

Race and whiteness in football talk amongst English fans: audience receptions of televised national team coverage (accepted for publication)

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Abstract

Televised football is still one of the main ways in which football fans consume football, often in a social setting. Previous studies into audience receptions of televised football often used focus group interviews with football fans and generally concluded that majority ethnic audiences tend to be engaged in ‘football talk’ that reproduces already existing racial/ethnic stereotypes and identifications. The current study takes one step further and has explored the consumption of televised football amongst White, male football fans *while it takes place*. We have watched football matches together with young people in Northern England combining participant observations in domestic settings with informal and more formalized group interviews. Results give insights into the (White-situated) ‘backstage setting’ of football consumption, identifications amongst fans with the national team, and the reproduction of racialized discourses. We will pay specific attention to the different ‘shades of whiteness’ that participants in our study (re)constructed based on their interpretations of the football matches that the English national men’s team played against the teams of Kosovo and Montenegro, within the context of the qualifying tournament for the men’s football European Championship in 2021.

Introduction

Mediated men’s football can be considered an important frame of reference and identification for football fans (Bruce, 2004). This frame of reference is created by media producers and offers audiences the cultural material to make sense of themselves and others (Azzarito & Harrison, 2008). Characteristic of professional (mediated) men’s football is the racial and ethnic diversity of the players it represents (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021). Research has shown how the dominant frame that football media use to give meaning to footballers of various racial/ethnic origins is a so-called ‘Black Brawn – White Brain’ frame (Buffington & Fraley, 2008). This frame refers to a hegemonic media discourse in which Black footballers are relatively often associated with natural strength and speed, while White footballers remain more invisible and are associated relatively often with leadership and mental skills. Scholars like Hylton (2009) have used the term enlightened racism for this phenomenon: natural athletic qualities associated with

being Black may be relevant in the sports domain but the characteristics associated with being White are relevant for the sports domain *as well as* for positions of power in society such as in academics, business or politics. These racial stereotypes tie in with societal discourses which uphold racial hierarchies in society where positions of power and leadership are mainly held by White men while Black people are overrepresented in unskilled work and/or lower-status jobs (Hylton, 2009; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; Van Sterkenburg, 2011).

Televised men's football, with the diversity of players it shows, is the place where such racialized discourse get reproduced and negotiated. Football, with "its show-bizz appeal and proliferation of stars" (Lines, 2000, p.670), is among the key topics being discussed amongst young people. Colleagues and I have shown, across national contexts, how mainstream media generally continue to reproduce these racialized discourses (e.g. Campbell & Bebb, 2020; Van Lienden & Van Sterkenburg, 2020; Longas Luque & Van Sterkenburg, 2022), with a few exceptions (e.g. Longas Luque & Van Sterkenburg, 2020). However, while previous content analyses have contributed significantly to our academic knowledge base on this phenomenon, everyday racial stereotyping in mediated football seems resistant to change. Moreover, there is relatively little knowledge on how audiences and football fans interpret, use and negotiate hegemonic racialized media discourses. Therefore, we focus in this project on the audience receptions of football fans who consume football on television. Drawing on insights from cultural studies, we thereby consider audiences not as passive recipients of mediated meanings, but as active interpreters of the presented content (Barker, 2008). Audiences can be critical of and oppose what they see on TV (a so-called 'oppositional reading'), they can approve of the message ('preferred reading'), or they can approve the message only partly ('negotiated reading') (Barker, 2008; Hall, 1980). Moreover, interpretations are not static or definitive but can change depending on context and are always negotiated within a social setting, i.e. with other people. This applies, in particular, to televised football consumption which often takes place in a social setting, with friends and family.

