes ‘lazy assumptions’ that should be challenged. One respondent stated that ‘you can have non-skilful Brazilians and weak Black players’, thereby challenging the common stereotype held by some other interviewees as well as mainstream sport media coverage that Brazilian players are all skilful and Black players are physically strong by nature (Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Ogasawara, 2004).

When asked about the origins of racialized assumptions and stereotypes, respondents point to society which ‘created’ them and now constantly spread them thereby turning these stereotypes into common knowledge. This line of reasoning suggests that these interviewees reflexively used a social constructionist perspective to race that acknowledges the constructed character of racial stereotypes (Morning, 2009). A large portion of the respondents find such ‘naturalization’ of racial stereotypes problematic. One interviewee argues, in relation to the Black athleticism stereotype:

It’s just a bit of a myth the way they think that, if you got a Black African player he probably [is] better in defending because he’s going to be strong, but I think I’m right in saying that there is nothing in science

that ever proved that a Black African has got stronger bone density and there is no proof. It's just a stereotype that is in everyone's head. (22-year-old White-British female)

Another interviewee argued that 'there's no evidence that's come out to suggest that a different race suggests different type of abilities physical wise at all' (19-year-old White-Caucasian male).

Various respondents – of different racial/ethnic backgrounds – challenge a 'natural physicality discourse' by a reference to individual qualities of players. They argue it is up to the individual player and his personal skills to succeed in football and that race/ethnicity has nothing to do with that: 'I think it's purely based on the individual' (19-year-old White-Caucasian male). Some respondents argue that people should become more aware of racial stereotypes as these stereotypes are harmful for Black people in the UK. They argue that football-related assumptions are being transferred beyond the football sphere where Black people will suffer from these connotations: 'The way they [the media] are portraying it, [...] that's what they [citizens] see' (23-year-old Black-British male). A focus on bodily skills might seem flattering, 'but it is undermining the other aspects' (25-year-old Syrian male). One interviewee points out how a consistent specific emphasis on natural physicality instead of more general 'football skill' is negative for Black players and serves to reproduce a stereotypical and racialized discourse:

[...] if you call someone skilful [...] there is no negative to that. Big and beast and powerful is kind a like ...
[...] It's like typical to what you would call a six-foot four Black guy. [Interviewer: Yes, so it's positive or negative?] Yeah, you can find [it] negative ... (24-year-old European-Asian male)

Our findings, thus, show how many interviewees reject a so-called natural physicality discourse to give meaning to Black football players. Earlier studies – both on sport media language and audience mindsets – showed how a natural physicality discourse has often become part of 'common sense knowledge' to define Black athletes (e.g. Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). In contrast to this, many students in the research here argue that such emphasis on 'natural' Black athleticism is a myth and a stereotype. While this rejection of a natural physicality discourse may seem to indicate clear opposition to older hegemonic discourses on race, such a conclusion may be preliminary and not entirely complete. This becomes evident in our data since paradoxically, when *not* explicitly asked by the interviewer and when finding themselves in the flow of a focus group discussion, a considerable portion of respondents occasionally drew on the natural physicality discourse and described Black athletes as naturally strong and powerful. These respondents were mostly White men but not exclusively so. It indicates the pervasiveness of this physicality discourse and how it may operate in an unconscious manner in the mindset of many people. Cultivation theory emphasizes how long term media exposure including exposure to racial stereotypes has a long-term impact on cultivating specific discourses in young people's minds (Gerbner et al., 2002). Moreover, Hall (1995) has argued how the dynamic character of discourses results in contradictions. This also seems to apply to the interviewees in the study here; while they critique and dismiss the stereotypical belief that Black people are 'natural' athletes on the one hand, they use this biological racialized discourse at the same time, on the other. This squares with Morning's (2009, p. 1186) argument that 'black biological exceptionalism' may still be a major principle for many people as to how racial concepts enter into everyday meaning making, with blackness being associated, more than any other group, with biological accounts of difference. The domain of professional sports and football, with its emphasis on athleticism and physicality, seems to function as a context where such biological exceptionalism may find particular resonance (Morning, 2009).

