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Author(s): van Lienden, Arne; van Sterkenburg, Jacco; Sommer, Mélodine

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Meanings given to race/ethnicity in everyday football talk by young adult Polish audiences: a reception study

Arne van Lienden^a, Jacco van Sterkenburg ^a and Mélodine Sommier^b

^aDepartment of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands;

^bDepartment of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

A wide body of research has focused on representations of race/ethnicity in sport media content, because of its central location in popular culture. These studies found that sport media content serves as a site where hegemonic and reductive discourses surrounding racial/ethnic identities are habitually reproduced. So far, these studies have predominantly been textual analyses. Studies that take into account the polysemic readings of media content by audiences remain few, especially beyond the Anglosphere and Western Europe. This audience reception study addresses this gap by exploring how young audiences of televised football relate to racialized preferred readings, and how they themselves give meaning to race/ethnicity and Whiteness in their everyday football talk, in the little-researched context of Poland. In 13 focus groups ($n=45$) with young adults (17–30) several key discourses were identified. This study found that most of the interviewees reproduced hegemonic discourses surrounding racial/ethnic differences, in particular regarding Black football players. The study also identified that in their everyday football talk audiences (re)produced contingent hierarchies of Whiteness.

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Introduction

Televised football is globally one of the most popular forms of entertainment. It draws vast audiences who are increasingly exposed to athletes from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Campbell and Bebb 2020). This has led to a growth of research that has explored the role of televised football as a site where meanings are given to race/ethnicity,¹ as well as to other markers of difference such as nationality, religion and gender (Campbell and Bebb 2020; van Sterkenburg, Knoppers, and de Leeuw 2012). These previous works have found that in various national contexts, commentators habitually draw on discourses that (mostly implicitly) differentiate between athletes from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Campbell and Bebb 2020; Rada and Wulfemeyer 2005). A consistently recurring stereotype identified in various national contexts is that of the natural Black athlete in which extraordinary physical qualities are ascribed to Black athletes (Carrington 2011). White athletes, on the other

CONTACT Arne van Lienden  vanlienden@eshcc.eur.nl

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hand, remain more invisible in the commentary or are more often praised for their psychological and cognitive capabilities (Hylton 2009). Such racially encoded commentary has also been identified in the Polish context, which will be the focus of this study (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022, 2023). These studies showed how Black footballers were relatively often described as naturally strong and athletic. These studies also identified how ambiguous intra-White hierarchies (Lewicki 2023) were reproduced in televised football, most notably around White Southern European and White Bosnian players. They were described relatively often as hot-headed (White Southern European) and physical (White Bosnian).

Although audience receptions are generally understood to form an integral part in the mediation of culture (Livingstone 2015) there is much that remains unknown regarding how audiences interpret and engage with racialized descriptors in sport media, both in the Polish context and beyond. In recent years, however, some studies have explored audience receptions regarding race/ethnicity in televised sports in the US (Buffington and Fraley 2008), the UK (Hylton and Lawrence 2015; McCarthy, Jones, and Potrac 2003; van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021) and The Netherlands (van Sterkenburg, Peeters, and van Amsterdam 2019). These works identified that audiences draw on various discourses in relation to race/ethnicity. These often appeared to be inflected by individual's social positionality, in particular regarding race/ethnicity and gender (van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021). This work aims to provide further understanding of audience agency in relation to discourses concerning race/ethnicity in televised football, focusing on the national context of Poland.

This present research also aims to add to the growing body of literature that has been produced within Cultural Discourse Studies (CDS), and that aims to explore how global racialized discourses are (re)configured and (re)produced in often underexplored geographical contexts (Shi-xu 2023). Scholarly work on the Polish context has shown how stereotypical representations of Blackness are longstanding features in the Polish cultural repertoire (Balogun 2020; Nowicka 2018). Many of these works also point at the unequal relationship between Western and Eastern Europe in hierarchies of Europeanness (Lewicki 2023; Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine 2016). This comes to fore, for instance, in popular Western-based discourses that position Eastern Europe as a reservoir of cheap laborers and criminals (Lewicki 2023). These works show how Poland on the one hand lays claim on White Europeanness through popular discourses in which especially Blackness is often racialized, yet at the same time Poland's full inclusion in imaginaries of European Whiteness is ambiguous and unstable (Lewicki 2023).

