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From studio to screen: The production processes of Polish televised football and discursive (re)constructions of race/ethnicity

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Abstract

In this study, we shed light on the relationship between the production processes in televised football in Poland and representations of race/ethnicity. Previous research has extensively explored representations of race/ethnicity in mediated sports texts, but there remains a gap in understanding the production processes and their connection to these representations, particularly in contexts beyond the Anglosphere. In order to address this gap, in this study we conducted interviews with football media professionals and conducted field visits at football media organizations in Poland. Our findings reveal that football media professionals employ various discursive strategies when giving meaning to racial/ethnic diversity in televised football and within the football media workplace, which occasionally incorporate stereotypes. Generally, football media professionals took a color-evasive stance, and argued that they do not speak through racial/ethnic stereotypes in their work. Critical reflections on the production process are also hindered by the everyday practices and dominant working cultures in the football media

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office, which is constructed and maintained by media professionals as a predominantly White and masculine space. We contextualize these findings in light of previous studies on race/ethnicity in sport media, and the complex discourses surrounding Whiteness in the Polish context.

Keywords

ethnicity, Poland, production study, race, representations, televised football

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increasing output of research focusing on how representations of race/ethnicity¹ in sport media (re)produce (and, at times, challenge) hegemonic racial/ethnic discourses in wider society (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022; McCarthy et al., 2003). Many of these works have found that journalists and commentators often draw on the stereotype of the ‘natural Black athlete’. Based on this racialized stereotype, Black athletes are presented as possessing innate physical abilities, particularly regarding power and speed (Campbell and Bebb, 2020). White athletes, on the other hand, tend to remain more invisible in commentary as the category ‘White’ is typically disconnected from ‘racial’ discourses (Wekker, 2016). When White athletes get drawn attention to, it is often in terms of cognitive qualities such as work-ethic and leadership skills (Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg, 2023). Research has also shown that representations of athletes in sport media are often not solely reproducing racial/ethnic ideologies, but that these representations intersect with other social identity dimensions such as gender, nation and class (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Hylton and Lawrence, 2015). These often-stereotypical discourses concerning race/ethnicity have also been identified in the context of Polish televised football which will be the focus of this study. Content analyses of Polish televised club football and international football have shown that especially the ‘natural Black athlete’-stereotype gets habitually reproduced by football commentators (Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg, 2022, 2023). Our previous audience reception study concluded that young Polish audiences largely tended to replicate these discourses concerning race/ethnicity in their everyday football talk. This shows that televised football is one discursive site where White-situated racial/ethnic logics are (re)constructed in the Polish context (Van Lienden et al., 2023).

The majority of works focusing on sport media and representations of race/ethnicity have been textual content analyses. This predominance has been noted in media research more broadly, and so has the need for these works to be complemented with studies focusing on other integral parts in the circulation of media, particularly audience reception studies and production studies (Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013). The former has seen some, albeit limited, attention in studies on televised sports (McCarthy et al., 2003; Peeters and Van Sterkenburg, 2017; Van Sterkenburg and Walder, 2021) – also in the Polish context (Van Lienden et al., 2023). However, studies that focus on the *production process* of televised sport and on how sport media professionals understand their role in the (re)production of racialized discourses remain few.

The few works that have focused on these production processes (see: Billings, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Silk et al., 2000; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021) have been conducted in the United States and Western European contexts and relied primarily on in-depth interviews with sport media professionals. In these studies, sport media professionals generally asserted that they did not rely on racial/ethnic stereotypes in their own reporting, often by taking a racially color-evasive stance (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Furthermore, media professionals generally conceived of sport media as primarily an audience-reactive medium that – contradicting findings from content analyses – provided neutral and objective coverage of athletes from all racial/ethnic backgrounds (Billings, 2008; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021). These findings reveal the limitations of exclusively using interviews as a means of data collection to understand processes through which racial/ethnic stereotypical discourses are reproduced in televised sport commentary.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature on production processes in televised sport by broadening their so far rather limited social-geographical and methodological scope. Social-geographically, this study focuses on the particular national context of Poland, a country located in Central Eastern Europe (CEE) where dominant discourses surrounding race/ethnicity have – for historical reasons – at times followed markedly different trajectories than in Western European contexts (Kościańska and Petryk, 2022; Nowicka, 2018). Exploring the Polish context thus provides insights into the (re)production and adaptation of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity beyond the often-prioritized Western European and North American center. This attention to the hybridity of racialized discourses and broadening of the geographical scope are particularly relevant for it can pose a challenge to popular discourses in the wider CEE region that tend to externalize issues of race and racism to Western Europe and the United States (Kalmar, 2023). Methodologically, the present study combines in-depth interviews with football media professionals with data gathered from participant observations at three football media newsrooms. This approach is primarily inspired by the Cultural Studies approach to cultural production in which an exploration of dominant everyday production practices and ‘common sense’ discourses in televised football media production takes center stage. The study also aims to contextualize these production processes in the wider structural political-economic conditions in which they take place (Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013). The research question of the present article can thus be formulated as follows: *How do everyday production processes and discourses in Polish televised football media newsrooms, and professional self-understandings of football media professionals relate to the (re)production of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in televised football texts?*

