

Research Article

Prejudice in the People's Game: A Content Analysis of Race/Ethnicity in Polish Televised Football

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Abstract

This study explores how televised football in Poland serves as a site for the (re)construction of discourses surrounding race and ethnicity and to what extent this squares with previous studies on sport media conducted mainly in Western countries. In our analysis, we identify the discourses surrounding race and ethnicity that the commentators in televised football draw on and examine how they relate to hegemonic discourses and categorizations in wider Polish society. Our findings show that Polish football commentators draw on transnationally circulating racialized/ethnicized discourses on assumed superior physicality when talking about Black football players and on supposed negative psychological capabilities when talking about White Southern European football players. The findings also show that when talking about non-Polish players and head coaches, the commentators regularly rely on an us-versus-them frame that constructs foreign influences as a threat.

Keywords

sport media, race/ethnicity, televised football, discourse, Poland

Every year, Polish anti-racist and anti-fascist organization Nigdy Więcej (2019; Never Again) releases its *Brunatna Księga (Brown Book)*, wherein Nigdy Więcej attempts to compile all recorded discriminatory incidents in Poland. Many of the

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incidents are violent acts perpetrated often by fanatical football fans or radical nationalist groupings. However, the *Brunatna Księga* also reports on discourses that are (re)produced in Polish media, culture, and politics that draw on racial and ethnic stereotypes. These incidents lay bare what Nowicka (2018) calls the pervasive “Polish lack of reflection about racism” (p. 829). This is perhaps best illustrated by Polish President Andrzej Duda who in October 2019 held a presentation and jokingly drew upon the stereotypical and racist trope of African cannibalism. Although many were quick to point out the racist nature of the joke, the controversy soon faded from public debate. The incident exemplified how in Poland—not dissimilar to many other countries in Europe—popular discourses about race which draw on racial stereotypes and prejudices are rooted in wider society, but debates about such everyday forms of racism in Poland are generally isolated and short lasting.

This article will examine the discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in Polish televised men’s football. Men’s football is the most popular sport in Poland and primarily consumed through television, which remains by far the most popular medium through which to consume sports (Jakubowska, 2015). After the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, the barriers to people’s movement were lifted. In Polish football, this has led to an increasing influx of non-Polish football players, especially since the mid-2000s when the Polish economy started recovering from the rapid and often painful transition to a market economy (Kossakowski et al., 2020). While Nigerian-born footballer Olisadebe was the first Black Polish footballer in 2000 (Ogasawara, 2004), since the 2007–2008 season, the number of foreign players has risen by almost 20% points and they now account for almost 38% of all players in the league (Transfermarkt, 2020). Because of televised football’s popularity and because of it serving as a domain where racial/ethnic diversity is increasingly visible, televised football serves as a significant site for exploring the (re)construction of discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in Poland.

The lack of reflection on the use of race/ethnicity in everyday discourse is not a uniquely Polish phenomenon. Various studies have shown that “racializing discourses” or “stereotypical and divisive, yet common-sense, embodied articulations of race and racial difference” (Andrews, 1996, p. 132) are still a structural aspect of popular discourse across various social fields and in different countries (Hylton, 2009; Omi & Winant, 2015). Even though race and ethnicity are now widely understood to be social constructs,¹ racial/ethnic categorizations remain “common-sense” markers of difference and hence “socially real and reenacted in the everyday life” (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1360). These markers of difference are usually reinforced in subtle and implicit ways, rather than in overt and explicit ways, as the latter is generally nowadays considered unacceptable. Generally, subtle racial/ethnic stereotypes are only articulated when it concerns the (often non-White) “Other.” The privilege of those considered White to appear “racially unmarked” (Hartigan, 2010, p. 86) is a defining feature of Whiteness (Hylton, 2009; Wekker, 2016).

In the Polish context, the exploration of Whiteness as a racial discourse is especially relevant. Poland is one of the most racially/ethnically homogeneous White societies in Europe (Kossakowski et al., 2020). The hegemonic conservative discourses on Polish identity stress the country's role as a "bulwark of Christendom defending Europe against the infidel (however defined)" (Zubrzycki, 2011, p. 25). Previous studies have pointed toward the role of normative Whiteness as a constitutive element in this national self-identification (Balogun, 2017; Jaskułowski, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019). Additionally, in recent years, Poland has witnessed immigration from mainly other White neighboring countries like Ukraine and Belarus (Mayblin et al., 2016). Researching popular discourses surrounding these and other non-Polish White groups could shed light on how the privileges of Whiteness are distributed among the racial/ethnic category of Whites in Poland, which potential variegations of Whiteness are (re)constructed in Polish public discourse and which contingencies lead to the differentiations among visually homogeneous groups.

