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When jokes aren't funny: banter and abuse in the everyday work environments of professional football

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ABSTRACT

Research question: As with most professional institutions, English Premier League football clubs offer insightful, unique opportunities to more fully comprehend the cultural significance of banter and abuse within workplace environments. This article offers a new, critical perspective that provides a better understanding of the distinctive, intricate social discourses surrounding banter in the daily lives of professional footballers by answering the research question: What is the cultural significance of banter within the competitive work environments of English Premier League players?
Research method: Data were collected from 10 male participants (aged 18–30) by means of qualitative semi-structured vignette interviews. Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions (30 interviews).
Results and findings: The data and subsequent analysis illustrate how banter is an accepted and legitimised discourse within professional football, but promotes considerable anxiety, stress and unhappiness in work environments.
Implication: This study provides an original insight into the attitudes professional football players hold towards banter. Contributing to the existing research that has examined forms of abuse within sport, this article aims to better inform the management and development of athlete well-being and player care.

Introduction

Banter is central to the daily lives of English Premier League (EPL) football players (Hickey, 2016; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b). It is generally accepted as the *back and forth* joking between teammates, which should not be taken seriously by either the recipient or antagonist (Magrath, 2016). Although joking relations are widely assumed to be harmless in professional team and individual sports (Plester, 2016), their characteristics and constant presence in football culture share unmistakable similarities to forms of abuse (Jacobs et al., 2017; Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Professional sport is an environment in which abuse is often present and condoned. More recently, the different forms of abuse that athletes are, and have been, exposed to have become

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more widely known (McMahon & McGannon, 2020). Regarding professional football specifically, abusive practices are traditionally accepted and positioned as part of the cultural norms within footballing work environments (Kelly & Waddington, 2006). In these professional environments, players both participate in and are the recipient of such abuse. By shedding light on this issue, this paper offers insights that will prove helpful to club officials, team managers and other relevant stakeholders involved in player care and athlete well-being.

Utilising a theoretical framework that combines elements of Goffman's Dramaturgy (1959) with notions of Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), this investigation seeks to better understand the impact of such abuse on Premier League players. It illustrates how banter is better understood as a form of psychological emotional abuse, is normalised as workplace putdown humour and carries with it many elements that players find marginalising, deliberate and threatening to their identities and sense of professional security. In doing so, this paper will answer its research question:

What is the cultural significance of banter within the competitive workplace environments of EPL players?

Seeking to answer the research question, the paper offers an original perspective via its main objectives:

  (i) To understand how banter exists in the everyday lives of EPL players.
 (ii) To understand how banter disguises instances of psychological emotional abuse.
(iii) To consider how players utilise banter in their efforts to maintain their professional security at their respective EPL clubs.

Literature review

Similar to other workplaces, professional sporting environments are sites of distinct sociocultural norms and behaviour that both produce and condone the abuse of those who work within them (Brackenridge, 2001; Bringer et al., 2002; Burke, 2001; Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009; Hartill, 2013; McMahon & McGannon, 2020; Owton & Sparkes, 2017; Parent, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). McMahon and McGannon (2020) highlight how recent research sheds light on athletes who suffer different forms of abuse, across a variety of sports and levels of competition (e.g. Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Kerr & Stirling, 2019; McMahon et al., 2012; Stafford & Lewis, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

While banter as a social discourse in the workplace environments of professional sport has yet to be comprehensively addressed and explained, previous investigations in sport exhibit similar characteristics to organisational studies that have focused on workplace bullying and the negative impact of humour as a form of abuse (Hylton, 2018; Jewett et al., 2020; Nery et al., 2019;). This harmful impact becomes intensified by the complex social environments of professional sport that not only legitimise but also encourage a culture of banter, as it is deemed to enhance group cohesion, increase mental toughness and improve performance (Kerr & Kerr, 2020; Parker & Manley, 2016). In order to place this investigation's contribution within existing literature, the following section will:

• Outline abuse as non-accidental violence, placing banter within the domain of psychological emotional abuse.
• Apply further precision to the proposed understanding of banter, empowered by existing research that examines putdown humour within workplace environments.

Recent investigations examining abuse in sport have explored issues such as, abuse directed towards referees (Webb et al., 2020), child sexual abuse in sport (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020), and whistleblowing and abuse in the international sports sector (Verschuuren, 2020). Acting as an initial departure point for this study, Roberts et al. (2020) conceptualise abuse in sport as non-accidental violence and describe the various types of non-accidental harms enacted on athletes by coaches, support staff and other athletes. The most common forms of non-accidental violence in sport include psychological emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Roberts et al., 2020; Sojo et al., 2016). While not discounting the importance of either physical or sexual abuse, for the purpose of this study and in order to help better frame its data, the investigation primarily focuses on a form of psychological emotional abuse, later more accurately identified as putdown humour.