Stacking

Academic literature speaks of 'stacking' as one of the negative consequences of racial stereotyping: Stacking refers to differential positioning of players on the pitch based on stereotypes and players' race/ethnicity. It results in Black players being positioned as 'wingers' – as these positions are

considered to require speed – while White players get positioned in the centre of the field – as these positions are considered to require intelligence and tactical qualities (Maguire, 1988; Olushola-Ogunrinde & Carter-Francique, 2020). Recent research shows how even in modern football which can be considered as requiring a variety of skills regardless of position on the field the phenomenon of stacking still takes place, with an overrepresentation of Black minority ethnic players in peripheral positions and an overrepresentation of White players in central positions (Makinde, 2021). In one of our focus groups, a Black interviewee reflects on this from his own football experience as a midfielder. His statement shows how the widely circulating association of blackness with natural quickness makes him manoeuvre in a careful way on the pitch:

Yeah, because, I'm a centre midfielder, attacking midfielder, when they see me run, I don't run, I try not to run, because I'm fast, but I try not to run. Once I start running, yeah, that's it, 'put the fast player on the wing, he's fast'. Fast white player here, no. Any coach ... (23-year-old Black-British male)

Other ethnicities

When asked about diversity in the Premier League, the interviewees also refer to other racial/ethnic minority groups than Black footballers. They most often mentioned (the lack of) Asian players in English professional football. This then obviously begs the question why the football league lacks 'Asians'. Firstly, when it comes to the definition of 'Asian', one interviewee – who identified as 'White-Asian' himself – pointed out that there is no such thing as the 'Asian person', 'so, to say Asian as a whole is too broad of a definition' (23-year-old White-Asian male). It is hence too simplistic to put everyone under the same umbrella category. This was only identified by a White-Asian interviewee, though, all the others (also the other European-Asian interviewee) described players from Korea, Japan, China or the Middle East collectively as 'Asian players'. It indicates, in a more general sense, how participants used broad racial/ethnic categories. Once established, however, they associate the constructed groupings with specific characteristics and traits that in turn confirm and strengthen the resultant categorizations (Morning, 2009). This was apparent, amongst other things, when respondents unreflexively use a very broad category as 'Asian' and associate this category with 'cultural difference' – in terms of different sport preferences or religion:

I'd just say it's a social factor, where you see a lot of people from the Afro- or the Caribbean backgrounds, who tend to enjoy football a lot more as opposed to *Asian communities who enjoy different other sports*. (25-year-old Syrian male, own emphasis added)

One respondent refers to Ramadan as an explanatory factor for the perceived underrepresentation of 'Asians' in football:

There are certain factors, but a main one is mainly Ramadan. And during Ramadan the [football] season is going and that's when the fasting comes [...]. So, with that, players will struggle physically in that environment. It's one of the factors, it's not everything, but that is a big part as well [...]. (23-year-old Black-British man)

Respondents, furthermore, mention that 'Asian' people enjoy other sports like cricket more than football and, thus, invest more energy in such sports. At the same time, they argue that this is a cultural instead of a natural preference and they advise the English Football Association to attract Asian communities at a younger age. This then connects to another reason the interviewees mention to explain the lack of players (in their view) of Asian origins in the Premier League. 'I think, it's because scouts, they look more for Black and White players. You don't associate Asian people with football' (20-year-old European-Asian male). Football clubs are believed to actively scout African, South American, and European players, and to have lesser interest in 'Asian' players. The respondents connect this to the former cultural argument, but some also mentioned a difference in natural physicality and athleticism, 'to me it's the fact that Asian people they don't have a body shape or the height or something comparable to, let's say European or African people [...]' (23-year-old

Vietnamese male). Similar to Black players, Asian players are, thus, sometimes reduced to their bodily functions, though in a different manner – as lacking the required physicality. The reason for this is described in terms of biological factors and genetics; One respondent argues that:

The average Asian male is like 5 foot 8. So, it's generally quite shorter. So, like for English football, it's quite physical and tall and it's 20 pound grown men going at it.⁴ (20-year-old White US-American male)

This association of (male) 'Asianness' with physical deviance and weakness has been found in a variety of studies and seems part of a wider western discourse on 'Asian athletes' (e.g. Kilvington, 2012; Park, 2014). Such references to 'Asian culture' and 'physicality' may subordinate Asian masculinity to a hegemonic normative masculinity, with the latter being a more valued type of masculinity associated with characteristics usually seen as desirable and superior. We will return to this later.

Compared to Asian and Black football players, White players remained relatively unspoken and invisible in the focus group interviews, except for some discussions based on nationality of footballers (to which we will come back in a moment). This reflects what scholars drawing on a CRT and cultural studies approach such as Hylton (2009) and Green et al. (2007, p. 396) have shown about how whiteness operates in media and in society at large: as an 'empty category' and an invisible norm against which those seen as belonging to non-White minority racial/ethnic groups are measured and 'Othered'.