Presently there is a small number of works that focus on everyday meaning-making processes regarding race/ethnicity in Poland (see: Balogun and Pędziwiatr 2023; Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine 2016) and there is a particular dearth of research focusing on how televised football might serve as a site in which discourses of race/ethnicity and Whiteness are (re)constructed. This study examines the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that young audiences of Polish televised football (re)produce or challenge in their everyday football talk when giving meaning to football players from various racial/ethnic backgrounds.

Theoretical framework

Audiences and sport media

The prominence of racialized representations in sport media content has been exhibited in a myriad of national contexts (e.g. Campbell and Bebb 2020; Rada and Wulfemeyer

2005; van Sterkenburg, Knoppers, and de Leeuw 2012). However, significantly less research is done on audience receptions of these discourses or on the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that audiences draw on in their everyday football talk. This present article will be predominantly informed by the concept of active audiences that has been developed within cultural studies (Hall 1997; Livingstone 2015). This view argues that media texts are necessarily polysemic, and that audiences are actively interpreting content. This perspective argues that there is a range of possible audience interpretations of media content and that individual interpretations are for a large extent influenced by viewers' social positionality, such as their racial/ethnic background and gender. This influences whether audiences accept, challenge or outright reject the preferred readings of media content (Hall 1997). Nonetheless, as Livingstone (2015) argues, audiences remain especially understudied in non-Western European contexts such as Poland. This study therefore tries to explicitly foreground the role of active audiences in the little studied national context of Poland.

This paper also follows a cultural studies approach by taking as a central focus the everyday discourses that audiences have about the cultural (often mediated) product of football. Although these conversations might have an unremarkable everyday quality for participants, cultural studies scholars consider such everyday conversations 'a culture of concrete practices which embody and perform differences' (Fiske 1992, 162; Livingstone 2015). Due to the popularity of mediated football and its habitual (re)production of hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, it is particularly interesting to see how everyday football talk reproduces, negotiates or perhaps challenges such discourses (Hall 1997; van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021).

Previous studies show how audiences draw on a multi-layered range of interpretations of race/ethnicity when consuming sport media content. These studies found, amongst other things, that White male audiences generally showed relatively little reflexivity on the use of racialized stereotypes in media or denied their impact. Studies by McCarthy, Jones, and Potrac (2003) for the English context and van Sterkenburg, Peeters, and van Amsterdam (2019) for the Dutch context concluded that respondents often balanced a recognition that certain representational practices might be stereotypical with a simultaneous acceptance of the validity of said racial/ethnic stereotypes. In particular White male audiences often accepted the preferred reading of sport media content which often features (re)productions of the stereotype of the natural Black athlete. A recent study by van Sterkenburg and Walder (2021) showed that UK audiences relatively often showed a relative critical perspective towards hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, but the natural Black athlete stereotype was nonetheless still often reproduced, mostly by White male respondents.

Falling back onto this stereotype is often combined with leaving the White athletic body relatively invisible. Various scholars have shown how this can be seen as a key tenet of Whiteness: hegemonic discourses that privilege White people by constructing Whiteness as normative and associated with desirable characteristics (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Wekker 2016). Research shows how the use of such discourses is not necessarily limited to the majority ethnic group of White males, but that women and those of an ethnic minority background also use hegemonic discourses when making sense of athletes from various racial/ethnic backgrounds (Buffington and Fraley 2008; Van Sterkenburg, Peeters, and Van Amsterdam 2019). At the same time, however, other studies

show that women and those of a racial/ethnic minority background may invoke discourses that challenge the preferred hegemonic readings of sport media content. McCarthy, Jones, and Potrac (2003), for example, showed how Black male audiences drew on oppositional readings in interpreting racialized sport media content. Azzarito and Harrison (2008) note how Black young men often took up ambiguous discursive strategies that both aligned with and rejected White-situated stereotypical sport media content. The latter study also notes how White young women often rejected the natural Black athlete stereotype by relying on liberal humanistic discourses of sameness and equality. These discourses express an *abstract* adherence to anti-racism, articulated through liberal notions of individuality and choice that generally do not challenge existing racialized social structures (Bonilla-Silva 2015).