Psychological emotional abuse represents the most recurring theme or type of abuse investigated in sport research (Alexander et al., 2011; Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). The most common forms of psychological emotional abuse in sport have been identified as shouting, belittling, threats and humiliation (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; McMahon & McGannon, 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Working with elite female swimmers, Stirling and Kerr (2008) came to define psychological emotional abuse in sport as 'a pattern of deliberate noncontact behaviours … that have the potential to be harmful [to others in the shared sporting environment]' (p. 178). These forms of abuse within sport are legitimised by social actors, such as players, teammates and coaches. Such discourses are accepted as normative behaviour and are indeed thought of as necessary when developing motivated athletes, improving performance and strengthening mental toughness (Kerr & Kerr, 2020; Kerr & Stirling, 2017).

Considering banter as a form of psychological emotional abuse, one is compelled to reflect on the ever-present defence of such a discourse as 'just a joke'. Such a position necessitates the consideration of banter within the realm of workplace humour. Traditional assumptions regarding the function of humour in workplace environments range from stress reduction to the formation and promotion of corporate culture (Plester, 2016). According to Godfrey (2016), the past 20 years have seen a growing, diverging academic interest that focuses on the intersections of humour, work and organisations. Considering humour and the culture surrounding banter in occupational and workplace environments, Collinson (2002) warns that by mistakenly identifying joking discourses as superficial and light-hearted interactions, we miss the true significance and meaning of what is actually happening.

The type of banter in which employees engage offers a potential lens through which we can learn more about the professional practices and cultures within organisations and how these might lead to more threatening human costs. Schnurr (2008) points out that workplace and professional environments are locations of significant importance for individuals in which to construct and manage various social identities. With humour so interwoven with workplace norms, a joking discourse – the *give and take* of banter – illustrates essential parameters for individuals to conform to. Both the willingness and unwillingness to accept these guidelines and their subsequent practice provides specific means for identity construction and management (Schnurr, 2008).

While existing research portrays notions of socialisation, group cohesion and team building (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Schein, 2004), there has been

an emerging recognition that joking and banter must be understood as more sociologically meaningful, involving threats to identity and damage to self-confidence. Often understood to be seemingly harmless fun (Magrath, 2016), Collinson (2002) encourages investigations to examine how humour has come to be a pervasive feature of occupational environments. This study illustrates how banter in EPL football environments should also be understood as a potent, emotionally draining cultural behaviour for professional football players trying to maintain a sense of integrity at work.

Terrion and Ashforth (2002) specifically describe the notion of *putdown humour* as an attempt to be entertaining at the cost of something or someone, for example via a deprecating joke, an insulting comment, or mocking or sarcastic remarks. A putdown expresses a potentially face-threatening comment but simultaneously indicates that it is to be understood as non-threatening (Alberts, 1992; Hay, 2001). In contrast to most other types of humour, putdowns 'create tension, as one is never completely sure which way an interaction might swing, owing to the unstable nature of the teasing' (Schieffelin, 1986, pp. 166–167).

Putdown humour offers its audience two opposing messages at the same time. Firstly, putdown humour may create a feeling of solidarity and a sense of belonging among the individuals involved, as well as displaying and reinforcing the joke teller's power and control (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Secondly, slurs and abuse justified as humour cause the individual who is the focus of such actions to experience significant embarrassments (Day et al., 2004). The discourse of joking within modern organisations regularly contains considerably hard-hitting characteristics that can lead to significant arguments, hostility and ill feeling (Collinson, 1992, 2002; Westwood, 2004; Westwood & Johnston, 2012). Godfrey (2016) suggests that putdown humour is commonly utilised as a social communicative tool employed to place oneself in a more superior social position compared to others. According to Gruner (1997, p. 13) we take pleasure in the moment when bad luck, absurdity, awkwardness, ethical or social deficiency, 'is exposed in someone else to whom we now feel superior to'. Duncan et al. (1990) argue that people use putdown humour to elevate themselves at the expense of their target: the more unpopular the target, the funnier the putdown.

Putdown humour is understood as having the potential to be hurtful, offensive and to create work tension (Mak et al., 2012; Plester, 2016). Rather than acting as a catalyst for social cohesion (the prevailing discourse connected with joking relations at work), putdown humour carries with it the potential to mirror and further emphasise divisions, disagreements, power asymmetries and inequalities in workplace environments (Plester & Sayers, 2007).

To those both inside and outside sport, it is not difficult to imagine how an environment where success is judged by the attainment of competitive results produces a culture that justifies tough, unsympathetic conditions as a means to achieving such ends (McMahon & McGannon, 2020; McMahon et al., 2012). Within competitive sport environments dominated by power and social structures, athletes are recognised as those who are at the highest risk of experiencing abuse (Roberts et al., 2020). Such an understanding proves particularly relevant to this study as it focuses on banter as a particular discourse that while previously alluded to (Richardson et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2018), has not been examined as a form of abuse directed towards athletes. By examining the use of banter as putdown humour within the work environments of

professional football, this paper addresses the gap within existing sport literature as it relates to psychological emotional abuse, offering a new understanding of banter as a more nuanced, and at times less overt, form of abuse compared with those investigated in past research.

Theoretical framework

The investigation was underpinned by a theoretical framework that paired elements of Goffman's Dramaturgy (1959) with notions of Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This theoretical partnership was first purposed by Hickey and Roderick (2017) as a way to analyse the ongoing identity management of individuals within professional sport environments.