Literature review

Producing race/ethnicity in sport media

For at least four decades, studies have explored how discourses on race/ethnicity feature in sport media texts (e.g. Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Rada and Wulfemeye, 2005; Rainville and McCormick, 1977). These works have mainly focused on the United States and to a lesser extent, the United Kingdom and Australia. In recent years the geographical scope has expanded to other (mostly European) national contexts, ranging from

The Netherlands (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012) to Spain (Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022) and Slovenia (Ličen, 2015). The majority of studies have explored traditional print media and televised sport. Although digital (social) media has provided novel ways of producing and consuming mediated sport (Kilvington and Price, 2019), television remains the most widely used medium to watch football, also in the Polish context (Jakubowska, 2015).

A recurring finding in many textual analyses is that Black athletes are often made sense of by (predominantly White and male) commentators and journalists according to the stereotype of the ‘natural Black athlete’, in which disproportionate weight is given to the physical attributes of Black male athletes (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). This focus on Black physicality provides a reductionist interpretation of Black athletic capabilities that aligns with and (re)produces wider circulating racialized logics concerning Black people (Carrington, 2011). On the other hand, societally valued cognitive qualities are more often assigned to White athletes (Hylton, 2009). Within sport media representations, these racialized logics are often co-articulated and intersecting with discourses on gender, national and other social identity dimensions (Campbell and Bebb, 2020; Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg, 2023). Occasionally, sport media texts have been found to challenge – or at least not actively reproduce – dominant common-sense discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, showing the potential for sport media to also serve as a more progressive site (Longas Luque and Van Sterkenburg, 2022).

Previous works have mainly used textual analysis to explore discourses on race/ethnicity in media products. Studies focusing on the *production process* of sport media in relation to race/ethnicity remain scarce. This dearth has been identified in Media Studies more broadly, and works have called for production studies to help elucidate ‘the complex relations between structure, production, the text and racialized epistemologies’ (Saha, 2012: 426). The present study aims to develop an understanding of these relations by relying on a Cultural Studies approach. With this lens, the central focus is on everyday production processes in football media, as well as the discourses regarding race/ethnicity that journalists and commentators draw on (Caldwell, 2008; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2022). In doing so, this study also aims to gain insight into the wider structural conditions in which these everyday meaning-making practices regarding race/ethnicity occur.

Previous studies have provided in-depth explorations of the production of printed and broadcast sport media texts (see: Barnfield, 2013; Boyle, 2006; Silk et al., 2000). Studies that have explicitly focused on sport media production and race/ethnicity in the United States (Billings, 2008; Bruce, 2004), the United Kingdom (Farrington et al., 2012) and The Netherlands (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021) mostly relied on interviews with sport media professionals. These works found that – the predominantly White – sport media professionals rarely reflect on the discursive nature and agenda-setting dimension of (sport) media texts (Bruce, 2004; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021). In a study on the Dutch context, some of the media professionals interviewed did acknowledge the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in sport media newsrooms and the limitations this could have on the range of perspectives included (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021). Farrington et al. (2012) found that in British print and broadcast sport media, this racial/ethnic homogeneity is reproduced through closed recruitment procedures that often did not reach racial/ethnic minoritized sport journalists. Generally, research on sport media production identified

how professionals' hegemonic self-conceptions lead them to often adopt a racially color-evasive stance that rejects the idea that they speak through racial/ethnic ideologies. Occasionally, media professionals may even discard the idea that sport media are shaped by or are shaping racialized discourses at all, notwithstanding previous findings in content analyses (Billings, 2008; Bruce, 2004; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021).

Race/ethnicity and Whiteness in Poland and Polish sport media

Academic interest in the (re)production of racial/ethnic stereotypes in sport media has predominantly centred around a small number of national contexts in the Anglosphere and Western Europe. The present article aims to expand this narrow social-geographical scope by focusing on sport media and constructions of race/ethnicity in the specific national context of Poland, located in the Central Eastern European (CEE) region. Scholars have called for more attention to the more regional and nation-specific racial/ethnic constellations within the CEE region (Nowicka, 2018) and the role Whiteness plays in the region (Imre, 2023).