Race/ethnicity and Whiteness in Poland and sport media

The rather limited number of previous audience reception studies in sport media prioritized Western countries such as the US, UK, Australia and The Netherlands (see: McCarthy, Jones, and Potrac 2003; Van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021). In comparison, Poland, and the CEE region more broadly, has received little scholarly attention. In this section we will present an overview of previous work on dominant discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Polish sport media, and link these to previous studies on conceptualizations of race/ethnicity in wider Polish society.

This present paper will use race and ethnicity as conflated constructs (race/ethnicity) to do justice to how in everyday discourses in Poland so-called racial markers of difference (hair and skin color, other physical features) and ethnic markers (language, customs) are often closely intertwined when discussing notions of identity (Balogun 2020; Jaskułowski 2019). In other words, in everyday discourses about sameness and differences the analytic distinction between race and ethnicity often collapses or becomes less pronounced. In Poland – like in many other European national contexts – also other markers of difference are used as modalities through which to construct racial/ethnic difference, most notably nationality, religion, or wider geographic regional background (i.e. Asian, Middle Eastern) (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Jaskułowski 2019).

Poland is a popularly conveyed as a particularly racially/ethnically homogeneous White country, with over 90% of the population considering themselves ethnically Polish (GUS 2023). For many Polish people, sport media is one of the few sites in which racial/ethnic Others are regularly encountered. Our previous content analyses of Polish televised men's football – focusing both on club football and national football – found that Black football players were relatively often overrepresented in comments that praised physical capabilities (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022, 2023). This aligns with the transnationally circulating natural Black athlete-stereotype as well as dominant ideas about Black people embedded in wider Polish society (Nowicka 2018).

White players, on the other hand, were more invisible in the commentary or represented more often in terms of cognitive traits. Televised football can thus be said to (re)produce discourses of Whiteness in which White people are more often attributed such socially valued qualities. These previous works found that these racialized representations were, however, not solely articulated through a Black – White binary, but inflected differently based on other social identity dimensions such as national identity and gender.

For instance, White male Southern European players are relatively often made sense of by commentators in terms that place them outside hegemonic conceptions of the White male athlete by describing them as hot-headed and reckless (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022), showing how various hierarchical 'shades of Whiteness' (Long and Hylton 2002, 100) appear to be reconstructed in Polish televised football.

The current study aims to critically explore everyday football talk in order to explicitly elucidate how racial hierarchies and boundaries are (re)produced in everyday football talk of young Polish audiences of televised football. In the Polish context, as in many other European countries, attachments to Whiteness are often not explicit but subsumed under and articulated through national, religious and ethnic markers. Additionally, Whiteness in the CEE has often been theorized to be ambiguous, due to its location *inside* of White Europe (having a population that identifies as White generally) but *outside* the Western European center (being located in – traditionally peripheralized – Eastern Europe) (Lewicki 2023). Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine (2016) found this ambiguity to be internalized in Polish self-representations, where uneasiness over its position among other European countries is attempted to be overcome by strong and explicit attachments to White Europeaness. Yet, little remains known about how this Polish Whiteness is given meaning in everyday discourses in the Polish context. This present study aims to gain further insight into how these shifting White positionalities are (re)produced in everyday discourses in the Polish context.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected through a set of 13 focus groups, consisting of 8 online and 5 offline sessions, conducted between August 2021 and March 2022. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online focus group interviews were organized when face-to-face meetings were not feasible. A total of 45 participants took part in the 13 focus groups, which proved sufficient to reach data saturation, with repeated use of similar discourses and no significant new ones emerging.

Interviewees were recruited through self-selection sampling, based on (online) recruitment posters that were distributed at various Polish universities as well as online advertisements in various Facebook groups related to Polish universities and football fan communities more broadly. Criteria for taking part in the focus group interviews were familiarity with watching Polish televised football and being between 17 and 30 years old. Participation to the focus group interviews was voluntary, but interviewees received a remuneration of 40 złoty. The study focused on young adults since previous studies into sport media and race/ethnicity have found that youth audiences possess a relative openness and susceptibility to media discourses in relation to their identity formation. Furthermore, young adults often are frequent consumers of mediated sport (Bruce 2013; Van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021).

Through the self-selection sampling process, 45 people eventually took part in the focus group interviews. Interviews were conducted in Polish. Thirty-five interviewees were male, and 10 were female. This gendered skewedness appears to reflect how in Poland men consume televised football more often than women (Jakubowska 2015). Focus groups sometimes consisted of participants who knew each other and occasionally watched football together, other times they did not know each other beforehand. Most

groups were homogenously male, one group homogenously female, and some others consisted of both male and female participants.