First utilising elements of impression management outlined in the Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman, 1959), it is important to note that the way in which individuals present themselves and interact with others in their social environments is explained and understood as *performances*. The individuals or group of individuals within such social environments are referred to as *the audience*. An individual is influenced by the expectations of their audience to offer performances that are both culturally accepted and expected. If these performances are accepted and deemed culturally appropriate, the audience will legitimise such behaviour by offering confirmatory actions and performances of their own. Goffman (1959) notes that if performances are not legitimised, then an individual's identity is brought into question as a result of their failure to offer the correct type of performance. This leads to forms of cultural shame and embarrassment and requires actions in the form of impression and identity management.

Turning to notions of possible selves, Markus and Nurius (1986) describe how individuals can shape and form any number of images of themselves in the future. Possible selves are constructed by individuals drawing upon their past social experiences and knowledge of what others have done before them. Possible selves can be both desired and feared. Within the context of professional football, it is easy to imagine a player holding a positive possible self of maintaining a long and successful career, while at the same time having a feared possible self of being released from their club or their career ending abruptly due to injury. Markus and Nurius (1986) explain that an individual's actions, behaviours and the way they interact with those around them are motivated by a desire to either attain or avoid their respective positive and negative possible selves. These concepts work in partnership by the understanding that individuals interact with others in their social environments, influenced by the expectations of their audiences and by the motivational function of their respective hoped for and feared possible selves (Hickey & Roderick, 2017).

The different settings within professional football are informative environments where players are schooled in the social proficiencies and characteristics (cultural capital) required in order to become individuals that their sociocultural field deems acceptable and valued. Such workplace and social environments are the settings where players are exposed to both direct and indirect instruction, feedback and models of emulation. Players learn how to exist and move through the social environments of professional football. It is here that their professional identities are dramatically realised via the offering of banter performances that are legitimised by social audiences.

Research methods

The data offered as part of this paper emerged from a wider investigation into the identity management strategies of professional football players during career transitions from the EPL (Hickey, 2016). As part of this enquiry, it was necessary to gain insight into the cultural and professional environments where identities came to be established, shaped, legitimised and threatened. Participants expressed their acceptance and understanding of banter as not just *jokes between mates* in the changing room, but as a central discourse within their professional environments. The following research methods were employed in order to better understand the cultural significance of banter within the workplace environments of EPL players.

The sample

After an approach to the Player Welfare Officers of 20 EPL clubs, six clubs responded with initial interest, with two clubs eventually offering the opportunity to meet and work with current and former players. These players could be classified into one of two groups; those who had been informed that their contract would not be renewed and were finishing off the season with the club (using club facilities to train but not playing in competitive matches); and those who had already been released and moved on from the club (in these instances the club put the researcher in contact with the players). The final purposive sample consisted of 10 participants. Six of the ten participants were still experiencing their first year of being released from an EPL club, while the other four participants had been released from their respective clubs two to four years previously. The all-male sample was aged 18–30 years at the time of data collection and experienced their respective EPL career transitions between the ages of 18–26. A participant summary is provided in Tables 1 and 2. Supplementary demographic information is purposefully left absent to ensure participant anonymity.

The study recognises that its sample cannot be considered representative of a wider population of professional footballers due to its size and the purposefully selected nature. Instead, it offers the data as the relevant and informed testaments of specialised insiders. This sampling strategy produced a panel of 10 former EPL players as research participants. The participants were each interviewed on three separate occasions with interviews varying in length from 1 to 2.5 hours. In total, 30 interviews were completed as part of the study.

Data collection

Vignettes provide a pathway to more inclusive engagement by seeking to lessen feelings of anxiety and vulnerability experienced by participants during conversations that may

Table 1. Players who received confirmation that their current contract would not be renewed and at the time of interview were continuing to train with their respective English Premier League club.

Player pseudonym	Age when released from club
Shane	21
Gary	19
Paul	20
Harry	24
Dave	26
Ricky	22

Table 2. Players who were released from their respective English Premier League club two to four years prior to interview.

Player pseudonym	Age when released from club
James	22
John	26
Ian	25
Ed	20

be sensitive in nature (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Importantly for this article, such sensitivities concerned issues of abuse disguised as humour in the workplace. Each participant was presented with three different vignettes in a semi-structured interview setting. Reflecting on their understandings and first-hand experiences, participants were asked to comment on the attitudes and behaviours of the central character in each vignette.

In order to prepare the vignettes, semi-structured interviews were carried out with five former EPL players. These individuals were recruited through personal contacts and were not included in the investigation's sample. This grouping of interviewees acted as an informative *sounding board* that would help construct each of the vignettes by ensuring authenticity and realism. Drawing on their experiences, three vignettes were constructed. Each vignette contained a central protagonist within a football setting to whom respondents could relate and comment upon. Each vignette was written in the first person and described how the player felt and saw themselves in relation to others. Based on the work of Frank (1995), each vignette was themed around its own narrative. Thus, each vignette was prescribed one of the following: a quest narrative, a chaos narrative or a restitution narrative, as explained below.