Previous research into Polish football media found recurring parallels between hegemonic racial/ethnic imaginaries in Western European and Polish sport media (Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg, 2022, 2023). These previous studies showed that the 'natural Black athlete'-stereotype is the dominant way Black athletes are made sense of by journalists commenting on Polish and international football games. Young audiences of televised football have also been shown to generally reproduce these racialized discourses of natural Black athletic prowess (Van Lienden et al., 2023). These discourses can be said to reflect and further produce a Black-White dichotomy, which is the dominant prism through which 'race' is understood in wider Polish society (Nowicka, 2018). This present paper will use race and ethnicity as conflated constructs ('race/ethnicity') to do justice to everyday discourses in Poland that invoked interchangeably markers of difference constructed as biological (hair and skin colour, other physical features) and markers of difference constructed as cultural (language, customs) (Jaskułowski 2019; Van Lienden et al., 2023), echoing larger trends in Europe to substitute 'race' for culture and ethnicity (Lentin, 2008; Morning, 2009).

The frequent reliance on racialized imaginaries concerning Blackness in Polish football media shows the prominence of racialized imaginaries in the Polish context in general (Balogun and Pędzwiatr, 2023). Mayblin et al. (2016) argue that due to the racial/ethnic homogeneity of Polish society – around 95% of the population self-identifies as White, Roman Catholic and ethnically Polish – there is little space for oppositional discourses regarding race to find a foothold in Polish popular discourses. Although the latest census was completed before the influx of Ukrainian refugees following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, it remains clear that this relative homogeneity markedly differs from many Western European contexts.

This homogeneity, together with the absence of a history of overseas colonial possessions and popular discourses portraying Poland primarily as a victim of German and Soviet imperial projects (Mayblin et al., 2016), is also associated with a particular 'ordinariness' and innocence (Wekker, 2016) of Whiteness that previous works have identified in the CEE region more broadly and Poland in particular (Balogun, 2020;

Imre, 2023). Imre (2023) argues that these intensifying popular and political attachments to a White European identity in the CEE region serve in part as compensation for anxieties about national identity and belonging that arose after the fall of the communist regimes in the late 1980s. Our previous audience reception study also brought to the fore that young audiences of televised football generally conflated Whiteness with Europeaness and Polishness in their everyday football talk, and routinely placed non-White people outside of dominant conceptualizations of Europe and Poland (Van Lienden et al., 2023).

Previous research has drawn connections between these relatively uncontested reconstructions of White Polish and European imaginaries and the CEE's concomitant ambiguous position in Western European-based hierarchies of Europeaness (Imre, 2023). These works argue that multiple and relational racializing hierarchies are at play in the context of the CEE region (Imre, 2023; Lewicki, 2023). Popular discourses reflect an attachment to belonging to White Europe, in part through racializing discourses that are particularly aimed at Blackness and the social group of Muslims (Balogun, 2020; Jaskułowski, 2019). These works situate these attachments to White Europeaness, in part, as a way to escape the CEE's 'Easternness', which has traditionally been hierarchically placed in a peripheral position to Northwestern European Whiteness in dominant Western-based conceptualizations of European Whiteness (Dyer, 1997; Rzepnikowska, 2023).

In our previous audience reception study, we also found how young audiences of televised football sometimes 'measured' Southern European, Balkan and Central European Whiteness against a perceived normative Western European Whiteness (Van Lienden et al., 2023). They typically did so by invoking a supposed Polish footballing backwardness and parochiality in opposition to Western European football cultures. The present study aims to further elucidate these complex and entangled racializing hierarchies and attachments to Whiteness in the Polish context and explore whether and how these epistemologies bear influence on the production process of televised football.

Methodology

The present article employs a two-level methodological approach. The first step involved sixteen in-depth interviews with football media professionals. All the interviewees identified as Polish and could be categorized as White although they did not self-identify in racial terms, aligning with the common positioning of White individuals as a-racial (Dyer, 1997). Fifteen identified as male and one as female. The interviewees were between 19 to 45 years old. Their social positionality is in line with the general demographic of Polish sport media professionals, which remains a male-dominated environment (Organista et al., 2021). The interviewees were predominantly based around the Polish capital Warsaw, where most football media organizations are located. The majority of the interviewees (12) were university-educated, mostly in journalism studies. The study can be considered 'white-on-white research' (Philippo and Nolan, 2022), where both researcher and participants identified as White, and where research is conducted in White spaces. Although easily rendered invisible through their ubiquity, Whiteness and masculinity permeated the research process in myriad ways. For instance, during the

participant observations in exclusively White and predominantly male spaces, the White male first author – who conducted both interviews and participant observations – was easily trusted and treated peer-like by the participants, which might have been more difficult to attain for racially/ethnically minoritized researchers. Although Whiteness and masculinity have unquestionably borne an influence on the inquiry and analysis process, we have aimed to be reflexive and critical about the various ways discourses of Whiteness and masculinity were factored through the research process and aimed to stay open for alternative readings of our data.