One way in which the social reality of racial/ethnic configurations is constructed and (re)produced is through cultural texts. As mentioned above, one very popular cultural text in many contemporary societies is televised football in which football journalists reproduce and sometimes—although more infrequently—challenge hegemonic racial/ethnic configurations (see Bruce, 2004; Ličen, 2015; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). Hence, televised football arguably is a powerful—though often popularly unacknowledged and hence invisible—domain for the articulation and reinforcement of supposed common-sense markers of racial/ethnic difference.

Previous research (see Azzarito & Harrison, 2008; Billings & Eastman, 2003; Bruce, 2004; Haslerig et al., 2020; Hylton, 2009; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005) on racialized discourses in sport media has mostly been carried out within the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia and generally defined race/ethnicity in dichotomous terms of Black and White (van Sterkenburg, 2019). These works have all been fundamental in broadening understandings on how sport media can serve as a site for the (re)production of racial/ethnic stereotypes. However, this study argues that in order to gain a better and wider understanding of the contextual and situational nature of racialized discourses and normative Whiteness in mediated sport, research should also be carried out beyond Anglophone countries and use insights from grounded theory in understanding race/ethnicity "as a complexly layered and contextualized social construct and not as a predefined [Black-White] dichotomous variable" (van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 93, own added words between brackets).

Drawing on Polish televised football commentary, this research explores which racial/ethnic categorizations and meanings are being drawn upon and reinforced (or challenged) in the context of Polish football commentary and how these potentially intersect with other hegemonic discourses surrounding gender and nationality. The research question that is central in this article can now be formulated as follows: What racial/ethnic categorizations and discourses are drawn upon or (re)constructed in Polish televised football through (implicit or explicit) patterns of representation of players in the commentary? We will also examine whether and how these patterns in

representation relate to (dominant) racial/ethnic categorizations and power relations in wider Polish society.

Theoretical Framework

Sport Media, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and Whiteness

This article understands televised football as a cultural text, wherein among other things hegemonic assumptions and understandings surrounding race/ethnicity, gender, and nationality are expressed and reinforced (Billings et al., 2015). These hegemonic discourses are neither stable nor fixed, and its meanings are in a constant process of defending or adapting to competing discourses (Hall, 1986). The producers of televised football, like with other cultural texts, sway the reader towards preferred dominant interpretations. Previous studies have shown that the sporting texts recurrently draw upon and reinforce dominant racial/ethnic categorizations and meanings apparent in wider society or within global racial formations (see Bruce, 2004; Ferrucci & Tandoc, 2018; Haslerig et al., 2020; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012).

This article will build on these previous works by using CRT as the theoretical foundation for exploring in-depth the specific manifestations of racialized/ethnicized codifications in Polish televised football. CRT has been defined by Hylton (2009) as a “framework from which to explore and examine the racism in society that privileges whiteness as it disadvantages others because of their Blackness” (p. 22). CRT challenges the dominance of the racial ideology of color blindness or what Bonilla-Silva (2015, p. 1364) argues is the “superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in ‘raceless’ explanations for all sort of race-related affairs” by researching the myriad of ways in which racialized ideologies still work through in popular wider discourse.

The exploration of and critical reflection on Whiteness is an important aspect of CRT. Whiteness is understood here as a racialized discourse that is based on and reinforces ideas and epistemologies that sustain dominant racial/ethnic hierarchizations, where people considered White constitute the normative, privileged, and invisible racial/ethnic category to which other categories are compared (Cabrera, 2014; Hylton, 2009; van Riemsdijk, 2010). Whiteness is a contingent and heterogeneous racial/ethnic discourse. Hylton (2009, p. 73) refers to this when he states that “a number of different forms of whiteness will exist as gender, class, sexuality, age, nation and ethnicity intersect in a dynamic process of being and becoming.” van Riemsdijk (2010, p. 117) argues that there are “variegated privileges of whiteness” also in visually homogeneous groups. In the Polish context, one way in which this variegation of Whiteness manifests itself is in the process of “attaining whiteness” (Law & Zakharov, 2019, p. 135), a process in which orientalizing discourses are (re)produced to distinguish Poland from its more Eastern and supposedly less European neighbours (Rzepnikowska, 2019; Said, 1978; Zarycki, 2014). These

orientalizing discourses serve to reaffirm Poland's place in Christian, White Europe (Goldberg, 2006) by stressing the supposed civilizational inferiority of areas to the east of Poland. The present study will research whether these discourses of variegated Whiteness are reproduced (or challenged) in Polish televised football. Televised football is an important field to explore in-depth; given its popularity and the diversity, it shows it can function as a catalyzer for already existing discourses surrounding race/ethnicity.