Quest narrative: Frank (1995) described how the quest narrative is defined by its protagonist meeting adversity head on, with a belief that something is to be gained from the experience. Such an attitude enables the character to explore different identities and possible selves as the need arises and circumstances allow.

Chaos narrative: following a disruptive event, the chaos narrative imagines life never getting better (Frank, 1995). Smith and Sparkes (2004) describe how such stories are characterised when identity-management becomes problematic as the individual is faced with intense confusion, misunderstanding and sadness.

Restitution narrative: following a spoiled identity or performance, the protagonist trusts that they will return to circumstances where their performances will be legitimised by their social audiences. Smith and Sparkes (2004) suggest that such a narrative has a similarity with the restored self.

Each participant was interviewed individually on three separate occasions. Each meeting focused on a specific vignette. Participants were asked to highlight points within the story they felt were significant. These were then discussed and acted as the starting point for the rest of the research encounter. As the interview progressed, conversations moved from the interviewee often providing insightful comments on the actions of the central characters within the vignettes to sharing their own experiences and wider attitudes within professional football culture (Hickey & Roderick, 2017).

Methodology

Established on the co-constructed meanings participants ascribe to their own intentions, motives and actions and those of others (Smith, 1989), data produced via vignette research should be considered that of a constructed reality. Vignettes imply an epistemological position conducive of interpretivism, with the nature of knowledge produced following data analysis being subjective and relative in the sense that there can be no all-embracing truth concerning the social world. Thus, knowledge claims presented in this paper are partial and contingent, as opposed to having the status of timeless truths that can be detached from the particular social context in which they are constructed.

Reflexivity

This investigation aligns itself to the reflexive position of Gouldner (1970). Its research and data are influenced and shaped by the researcher's involvement in it. The researcher is a former elite athlete. Participants appreciated the interviewer's shared understanding of the world of sport. Such understanding empowered individuals to express candidly how they experienced the events in question. The fact that the researcher's sporting career was not based in football helped to remove expectations from participants to offer 'legitimate' footballing performances. By participants regarding the interviewer as a critical friend who understood the physical, emotional and social demands of sport rather than a hostile enemy, the investigation was able to facilitate the space necessary for participants to critically reflect and engage with their own experiences during challenging times in their own professional careers.

Data analysis

All data were analysed using NVivo (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019). Applying a whole-parts-whole approach as outlined by Champlin (2009), interviews were collectively collated, then analysed individually via the developmental and contextual framework centering upon the ongoing management of the participants' identities via the previously outlined theoretical framework. Data were then re-examined as part of a reformed data set in order to gain familiarity with it in its entirety and to reveal overall themes. Next, essential meaning units within these themes were identified and subject to examination and reflection. Those that shared similar characteristics were then linked together and organised into meaning clusters. As a final step in the data analysis process, the text was once again treated as a whole, in order to identify the essential configuration of issues being examined.

Qualitative researchers have highlighted the importance of ensuring 'trustworthiness' as part of the data analysis process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) and call for safeguards to ensure that an investigation's final results accurately reflect the sentiments expressed by participants (Jackson et al., 2009). Addressing such concerns, member checking was employed via the researcher asking participants to confirm the accuracy of the accounts following the interview process and final interpretations presented in the study's findings. Doing so helped to ensure the rigour of data (Candela,

2019; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and reduce the impact of researcher bias (Birt et al., 2016).

The researchers fully appreciate the importance and thematic significance of issues related to gender, class and ethnicity, and acknowledge that they are not discussed within this paper. While the study's participants came from different social classes and ethnic backgrounds, this investigation did not possess the appropriate theoretical underpinning to offer informed commentary on such structural issues.

Findings

Data collected as part of this investigation contributes to answering its research question and provides a better understanding of the cultural significance of banter within the work environments of EPL players. Reflecting the study's research objectives, data is presented in two parts. Firstly, the study illustrates players' initial attitudes towards banter in their everyday professional lives and how, under closer inspection, banter often disguises instances of psychological emotional abuse. Secondly, the data offers an insight into how players navigate and utilise banter amongst their professional peers in order to sustain their own professional security.

Banter and abuse in the everyday lives of EPL players

Participants regularly referred to banter as a 'friendly back and forth' and 'it all being in good fun'. Statements of this kind provide arguably superficial evidence that banter can be recognised as a form of social cohesion where both actors and audience understand that the interactional performances being offered are based on the shared cultural values established within their working and professional environments. Such rudimentary understandings neglect the nuances of the banter that are unpacked later, but at least to begin with seemingly support sentiments found in existing research (e.g. Magrath, 2016; Plester & Sayers, 2007). The following quotes offer illustrative examples:

> Some of my best memories were back when you were early on. The squad we had like … we just had the banter nonstop. I had a great time just out in the training pitch and then about the canteen and stuff with the lads … it was constant slagging each other off. (Gary)

> The banter was the best bit of some days, we were all mates just going at each other, just having a bit of fun when we could … pretty much all of the time. (Dave)

> It was nonstop abuse [banter] all day bruv. I look back and wonder how we ever got any training done with lads just taking chunks constantly. It was peak nang [great fun]. (Shane)

Ian further reinforces the theme of banter as part of everyday life in football. Additionally, he highlights the importance of offering the correct response when being the target of such discourses, notably countering with banter directed back towards one's audience.