The majority of interviewees were White Polish, with the exception of 3 White Ukrainian participants and 1 White Romanian participant. Most interviewees had received higher education, either currently attending various Polish universities or having graduated recently. It is essential to recognize that dominant conceptualizations of race/ethnicity are influenced by the classed, gendered and racialized positionality of interviewees (Morning 2009). While universities are often considered progressive institutions in many societies regarding racial/ethnic conceptualizations (Morning 2009), a study by Kaszycka and Strzałko (2019) suggests that the racial/ethnic conceptualizations of Polish university students align to a large extent with prevailing views in wider Polish society. The authors attribute this to a limited attention in higher education on social constructionist perspectives regarding race/ethnicity (Kaszycka and Strzałko 2019).

This suggests that although the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that the interviewees drew on in the focus group interviews in this present study were undoubtedly inflected by interviewees' age, as well as their educational experiences among other things, the sample of this study provides ample insights into the complexly layered and heterogeneous discourses surrounding race/ethnicity that are available to the interviewees. Nonetheless, the sample of this study can also be considered a limitation and further research should replicate this study design with more diverse social groups to acquire further understanding on how racialized football media discourses are received by Polish audiences.

It is essential to acknowledge that it is not possible to directly determine the influence of football media discourses on dominant racial/ethnic conceptualizations of young audiences. These conceptualizations are constructed through personal experiences and through various discursive sites, of which football media is just one (Morning 2009). As such, the main objective of this study was to identify whether the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity drawn upon by the interviewees were congruent with the prevailing representations of race/ethnicity in Polish football media and broader Polish society.

The focus groups followed a semi-structured format that was centered on the following predetermined main themes: (1) consumption of football media, (2) meanings given to race/ethnicity in club football, (3) meanings given to race/ethnicity in international football, (4) evaluation of sport media representations. The main themes were derived from previous literature on audience reception studies and our earlier content analyses of Polish televised football. While the research design had a partial deductive approach, we intentionally allowed interviewees to introduce other topics and themes during the focus group interviews, adopting a more inductive approach. We aimed to recreate as much as possible their everyday football talk. This meant that the researchers asked questions based on a topic list but mostly limited their engagement in the ensuing conversations. This more inductive approach is also evident in the coding process, as explained below. Following Morning (2009), we left it to the interviewees to conceptualize various racial/ethnic groups instead of referring to pre-defined categories. The focus group interviews generally lasted for 45–90 min and beside more general questions the interviewees were asked to reflect on various TV fragments from our previous content analyses of Polish club football and international football games involving the Polish national football team (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022, 2023). The three

selected fragments were each three to four minutes long. Two were taken from shows broadcasting highlights of the Polish national league. One fragment was a highlight reel of the game Śląsk Wrocław – Jagiellonia Białystok, and the other fragment showed a discussion between analysts about two Black players. The other fragment was taken from a live broadcast of the game Poland – Senegal during the 2018 World Cup. Within these fragments commentators occasionally relied on the natural Black athlete stereotype, and all included commentators (implicitly) giving meaning to racial/ethnic and national diversity on the pitch. These fragments thus served as conversation starters about televised football in the ensuing focus group interview, yet also allowed the researchers to observe how people talk about televised football *while they are watching it*, which denotes a rather unique element in audience studies of sport media content, as previous studies generally limited themselves to focus groups only or that just did focus groups after showing content (see for instance: McCarthy, Jones, and Potrac 2003).

Focus group interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using the Atlas.TI coding program. The coding process followed three distinct steps and with its bottom-up logic drew on insights from grounded theory (Boeije 2009). The first step of open coding entailed identifying themes on a preliminary level and giving them wide-ranging labels. The second step of axial coding involved grouping some of these labels together to form broader themes. The final and third step, selective coding, involved refining the categorical themes, exploring connections between themes and, where necessary, create new themes. The bottom-up logic in our coding process required a high level of reflexivity on the categorical themes. This was enhanced by extensive peer debriefing sessions that were held within the research team and with a (Polish) external research associate in which the data and themes were extensively discussed (Spall 1998). In the results section we focus on three themes that were identified in the selective coding process and in which we could situate the most prominent discourses concerning race/ethnicity that participants drew upon, namely (1) race and Black physicality discourses, (2) 'Shades of Whiteness' and nationality and lastly (3) discourses on Polishness.