Race and Ethnicity as Conflated Constructs

This article will follow social cognition theory in that whilst race and ethnicity are both socially constructed concepts that are not based on any a priori biological or natural foundation, they remain socially real markers of differentiation. Several scholars have differentiated between race and ethnicity—broadly speaking, race is associated with skin color and ethnicity with cultural differences (Eriksen, 2002)—whilst others see the two categories as conflated constructs and racism's registers of biology and culture (Gunaratnam, 2003; Hall, 2000). This article will use these categories in the way they are understood in everyday discourse in wider Polish society. In his study on Polish discourses on the migration crisis of 2015, Jaskułowski (2019) notes that in everyday discourse, people often interchangeably draw on supposed cultural and biological differences when making sense of "Others." Further complicating the analytic distinction between race and ethnicity is that religion and nationality are often invoked as markers of difference as well (Jaskułowski, 2019). This "cultural racism" (Jaskułowski, 2019, p. 77) dovetails with other studies done in European countries where "biologically informed racisms" (van Sterkenburg et al., 2019, p. 198) are generally thought to be taboo and where cultural markers of differences are invoked to justify assumed racial/ethnic hierarchies instead. This circumvention of the concept of race is a defining feature of European Whiteness (Essed et al., 2019). Previous studies have noted the dominant myth in Polish society that the country is supposedly free of racism (Jaskułowski, 2019; Nowicka, 2018). However, these studies also note the "patterns of racial stereotypization based on qualities of behaviour, body, and mind that are well established in Poland" (Nowicka, 2018, p. 830). Whether body (race) or behavior and mind (ethnicity) take precedence in these racializing discourses is dependent on the context. This article will consequently make use of the term race/ethnicity. This reflects the popular Polish understanding of the "Other," where cultural, national, and physiognomic ("racial") discourses are invoked in making sense of different racial/ethnic groups.

Race/Ethnicity, Nationality, and Whiteness in Poland

In order to explore how sport media might serve as a domain in which hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity are (re)constructed, it is vital to have an

understanding as to how race/ethnicity is given meaning in everyday discourses in Poland. As noted above, popular discourses on Polishness and the “Other” include a complex concoction of cultural, national, and physiognomic markers of difference that are informed by transnational, “porous” (Nowicka, 2018, p. 825) discourses on the one hand and historical and more nation-specific on the other. In recent years, there has been an increasing output of academic works on the discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Poland (see Jaskułowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2018; Nowicka, 2018). This interest is in part fueled by the nationalist, conservative, and anti-refugee stance of the governing Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS)) that enjoys considerable support in Poland (Kossakowski et al., 2020). Two important factors in understanding everyday discourses surrounding race/ethnicity in Poland are the country’s racial/ethnic homogeneity and the role of the catholic church in Polish political and public discourse.

Since the 18th century, Poland has rarely known independence as a sovereign state (it’s been independent from 1918 to 1939, and from 1989 onwards) due to partitions and occupations. The absence of civic nationhood has led to an enduring ethnic/cultural understanding of Polishness that is closely tied to the catholic church, although Polish territories were up until World War II truly multicultural (Jaskułowski, 2019). After World War II, Poland became a racial/ethnic homogeneous state due to the Holocaust and the forced ethnic relocations of former minority groups (Kossakowski et al., 2020). This homogeneity was fostered under the communist regime, although the catholicism that has always remained a strong marker of Polishness was simultaneously downplayed. Since the fall of the communist regime, a nationalist-conservative understanding of Polishness became increasingly widespread and firmly established under the majority rule of the PiS since 2015. Zubrzycki (2011) summarizes this dominant understanding of Polishness as follows:

essentially and eternally Catholic, Poland is the bulwark of Christendom defending Europe against the infidel (however defined). A nation assailed by dangerous neighbours, its identity is conserved and guarded by its defender, the Roman Catholic Church, and shielded by its Queen, the miraculous Black Madonna, Our Lady of Częstochowa. (p. 25)

Jaskułowski (2019) consequently notes that the dominant understanding of Polishness has “substantial exclusionary potential” (p. 55). These exclusionary elements in dominant understandings of Polish identity are reflected in popular attitudes towards racial/ethnic diversity. A 2016 survey shows that Polish attitudes towards Africans and Arabs are particularly negative; 76% of the respondents had an unsympathetic view of Arabs and 44% of Africans (Ipsos, 2016). This negative attitude towards Africans and Arabs dovetails with the dominant Black–White dichotomous way in which race and racism are understood in everyday discourse (Nowicka, 2018). Racial prejudices and stereotypes in Poland towards Black people