> You have to know how when and where to have it [banter], and who's in and around the squad. It can be pretty full on at times … but that's just the banter. It's a part of the changing room. It's all about the back and forth really. You have to spread it out [reciprocate banter with banter] as much as you get it. (Ian)

Ed explains that he believed banter to be a key element of life as a professional footballer. Additionally, he indicates the importance of being able 'to take it'. The concept of 'taking it' refers to an individual's ability to withstand banter. If a player is the target of sustained disparaging jokes or demeaning comments disguised as banter, it is crucial that the player responds with a performance of their own. This performance must be both culturally accepted and expected by their social audience. In this respect, Ed highlights the importance of 'giving it back', referring to a player's ability to offer similar banter directed back towards their audience and equally what happens if they fail to offer such performances.

> I've always been up for it … and always took the abuse; I could give it out too though, which was important. If you didn't give it back, you could be in trouble. You see players sometimes, not almost get picked on, but if they've not got the banter and don't dish it out as much, they kind of seem to get sometimes a bit more of it than others or worse they were left out. It is a big side to football … it is an important part of being a footballer. (Ed)

Similar to previous comments, Ed interestingly refers to banter using the word 'abuse', although he is quick to frame banter not as something that should be considered as a form of cruelty or ill-treatment, but rather as a form of meaningful but hardened *back and forth*. Ed echoes the sentiments of Ian, describing the seemingly central back-and-forth characteristic of banter. This type of understanding therefore can be interpreted as the generalised attitude players are expected to adopt and conform to regarding workplace joking relationships. All players acknowledged the importance of banter within the cultural context of professional football and alluded to the importance of a dramaturgical performance in which players must 'give it back' to their audience.

As research participants became familiar and more comfortable with the interviewing process, many addressed the vulnerabilities they felt as employees and professionals. Common vulnerabilities consistently revolved around notions of how poor sporting performances impact the chances of regular first-team football and could lead to extended periods of de-selection and sustained professional insecurity. Such sentiments came to the fore as participants began exploring the importance of banter and the underlying negativity it held as a daily discourse within their workplaces. Harry and James' comments begin to portray a conception of banter between players that seeks to highlight reasons for a player to feel embarrassed or experience a form of cultural shame in front of their peers.

> Some of the stuff that happens … you wouldn't believe. It's all just about making you look like a tit in front of the lads … taking the piss out of how you might have gaffed in training or like pranks in the dressing room. (Harry)

> There are very few things that are off limits and the more you would get annoyed the worse it gets. It was a case of winding someone up, trying to get a rise out of them … getting them angry to the point where they'd blow their lid. (James)

Rather than banter building a sense of team cohesion, the 'negative' implications of seeking to further reinforce the embarrassment of players-as-fellow-employees becomes all the more real. Banter often creates circumstances that are potentially identity threatening. Data points to the creation of potential conflicting tensions for players. Due to the volatile nature of such banter, players might never be completely sure if jocular interactions are meant in a non-threatening fashion or whether they have darker intentions. James continued:

> I've seen it get between lads … say one has taken it too far. The other might not let that go if he thinks a line was crossed. Sometimes things don't just blow over, and lads just won't ever see eye-to-eye again. That stuff can linger around a team. (James)

Paul recalls interactions among players that emotionally 'pushed' targeted recipients to their limits. Once the individual in question breaks from the culturally expected norms and 'has a go' at their aggressor (referring to the loss of one's temper and directing such anger at particular individuals), their performance is deemed illegitimate by their failure to be able 'to take a joke'. Instances of this kind, where a player 'bites back' aggressively, further weaken an individual's already depleted confidence and may have an impact on their performances in training and matches, as indicated by the following quote:

> We had a lad, might have made a few mistakes in training during the week, and the lads just give him abuse for it like – cause they were schoolboy mistakes. You're always thinking about your place on the squad, if you are safe or not. He lets it annoy him to the point where he has a go at one of the boys in the dressing room. Well then everyone just laughs at him, cause everyone knows that's all the lads winding him up were trying to do. But that then affects his football and it plays on his mind even more and he will take even more abuse for it. His confidence was shot after that and it took a decent bit of time to get his football back to where it needed to be and like that hurts you when you are fighting for selection. (Paul)

Here we see similarities to the joking relations in organisations as described by Ackroyd and Thompson (1999). Such relations are characterised by much more aggressive forms of putdown humour leading to players 'blowing their lid', as previously described by James, and the potential development of dysfunctional feuds (Collinson, 1992). While the intention of his fellow teammates was to push this individual to their breaking point, the response deemed culturally acceptable was to respond with similar slurs directed at the relevant actors and not by retaliating with an outburst of anger.