Note on positionality

The focus in this paper on dominant conceptualizations of race/ethnicity also warrants a reflection on the positionality of us, the researchers, and how the relationship between our identities and those of the research participants influenced the research process. Our research can be considered what has been called 'white-on-white' research (Phillippo and Nolan 2022, 2), in which the functioning of Whiteness can be easily overlooked. All participants of the focus groups considered themselves White, and the focus groups were led by White, able-bodied Dutch and Polish males. The authors of this paper are two White males and one White female. Our Whiteness appeared, at times, to have provided a certain comfort among the White respondents to discuss sensitive matters surrounding race/ethnicity, yet our Whiteness did not solely predetermine how respondents related to us. With the majority of focus groups being led by the Dutch first author, it became clear that his Dutchness complicated notions of a dichotomous White insider/non-White outsider positionality. The Dutch nationality of the researcher was remarked upon multiple times throughout the focus group interviews and many respondents assumed the researcher to be unfamiliar with the Polish footballing

context or about the particular racial/ethnic configurations in wider Polish society. These dynamics have had an undoubtable influence on the data collection and analysis and brought to the fore the subjectivity and complexity of the positionality of researchers. Yet, by continuously being reflexive and critical about our ambiguous insider/outsider positionality and the role Whiteness played in this we aimed to stay open for alternative readings of our data.

Results

Race and Black physicality discourses

In the focus group interviews, a dominant perspective, (re)produced by most participants, revolved around a natural physicality discourse concerning Black football players. This occasionally happened as a direct response to the fragments interviewees watched, but more often interviewees relied on the natural Black athlete stereotype in the flow of conversation. When talking about Black players interviewees sometimes explicitly invoked physiognomic features ('Black', 'Black-skinned'), other times they referred to specific geographical areas ('African', 'African American'). Black athletic capabilities were most often explained through references to genetics and biology.

This is just ... probably for thousands of years ... they have been running for so long. For example, earlier it was their ancestors who were hunting for lions, they learned to run so fast, and something happened to them genetically. (Tymoteusz [19], Polish White male²)

Unlike a previous audience study in England (Van Sterkenburg and Walder 2021), social constructionist discourses regarding race/ethnicity were rare. Nonetheless, a handful of interviewees challenged the natural physicality discourse, mainly relying on universal liberal discourses about sameness which state that everyone is equal regardless their racial/ethnic background (Azzarito and Harrison 2008) or by referring to individual Black players who do not fit the natural Black athlete stereotype. However, the quote below exemplifies how these discourses still frequently (re)produced notions of fixed and hierarchically related racial/ethnic groups possessing specific traits and qualities, where, as indicated by the interviewee's statement, Asian footballers are positioned at a lower status.

I have the impression these stereotypes are an old topic. We are in the 21st century, and I think we are all equal. Both black and white-skinned players can play fantastically, even a person from Asia. (Mateusz [24], Polish White male)

The infrequent use of social constructionist discourses might be due to a lack of familiarity with such a perspective in the Polish context where understandings of race as a biologically grounded concept remains relatively uncontested in comparison to many Western European contexts (Balogun and Pędziwiatr 2023). Previous research has, for instance, indicated that stereotypical racialized discourses concerning Blackness are frequently perpetuated not only in Polish higher education (Omeni 2016) but also in various popular entertainment industries in Poland (Nowicka 2018). Most interviewees, thus, appear to accept this preferred reading of Blackness in televised football, and reproduce it in their everyday football talk. Participants in the focus groups rarely invoked non-Black athletes in relation to supposedly natural qualities and capabilities. Interestingly, infrequent

and frequent viewers of televised football relied on discourses concerning biology and genetics when giving meaning to Black athletic qualities. This suggests that although televised football may be an important learning site for the articulation of racial/ethnic discourses, it is not the only source in which notions of a biological Black – White dichotomy are (re)constructed and disseminated in wider Polish society.