stem mainly from the 19th and early 20th century and are akin to globally circulating racializing discourses that found their origins in the West and were adapted to the specific Polish context (Nowicka, 2018). Ząbek (2007) argues that ambivalent and stereotypical predispositions towards Africans or Black people remain a feature of contemporary Poland. Nowicka (2018) argues that in dominant Polish racial/ethnic hierarchies, both Blacks and Arabs take place at “the bottom of the socio-cultural ladder” (p. 831). The particular negative attitude towards Arabs can also be explained by the dominant understanding of Poland as “the bulwark of Christendom defending Europe” (Zubrzycki, 2011, p. 25). The popular equation of Muslims with Arabs, whose Blackness is emphasized in dominant political and public discourses (Jaskułowski, 2019; Krzyżanowski, 2018), again points to the popular conflation of cultural and physiognomic markers of difference. This article will use, amongst other things, the dominant dichotomous Black–White distinction to see whether and how football media reconstruct the racializing discourses that are commonplace in wider Polish society. Whereas Black people are small in numbers in Poland—2,000 to 3,000 (Nowicka, 2018)—they are relatively visible within the Polish highest football league Ekstraklasa. In recent years, several Black players have transferred to the Ekstraklasa mainly from other (Western) European countries but also from African and South American countries. Arab players are barely visible in the Ekstraklasa but will, at least within our Black–White categorization, be classified as Black for they constitute an “exotic other” whose Blackness has been emphasized in popular and political discourses in recent years (Balogun, 2017; Jaskułowski, 2019).

The Black–White dichotomy also shows how Whiteness plays an important role in Polish self-identification (Balogun, 2018). Whiteness is however heterogeneous, and a myriad of contingent social identifiers determine who enjoys full access to its privileges. It is therefore worthwhile to explore who in the Polish context enjoy the full privileges of being the normative group and who do not. The 2016 survey on the attitudes on racial/ethnic diversity also points to widespread negative attitudes towards Ukrainians about whom 38% of respondents held unsympathetic views (Ipsos, 2016). Previous studies have shown how racializing and paternalistic discourses aimed at Russia, and the former Polish colonial Borderlands (*Kresy*) comprising areas of today’s Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus, are a recurring phenomenon in Polish public discourses (Bakuła, 2014; Mayblin et al., 2016). Post-Soviet countries in Central-Eastern Europe are, according to Law and Zakharov (2019, p. 135), invested in “attaining whiteness” in order to “serve and reflect their place among the ‘civilized’ nations of Europe,” which are perceived to be found in Western Europe. This process manifests itself in discourses emphasizing the supposed non-European (in the Polish context particularly non-Catholic) characteristics of Eastern neighbors. This suggests that although especially people of color (in the Polish context especially Africans and Arabs) are subject to racialization processes and symbolically marked as non-White, also within supposedly visually

homogeneous groups hierarchies and variegations exist that are maintained through racializing discourses.

This article will use these various understandings of Whiteness in the Polish context as a theoretical starting point to explore how its normative power is distributed. As stated before, this will be done through the lens of televised football for it is a domain that is extremely popular and displays various racial/ethnic groups in its coverage due to the increasing globalization of professional football. We will examine, for instance, whether and how various groupings of White players are represented in Polish televised football and how such representations may or may not provide all Whites with similar privileges that come with being considered White.

Methodology

This research focuses on three Polish football shows that provide highlights of the highest Polish football league, the Ekstraklasa. In the selection of shows, we ensured a combination of commercial and public channels. Also included is an online show to account for the growing share of viewers that consume sports online (Jakubowska, 2015). The first highlight show is *Liga+*. It is broadcast on the commercial channel Canal+ that owns the rights to most Ekstraklasa footage. It is broadcast every Saturday after the games of the day have ended. In the *Liga+* broadcasts, the highlights of Ekstraklasa games are shown, with one rotating presenter and one rotating analyst talking about the game before and after. Various commentators comment upon the games themselves. The second show is *Golekstra*, which is broadcast on public channel Telewizja Polska (TVP). This show is broadcast weekly on Mondays. Viewing figures of this show have last been released in 2017 when the show on average attracted almost 190,000 viewers (Ekstraklasa & EY, 2017). *Golekstra* has two rotating presenters and two or three rotating analysts who comment upon the games, with various commentators providing commentary for the matches. *Magazyn Ekstraklasy* was a weekly online show, airing during the 2018–2019 season, and broadcast on the official Ekstraklasa website and popular sports website *Przeгляд Sportowy*. Although exact viewing figures are unobtainable, *Magazyn Ekstraklasy* is included in this research to account for the increasing use of the internet in the media consumption of football. *Magazyn Ekstraklasy* has one regular presenter, with two regular analysts (one of whom also appears regularly in *Golekstra*). Two episodes included different third analysts. This show included shorter highlights than the others and mainly revolved around the analyses. We analyzed the commentary in conjunction with the visual (televised) imagery that accompanied it to increase precision of our interpretation of the commentary. The total number of comments amounted to ($N=$) 1,562. All the commentators were White Polish males except for one episode that featured a Spanish male guest. This homogeneously White and male composition generally mirrors that of Western European sport media outlets (The Black Collective of Media in Sports, 2019; van Sterkenburg, 2011).