Banter, abuse and players' professional security

The previous comments from Paul show how banter affords players a chance to display and reinforce power and position within the subculture of their employee group and workplace (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). Similarly, Ricky contributes:

> Players will use banter to get in your head or mess with your football. We would all be competing for those last few spots on the first team that might be up for grabs and say you had a bad day in training, it plays on your mind. Other players know it, they can pick up on it … cause they might be the same way. So they know you are a bit down or maybe thinking about your footy too much, which is never a good thing, they will pick up on it and come at you with small quick comments … like real sarcastic – just enough small things to have an effect on you. (Ricky)

Ricky directly addresses how players use banter in order to socially embarrass their teammates by highlighting their inadequate play with sarcastic comments and remarks. Ricky outlines how such forms of banter are often hurtful and offensive. These kinds of strategic interaction are not appropriately understood in a workplace context as a source of social cohesion but rather, as Plester and Orams (2008) describe, as a form of discourse that creates and articulates division and tension. Ricky elaborated that banter is used to

reinforce a player's run of bad form, lessen their chances of selection and thus place the players delivering the banter in a stronger position for selection, at least in perception if not reality. Ricky continued:

> It's like a weapon or something … a tool they are using to hurt your chances of playing ahead of them and making the team. (Ricky)

Paul seems to take the notions of banter fuelled by ill feelings a step further. With great candidness, Paul reflects personally on the times he deliberately directed banter to elevate himself at the expense of targets (Duncan et al., 1990). Paul suggests that this motivation stems from the competitive feelings that all footballers hold towards each other as they constantly compete for selection.

> I always felt like there was something more to it [banter] under the surface. It was either jealousy or a lad didn't get on with you. There was just a bit of venom in some of the things and more the ways the things were said … and maybe when they had a go at you too. You can't really speak to anyone about it and if you get mad, people just give you an even harder time. You just need to learn to take it and keep yourself right and move on. So yeah … then when I had the chance, I would do the same to the lads that tried to wind us [me] up … Get into them like … (Paul)

Within the cultural environment of football the general practice in order to 'keep yourself right' is for players to learn how to not let such 'abuse' affect them or heighten any frustration, while at the same time being able to strike back with similar forms of accepted and expected abuse in front of fellow teammates. Further reinforcing the notion of *taking and giving* banter. This overarching acceptance of banter and its less appealing characteristics is exemplified by the comments of Harry.

> Listen, about half the banter in and about football is just you or your mates giving abuse, it's harmless and a bit of fun. The other half though is the lads you aren't really pally or close with … that other half is about trying to psych you out or make you look bad … At the end of the day you've got to learn the banter, basically. So, like, to get on [with teammates] not just on the pitch but in the changing room, on the bus, it's important to be able to take it, because when it matters, in this game everyone is looking out for number one and if you are serious about your football, you learn all these things, you have to survive. (Harry)

Harry describes how at certain times and in certain spaces, banter is seen as just 'fun' whilst simultaneously and paradoxically utilising a vocabulary of 'abuse'. Harry continues to explain that banter is often underpinned by the idea of players being isolated in their environment and from fellow teammates as their social audiences. As they strive to attain secure player identities, banter becomes a tool by which individuals highlight the shortcomings of others as professional players. Data reveals how banter is often used to reinforce an individual's inadequacies or mistakes in order to affect their mental state and their play on the pitch. Such intentions are motivated by a desire to lessen the competition for places at the respective club. Nothing expresses such a rationalisation better than the notion of the 'stitch-up'. In his description, John illustrates how banter leads to acts that deliberately intend to destabilise other players' positions as competent professionals.

> You always have to have your guard up for someone trying to stitch you up. (John)

> *How do you mean?* (Interviewer)

> Just someone trying to make you lose face in front of coaches and that. There are lots of things lads do. The big one is, say you are out in training and you and this lad are going for the same position. Well, him and his mates might give you a shit ball, say. Like they'll give the pass but they will fire it at you and then you look like the monkey who can't control a ball. That happening once is okay but if that happens just a couple of times in training then coaches look at you as the lad with no first touch. So you got to, got to, be able to be ready to have a go if you know what they are up to and just give the same type of shit back. (John)

John's comments reiterate previous sentiments expressed by participants exemplifying the harmful extent to which banter can be, and is, used within the workplace environments of professional football.

Discussion

The previous sections illustrated how humour within work environments centres on humorous joking oriented around shared experiences, culture and history (e.g. Holmes & Marra, 2002; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Schein, 2004). Banter understood as putdown humour more specifically involves the mocking, disparaging or denigrating of a particular target or persons for the purpose of belittlement (e.g. Schnurr, 2008; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002). Addressing the investigation's research question to better understand the cultural significance of banter within the work environments of EPL players, participants described banter as an inescapable part of everyday life within the work environments of professional football. Understanding the abusive nature of banter has the potential to help club staff (and sport managers more generally) to better comprehend the issues faced by players and appreciate the complexity attached to the notions and practices of banter as more than just jokes between teammates.

Considering Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (1959) combined with notions of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), we see how players are motivated to achieve or avoid certain footballing future selves and also by the expectation of their audience to display performances that legitimise their footballing identities. Supporting the existing sentiments of Schnurr (2008) with the *give and take* nature of banter so entrenched in workplace norms, as a discourse it illustrates essential parameters for individuals to conform to. The willingness and unwillingness to accept these guidelines and their subsequent practice provides a specific blueprint for identity construction and management.