Most interviewees were initially approached on social media and additional interviewees were gathered using the snowballing technique or during field visits. The interviewees worked at several of the most well-known sport media organizations in Poland that draw large audiences in the Polish sport media landscape. Two interviewees who had worked as writer/editor and presenter had recently left their jobs in football media. Most of the interviewees worked primarily as match commentators (9), others worked as on-screen analysts (3), chief editor (1) or production assistant (1). We aimed to gather interviewees with a diverse set of roles and functions in order to best explore newsroom routines and practices. Some interviewees held jobs both in televised sport and other forms of sport media, generally serving as writer or interviewer for online football news outlets. The interviews took between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted either in-person or online in Polish and, occasionally, in English.

The participants signed an informed consent form before the interview or consented verbally at the start. After 16 interviews, saturation was reached, meaning that the interviewees no longer appeared to draw on newly emerging themes and broadly repeated themes that had come to the fore also in previous interviews (Boeije, 2009).

The in-depth interviews were supplemented with 4 days of participant observations at three sport media organizations spread out over multiple visits to Warsaw in March–April 2022 and October 2022. Most of the interviews with football media professionals were also conducted during the 8 weeks that the first author spent in Warsaw. Two of the visited organizations are subscription-based television channels that broadcast various football leagues, the other was an Internet-only platform that provides mainly YouTube content on Polish football and other European leagues. This format appears to be increasingly popular within the Polish context (Sportmarketing, 2022). Access to these sport media organizations was obtained through contacts established in the interviews. During the participant observations, the first author was given free access to the newsrooms and studios of the organizations for 1–2 days, and he was free to speak to various employees and to visit studios where football shows were being recorded. The sport media organizations were aware and gave approval of the research being conducted.

Based on previous research, a protocol was developed in which various elements were included that were relevant to explore and helped shape the field notes being made during the visits (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2022). Themes in this protocol were, for instance, the positionality of people encountered in the newsroom, the spatial lay-out of the newsrooms, and codes and styles of everyday conversations. This protocol served as an observation guide to identify elements of importance in the production process, but throughout the field visits we remained open to unexpected aspects as well as those

specific to the Polish context. This two-level methodological approach, interviews and observations, allowed us to explore the discourses that football media professionals draw on regarding their own work and race/ethnicity, as well as to gain insights in some of the everyday practices and norms that constitute the production process of televised football. The transcripts of the in-depth interviews and field notes from participant observations were first coded openly, then axially, and finally followed by a round of selective coding (Boeije, 2009).

Results

Racial/ethnic and national stereotypes in football media

Interviewees drew on a range of discourses regarding the topic of race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic stereotypes in televised football. Two dominant discourses that were identified were: 1) an awareness of racial/ethnic stereotypes in sport media, and 2) racial/ethnic stereotypes as valid and/or a non-issue.

Most interviewees displayed some awareness about the reproduction of racial/ethnic and national stereotypes in Polish football media, indicating a certain level of reflexivity regarding practices within the football media industry amongst the interviewees.

For many years we at [media organization] have quite often described foreign players in terms of their origin . . . that when someone comes from Africa, he is a fast and sprinting player, or someone is from South America . . . so he's probably technically good.

Mikolaj (interviewer and journalist)²

There was, however, quite a broad variation in the degrees of critical awareness among interviewees. Only two interviewees explicitly reflected on their own individual or their own organization's practices like in the quote above. The most common response focused on the poor level of *other* analysts and commentators who, interviewees argued, tended to rely on stereotypical racial/ethnic ideologies due to 'laziness and unpreparedness' (Jarosław, presenter) or in order to 'mask some of their gaps in knowledge about individual players' (Jan, editor-in-chief).

In other words, when interviewees did acknowledge how football media can serve as a site where racial/ethnic stereotypes are (re)constructed, it most often did not include critical self-reflection or a reflection on the practices in their own organization. Interviewees typically argued that they were well-prepared and therefore went beyond 'lazy' racializing frames or drew on color-evasive frames: 'It's a tough topic for me you know, because I don't see the skin-color' (Robert, production assistant).

Furthermore, interviewees frequently drew on examples of well-known explicit racist incidents on Polish television or in Polish football stadiums. Equating discussions about processes of racialization/ethnicization with explicit racist incidents was a common trend in the interviewees' discourses. This reflects how, in the Polish context, debates surrounding 'race' are popularly equated with instances of overt racism (Balogun and Pędziwiatr, 2023). Multiple interviewees referred, for instance, to a well-known incident

where a TV-analyst referred to Croatian striker Mario Mandzukic as a ‘typical Jugol’, which is a derogatory term regarding former Yugoslavian nationals. This focus on overt incidents appears connected to the overall absence of reflection from the participants on how racial/ethnic ideologies can often be *implicitly* reproduced in (football) media texts through the reproduction of widely circulating racial stereotypes (Carrington, 2011).