A total of 12 episodes of the shows have been transcribed in the period between December 2018 and November 2019. Nine of the episodes come from the 2018–2019 season and three from the 2019–2020 season. The coding of these transcriptions was carried out with a specific two-step design. The first step entailed coding the value-judged commentary in what van Sterkenburg et al. (2012) described as “qualitative verbal categorical content analysis” (p. 428) and in the process of axial coding, identifying umbrella themes. After identifying the dominant conceptual themes, the second step entailed linking the themes and comments to the dominant racial/ethnic categorizations that can be witnessed in wider Polish society. This two-step approach uses a combination of mainly inductive and partly deductive coding techniques. The dominant conceptual themes were identified using an inductive coding technique in order to do justice to the shifting and constructed meanings that are given to race/ethnicity in everyday discourse. However, for identifying dominant racial/ethnic categorizations in wider Polish society a deductive approach was used, for whereas journalists might “speak through” (Bruce, 2004, p. 863) hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity, they rarely overtly refer to these dominant racial/ethnic classification schemes.

In the first step, we coded the comments that assessed a player and examined whether they were doing so positively or negatively. With “positive” we mean here a value judgement from the commentator that ascribes positive qualities to the player, with “negative” we mean negative qualities being ascribed. An example of a positive comment is “that is a brilliant pass,” an example of a negative comment is “he was in weaker form.” After this process of “open coding,” we could eventually combine codes that referred to the same overarching theme in the process of “axial coding.” We grouped the codes together in five umbrella themes. These themes, thus, reflect the meanings commentators gave to the football players regardless of their race/ethnicity. Four themes are similar to those that van Sterkenburg et al. (2012) identified in their study on Dutch football commentary and one was specific for the Polish context. The four similar themes were labeled “technical,” “physical,” “psychological,” and “general.” Technical comments pointed to specific technical actions on the field, such as a pass or shot. Physical comments referred to the physique of players. This could be their strength or speed but also included comments such as “he shoots powerfully,” which, although referring to a technical action, emphasized physical capabilities. It also included comments such as “a good reflex.” Psychological comments pertained to the cognitive abilities of the players, such as concentration, cool-headedness, and leadership capabilities. The general theme included comments that did not refer to a specific technical action on the pitch but were evaluative in nature, such as “he is a good player” or “he played a good game.”

Throughout the process of open coding, we were alert for new categories to emerge. In the commentary, we did detect one other recurring theme, which we labeled “Poland first.” This theme is somewhat different from the others as the comments within this theme do not refer to specific individual players but consist

of more general comments that stress the number of foreign players and coaches in the Ekstraklasa and the (allegedly endangered) identity of Polish teams. An example of a comment that we categorized within this theme is “Gloriously, in both team line-ups are six Poles.” The theme seems to reflect the general discourse surrounding “Otherness” in Polish wider society in a more indirect manner and thus, in part, shapes and reinforces the discourses in which racialization/ethnicization is facilitated.

The second step in the methodological design entailed linking the dominant conceptual themes that were identified in the first step to the dominant racial/ethnic categorizations in Polish wider society in order to search for potential patterns related to the race/ethnicity of players. As mentioned above, these dominant racial/ethnic categorizations were based on (1) the Black–White dichotomy through which race is popularly understood in Poland and (2) discourses of Whiteness that particularly “Other” people originating from “White countries” to the east of Poland. In the Black–White categorizations, we coded as Black those who, in everyday discourse in Poland, would be labeled Black—Black being a constructed and political category that not necessarily refers to skin color in the literal sense but to be seen as an exotic “other” through a Eurocentric gaze (Balogun, 2019). This, thus, included (Black) players from African descent with European or South American nationalities and players from Middle Eastern countries or heritage. The players coded White were those who are considered White in everyday Polish discourse in that they reflect the physiognomy of the dominant White racial/ethnic group in Polish society. The second racial/ethnic categorization we applied looks at how the normative power of Whiteness is distributed among different White groups of players in the Polish Ekstraklasa, most notably White players of Central European, Northwestern European, Southwestern European, and South American origin, as well as people originating from the Balkan and Post-Soviet states. This last category included White players from, among others, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, and Russia. The validity and credibility of the coding process was enhanced through intensive peer debriefing sessions (Spall, 1998). In frequent (almost weekly) sessions, throughout the entire research process, ambiguous comments were discussed within the research team in detail until a consensus was found. After reaching thematic saturation and linking all coded comments to the racial/ethnic categorizations, we could identify specific recurring patterns based on these categorizations. In the next section, we will present the main themes and racialized/ethnicized patterns we identified. The findings are partly presented in percentages; however, the analysis was qualitative in character as we looked for main themes and saturation across the televised football shows. Percentages do however give a good overview of the share of different racial/ethnic groups within the overall commentary and enhance the impact of the findings for they “cannot be easily dismissed as just anecdotal evidence” (van Sterkenburg, 2015, p. 1).