'Shades of Whiteness' and European geographies

Although the main topic of the focus groups was meanings given to race/ethnicity, the interviewees often talked about footballers' nationalities or specific regional backgrounds (e.g. 'Balkans', 'Central Europe' and 'Iberian Peninsula'). A reliance on other social signifiers than 'race' or ethnicity such as the nation or region could occasionally be read as efforts to circumvent explicit invocations of 'race', which is deemed taboo in many European contexts (Lentin 2008). At other times, meanings given to the nation seemed more significant to the interviewees than race/ethnicity. For instance, when talking about Brazilian players, the interviewees typically argued these players 'play with a certain finesse' or were 'very gifted'. Here interviewees did not appear to distinguish between White Brazilian and Black Brazilian players. This suggests that, at times, racial/ethnic conceptualizations can be overridden by other conceptual frames such as the nation (Morning 2009). This may particularly apply to meanings given to players in international tournaments such as the World Cup where different nations compete with each other, and fans tend to identify with their nation.

Interviewees often spoke through stereotypes of fixed national or regional playing styles when discussing specific groups of White players. A prevailing discourse among the interviewees was to emphasize Spanish and Portuguese technicality and Balkan fighting-spirit.

Players from the Balkan are very energetic. They work together and they fight. (Barbara [21], Polish White female)

When asked where these players obtained these skills, interviewees exclusively argued that these skills were learned or culturally informed.

I think it all depends on their [Spanish players] training. They are taught to play football like that from childhood. (Andrzej [21], Polish White male)

You know what the situation in the Balkans was like, and probably all such players from those regions are always associated with such persistence and bravery, only because of the war. (Tomasz [23], Polish White male)

These quotes illustrate that whereas Black athletic capabilities were typically given meaning in relation to supposed genetical exceptionality, White athletes were more often thought to either gain specific skills through training, or to have certain skills as a result of national (football) cultures and histories. Discourses of Black people having primarily inherent and genetic qualities, in contrast to White people who instead supposedly acquire qualities through learning have historically been a structural element in constructing the superiority of Whiteness in racially stratified societies (Dyer 1997; Hylton 2009). This is echoed in the discourses interviewees drew on when giving meaning to the qualities of White players.

Although the skills of White footballers were assumed to originate from culture rather than biology or genetics – as was generally the case with discourses on Black athletes – it was nonetheless remarkable that interviewees often invoked White Spanish, White Portuguese and White Balkan players. These groups are numerically strongly represented in Polish football, yet to a lesser extent than players from neighboring countries such as Czechia and Slovakia. Nonetheless, players from these latter countries were less frequently mentioned in relation to specific skills. The different qualities and skills of White Spanish, White Portuguese and White Balkan players were, on the other hand, attributed a certain permanence and weight that resemble what Hall ([1981] 2021, 108) called the ‘grammar of race’. Our earlier content analyses showed how Polish football commentators often gave meaning to White Spanish and White Portuguese players through discourses that often revolved around assumed superior technical skills, hot-temperedness, laziness and a focus on physical attributes. The latter was also identified in the representation of White Bosnian athletes (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2023). Audiences thus seem to reproduce similar discourses regarding these groups of White athletes. This suggests that in Polish mediated football and football talk ‘shades of Whiteness’ (Long and Hylton 2002, 100) are reproduced, in which racialized projections of Balkanness and Southern Europeanness are invoked in opposition to an unremarked dominant Whiteness. We return to this in the conclusion.

Discourses on Polishness

Participants in the focus groups also discussed dominant conceptualizations of Polishness and of national belonging in relation to football. Generally, respondents assessed the psychological skills of Polish players in positive terms, often highlighting qualities (‘hard work’, ‘patriotism’ and ‘winning mentality’) that are associated with historical conceptualizations of Whiteness (Dyer 1997). At the same time, both avid and infrequent viewers of televised football repeatedly drew on discourses that highlighted the poor footballing qualities of Polish footballers. This related particularly to a supposed lack of technical and tactical skills of Polish players. One respondent stated, ‘we basically should start working like in the West or like in developed football countries, because in Poland we are still behind’. Occasionally this was linked to wider discourses in Polish society regarding notions of inferiority. This is illustrated by the interviewee quoted below:

Even in my first association a Polish player is a bad player ... [we are brought up with the idea] that in Poland we are the worst and there’s basically nothing good in us. (Krystyna [22], Polish White female)

These notions of inferiority and the need to catch up to the West have been argued to play a significant role in popular Polish self-definitions (Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine 2016). For respondents, the national team appeared to open a discursive repertoire that echoed such notions that position Poland in a peripheral position to the West.