Stereotypical discourses about race/ethnicity were recurrent in the interviews, including in some that simultaneously displayed critical awareness of the existence of racial/ethnic stereotypes in televised football. This mainly concerned the stereotype of the ‘natural Black athlete’:

It is said that a black man is also built differently, right? That’s why we will see at, for example, men’s 100-meter races, yes, they are usually won by black athletes who have different and better predispositions for this sport.

Adam (analyst)

Occasionally these were co-articulated with implicit invocations of Poland and Europe as White:

Runners from Jamaica will be always faster than sprinters from Europe, that’s normal. We people from Europe, have, we don’t have some things, some features that they do have.

Sebastian (commentator)

Interviewees generally circumvented explicit invocations of ‘race’ – which in many European contexts, including Poland, is taboo (Lentin, 2008) – and appeared to feel more comfortable speaking about ‘fixed’ national or cultural traits. These differences were, however, often assigned a permanence and relevance that hark back to the ‘grammar of race’ when discussing non-European athletes (Hall, [1981] 2021: 108; Morning, 2009).

In Africa, footballers have a completely different mentality, in America, in the USA, completely different, in Asia, completely different. It comes from the culture of each country, and it translates into football, so to speak.

Jarosław (presenter)

Occasionally interviewees denied race/ethnicity to play any role in Polish society in general, a discursive strategy of racial exceptionalism that has been noted before in the Polish context (Nowicka, 2018; Balogun and Pędziwiatr, 2023).

Interviewer: Do you think commentators describe all players the same, regardless of ethnicity or nationality?

A: Yes, they are described the same. Nobody . . . I don’t think there has ever been a problem with that in Poland. Karol (commentator)

The White male editorial office

Our findings show that the production process of televised football in Poland is predominantly run by White Polish males. The Whiteness and Polishness of the editorial offices were ubiquitous, and all interviewees stated this had not been something they had given much thought to before. This reflects the wider invisibility and ordinariness of Whiteness that has been noted in the racially/ethnically rather homogeneous Polish context society (Balogun and Pędziwiatr, 2023). With one exception, no interviewee could recall having worked with a non-White colleague, although there appears to be some sporadic diversity in terms of nationality, mainly regarding people from countries perceived as culturally close to Poland such as Ukraine and Belarus, as well as a very small number of former footballers from other European countries working as TV analysts.

Although the interviews focused on race/ethnicity, when talking about diversity, interviewees often first invoked gender, which appeared a more comfortable and relevant topic to them. Multiple interviewees stated that they estimated around 90% of the employees in Polish football media to be male, and that the majority of women who are employed are, as one interviewee stated, 'in administrative jobs, or rather make-up artists. The journalistic side of things is definitely done by guys' (Karol, commentator). Many interviewees argued that the male homogeneity in the office was due to women's unwillingness or because 'there's simply few good female journalists in our market' (Jan, editor-in-chief). Similar discourse of 'naturalness' or inevitability came to the fore regarding race/ethnicity, where most interviewees pointed to the racial/ethnic homogeneity of Polish wider society and the importance of speaking fluent Polish in sport media.

I think this is because there is no such diversity in Poland, and it would be difficult to change it by force. I also think that the Polish viewer wants to broadcast in Polish, with Polish commentary, so this largely limits other nationalities.

Karol (commentator)

When asked to define a good editorial team most did stress the importance of diversity. Diversity was, however, mainly conceptualized in terms of people possessing different skills and did not extend to social dimensions such as racial/ethnic, national or gender diversity. This limited understanding of diversity was also reflected in the apparent lack of any codified diversity policies in hiring practices or attention to racial/ethnic stereotypes from senior management. Regarding race/ethnicity, only one interviewee (Wojciech, commentator) recalled that in commenting on the Africa Cup he was told by senior people in the office hierarchy to 'discard all stereotypes', especially regarding talks of African 'wizards' and 'shamans', suggesting that there is sporadic attention to the issue of overt racial/ethnic stereotypes in media content.

Interviewees repeatedly drew on metaphors of an 'ecosystem', 'locker room' and 'football team' to describe editorial teams and occasionally also argued that a certain uniformity within the editorial offices was conducive to good reporting:

There are many ingredients, same age, same characteristics of people, same . . . I don't know, sense of humor even, yeah . . . I would compare building a newsroom to building a team, a football team. The locker room is the basis.