In this research¹, we will explore 'race talk' amongst football fans watching televised football. 'Race talk' can be considered everyday talk about 'race' and typically takes place in what Picca & Feagin (2020) called 'White backstage settings - relatively private comfort zone where whites

get together. The football viewing setting where friends gather (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021) can be considered such a backstage setting and deserves in-depth exploration. This is also important because there is relatively little knowledge on negotiation of racialized mediated discourses amongst football fans in such backstage settings. The relatively few previous audience studies into football consumption and race/ethnicity have used formalized individual or group interviews and have not been able to explore the viewing experiences and football talk *while these take place*. In this research, we have, therefore, taken a different approach and have watched football matches together with football fans, combining participant observations with focus group interviews afterwards. This way of working enabled us to reveal hegemonic (and occasionally alternative) discourses surrounding race and ethnicity that young people in contemporary multi-ethnic society draw on when watching televised football. The research thereby contributes to theorization on everyday meaning-making on race and ethnicity as a social practice.

The point of reference in the paper are televised football matches of the English national men's team as they are watched by male friend groups (young adults), as a collective practice. An earlier audience reception study we did (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021) showed how English football fans sometimes challenge the hegemonic 'natural' physicality discourse surrounding Black (male) footballers while reinforcing this discourse at the same time, sometimes during one and the same interview. For example, respondents disqualified the Black 'natural' athleticism discourse as a 'myth', while, paradoxically, associating Blackness with 'natural' athleticism later on in the interview. While that earlier study mainly addressed audience interpretations of *club* football coverage, though, our current study will focus on football fans' interpretations of (televised) *national* team matches. Van Sterkenburg (2013) and Wensing & Bruce (2003) have shown how such matches may trigger different responses, identifications and discourses compared to club football coverage (Van Sterkenburg, 2013). Wensing & Bruce (2003), for example, have shown how sport fans' identification with athletes representing their nation during a major event like the Olympics can trigger feelings of national pride that replace and override commonly used racial and gender stereotypes. The study by Van Sterkenburg & Walder (2021) on interpretation of club football coverage indicated that, when football fans occasionally discussed national football teams amongst each other, they tended to speak of 'national playing

styles' regardless of the racial composition of the national team. More specifically, biological racialized reasoning to give meaning to footballers— which was present in discussing footballers in the *club football* context (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021) - seemed to be replaced by more culturally informed reasonings of differences in national playing styles. Van Sterkenburg & Walder (2021) argue in relation to this that “ [...] 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 [...]. The current study aims to elaborate on that and explore this in a more in-depth manner. The main research question guiding the current study can now be formulated as follows: *How do audiences of televised men's football in England give meaning to race/ethnicity in their reception of national (men's) football coverage?*

A sub-aim of the current study is to explore how whiteness gains meaning in audience receptions of the football fans. While many studies on race and football media have explored how Black athletes are represented in media or interpreted by audiences, in comparison to White athletes, only a few studies have shown how *within the broad category of white players*, internal differentiations may be (re)constructed by fans. Van Lienden & Van Sterkenburg found, how within Polish football coverage, 'Polish Whiteness' gets constructed as 'normative', while South European players and footballers from the Balkan are constructed in more deviant terms being associated with hot-temperedness, amongst other things. The current study explores if and how such 'different shades of whiteness' (Long & Hylton, 2002) gets (re)constructed in audience receptions of televised football. A sub-question can therefore be formulated as follows: *How do audiences of televised men's football in England give meaning to whiteness in their reception of national (men's) football coverage?*

Theoretical lens

Conceptualization of race and ethnicity

This study aims to gain a deeper insight into meaning making processes of football audiences, with a particular attention for discourses surrounding race, ethnicity and whiteness. While 'race'

usually refers to meanings given to phenotypical characteristics (“marks in the body”) to differentiate amongst people (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1359), ethnicity rather refers to (meanings given to) cultural characteristics and differences such as differences in language, dress, or customs (Hylton, 2009; Tatum, 2017). However, even though race and ethnicity can be distinguished in analytic terms and in processes of self-identification (Tatum, 2017), the two constructs often collapse into each other in processes of Othering in everyday discourses, and also intersect with other dimensions of difference such as gender, nationality, class and sexual orientation (Hylton, 2018; Van Sterkenburg, Peeters & Van Amsterdam, 2019). I, therefore, use race and ethnicity in a conflated sense in this paper (‘race/ethnicity’) (Van Sterkenburg, 2011).