At other times, respondents discursively placed Poland within imaginations of a White Europeanness. This often happened through attaching value to Poland’s racial/ethnic homogeneity (Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine 2016). Some of the interviewees invoked the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of Western European national teams such as the French and German teams as undesirable.

You have for example the final of the World Cup between France and Croatia. Except for Griezmann, the goalkeeper and Giroud, you might have had the idea it was Africa playing versus Europe in the final of the World Cup, and not two national teams from Europe. (Arek [19], Polish White male)

The quote above points to how interviewees occasionally drew on discourses that conflated Europeanness and Whiteness and that represent Black European players as African Others.

These were also seen as important factors in defining Polishness. This was evident when interviewees talked about non-White players that had obtained the Polish nationality to play for the national team, such as Roger Guerreiro (Brazilian-born) or Emmanuel Olisadebe (Nigerian-born).

Matty Cash [recently naturalized White player], he should have Polish citizenship, because he is to some extent Polish. But the case of Olisadebe ... for me it is such an exaggeration. It's distasteful. If Olisadebe would be to some extent a Pole ... I am asking you to come to Poland as a citizen. (Tymoteusz [19], Polish White male)

This quotation reflects, first of all, how foreign-born White players – that often have distant familial links to Poland – who get naturalized can potentially be seen as Polish (such as Matty Cash in the above quotation). This appeared much harder for non-White foreign players such as Olisadebe. Interviewees disagreeing with naturalization of football players often invoked Olisadebe and Guerreiro as examples, (re)producing a racialized discourse that presented Polishness as a White identity which is congruent with discourses that are firmly established in popular Polish discourses (Balogun and Pędzwiatr 2023). Some respondents that *did* support the naturalization of non-White players occasionally also reproduced conflated notions of Whiteness and Europeanness when referring to the racial/ethnic diversity of the German and Dutch national teams. At the same time, inclusion of non-White players was also typically discussed in relation to potential successes of the national team, reflecting a discourse that highlights the *conditional* belonging of often non-White players in European national football teams, where their inclusion is often framed as contingent based on players' qualities and contribution to the team (Jansen and Skey 2020).

This would be a huge strengthening for the Polish national team, and it would not be a problem for me, after all, if you only look at the Germans or the Dutch, where naturalized footballers are the strength of this team, and nobody there is rebelling at all, I mean in society. (Radek [21], Polish White male)

The quote above illustrates how in the focus groups non-White athletes in the Polish and other European national teams were routinely placed outside of dominant imaginaries of what constitutes Europe. This conflation of Europeanness with Whiteness have been noted as central to the discursive configurations of Whiteness in Poland more broadly (Balogun 2020), and televised football appears to be one discursive site in which this configuration is (re)produced.

Conclusion

Through an intracultural and intercultural analysis of Polish televised football (Shi-xu 2023), this study has contributed to Cultural Discourse Studies by showing how both

global and more localized racialized power relations are discursively (re)produced through everyday football talk in the little-researched context of Poland. Our study has shown that televised football opens up a multi-layered and relational reservoir of discourses on race/ethnicity for young Polish audiences. In these discourses, we can witness how through everyday football talk multiple intersecting hierarchies of belonging are being reproduced that tend to often be congruent with popular discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in wider Polish society. The study has also contributed to racial/ethnic and Whiteness studies, as the paper elucidates how discursive constructions of Whiteness are complex and multi-layered. Especially in the European context where explicit mentions of race are taboo, Whiteness appears to be typically given meaning through intersections with other social identity markers (Essed and Trienekens 2008). In the context of Polish televised football, as this study shows, it is especially discursive (re)productions of supposed levels of modernity and Europeaness that appeared as relevant modalities through which Whiteness was (re)constructed.

Most prominently, the interviewees reconstructed a Black – White racial dichotomy. Black athletes were often made sense of according to the natural Black athlete stereotype. This is in line with our previous content analyses and shows that mediated football is one ‘modality through which popular ideas around race are lived’ (Carrington 2011, 86) in Polish wider society. However, mediated content is necessarily polysemic, and our study also unearthed readings of Blackness that did not square with the preferred readings. These, however, rarely came from a reflexive or constructionist perspective on race/ethnicity. Instead, these readings drew more on universalist and liberal perspectives that left the existing racially/ethnically determined cultural and material structures in Polish society unchallenged.