National playing styles

Even though the main focus of the group discussions was on race and ethnicity, interviewees also referred to nationality of players relatively often. It indicates how 'race talk' intersects with talk about nationality and how race is constructed through other modalities such as nationality (Hylton & Lawrence, 2015). This may particularly apply to a sport like football where national teams who compete in major tournaments like the football World Cup are important means of identification for viewers (Van Sterkenburg, 2013). Interestingly, discourses about specific qualities of players get more diverse when discussions turn from race/ethnicity to nationality of players. Respondents tend to associate different nations with different playing styles: 'Italian very slow, Spain very slow' (19-year-old White-Caucasian male), 'I think England has very high tempo' (21-year-old Latin-American male), 'in Brazil you'll see a lot of flair' (21-year-old Latin-American male)', then you go to Spain, where it's one touch everything' (20-year-old White US-American male). In discussing playing styles, respondents thus associate different nations with (fixed) playing styles. In their argumentation, all (male) Spanish players were highly skilful, ball centred and Brazilians were seen as having flair. Interestingly, when describing such national playing styles, interviewees do not distinguish amongst players of different racial/ethnic origins in multi-ethnic teams such as the English team. Nationality as a marker of meaning making seemed to then override race/ethnicity as the most relevant marker for meaning making. *All* English players, for instance, were cast together regardless race/ethnicity and were described as strong, aggressive, tactical and physical:

England is very static, where players hold their positions and it's very tactical, so where it's hard to break down, from a defensive, from an attacking standpoint. (21-year-old American-Lebanese male)

I think mostly it's the culture. So, like in England they have a more aggressive football, high tempo. You know, big players. So, a footballer adapts to a certain type of play. In Spain, they have much smaller players and more technical. I think in that sense, kind of it does [matter] where you come from. Kind of plays a part in how you get to play. (23-year-old Kenyan male)

Statements about these 'national playing styles' seem to draw on wider discourses. Earlier studies found, for instance, how media and audiences describe English players as 'tough' and 'aggressive' in their playing style, Brazilians as having flair and being skilled, Spain as technical (e.g. Cox et al., 2015; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015; Ogasawara, 2004).

Cox et al. (2015, p. 678) have shown how in the English context it is, in particular, English players (particularly those playing in the English national team) who are ‘thought to embody the values of the nation in their character (honesty and hardworking) and style of play (aggressive and utilitarian)’. Cox et al. (2015) and Hylton and Lawrence (2015) show how English football media and media consumers tend to equate an idealized masculine identity with White English footballers who are represented as loving football, possessing physical and mental toughness, knowledge of the game, and determination and aggressiveness. Lawrence (2016), in a study on media images of athletic bodies in Men’s Health magazine, also shows how a reading of White athletic bodies as idealized bodies is promoted, with White men being portrayed and interpreted as disciplined and their virtues of the body mainly a result of the mind (discipline and training). Our findings indicate that some of the participants in our study seem to draw, in part, on a similar discourse when they describe the English national team as aggressive and physically tough but tactical at the same time (and thus ‘disciplined within a game plan’), while constructing ‘Asian’ or ‘Brazilian’ footballers as different from this norm (as ‘physically weak’ or ‘having flair’). It also seems to show how normative whiteness and white privilege operates in football talk: as either the invisible norm or the preferred norm that is associated with a diversity of desirable skills or characteristics such as being disciplined, committed, strong, and intelligent (Hylton, 2009; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015).

Role of media as (re)producing racial/ethnic stereotypes

Another dominant theme in the focus groups was the role of media in reproducing (or challenging) hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity. Focus group discussions about media coverage and race were mainly about Black and White players, as one interviewee said: ‘The cases in England are mainly Black and White’ (23-year-old Black-British male). Respondents generally argue the media have an important role in (re)producing racial/ethnic stereotypes. Such a reflexive and (at times) critical stance towards media contrasts with some earlier studies that concluded how media users mainly consider journalists objective, factual and neutral (e.g. Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019). At the same time, such scepticism is not that surprising given the debates on race and football media in England since 2018 – a debate initiated by Manchester City player Raheem Sterling and followed up by other players such as Lukaku. They argue English media are more critical towards Black players than White players and fuel racism in society (‘Raheem Sterling accuses media of fuelling racism after alleged abuse’, 2018). Many respondents in the focus groups agree and state that English football media are racially biased. As a result, Black players ‘walk on eggshells because as soon as they do something wrong, it’s blown out of proportion’, one of the interviewees says (21-year-old American-Lebanese male). Participants illustrate the differential media treatment of White and Black players by providing specific examples:

Especially with Sterling [Black English player at Manchester City] who probably, especially this season, is probably one of the best players in the league. Even though he’s playing really well, there’s always some something negative that comes out in the newspapers. If I relate it back to my [club], if I was talking about Leicester and particularly Vardy [white English player at Leicester], that season where he scored loads of goals. And even when there’s been those parts that season where there was just, there was negative stuff. He got sent off and he was banned for a few games. Even though there was stuff like that, there was never really any negative media [...] And I believe it’s because he’s white. [...]. (20-year-old White-British male)

Based on interviewees’ narratives, targeted negative media coverage seems to mainly take place in relation to Black players. The interviewees hardly mention White players or any other minority ethnic group as being targeted by media. It indicates how the English (media) discourse is framed in terms of a Black–White dichotomy and how a process of Othering seems almost exclusively directed to Black players.