Backstage race talk

This research will, thus, explore the viewing experience and potential ‘race talk’ amongst football fans in their natural, private setting when they watch televised football. Morrison (1993, in DiAngelo, 2018, p. 45) speaks of ‘race talk’ as “the explicit insertion in everyday life of racial signs and symbols” (including commonsensical racial stereotypes) that help elevate White people while demeaning minoritized groups and positioning them in the lower levels of the racial hierarchy. Race talk can be explicit but it also often takes implicit forms like racialized jokes towards Black players in a football context (Harmsen, Elling & Van Sterkenburg, 2019). Feagin & Picca (2020) showed how such forms of racialization get reproduced in what they coin ‘White backstage settings’. The backstage setting is typically a relatively private comfort zone where whites get together. Research shows how in the privacy of the ‘White’ backstage settings - “private clubs of whiteness” as Jensen (2005; in Hylton & Lawrence, 2016, p. 2744) labeled them - many whites feel that it is appropriate to speak openly and assertively to other Whites about their deeper racial views which may also include stereotyping and prejudice (Feagin & Picca, 2020).

Being White (Dutch and Italian) men ourselves, we, also, have routinely ‘witnessed whiteness’ in the backstage settings (Hylton & Lawrence, 2016). However, while this is an experience shared by many White people, it remains usually hidden for Black people who only hear about this indirectly through anecdote (Hylton, 2018). The European football viewing setting where mainly White male friends gather (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021) can serve as backstage areas of whiteness (Carrington, 2011). These backstages may be relevant places for the

reproduction of ideas and worldviews within society (Feagin & Picca, 2020). For that reason, this paper explores actual backstage football viewing settings as they unfold amongst White (male) friend groups.

Whiteness

Of particular relevance for a study on meanings about race/ethnicity in football media is the concept of whiteness. Whiteness scholars like Essed & Trienekens (2008) and Wekker (2016) have defined whiteness as a process which consists of a set of discourses and practices that sustain White normativity and advantage (Hylton, 2009; Wekker, 2016). Whiteness as a discourse privileges white people, amongst other things by associating a white skin color with desirable and normative characteristics such as leadership, rationality, commitment and mental toughness, while disadvantaging and marginalizing those of a non-White minority ethnic background, and those who are seen as being located in the ‘margins’ of whiteness, as ‘strange’, ‘irrational’, ‘different’ and the Other (Green, Sonn & Matsebula, 2007; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015). Whiteness has long been propagated and held by the majority group of White people but is also, at least in part, accepted by many people of color showing the pervasiveness and normativeness of the discourse. White normativity and advantage has been documented for a range of institutions like academia, the arts, the fashion industry, the police force (e.g. DiAngelo, 2018; Essed & Nimako, 2006), surprisingly little attention has been given to how whiteness operates and gains meaning within a White-situated football audience (fan) setting. This deserves attention because we know from research that White people in White dominated settings often have a ‘blind spot’ to identify White-situated discourses or simply refuse to see it (DiAngelo, 2018). As a consequence, they may incorporate racial/ethnic stereotypes in their everyday talk without realizing it or while also denying or downplaying the use of stereotypes. The current research will explore this more in-depth.

Method

To capture the interpretations of televised football matches amongst football fans, this study aimed to recreate the social setting of the viewing of a football match as much as possible. Therefore, the second author watched football matches together with participants (football fans)

in their everyday domestic context. Two England national games were selected for these viewing sessions, both games took place in the context of the qualifying tournament for the men's football European Championship in 2021. The first game, England against Montenegro, was held on the 14th of November 2019 (hereafter called 'viewing 1'), the second, Kosovo against England, was held on the 17th of November 2019 (hereafter 'viewing 2'). After and during each viewing session, the researcher took part in small informal focus groups with the participants where they collectively discussed the seen program and where the researcher explored issues related to race/ethnicity, nationality, and whiteness. Furthermore, in addition to the two viewing sessions, the second author held two separate, more formalized, longer focus groups with audiences of televised men's football on the 15th (hereafter 'focus group 1') and 16th (hereafter 'focus group 2') of November 2019. The second author was – at the time of the research – a Research Master student with the same age, gender and race (White) as many participants in the study, he was also a knowledgeable football fan. This facilitated trust within the group setting, we will return to this laterⁱⁱ.