Our findings show that beyond the Black – White binary, a hierarchy of White Europeaness was also reproduced in the focus groups. Aligning with our previous content analyses, it appears that the Whiteness of White Spanish, White Portuguese and White Balkan players is complicated by their geographical background. Discourses on White Spanish and Portuguese as technical and White Balkan players as fighters possessed a racial quality in that they were often seen to be self-evident and flattened out any sense of difference *among* these players (van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022, 2023). They resonate with wider circulating projections of Southern Europeaness and Balkanness as deviant from unremarked European Whiteness (Arat-Koç 2010). These intra-White hierarchies were, however, located in supposed cultural differences rather than in the assumed genetic differences that served to explain differences between Black and White athletes. This suggests that along continuum different degrees of difference are (re)constructed through different – yet nonetheless racializing – repertoires.

Everyday football talk also appeared as a site where young Polish audiences talk through discourses that reflect the unstable position of Poland in said White hierarchies of Europeaness. The supposed lacking qualities of Polish footballers were made sense of through a discourse on the need to catch up with the more developed footballing West, echoing what previous studies have argued were wider discourses of hierarchies of Europeaness (Lewicki 2023). In the focus groups, this White vulnerability appears to be offset by overtly constructing Polishness as a White European identity, with which Blackness was deemed antithetical. Our study showed that everyday discussions of young adults about football provide a space for discourses that mirror what Sayyid

(2018, 427 as quoted in Kalmar 2023) argued about the broader CEE region in that ‘these countries are both vulnerable in their Europeanness’ due to the contested inclusion in Western-based discourses on European Whiteness, yet ‘most strident in their claims for it’.

We want to end this paper by highlighting three possible future avenues of research. Firstly, future studies would benefit from a more diversified set of respondents, particularly concerning their age and education levels. The current study can best be considered a relevant vantage point for a more overarching study on discourses surrounding race/ethnicity and whiteness in Polish everyday football talk. Secondly, we recommend future research to focus more on the co-existence of various repertoires of racializing discourses in everyday football talk. Our study showed that specifically studies on Whiteness can benefit from such a perspective for it identified shifting and flexible White positionalities being reproduced by young Polish audiences. Furthermore, it is relevant to elucidate how the (re)production of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity takes place at various other sites within the football communication enterprise. For instance, academic attention could focus on how athletes themselves negotiate and (re)produce media discourses surrounding race/ethnicity. Particular attention should also be paid to how sport journalists view their own role in the (re)production of hegemonic discourses on race/ethnicity and the level of reflexivity surrounding this topic in the sport media newsrooms. We therefore also call for a focus on the production of mediated football in relation to race/ethnicity.

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. We expand on this terminology in the theoretical section.
2. Names of respondents have been pseudonymized. Their age is 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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Notes on contributors

Arne van Lienden is a PhD candidate at the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication, and Culture. His research focuses on the content and production of discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Polish televised football and the audience receptions of these discourses. Arne's research is part of the Dutch Research Council-funded research project *How racist is televised football and do audiences react?* and is conducted under the supervision of prof. dr. Jacco van Sterkenburg (promotor) and dr. Mélodine Sommier (co-promotor).

Jacco van Sterkenburg works as an Endowed Professor "Race", Inclusion and Communication, specifically in relation to Football and Media' in the Department of Media & Communication at Erasmus University. He obtained his PhD at the Humanities faculty of Utrecht University in 2011. In addition, Jacco has an MA (Drs.) degree in Psychology at Utrecht University with a specialization in Cross-cultural Psychology. For the past years, Jacco van Sterkenburg's research has focused, among other topics, in particular on football and racism in a broad sense, including media, leadership, professional and recreational sports/football.

Mélodine Sommier works as an Academy of Finland Research Fellow. Her research project focuses on 'Racial Landscapes', that is the way race and racism are perceived to materialize in urban environments. Before joining the department of Language and Communication Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Mélodine worked for five years at Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands). She is currently acting as vice-chair of the International and Intercultural Communication division (IIC) within the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA).

ORCID

Jacco van Sterkenburg  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3884-9934>

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