When a player is the recipient of banter, participants explained that individuals must retaliate in a similar fashion, directing putdown humour back at those who may have started the transgression. That is to say, when one social actor directs banter towards another, the recipient must respond with a similar performance directed towards their aggressor(s). In doing so, they convey to their social audience and fellow professionals that they accept the social norms of their environment and are knowledgeable enough to offer what is accepted as the culturally correct response. Therefore, while players strive to attain their respective socially accepted future possible selves, simultaneously their identities as professional footballers and their social performances are dramatically realised by their social audiences.

Research participants shared how the willingness and ability of professionals to be able to take and give banter to and from their peers is not just a normalised but an essential performance, that they must be ready to offer in order to safeguard and manage their identities as competent footballers. Engaging with banter in such a fashion and portraying such a performance is then legitimised in the co-presence of professional peers (Goffman, 1959). Data offered by all participants illustrate how footballers are aware of the cultural and social expectations of their professional audiences and are absolute in their understanding of the importance of banter in such settings.

Players use the vocabulary of 'abuse' when referring to everyday joking exchanges. What is expressed with equal gravity is the interaction strategy for coping with and managing this 'abuse'. Surface understandings of humour, which point to the function of social cohesion, miss the more nuanced point that although apparently harmless, even light-hearted exchanges must be managed such that any loss of face or social othering on the part of players can be avoided or appropriately handled. Rather than interpreting workplace humour as functioning to build cohesion (Holmes & Marra, 2002; Plester & Sayers, 2007; Schein, 2004), the negative implications of seeking to further reinforce the embarrassment of players-as-fellow-employees becomes even more real in the sentiments of players. Here the abusive nature of banter causes significant embarrassment, cultural shame, ill feelings and hostility in players' workplace environments (Collinson, 1992, 2002; Day et al., 2004; Westwood, 2004; Westwood & Johnston, 2012).

Aligning with previous research findings (e.g. Alberts, 1992; Eisenberg, 1986; Hay, 2001), the comments from participants portray how banter routinely takes the form of putdown humour. Banter is employed to shame and embarrass targeted players such that they lose face in front of teammates and professional peers. The initial admission from James that 'nothing is off limits' stands in contrast to Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) classical idea that putdown humour is kept within certain defined lines. By shedding a new light on such distinct forms and characteristics of banter, it is also clear how it contributes to wider conversations regarding toxic cultures in sporting environments (Iida & McGivern, 2019; Sappington, 2021) and how such understandings offer an extension to current research that highlight the limited nature of investigations surrounding 'locker room talk' (Cole et al., 2020).

Like so many occupational features of the lives of professional footballers, the comments of interviewees point to banter as a cultural discourse underpinned by the ever-present struggle to remain a permanent and relevant player-as-employee at their respective EPL clubs. Sentiments provided by research participants illustrate how banter is used to point out the shortcomings of their peers who are either stressed or failing to perform in a meaningful athletic or footballing sense. Banter is a social tool utilised to discredit teammates and is carried out with the intention of strengthening one's own position for first team selection and sustained career stability.

One way in which individuals seek to avoid or mitigate accusations that their banter is underpinned with ill intentions is to claim that their comments were 'just a joke' and non-threatening (Hay, 2001). Similar to the claims of existing research (Müller et al., 2007; Pickering & Lockyer, 2009), when a player claims his banter is meant as 'just a joke' or even by their partaking in the *give and take* of banter, in a dramaturgical sense (Goffman, 1959), the said individuals are offering a performance intended to communicate to their audiences that they indeed hold a viable and legitimate identity as a

professional footballer. At the same time, the player is motivated by both feared and positive future possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, a feared possible self could be that the player is not socially accepted in their team because they do not conform to the team's accepted cultural norms. A positive possible self could be that the player has attained this acceptance from their professional peers.

Implications

Drawing from the interpretation of data collected from the research participants, this study has outlined how banter features as a central component of the daily lives of professional footballers. The article has explained how the expected interactional performances necessitated during the *give and take* of banter are derived and drawn from the sociocultural contexts within the respective footballing experiences of players and the cultural values within their EPL clubs. This investigation and its findings offer a new perspective to existing research on abuse, humour and workplace environments in professional sport. In so doing, the article presents an original examination of banter as a form of abuse within sport by addressing its research objectives.

Firstly, this article portrays how banter exists as a form of abuse and necessitates identity management strategies in the everyday lives of players. Unlike previous investigations that allude to or reference banter in sport (Richardson et al., 2004; Thompson et al., 2018), this study seeks to address banter directly. It provides a rationalisation of how banter, understood as psychological emotional abuse and examined as workplace putdown humour, necessitates certain forms of self-presentation during times when players find themselves the target or recipient of such abuse. Extending current understandings of putdown humour (e.g. Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Plester & Orams, 2008; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002) and psychological emotional abuse (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; McMahon & McGannon, 2020; Roberts et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2008), this article illustrates how banter is legitimised by social audiences justifying such a discourse within the framework of joking. Banter manifests in the context of the professional environment of EPL football and refers to exchanges among players that seek to highlight reasons for a player to feel embarrassed or experience a form of cultural shame in front of peers.