Data collection and sample

Students from a Northern-England University, some of whom the first author knew from an earlier research project, were contacted and asked to participate in the viewing sessions and focus groups. Further participants were acquired using the snowball system (Boeije, 2010). Interviewees acquired other participants in their respective social network and where thus involved in the sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Each participant received a 10 Pound incentive for their participation. All signed a consent form, allowing the researcher to use the gathered data in an anonymous and aggregated manner.

In total, five and seven persons respectively participated in the two viewing sessions ('viewing 1' and 'viewing 2', total of twelve participants there). Nine of the twelve interviewees identified as 'White-British', one as 'British', one as 'White', and one participant as 'European-Asian'. The age of the participants ranged from twenty to thirty years old, with an average of 24.4 years. The interviewees were born in the UK and can be considered football fans to some degree. Eight of the twelve participants described themselves as avid football enthusiasts watching football matches two to three times a week. Seven interviewees were involved in Sunday League clubs,

which means they trained regularly and competed in organized matches in the weekends. Football therefore played a big role in their lives. Two respondents stated that they only watch the “big” matches, one respondent watched only the matches of his favorite club and one interviewee follows football occasionally. Overall, the sample was mostly well involved in the football world.

In the two separate longer focus groups, ten participants were included. One focus group was held in the home of an interviewee, the other one at the workplace of the participants. Almost all participants were men (9), only one woman participated. Everybody identified him/herself as White-British. The age in these focus groups ranged from 21 years to 39 years, with an average age of 25.8 years. Six of the ten participants described themselves as huge football fans, following not only club matches but also international matches actively. One participant would describe himself as a sports enthusiast in general and followed football only passively as her/his children follow it. Two participants followed football occasionally.

Participant observations and focus groups

The viewing sessions/participant observations were conducted at the homes of one of the participants. The group already knew each other and watch football matches together more often. It was, therefore, easy for them to feel comfortable right from the start. Obviously, the presence of an external person, the researcher, changes the social setting to some extent. Prior to the game, the researcher therefore met with the group to get acquainted to one another and to create a familiar, loose atmosphere. Being of a similar age and having an interest in football as well, it was easy for the researcher to bond and to create a trusting relationship with the participants. During this time the researcher also explained his role in the group and made clear that the group should watch this match like any others they watch with friends.

During the match, the viewing session was audio recorded. In addition, the researcher took notes and observed the participants. Field memos are a useful tool to collect the researchers’ reflections during the data gathering phase (Boeije, 2010). The researcher wrote down all the non-verbal observations he made during the sessions. This included information about the participants’ consumption (alcohol, sodas, food etc.), the seating arrangements, how the

participants watch the game (concentrated, relaxed, agitated etc.), the interaction within the group and, in general, noteworthy observations that cannot be audio recorded. As the participants were sitting in front of the TV (in a semi-circle), the researcher sat slightly behind them. Even with this rather passive approach, the researcher was sometimes involved in discussions during the session, but merely in his function as football fan and not as scientist, without interfering or channeling the discussion at hand. Both matches were broadcast publicly, so no extra arrangements needed to be taken.

The viewing of the football match was supplemented with a range of short interviews. The first short interview round took place before the match started and included an introduction round, an explanation of the research context, and some first questions about background of participants and their relationship with football. The second question round was held during the half-time break and included questions about the seen content. The third question round took place right after the match and was based on an interview guide that the researchers had prepared in beforehand. The interview guide included more focused questions about meanings given to race/ethnicity in football, national belonging, and the interpretations of the football media broadcasting and seen content. Each viewing session lasted a little over 2 hours.

Furthermore, as said, two additional separate focus groups were organized with ten participants in total. The researcher used a topic list that was similar to the one used in the viewing session, however there was more time and space to discuss the matter more in-depth and to ask more detailed questions. Both focus groups lasted around 45 minutes and were voice - and video recorded.