Results

In general, most of the analyzed football commentary was positive in nature (78%). This applies to comments made about both Black and White players. The analysis also shows that most comments about players were evaluative in character (46% of all [$N=$] 1,562 comments). Most of these evaluative comments were, again, positive in character. An example is, for instance, “The 22-year-old Slovak was doing great on the pitch.” The second biggest category was technical (36%), which includes commentary about technical skills of players. Commentators did not differentiate amongst players of different racial/ethnic origins in comments pertaining to their technical capabilities. The other categories of physicality (6%) and psychology (12%) made up a significant smaller bulk of the commentary; however, it is these two latter categories in which we did identify racialized/ethnicized patterns of representation. Therefore, we will now focus mainly on these latter two themes in the results below.

Black and White

The data show that commentators relied on the physicality theme and psychology theme to (re)construct racial/ethnic differences among White and Black players. Black players received 20% of all positive comments made about physical capabilities. This is significantly higher than expected based on their average share of 4.6% in the overall commentary. The comments mostly focused on both speed and physical build. Typical comments included “They [Remy and Cafu] are big guys when it comes to muscle mass” or “his [Musonda] speed of a professional sprinter.” The average share of commentary in the physicality theme significantly dropped for White players compared to their share in the overall commentary. While comments about White players comprised 96.5% of the overall commentary in the broadcasts, this percentage dropped to 80% when looking at positive comments pertaining to physicality.

The second theme in which we found patterns of racial/ethnic differentiation among Black and White players was in that of psychology. In contrast to the underrepresentation of White players in the positive comments about physicality, White players are (slightly) overrepresented in the psychology theme. Although this applies to both positive and negative “psychological comments,” White players are particularly overrepresented within *positive* psychological commentary. In this category, they received 98.6% of the comments, whereas their average share in the overall commentary was 95.5%. Typical comments would be “He [Vejinovic] was a leader on the pitch today” or “This is a very intelligent pass.” Only 1.4% of all comments in this category were made about Black players, which is a much lower share than expected based on their share in the overall commentary (4.6%). We will return to these findings in the Discussion section.

“Shades of Whiteness”

Our findings confirm the variegated character of Whiteness in the Polish context, although the analysis also shows how football commentators’ constructions of different groups of White players go into different and, sometimes, unexpected directions. The findings show that White South European players (comprising White Spanish, Portuguese, and Greek players) are relatively often described negatively in relation to their psychological characteristics. Whereas on average, this racial/ethnic group received 18.7% of all commentary pertaining to White players, they received 25.5% of the negative psychological comments concerning White players. Typical comments here included “Dani Ramirez behaved senselessly” or “Jimenez was not able to keep his cool.” This overrepresentation of negative comments about the psychological traits of White South European footballers—which mainly concerned issues surrounding temperament and a lack of sports mentality—contrasts with that of White Polish players. White Polish players received around 50% of all commentary pertaining to White players, but they only received 36% of negative comments about psychological traits, although they were overrepresented in negative evaluative commentary (56%).

Poland First

Next to the racialized/ethnic patterns found in the categories above, another, more general characteristic of Polish football commentary is that the commentators regularly talk about issues that we have themed here as “Poland first.” Comments in this theme include discussions about the number of foreign players and coaches in the league, which then is generally represented as a threat to Polish footballers. This is juxtaposed with positive remarks about teams that consist of many Polish players. Examples of this can be seen in this remark from a commentator complimenting three foreign players: “And I mention these three, and I did not expect it, because I am pro-Polish and Polish players are favored” or another commentator talking about Legia Warsaw’s foreign head coach: “I feel he deprived Legia a bit of their Polish identity.” These comments generally do not pertain to an individual player but rather are made as general remarks or referring to head coaches. Comments in this theme can be seen to construct an idea of Poland juxtaposed to and under threat by “Others.” They also occasionally slipped into comments that can be considered more overtly racist. For instance, in a discussion about the head coach of Legia Warsaw, one commentator argues that “First we had a Croatian identity . . . then a Portuguese identity, and I am afraid of what will come next if it won’t be a Pakistani or a Filipino identity.” We will return to this in the Discussion section.

Discussion

Constructing the Racialized Black Body

One of the main findings in our analysis is that in Polish televised football, Black players are associated relatively often with their physical capabilities, while their

mental capabilities get understated. This suggests that the Black Brawn–White Brain discourses that have been found to be prevalent in other national contexts (e.g., Buffington & Fraley, 2008; Haslerig et al., 2020; Ličen, 2015; Rada & Wulfemeyer, 2005) are also replicated within Polish football media. Although the number of comments reserved for Black players was quite limited and focused on a few individual players, the findings are significant for they do dovetail with hegemonic discourses surrounding race/ethnicity internationally and in Polish society.