Sebastian (commentator)

Interviewees typically stressed the importance of humor and a good work atmosphere as important elements in their work. This also came to the fore during the participant observations, which showed that dominant forms of interaction appeared to center around jokes and a seemingly informal hierarchy. The humor often took the shape, as several interviewees pointed out, of jokes for which a 'thick-skin' was needed.

There aren't really women, so it's really like a locker room and when you have like twenty guys locked in a place, that usually isn't, there is no good thing coming out of it in terms of jokes and the atmosphere.

Krzysztof (commentator)

Although some interviewees saw these modes of interaction as perks of the job, others argued that they had to develop a certain 'immunity' to the often-harsh jokes, such as the interviewee below:

At the beginning I felt some of the people were very mean to be honest, but after a while I got used to it and understood that those are the jokes.

Tomasz (commentator)

The everyday production practices within the media newsrooms thus took place in a working culture that was characterized by overtly masculine locker-room banter. This 'tough' masculine culture was often remarked upon by the interviewees – both positively and negatively. However, most interviewees did not perceive the dominant culture of production to be a constraining element for journalists from marginalized racial/ethnic, national or gender backgrounds to work in football media. Furthermore, the interviewees also typically denied that the White Polish male homogeneity might cause a limited range of perspectives in the production process.

Two interviewees raised alternative voices and explicitly stated that the working culture in the newsrooms was, at times, sexist. One of these was the one female interviewee in our study, who had recently left her job in sport media.

I had the impression that I was there just as a nice element, an addition, as if no one treats me as an expert, like a professional, who knows about sports, only a girl who simply reads sports news.

Monika (former presenter)

Along similar lines, Tomasz (commentator) argued that 'some sexual jokes are honestly out of place'. Although these voices were a minority in our study, it does indicate

that counter-hegemonic understandings of the dominant masculine working practices in Polish football do exist among some Polish football media professionals.

Everyday working practices and structural conditions

Our findings also identified how everyday working practices, and structural economic conditions bore an influence on the production of televised football. Interviewees' descriptions of everyday work practices often revolved around the dynamic and fast-paced environment of live football. Within this environment, the interviewees generally performed a range of different tasks with little time to prepare:

It's like, you know, like a lot of responsibilities and also a lot of different tasks so I don't know what will happen, I don't know two weekends ahead.

Jaroslaw (commentator)

Although this dynamism and flexibility were mostly assessed positively by the interviewees who generally stated they did not feel pressure in the job because football was their passion, it did become clear that the fast-paced environment hampered extensive time for reflection on their own work. Only one interviewee stated that he listened back to his own commentary to develop as a commentator. Most others, on the other hand, stated that this was not feasible because of the hectic work rhythm imposed on them.

I had like a game seven days straight, every day, it was really hard because you can't really get the feeling of the game you know . . . like you would come to some kind of factory.

Krzysztof (commentator)

Many interviewees also highlighted the precarity of working in football media. This precarity came through during the field visits where the same journalists worked at different media organizations. These journalists either worked for multiple organizations at the same time – often combining roles as commentators with those of written journalists – or had changed jobs due to the ever-changing situation of media broadcasting rights. New job positions were obtained in what many interviewees referred to as a small world where personal networks were deemed of key importance. These precarious and unstable working conditions appeared internalized in professional self-definitions of 'good' football journalism, in which qualities such as creativity, flexibility and versatility were often invoked.

If I lose my job, it will be easy for me to find another one, because maybe I'm not super brilliant in one particular area, but I can do something very well in many areas, so I think that versatility is also an asset.

Jarosław (presenter)

The precarity of journalistic employment appears to leave scarcely any room for sustained critical (self-)reflection on journalistic practices in editorial offices, let alone on

the use of racial/ethnic stereotypes which tended to be quickly dismissed as irrelevant by most interviewees and appeared not to be prioritized within editorial offices more broadly.

Envisioning the audience

Another relevant theme that came to the fore were the dominant conceptualizations interviewees harbored concerning their audiences. Although some interviewees claimed they had not given audiences much conscious thought before, most interviewees stated that they adapted content or used different vocabularies depending on their envisioned audience. This came to the fore most clearly for commentators who (had) worked for both public and paid channels and suggested significant differences exist between the respective viewership of these channels. Despite all interviewees claiming to be unaware of any market research into their audiences, interviewees characterized the viewers of paid subscribers of football channels as ‘demanding the highest level of commentary’ Jarosław (presenter), while audiences watching football on publicly available and online channels were described as ‘typical football fans’ (Karol, commentator), which generally meant: ‘White men, 25–40 years old . . . more conservative’ (Mikolaj, interviewer and journalist). Another interviewee working for an online football media production claimed:

I am aware that I address my content primarily to football fans, I do not think that I have to use any highly sophisticated vocabulary. I believe that I can afford, for example, swearing or a very loose language. This is the language that football fans also use to communicate.