Respondents also argue that media often associate ‘being Black’ with natural physicality, not only in relation to footballers on the pitch but also more generally: ‘in the media, Black people are more precepted as being more physical people’ (23-year-old Black-British male). If media coverage of

White players was discussed (though this happened just rarely), respondents mentioned that media emphasized other characteristics. One respondent, for instance, is critical of football journalists as they associate Black people with physicality and White people with ‘thinking’ skills’:

The conclusion of how the media perceive Black people can’t be higher than being physically, being physical and performing. So, they are using words like ‘being a beast’ and stuff like that, that’s how it is. The perception of a White person in that environment or player, ‘he can go on to be more thinking’. So, they can think more. (23-year-old Black-British male)

Media as factual and neutral

A relatively small portion of the respondents argue that media coverage is fair and racially neutral. They consider the video fragment about Lukaku – in which the pundits describe him as a ‘tiger underneath the surface’ and as a ‘pussycat’ – as relevant critique that will improve the player’s performance: ‘You need negative critique in order to know where you can improve’ (23-year-old Gibraltar male). Another interviewee states that:

To say that the critique is due to his ethnic background is a bit jumping too fast to a conclusion because they actually get quite fair points about Lukaku. (23-year-old Vietnamese male)

Within this context, some respondents differentiate amongst various British media. On the one hand, they talk about media that discuss the game itself and ‘know what they are talking about’ (21-year-old American-Lebanese male). On the other hand, they mention tabloid media that focus on the private life of footballers in a more sensationalist way to attract readers. The latter are more judgmental, according to the respondents, and leave much room for audiences’ own interpretations which may then be informed by racial/ethnic stereotypes in describing and explaining players’ characteristics and their behaviour.

Conclusion

Televised football can be considered one of the main forms of entertainment nowadays where meanings around cultural differences are (re)constructed on an almost daily basis. The current study has, therefore, foregrounded football media audience perspectives and explored the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that young people at a Northern-England university draw on in their ‘football talk’. Many participants in the study – regardless of their race/ethnicity – had a relatively reflexive and critical stance towards the football media. They argue that football journalists produce unbalanced racialized coverage using racial stereotypes, thus reproducing racial/ethnic hierarchies. Many interviewees were particularly critical of the ‘natural physicality discourse’ that football journalists use to give meaning to Black football players. At the same time, while this may seem to indicate that young people in England have become more aware and critical of racial/ethnic stereotypes, such an inference may be preliminary. Meanings shift over time and depend on the specific (research) context from which such meanings emerge (Andrews, 2002). While the specific research context in the study here resembles a natural football ‘sitting’ with friends, this ‘naturalness’ is contrived by the researcher (Finch & Lewis, 2003). Within such a – somewhat artificial – setting, some participants may have been more aware of what they say compared to their everyday football talk outside of the research context, resulting in more socially desirable answers in which racial stereotypes are critiqued and rejected. This may apply, in particular, to the English context where well-known celebrity footballers had spoken out against racial stereotypes just prior to our field work. Moreover, our data show the shifting and contradictory character of audience discourses (Hall, 1995). While relatively many of the interviewees rejected a hegemonic natural physicality discourse in relation to Black football players, respondents accepted and drew on this discourse in the flow of the conversation, at the same time. It seems to indicate how, within the wider reservoir of discourses people have at their disposal for meaning making, a ‘Black Brawn’

discourse remains relevant for meaning making and may get reproduced without people always being aware of it.