This imbalanced and stereotypical representation of Black athletes seems part of wider racialization processes that produce “dehumanized Black bodies” (Haslerig et al., 2020, p. 275) and reinforce racist ideas about assumed biological differences. Our findings suggest that racialized stereotypes in sport coverage on Black athletes “travel” in the globalized sport–media complex (Maguire, 2011) and consequently also inform Polish media representations.

At the same time, besides the global racial formations that are replicated transnationally within sport media, the racialized representation of Blackness in Polish sport media also appears to be rooted in hegemonic discourses in Polish society. Previous studies (Nowicka, 2018; Rzepnikowska, 2019; Ząbek, 2009) have shown how Western colonial discourses on race/ethnicity found a foothold in Poland in the 19th century despite—or perhaps because of—the general absence of Black people in Poland. These discourses were particularly preoccupied with the Black body and presented a binary image of the Black body that oscillated between admiration and loathing (Ząbek, 2007). Nowicka (2018) notes the continuing dominance of these discourses with a focus on the Black physique, which may explain the overrepresentation of Black athletes in comments pertaining to physicality. This fascination with the Black body is something that Ząbek (2007) noted before in Polish sport media’s coverage on Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho. The Black players’ overrepresentation in comments pertaining to their physical capabilities seems rooted in the historical stereotypical representations of Africans and Blackness in wider Polish society and culture, stereotypes that still are regularly drawn upon in contemporary Polish public discourses.

Another interesting finding in our study is that although Black players are portrayed in a racialized and stereotypical way that overstates their physical attributes and understates their cognitive abilities, when Black players are discussed and evaluated in a more general manner, the commentators were overwhelmingly positive. This is significant for it reflects how racialization processes work through discourses that can be considered positive on the one hand and stereotypical on the other. It reflects what authors such as Bonilla-Silva (2015) and Hylton (2009) have branded “new racism” or “enlightened racism” characterized by the “increasingly covert nature of racial discourses and practices” (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1362), which enables “white audiences to deny the existence of institutional racism in sport or society because they mythologise individualism and meritocracy” (Hylton, 2009, p. 92). With general comments about Black players tending to be positive, it may seem that obsolete racial/ethnic stereotypes are indeed a thing of the past. However,

the present study shows how Black players in Poland structurally receive unbalanced coverage that highlights only those aspects that fit in wider, hegemonic, racialized/ethnicized discourses.

Latin Fury: Constructing Whiteness

Hylton and Lawrence (2015, p. 768) note how “to treat the white (male) body as an absolute marker of unbridled social power, is to overlook the heterogeneity of white masculinities and the contingent, marginalized/alternative nature of whiteness.” Our findings suggest that in the Polish context, football media construct and reinforce heterogeneous and layered “shades of Whiteness,” where the normative privileges of Whiteness are unequally distributed among a visually homogeneous group. This particularly applied to the White South European (Spanish, Portuguese, and Greek footballers) who were assessed relatively often in a negative manner in relation to their cognitive traits. These comments mainly pertained to supposed temperament and lacking work ethic. In recent years, the Ekstraklasa has seen an influx of mainly White Spanish and Portuguese players and in giving meaning to these groups, the commentators often rely on the stereotype of “Latin fury” (Crolley & Hand, 2002, p. 105), which points at the assumed proclivity of Latin, including South European players, for anger, passion, and commitment. This stereotype conflicts with the dominant conservative conception of White masculinity in Poland, which values stoicism among other things (Suwada & Plantin, 2014). Previous studies have also noted this stereotype appearing in sport media in other national contexts such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Crolley & Hand, 2002; O’Donnell, 1994; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012). The stereotypical representation of the White Latin athlete draws upon transnationally circulating discourses and suggests that these athletes are not made sense of as a normative White group.

At the same time, previous studies have documented how the majority of Poles attain and protect a sense of normative Whiteness through orientalizing the areas east of Poland (Mayblin et al., 2016; Zarycki, 2014). This study found that footballers from countries to the east of Poland received balanced coverage, however. This ought not to be necessarily seen as a challenge to the prevalence of these discourses. Rather, the stereotypes on which these “Othering” discourses surrounding “un-European Ukraine and Belarus” generally rely (supposed cultural and economic backwardness) may just not make much sense within the hegemonic discourses that prevail in televised football where a reservoir of more transnationally established stereotypes surrounding physicality and cognitive abilities take precedence.