Jan (editor-in-chief)

In the interviews, participants who conceptualized their audiences as typical football fans often also appeared to distance themselves from their audiences. Interviewees often thought themselves to be liberal and open-minded, which clearly contrasted with their envisioned typical audiences: ‘I don’t like my viewers and listeners. We wouldn’t be friends . . . I have the impression that they have very right-wing, conservative views’ (Mikolaj, interviewer and journalist).

Discussion/conclusion

Our findings reveal that Polish football media professionals mobilize various discursive strategies when giving meaning to racial/ethnic diversity in televised football and on the work floor. Findings indicate how critical (self-)reflection on the production process is hampered by everyday practices and dominant working cultures in the editorial office. Our combination of doing interviews and participant observations revealed how Polish televised football is constructed and maintained by media professionals as a White and masculine space (Anderson, 2015) both discursively and spatially. In this concluding section we will reflect on our findings and contextualize them in relation to previous research and reflect on their implications also in a broader, international perspective. We will end the section with some reflections on potential drawbacks in our study and suggestions for future research.

Speaking through Polish Whiteness

Although interviewees occasionally drew on racializing and essentializing discourses regarding (primarily Black) football players, practically all interviewees upheld the notion that they themselves did not speak through racial/ethnic ideologies in their work and instead pointed to isolated racist incidents in other media. These incidents were seen as isolated rather than indicative of structural forms of racism and the privileges granted to individuals racialized as White in Poland. Previous production studies on race/ethnicity and sport media in other national contexts also found that notions of professional objectivity and racial color-evasiveness play important roles in White journalists' self-understanding (Bruce, 2004; Billings, 2008; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021).

In the Polish context, these presumed a-racial professional self-understandings were accompanied by and articulated through a wider discourse of Polish Whiteness (Balogun, 2020). This discourse persistently places Black and other non-White people outside of dominant imaginaries of Polishness, which to a large extent can be explained by the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in Poland and subsequently, an absence of imaginaries of Polishness that challenge its hegemonic anchoring in Whiteness (Mayblin et al., 2016). So whereas Polishness is generally associated to notions of Whiteness in popular discourses, these popular discourses at the same time display a particular adherence to notions of racial exceptionalism and innocence that disavow any sense of responsibility for participating in and benefiting from Whiteness and its place in global racial formations (Imre, 2023). Imre (2023: 5) subsequently argues that Whiteness in the CEE region is marked by a 'contradictory state of simultaneous accessibility and deniability'.

The relevance of Whiteness for interviewees became most apparent when they relied on 'common sense' discourses which rendered the White athletic body as invisible and simultaneously constructed Black athletic capabilities through notions of assumedly superior genetics and biology. Whiteness was rarely explicitly invoked but became evident as a relevant factor in interviewees' conceptualizations of Polishness and Europeaness. The reliance of journalists and commentators on discursive positionings of Blackness through discourses of genetics, and as 'out of place' in dominant imaginaries of Poland and Europe reproduces hegemonic racial discourses in Poland (Balogun and Pędziwiatr, 2023; Nowicka, 2018). Previous content analyses (Van Lienden and Van Sterkenburg, 2022, 2023) show these dominant conceptualizations are mirrored in televised content concerning Black football players.

The general absence of critical self-reflection on working process and on journalists' own racial/ethnic White positionality seems closely related to the reproduction of these often-stereotypical racialized imaginaries in televised football. Interviewees typically placed responsibility for racism or racial/ethnic stereotypes onto 'backward' journalists and audiences. According to Mayblin et al. (2016), the perception of Polish as being conservative and 'backwards' in contrast to Western European liberalism and modernity has become ingrained in popular ideas of Polish identity. At the same time, interviewees distanced themselves from this seeming backwardness and positioned *themselves* within discourses of modernity and racial/ethnic liberalism. These discourses precluded a wider reckoning of how race/ethnicity and Whiteness operate in their own work. This indicates that for interviewees their own invisible Whiteness is sustained through (re)constructions

of classed hierarchies in which responsibility for racism is placed at the social ‘backwardness’ of some audiences and colleagues. This reflects how in the European context normative and invisible Whiteness is often negotiated through other social identity dimensions such as gender, nationality and Europeanness and in this latter case, through social class (Essed and Trienekens, 2008; Hylton and Lawrence, 2015).