Data-analysis

The data analysis combined all the different data gathered during the viewing sessions and the focus groups, this includes the conversations amongst participants during the match, the question rounds at the viewing sessions, the researcher's field notes from the viewings and the discussions during the more formalized focus groups. Each data set was transcribed and initially analyzed separately, and then connected to the other parts of the data and their analysis. The coding software NVivo was used to systematically analyze all interview data. Codes and more overarching themes were created following a process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). Themes that were identified within one data set (for example the separate

focus groups) were constantly compared with those identified in the other data sets (e.g. the interview rounds during the viewing sessions) to create larger themes and to ensure validity of the results (a process called constant comparison) (Silverman, 2011). Overlapping themes were connected and core themes and results extracted. The field notes during the viewing sessions served, moreover, as useful contextual material to the more focused interview materials.

Results

This section will give an overview of the main results of our study. Firstly, we will describe more in-depth the actual ‘backstage setting’ of the collective practice of televised football viewing. After that, we go deeper into what the audience members actually said in the question rounds and the longer focus groups. Findings will indicate how football fans describe male) players of different racial/ethnic and national origins and how they make sense of the England team and the opposing teams. Furthermore, results will address how the fans create different sub-categories within the racial category of ‘White footballers’ and how that relates to different ‘shades’ and hierarchies of whiteness. After the Results section, we will place findings in a broader academic and societal context in the Discussion section.

The televised football setting

One central aspect of this study was to observe football audiences in their most natural setting, at home, watching the game with friends. Of course, as said before, the presence of a researcher cannot be ignored. However, after accepting this rather new situation, the audience loosened up and seemed to forget about the external presence of the researcher with every minute played, this happened in both viewing sessions. This could be felt predominantly in the way participants interacted with each other, but also in the topics of discussion during their conversations. Both viewing sessions were very interactive, both before and during the game. In the pre-match phase, the audiences’ focus and interactions were mainly non-football related, preparing food and drinks. But even already in this phase, talk about football started with discussing expectations about the game or players, or the latest news on the game at hand. Some respondents commented on the starting line-up, like “*Why is Declan Rice getting the first team chance?*” (Viewing 2) and others discussed England’s chances for the game: “*Chillwell is going to score a freekick. Trent is going to score a freekick*” (Viewing 1). The pre-match televised reporting plays into that, giving

the audience already points for discussions, the starting line-up of their home team being one of the biggest ones. It is also in this phase where the interest in the game was almost at its peak. It is, though, important to say that both matches in our viewing sessions were not ‘top games’ - despite the fact that they counted towards qualification for the European Championships final round; England was already leading their qualifying group while the opposing countries (Montenegro and Kosovo) could be found in the back of the ranking. This may also be a reason why audiences were not very eager to discuss or preview the game in much detail during the pre-match period. If football was discussed, the focus lied on the English team without mentioning or pondering about the opponents. The very few comments about the opposing teams were restricted to statements about the lack of knowledge about them, like “*Where is Montenegro?*” (Viewing 1), “*You know where Kosovo is?*” (Viewing 2) or “*What flag is that?*” (Viewing 1). One respondent explained his lack of knowledge about the opponent by saying: “*The thing with Kosovo is that until ... what is it... three years ago? It wasn't even a country*” (Viewing 2).

During the match, it became clear that the ‘opposing countries’ Kosovo and Montenegro could not put up with England and the England team scored quite early in both games. Without much suspense in the game, discussions amongst the participants diverted into their social lives. With only one eye on the screen, people started talking about their days, about their work or study life, they talked about partying and girls. One respondent, for example, started showing a girl he likes on Instagram “*Hey look at her, look at this pic. Quite beautiful, isn't she?*” (Viewing 1) and a longer discussion about girlfriends and girls in general started. In case of big chances or eventful happenings in the game, the focus quickly changed back to football. This was usually accompanied by enthusiastic screams. Football talk therefore came and went, changing from being important in the group interaction to merely being noticed during these 90 minutes.