Our Polish Masculine Ekstraklasa

In Polish televised football, commentators regularly refer to the Ekstraklasa as *nasza Ekstraklasa* (our Ekstraklasa). Considering our findings, it is worth exploring who is symbolically included in this imagined collective. In talking about foreigners and

diversity in the Ekstraklasa, commentators regularly relied on us-versus-them frames. Most notably, the commentators relied on discourses that construct foreigners as a threat to the Polish character of the Ekstraklasa and which mirrors the “anti-pluralist stance” (Krzyżanowski, 2018, p. 80) that marks Polish attitudes towards diversity and has been solidified under the current government. The (re)construction of banal nationalism in sport media is not limited to the Polish context, nor are debates surrounding the influx of foreign players in domestic club football, which cannot be separated from wider debates about national identity and globalization (Maguire, 2011). Sometimes the focus on the imagined Polish character of the league resulted in overt racist comments. It happens, for instance, when commentators explicitly fear foreign head coaches, saying that “first we had a Croatian identity . . . then a Portuguese identity, and I am afraid of what will come next, if it won’t be a Pakistani or a Filipino identity” (see also Results section). The two latter countries have no notable presence in professional Polish football and seem to be mentioned solely as symbolizing the racial/ethnic Other. The comment also shows the layers and variegations of Whiteness as mentioned earlier in this article where a certain hierarchy of “Othered” Whiteness starts with Croatian, then moves down to Portuguese, to be then followed by non-White “Others.”

The nationalist discourses surrounding Polishness and foreigners in the Ekstraklasa were also situated in a particular gendered discourse (Jakubowska & Ličen, 2017) for they relied on the stereotype of “White heroic masculinity” in describing White Polish athletes (McDonald, 2010, p. 166). More specifically, Polish White players in our study were generally commented upon in ways that positively highlighted their psychological capabilities in terms of determination, bravery, and intelligence. They were also relatively overrepresented in negative evaluative comments. This aligns with Dziubiński et al.’s (2019) findings in their research on gender inequality in Polish sports paper press. Similar to print press, in televised football White Polish athletes with disappointing results were “treated like men” (Dziubiński et al., 2019) through harsh negative evaluations. This suggests that Polish sport media reconstruct racial/ethnic categorizations and meanings, in part, by evaluating athletes according to the traditional and orthodox understandings of masculinity in Polish wider society in which heroic qualities such as chivalry and bravery are considered important (Kossakowski et al., 2019). This discourse of masculinity is also evident in the discourses surrounding Black and White Southern European players who were constructed as non-normative by drawing on transnationally established discourses that highlight their supposed deviant masculinities (emphasizing; e.g., a poor work ethic and hot-temperedness instead of hegemonic masculine qualities such as determination and intelligence). This shows how in Polish televised football, normative Whiteness is given meaning through a myriad of social identity markers related to gender, race/ethnicity, and nationality.

Conclusion

This study has shown how football commentators draw upon various discourses to (re)construct racial/ethnic hierarchizations in Polish televised football. The transnational character of these discourses is a testament to the porosity of racialized/ethnicized discourses in their dissemination into various national contexts. The findings in this study are particularly interesting for they concern Europe's most racially/ethnically homogeneous White country that in recent years has seen a consolidation of nationalist and conservative discourses abhorring racial/ethnic, sexual, and religious diversity. This study suggests that televised football serves as a site in which these discourses are in part replicated and in which the Polish football league is constructed in distinct nationalistic terms. In finding explanations for the solidification of anti-pluralism (Krzyżanowski, 2018) in Poland, it might thus be worthwhile to, among many other things, look at the role played by the country's most popular pastime: watching football. It is significant that in constructing these supposed racial/ethnic differences within televised football, commentators draw upon transnationally circulating discourses that are firmly established in and originating from the West.

Even though we believe this in-depth study into the Polish context has contributed significantly to understandings of representations of race/ethnicity and Whiteness in sport media, further research should be focusing on the production of both televised football and audience receptions. So far, only very few studies have focused on production processes in sport media in relation to dominant racial/ethnic categorizations and meanings. Production studies are necessary in order to gain a better understanding of journalists' motivations and awareness of the racialized meanings they produce. Furthermore, audience studies are necessary to see whether the racialized stereotypes that we found within Polish football commentary are actually taken up or challenged by people watching the content. Similar to production studies, such audience studies are relatively rare but pivotal to measure the potential impact of the racialized discourses in the content (Hall, 2007). Furthermore, racialized/ethnicized discourses depend on and intersect with other social dimensions such as gender. More research should be done to see how normative Whiteness is given meaning through and influenced by other social identity discourses.

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Note

1. The concepts of race and ethnicity in everyday discourse are often conflated, and racial and cultural/ethnic markers are frequently drawn upon together in meaning-making (Gunaratnam, 2003). This article will therefore use the term “race/ethnicity” throughout the article. This will be elaborated upon further in the article.

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