Cultures of production in the ‘locker room’

Our study has also shown how dominant cultures of production in televised football are factored through Polish male Whiteness. Although diversity was valued by most interviewees in a normative and broad sense, our findings reflect that, in practice, the White, Polish and male homogeneity of football media offices was (re)produced through dominant forms of interaction on the work floor. One prominent ideological discourse that our study identified was the dominant shared discourse of a good editorial team as a ‘locker room’ or ‘ecosystem’. Gregory (2009) notes how the metaphor of the locker room is more often applied in predominantly male working environments, and how ‘locker room’ practices such as course banter and the sexualization of women serve to reproduce a specific performance of hegemonic masculinity. This male-dominated culture has also been noted in previous studies on Polish sport media (Organista and Mazur, 2020). In the Polish context, where White Polish males form the absolute majority of football media professionals, especially in senior management roles, the importance assigned by interviewees to the locker room mentality and homogeneity in the newsroom was striking. Paired with interviewees not being aware of any codified diversity policies, it was indicative of how, notwithstanding the nominal value given to diversity, meaning-making processes regarding race/ethnicity in the production of Polish televised football take place in an environment in which there is little to no reflection on and/or recognition of wider gendered and racialized power relations. This homogenous male Whiteness – which was often fairly invisible to and ‘invisibilized’ by interviewees – might in turn serve as a constraining force in the production of racialized stereotypes in mediated content.

Another, more structural factor, that appeared a constraining force on football media professionals in critically reflecting on their own reporting and own organization pertained to the precarious working conditions and the time-pressure involved in producing – often live – content. The time-pressure and dynamism of sport media production has been noted as a constraining factor on critical self-reflection in previous production studies (Bruce, 2004; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021). Previous works have also pointed at the relation between hegemonic neoliberal working cultures in journalism and racialized cultural productions (Saha, 2020). The particularly precarious nature of journalistic work in Poland has been outlined in a previous study by Gober (2020), who highlights how the project-based model of journalistic employment, marked by insecurities and long working hours, became dominant in post-communist Poland where collective bargaining and self-regulatory journalistic bodies are absent or marginal. Agency to instigate change in cultures of production thus seems to primarily reside *within* editorial offices. However, challenging ‘common-sense’ – working practices appeared to be constrained by the importance interviewees placed on marketing themselves well and maintaining good

relationships in the field in the precarious, small and network-based world of football media. Furthermore, connected to this precarity is the fact that many television journalists combine their work with jobs in other football media (written and/or online journalism work). This suggests that discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in televised football production also permeate and are (re)produced in other football media environments in the Polish context.

Concluding remarks

The findings in this study have shed light on the complex and ambivalent ways in which Polish televised football media professionals (re)produce discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, and how editorial practices and routines influence the representations that end up on the screen. These findings provide valuable insights into the broader operation and functioning of a football media environment which is overwhelmingly White and male, a phenomenon not limited to Poland but prevalent across various European contexts (Carrington, 2011; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021). We conclude this paper by elaborating on recommendations for interventions in meaning-making processes surrounding race/ethnicity in the production televised football.


Firstly, when looking at the Polish context it remains a critical task to further problematize Polish Whiteness, in which White Polish people perceive themselves as innocent and not complicit in (re)constructions of racialized social structures and practices (Kalmar, 2023; Wekker, 2016) that this study has found to also permeate the production process in televised football. Practically speaking, this could involve football media professionals to follow training in racial/ethnic biases. Especially in the Polish context where journalistic education appeared little valued by football journalists a particular responsibility should lay at the media organizations to provide such critical education of their workforce. Secondly, a similar critical and sustained attention should go out to gender imbalances in football media production, which have also been identified in European (see: Schoch, 2013) and North American contexts (Xu and Billings, 2021). Although gender diversity in the editorial office does not necessarily cause more balanced representations of race/ethnicity, nor does it directly relate to racial/ethnic diversity on the work floor, an increase of gender diversity would be invaluable in deconstructing the processes of exclusion that are connected to the masculine locker room-culture in Polish football media.

Lastly, we will highlight some drawbacks in our study and provide some suggestions for future research. In our study we have predominantly interviewed football media professionals in more junior functions. The interviewees were mostly employed on short-term contracts, below forty years old and employed at multiple football media organizations at the same time. Although they were representative of a large part of the Polish football journalistic workforce, future studies should focus particularly on the structures and practices in the senior tiers in football media organizations. Secondly, the field visits at various football media organizations were an invaluable source of data, but these visits were relatively short. It appeared the only way to do this at this point in time and they provided useful snapshots of daily routines and practices. However, we hope for future research to do more immersive ethnographies of football media newsrooms.

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Notes

1. In this paper we treat race and ethnicity as conflated constructs (race/ethnicity) to do justice to how in everyday discourses on identity in Poland, people often conflate ‘racial’ and ‘ethnic’ markers of difference. For further elaboration, see theoretical framework.
2. Names of respondents have been pseudonymized. Their age and job title(s) are mentioned between brackets. The quotes have been translated from Polish to English by the first author. Original quotes and transcripts in Polish are available on request to the first author.

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