It could be observed that, in general, banter and joking were a big part of the interactions. The friends winded each other up, joked about players and talked about the other fans’ opinions, always with a comment ready. This friendly windup included comments like “*Certain members of the group seem to only be here for the food*” (Viewing 2) or “*He's the betting king*” (Viewing 1), ironically describing another member of the viewing session because of his lack of success in betting on sports. The banter was, though, friendly and seemed to be an integral part of the interactions. Some comments about the game reflected participants’ own experiences in the

sport, like “*When I was younger, I scored three goals and lost 2-1. Two own goals in the same game*” (Viewing 1). In the later stages of the game, the banter and off-topic discussions increased, also due to the increase of alcoholic consumption. As said before, food and drinks were a big part of the viewings and seem to be an important element in the football viewing culture.

In general, the tone of sessions could be described as a ‘typical’ masculine atmosphere. Some might call it ‘locker room talk’, where males interact in an almost competing manner; everyone tried to name interesting facts, nuanced comments on the game or their own interpretation of the seen content. Although this all happened in a friendly manner, a sense of need for the participants to show their football knowledge could be felt (as well as knowledge about the other topics being discussed). For example, participants criticized certain on-screen happenings and presented alternative, ‘better’ solutions: “*Rashford should’ve passed there*” (Viewing 1), “*That was poor yeah*” (Viewing 1) or “*Well, we would be playing better with the first team in. With Kane, Sterling...*” (Viewing 2).

The role of race/ethnicity in participants’ football talk

Within participants’ interactions, meanings given to race and ethnicity also played a role in implicit and more explicit manners. Football talk consisted both of discussions about individual footballers (evaluating their qualities and shortcomings), showing identification with the English team, and comparisons between the England national team and the opposing teams Montenegro and Kosovo. Firstly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, results show how the English audience members talk differently about the English national team than about the national teams of Kosovo and Montenegro. More specifically, players from Montenegro and Kosovo were seen as one homogeneous group; participants perceived all players of, for example, the Montenegro squad as similar, and they did not go into a discussion about player’s potential individual differences. For the English team, on the other hand, comments were more differentiated and (also) based on (perceived) individual differences amongst players who were assessed and talked about.

At the same time, our data analysis shows how participants regularly use commonsensical racial/ethnic stereotypes and discursive patterns when discussing the footballers. Most notably, participants used the Black athleticism argument when describing Black players of the English

team, associating them primarily with bodily characteristics (“*he is naturally quick*”, Viewing 1). Descriptions of White players, on the other hand, were still focused more often on their mental capabilities. Paradoxically, participants combined the use of such hegemonic racialized discourses with an awareness and disapproval of these same racial/ethnic stereotypes. It shows that discourses are not straightforward and contain contradictions (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021; Van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004).

Participants, thus, seemed aware of the problem of racial stereotyping, but these stereotypes seemed deeply implanted in their heads, continuously emerging in the football talk. Upon further questioning, participants sometimes justified their use of racial stereotypes by saying that these stereotypes are not necessarily bad or ‘racist’ and may also be true sometimes. One participant said, for example: “*I think you can't, you can never be completely unbiased. You'll never have one [...] person is completely neutral, but [...] it's recognizing that like, just because you have a bias, [...] it doesn't mean you're racist or whatever [...]*” (Focus Group 1). When describing the Black English player Raheem Sterling, some interviewees were aware that they merely describe him in terms of his speed and agility. However, in the next sentence, they then legitimized this limited description with the argument that it is ultimately true: “[...] *like a Raheem Sterling, or someone like that, he is in that same mould, isn't he? He's got tricks and skills, he's fast, so you could probably say he's [just] like that*” (Focus Group 1). Other studies have also shown how racial stereotyping is often explained by a reference to ‘truth’; Participants using stereotypes to describe Black players as naturally fast of strong say that these stereotypes are simply true. The argument is not seldom extended to Black players more generally, as also seems to happen in the above quotation with the participant referring to “*Raheem Sterling, or someone like that*” (own emphasis in italics added)), thus reinforcing a racialized Black Brawn – White Brain discourse of enlightened racism (Hylton, 2009). It is interesting to note in this context that participants, when describing Harry Kane, a White English player with a strong physique, focus on his tactical capacities as a reason why he is such a good player, while Harry Kane could easily be described in terms of his physical traits as well.