The constant presence of these joking relations in football is overlooked, as it is assumed that this behaviour takes the form of harmless fun. This form of surface understanding is precisely why an investigation such as this is important. These discourses occur as a variety of habits and systems, and can conceal real emotional distress. Banter must be taken seriously.

On numerous occasions participants refer to and describe banter as *abuse* either literally or indirectly; for instance, Shane comments that 'it was nonstop abuse all day'. In this respect, this article demonstrates how banter necessitates certain forms of self-presentation – the management of discreditable identities – during times when players find themselves the target of this form of behaviour. This further reinforces the usefulness of interactionist perspectives and in particular the working combination of Dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959) and Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). If a player is the subject of such abuse, data illustrates how offering the correct interactional response is crucial within the cultural environment of professional football.

The response deemed both correct and culturally acceptable requires players not to retaliate with unmistakable anger but rather respond with similar insults directed towards the relevant actors. Motivated by the expectation of their audience and relevant possible selves, such responses from the targets of banter are understood as a means of portraying to fellow professionals that they accept the social norms of their environment and are knowledgeable enough to offer what is accepted as the culturally correct response, even though this course of retaliatory behaviour seems self-defeating and damaging to workplace dignity. If a player vents frustration and gets visibly angry, resulting in an emotional reaction – 'blowing their lid' – a performance of this kind is not only de-legitimised, the individual is likely to be subjected to even more targeted abuse seeking to cause further embarrassment in front of professional peers. Such situations cannot be easily sidestepped and require careful, strategic interactions.

Secondly, this article illustrates how banter can be, and is, used by players to strengthen their professional security by weakening others' chances of first team selection. Findings demonstrated how banter is employed in the form of strategic interactions in order to safeguard a player's sense of professional security and heighten the insecurities of professional peers within the stressful, competitive workplace environments of the EPL. The data provided disputes the generalised misconceptions of a team-first mentality within professional football. The sentiments of the research participants depict a cultural environment that is highly individualistic in nature. Players are (understandably) primarily concerned with their own professional security. It is evident that while players will have friends at their club and take part in the culturally expected banter in such groups, they still operate as individuals moving singularly within the footballing environment, constantly seeking the professional security that is affirmed by regular first team selection. Professional players are fully aware of and must continually manage the precarious nature of their careers. Roderick (2006a, 2006b, p. 44) supports such a notion, explaining how footballers are above all concerned with 'looking after themselves' but must do so covertly as this attitude stands in stark contrast to 'the rhetoric of being a good team player'.

Participants described how, in order to further their efforts for job security, players utilise banter to destabilise the position of teammates in the competition for selection and professional security. Perhaps best exemplified by John's explanation of 'stitching a player up', we see how by instigating and highlighting the inadequacy of others, players strive to establish themselves in positions of superiority. A performance of this kind, already motivated by a feared possible self of deselection or release as opposed to success in a career, is only comprehensible in relation to the performances and actions of social others seeking to emphasise an individual's points of embarrassment.

These types of face-to-face focused encounters further weaken an individual's already depleted confidence and may impact on athletic performance in training and matches, thus detrimentally disturbing the likelihood of selection and professional progression. Such findings challenge existing notions of humour as a social cohesive (e.g. Godfrey, 2016; Gruner, 1997; Terrion & Ashforth, 2002) and instead, add to previous studies that draw attention to the sinister, darker side of humour in the workplace.

Conclusion

Examined through the lens of workplace putdown humour and understood as psychological emotional abuse, this study provides original insight into the welfare and

mindset of professional football players regarding banter. In doing so, the authors have sought to answer the call for research into the sites and environments in which abuse occurs. These findings offer a unique and original insight to sporting stakeholders who are concerned with and responsible for the care, development and well-being of professional and elite athletes (e.g. club and federation managers, coaches, player unions, welfare officers and player agents). In the light of the sentiments expressed by the participants, it is evident that professional players experience feelings of comparative isolation. Given the demands for excellence in their physical performance and the stresses of providing for their families, one can understand their need for job security, if not only for the financial but also the emotional stability it affords them. In gaining an appreciation of the darker sides of what for decades has been considered 'harmless banter with the lads', individuals and organisational bodies concerned with the health and welfare of players, and indeed wider team management, may come to find such conclusions helpful in their athlete care and team development strategies.

Speaking more broadly about banter and not just in a football sense, one can consider how athletes competing in other sports endure similar experiences that can leave them deflated and fearing further othering. This paper has illustrated how in football, the willingness to engage in the *give and take* of banter as part of a broader work culture signals the importance of the need to engage to survive, however unhealthy this might be for individuals to do so. The inescapable nature of this survival strategy is what makes football an appropriate context for the study of banter.

Future research may orientate itself around whether abuse, as outlined in this article, would be tolerated in alternative sporting work environments; whether banter is exercised differently within female professional football; and how senior management reacts when similar forms of concealed abuse are reported. In furthering research in these potential directions, managerial figures in the football profession and indeed wider sport may be more appreciative of this form of abuse and the consequences of *when jokes aren't funny*.

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