A natural physicality discourse was also invoked when interviewees talked about Asian players, though in an opposite manner compared to when they talk about Black players. Some students explained a perceived lack of Asian players in English professional football by pointing out how Asian (male) players do not possess the required physicality for a sport like football. Participants, thus, evoked ‘race’ and ‘natural physicality’ to construct and essentialize non-White racialized groups by an emphasis on ‘natural’ footballing excellence (in relation to Black players) or ‘natural’ shortcomings (in relation to Asian players). White players remain relatively unspoken in discussions about race thus indicating how whiteness operates as an invisible, normative discourse. At the same time, our findings show how football talk is a complex and contradictory space in which participants sometimes also criticize the football media for ‘hiding’ White players from explicit negative press while targeting Black players. Moreover, findings show how interviewees create and reproduce different shades of whiteness, especially within the context of national teams. Most notably, English players from the national team got associated with characteristics that can be considered desirable in both football and other societal contexts (toughness, tactical/strategic skills) while other national teams that are usually considered ‘White’ like (in this research) the Spanish team got associated with football specific skills only (technical, ball-centred, slow play). Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg (2020) found how football commentators also tend to create and strengthen such differentiation within the social group of White football players. In particular, they showed how Polish football commentators constructed White South-European players playing in the Polish football league as deviant by associating them with emotion, passion and anger, thereby placing them outside hegemonic conceptions of Whiteness that was mainly reserved for the White Polish players who were described more positively. Future research should gain more insights into the (re)construction of these different shades of white within sports and football.

Furthermore, our results show how meaning making towards race and ethnicity in everyday talk can be complex and the conflation of race and ethnicity that we discussed earlier in the article can take different forms depending on the topic of conversation and the racial/ethnic groups that are being discussed (see also Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019). In relation to Black footballers, for instance, interviewees often drew on a discourse which is grounded in racial (genetic, biological) factors, either by accepting or rejecting an idea of natural athleticism and genetic athletic advantage. This squares with earlier research that showed how people in their everyday talk tend to turn to biological and ‘racial’ explanations within the context of sport and Black athletes in particular (Morning, 2009). At the same time, when giving meaning to ‘Asian footballers’, respondents in our study combined biological arguments (‘Asian footballers are naturally weak’) with cultural arguments (‘Asian culture is more invested in other sports than football and prioritizes religion’) to explain the underrepresentation of Asian people in (professional) football. Yet, in other moments, national categorizations took precedence over ethnic or racial ones in differentiating amongst football players. This applied particularly when participants discussed national football teams and shifted the main marker of difference from race/ethnicity to nationality, which resulted in a discussion of different ‘national playing styles’ of teams – regardless of racial or ethnic composition of these teams. Future research should further explore these differentiating practices and examine how the conflation of race and ethnicity operates in everyday (football) talk and what this means for the conceptualization of race and ethnicity from a more theoretical perspective.

Given the complexity of football talk on race, we also advise future researchers to track audience discourses over a longer period of time. This is relevant as previous research has shown how alternative discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that challenge rather than reproduce everyday racism may be temporary and overridden by mainstream (hegemonic) discourses in the long term (Bruce & Stewart, 2015; Gerbner et al., 2002; Wensing & Bruce, 2003). It may then also be of added value to distinguish between heavy viewers and lighter viewers of football since cultivation analysis shows how ‘the repetitive lessons we learn from television’ (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 52) have

the most impact on heavy viewers' conception of reality. Lastly, it is imperative that future research expands the scope of the study by increasing the variety of participants on dimensions such as age, educational attainment, national identity and gender. Earlier research showed how, in particular, men and those of a lower educational background tend to draw on biological accounts of race, while college students may be more sensitive to racial issues (Ash & Cranmer, 2020; Azzarito & Harrison, 2008; Morning, 2009). This may have impacted the current findings. While the particularity of our sample does not impede the knowledge contribution the study makes to the field (e.g. Morning, 2009; Silverman, 2011), we advise future research to include a more heterogeneous sample. This will further broaden academic insights into audience receptions of race/ethnicity.

Notes

1. While we use the term 'youth viewers' and 'young viewers' for the 18–26 age group in this study, we realize that 'youth' and 'young people' are socially constructed concepts and that its meanings can change across time and place. Costera Meijer and De Bruin (2003), for instance, used the term 'youth viewers' for those between 18 and 28 years in their study on soap opera reception, while the European Union (in their Erasmus+ program) and the Council of Europe youth sector use the term 'youth' and 'young people' for the age groups 15–29 and 18–30, respectively (EU/Council of Europe, 2019). Some other academic studies into 'youth' and 'young people', however, have leaned towards the under-aged group of those between 14 and 19 years (often high school pupils) (e.g. Millington & Wilson, 2010).
2. We want to thank the university lecturers for their assistance in this process, this was much appreciated.
3. A portion of the data analysis and preliminary reporting was part of the requirements of the second author's Research Master traineeship paper (Walder, 2020).
4. The metric equivalent of 5 feet 8 inches is 172.72 cm. Furthermore, the metric equivalent of 1 pound is 0.453 kg.

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