Stereotypes were furthermore legitimized when they seem positive in character. All participants rejected explicit racism, which they perceived as insulting someone because of her/his race. However, if stereotypes are used to compliment (in their view) a player, this goes without further

critical thinking. Potential negative effects of racial stereotypes are thus mainly noticed when the stereotypes are obviously negative in tone. More implicit and seemingly more positive forms of racial stereotyping – that still can have negative wider consequences like the Black Brawn – White Brain frame - are not seen as problematic.

(Re)construction of different shades of whiteness

A sub-aim of this study was to observe how the television audiences (re)construct whiteness.

Both the Montenegrin and Kosovar teams consisted entirely of White players, whereas the English squad was racially mixed. Participants did not mention any differences between the teams of Montenegro and Kosovo: both teams were seen in the same manner, as a distant entity that is a rather peripheral phenomenon in this context. England was described as a more developed country compared to Montenegro and Kosovo with a lot of football history.

“[England] *It’s a more prosperous country*” (Viewing 1) or “*more money in England*” (Viewing 1). The prosperity was seen as a reason for the high-quality football academies in the country resulting in better footballers. At the same time, these football related comments also reinforce a wider hierarchy, with England being generally rated higher and more developed than Montenegro and Kosovo. While England was described as a highly functioning and economic powerful country in the interviews, Montenegro and Kosovo were perceived as countries without many possibilities. “*They probably have other things they need to deal with as well*” (Viewing 1), one respondent noted in relation to football interest in Montenegro and Kosovo, without getting into more detail. Participants, thus, lumped together Montenegro and Kosovo, associating them with poverty and being under-developed vis-à-vis England. We will return to this in the next section.

Race and different shades of whiteness

The English team, although it consisted of several players of color, was predominantly described by participants as a White squad. Participants considered whiteness ‘the standard’, so to speak, with Black players being seen as ‘an addition’. This is illustrated in some of the conversations amongst participants in which racial background of some of the Black players in the English team was explicitly discussed, while whiteness never came up, thus reinforcing an idea of White being the ‘normal’ race/ethnicity of the England squad. Interestingly enough, the whiteness attached to

the English team was different than the whiteness connected to the Montenegrin and Kosovar team, this constructing different ‘shades of whiteness’ (Long & Hylton, 2002). Participants made comments, for example, about structural differences between the English team, on the one hand, and Montenegrin/Kosovar football teams, on the other. One respondent argued that this difference is obvious and can be seen everywhere: “*Everything from there, even down to the kit, that they wear, to the hotel they stay, into the food they eat, everything*” (Viewing 2). Without actually knowing the countries, comments about Montenegro and Kosovo seemed to be based on well-known Western-situated stereotypes of Eastern European countries in general: the countries were seen as under-developed, lacking financial means and laying behind. Comments about football fans’ misbehaviors, in one of the viewing sessions, also reflected the perceived inferiority of Montenegro and Kosovo versus England, thus further strengthening a discourse of normative whiteness (England) versus deviant whiteness (Montenegro and Kosovo). More specifically, participants said England had more “civilized” hooligans than Montenegro or Kosovo. They also condemned racial abuse by Montenegrin and Kosovar fans with more fervor than the racial abuse by English fans: “*The problem is not really in England though. I think there's is an issue, [but] nowhere near as much [as in Montenegro/Kosovo]*” (Viewing 2). This once again reinforced a discourse about England (and western countries more generally) as being more civilized and superior vis-a-vis Montenegro and Kosovo. It strengthens an already existing hegemonic discourse on civilization in many western countries in which Western-European whiteness is framed more positively than Eastern-European whiteness (Hylton, 2018).

Discussion

The present study provides useful insights into ‘football talk’ and meanings given to race/ethnicity and whiteness, in the backstage setting of football viewing. Results show how, in an intimate viewing setting with male friends, football fans’ identification with and talk about the national men’s football team can get a rather masculine tone. Respondents in the all-male settings engaged in competitive discussions where they share their view on football and offer their own interpretations of the mediated content. Hermes (2005) has shown how men tend to use their football knowledge to show their masculinity. The present study seems to confirm this. The men in both the viewing sessions and focus groups voice opinions to show their knowledge of the game to promote their status in the group. This ‘struggle over hierarchy’ goes hand in hand

with the use of banter and friendly insults amongst the viewers. Such banter seems to serve two purposes, it confirms the own status as a valuable member of the group (one is funny and has the power to ridicule others), and it downplays others' opinions at the same time - to then offer the own, 'actually right', opinion. The use of jokes and irony masks this competition as something that should not be taken too seriously. The overall tone of the viewing sessions reinforces this, as the atmosphere can be described as very loose and party-like. Respondents got easily distracted and intertwined football talk with personal stories. Lines (2000) and Van Sterkenburg (2013) also found how the collective viewing of national men's football during a major event is characterized by a carnivalesque atmosphere, especially amongst White male fans. This also applies to our study where respondents shared drinks, talked about their private life (such as girlfriends and personal stories) and cheered on their team.

The study also shows how, within the backstage setting of football viewing of national teams, meanings about race and ethnicity get (re)produced, negotiated and occasionally challenged. On the one hand, race and ethnicity played a less prominent role in discussing the national teams compared to the context of league teams we researched earlier (Van Sterkenburg & Walder, 2021). In interpreting national teams, which was the reference point in this current study, participants perceived the players as more connected to the nation itself, rather than on the basis of their skin color (as was the case for club games). On the other hand, racialized discourses still came up regularly. Participants appeared knowledgeable (and critical) about racial stereotypes and the role of media in reproducing them. At the same time, however, the fans combined a critical reflection on racial stereotyping with reproducing these very similar racial/ethnic stereotypes. This squares with audience reception studies by McCarthy, Jones & Potrac (2003) and Van Sterkenburg & Walder (2021) who also showed how White male media audiences in England were aware of racial stereotypes and reproduced them at the same time when they discuss players of various racial backgrounds.

Some of the football fans in our study explained their use of stereotypes by saying these are ultimately 'true' or that they should not be seen as negative per se. Such argumentation helps to naturalize and/or promote hegemonic constructions of blackness and whiteness that serve to uphold long-lasting power relations and hierarchies. Moreover, White participants generally, even when they were aware and critical of stereotypes, distanced themselves from the idea that

these may serve to privilege them, while disadvantaging minoritized racial/ethnic groups. Again, this finding confirms those by McCarthy et al. (2003, p. 231) who concluded that “White respondents thus appeared to deny any real meaning to stereotypical portrayals of Black players, even though they were aware that the discourse used tended to promote such portrayals.”

Whiteness

The current study has also shown how meanings given to whiteness intersect with discourses surrounding other social dimensions like nationality and geographical positionedness, resulting in ‘different shades of white’ (Long & Hylton, 2002). More specifically, the (perceived) whiteness of the English national team was constructed as a normative type of whiteness that had positive associations like ‘prosperity’ and ‘richness of football culture’. In contrast to this, the whiteness of football teams of Kosovo and Montenegro was perceived as a deviant type of whiteness. They were associated with poverty and cultural ‘backwardness’.

As such, the football fans in our study constructed English whiteness as superior to both English blackness and Kosovar/Montenegrin whiteness, within the context of the televised men’s football match. These findings also show how a major sports event like the football European Championship that has the potential for fostering connections amongst nations is also implicated in the reproduction of intra-European hierarchies. As such, this study reveals how whiteness gains meaning as a layered and hierarchical discourse in and through everyday football talk.

To conclude this article, we want to encourage future football media researchers to apply the observatory method we used in our study. We gained access to the natural backstage setting of football viewing and were able to explore racialized meanings during the actual moment of football consumption. Comparing the dynamics of the viewing sessions and the more formalized focus groups in our study, the former seems to have produced more direct and unfiltered findings (meaning-making) while the latter seemed somewhat more reflexive, sterile and less spontaneous/direct. Another advantage of the viewing sessions was that they gave a more general insight into the atmosphere within the private ‘backstage’ setting where White friends gather to watch football. Future research into football fandom and media can use this as a starting point for further elaboration.

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