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'Bigger than football': racist talk on and off the soccer pitch

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ABSTRACT

Racism is a major social and cultural problem that has, in various forms, plagued football for a long time. Despite the attempts of official bodies to root it out, racist talk and behaviour are still rife among players as well as in fan communities. The present paper provides a case study of online users' comments on the media coverage of a series of controversial incidents during a recent UEFA Europa League match involving an alleged verbal act of racial abuse between two players. Adopting a discourse analytical perspective, the paper contrasts how the match controversies were reflected in the users' public online discourses in two different cultural communities, namely the UK and the Czech Republic, and identifies some of the similarities and differences between the two. The analysis shows how the users reframe the underlying racist issue, trivialize it through humour and relativize its seriousness. The data indicate that such discourses surrounding football are important for understanding how fans construct various group identities and how specific socio-cultural contexts influence the perception of race-related controversies.

Introduction

In recent years, the issue of racism in sports, with a particular focus on football, has moved into the centre of attention of all major stakeholders – soccer players, national and international associations, the general public, as well as the media. Race-related incidents have come to have serious implications for the parties involved, including players and their teams, regardless of whether such incidents originate from events on the field, in the stands, or beyond, e.g. on fans' social media accounts. Not surprisingly, race-related incidents often overshadow the sports event itself, being representative of deeply seated and socially pathological issues that are truly "bigger than football".¹

While definitions of racism point out its psychological basis,² as it involves individual, community-wide or institutional prejudice and discrimination against individuals or groups of people on the basis of their ethnic or racial origin, racism is articulated through utterances and discursive practices, both overt and covert.³ Concerning sports in general and soccer in particular, racist discourses involve phenomena such as the chanting of openly racist taunts by fans,⁴ (mutual) verbal abuse of players⁵ and even racist joking among soccer team members.⁶ Although anti-social behaviour among fans has been traditionally linked to hooliganism, it goes much further, thus, having a place more central to football culture. It has been noted that there is "an expressive tradition which ranges from banal, individually spoken insults to sophisticated communal chanting built around an implicit collective identity which can cut across the full spectrum of the football supporting community".⁷

However, football-related racist discourse simultaneously generates and is embedded in the broader public and private discourses about football and racism, both in the media and elsewhere. To this end, in order to pay attention to the non-elite discourses⁸ of racist talk and talk about racism – rather than institutionally-based media discourses⁹ – this article analyzes the recontextualizations of racism in reader comments in discussion forums accompanying mainstream online news sites. While research into the fan communication in news discussion forums in relation to racist discourse is gradually increasing,¹⁰ there appears to be little to no research that adopts a comparative perspective, investigating which discourses and discourse strategies are adopted by fans/users in different cultures in relation to one and the same incident.¹¹ Although news discussion forums cannot be taken as representative of public opinion, being the public voices of a small group of commenters, their analysis can indicate which issues recur in the given communities, ultimately helping us to identify how such issues as racism are discursively handled in different cultures and fan groups.

The present study seeks to fill this gap by investigating, from a discourse analytical perspective, how a highly controversial act of verbal abuse produced during a match between two players¹² is taken up by fans on online message boards, resulting in heated debates about racism, partisanship and fandom. The data includes fans' reactions expressed in British and Czech online news discussion forums following an alleged racist utterance produced by Slavia Praha's Ondřej Kúdela against Glasgow Rangers' Glen Kamara in 2021. Using content analysis, the paper identifies how salient the crucial controversial match incidents were for the respective fan communities (i.e. the online commenters) in the two countries right after the match and one month later after a UEFA ruling in the matter, and how the online commenters built up their argumentation around the issue, i.e. what discursive strategies they used in the reader comments' section to discuss and reflect on the underlying racist issue. The paper starts by reviewing the controversial match incidents (Section 2) and goes on to identify key discursive strategies that were found to be salient in the British and the Czech data subsets (Section 3). It concludes with a discussion of how the two national/linguistic communities adopt quite different perspectives on the case, noting how they negotiate and recontextualize the core issue in complex ways (Section 4).

Case background: events on and off the pitch

The incident in question occurred during the 2020/21 UEFA Europa League second leg match between Glasgow Rangers and Slavia Praha, played on 18 March 2021 in Glasgow. After a 1:1 draw in Prague one week before, the match was crucial in deciding which team would continue into the quarterfinals of the UEFA Europa League. Throughout the match, Slavia was the dominant side, which was confirmed by the two goals (scored in minute 14 and 74), ultimately leading to the victory of the Prague team and the Rangers' first loss at their Ibrox stadium in a year. However, the match became marred by several serious incidents, which led to an extensive subsequent media attention and resulted not only in a UEFA disciplinary action and a criminal investigation filed in Scotland, but – rather unusually – even in the involvement of the office of the President of the Czech Republic, attesting to the degree of controversy which the match created in the public sphere.

There were four incidents during and after the match that were widely reported on, some of which are likely to go down in European football history in a rather infamous way. A brief discussion of these incidents is needed here in order to provide the context for understanding the subsequent public discussion of the match, particularly in online news discussion forums that serve as the basis for my analysis in Section 3. These incidents form the pre-existing topics that online commenters orient to and recontextualize in their discourses.

Incident 1: Roofe's dangerous tackle

The first problematic incident concerned a dangerous tackle by a Rangers player against the Slavia goalkeeper. Apparently, in response to the increasing pressure to turn the losing match,

Rangers' players resorted to a rather aggressive playing style, which culminated in minute 61, when the Rangers player Kemar Roofe – after a mere six minutes on the pitch – was sent off for a dangerous high tackle, when his foot ended up kicking Slavia's goalkeeper Ondřej Kolář straight in the face. The image of the dangerous tackle has since become a part of the soccer “hall of infamy” and, together with a photograph of Kolář's bloodied face, is to be found in many fans' internet collections of the most violent soccer incidents.¹³ Roofe was punished by the UEFA with a four-match ban¹⁴ and, according to Slavia's goalkeeper, he did not reach out to apologize for causing the injury.¹⁵

The tackle was described very emotionally by some UK football commentators as “horrific”, “despicable and absolutely disgusting” (Andy Goldstein) and even as “coward's challenge” (Jason Cundy).¹⁶ Roofe subsequently received racial abuse from fans on his social media accounts in connection with the incident.¹⁷

Incident 2: Kúdela's racist utterance

The second incident, which eventually came to epitomize the entire match, concerned a case of alleged racial abuse by a Slavia player. After Roofe's tackle, the violence in the game continued, and, in minute 73, the Rangers player Balogun was sent off for a second yellow card. Right after that, Slavia's Stanciu scored the second goal from a free kick. In minute 85, an incident occurred, described by the Guardian's live-text commentator as follows:

One of the Slavia players goes down, the ball is kicked into him by a Rangers player, bounces away, and is kicked back into him again, on neither occasion with any great force. The Slavia man stays down as if viciously assaulted, various players get upset about it, and Kudela and Goldson are both booked.¹⁸

Just a couple of minutes later, in minute 87, when the chances of the Rangers squad changing the final result were quickly slipping away, the events took an even more sinister note, see the Guardian's live-text description of the key moment of the game:

While that's all happening, Ondrej Kudela has leaned into Glen Kamara, covered his mouth with his hands and whispered something into his ear that has enraged him. No lip-reader is ever going to get the chance to decipher that, but sadly I fear we can imagine what it might have been.¹⁹

That description captures well what is uncontested about the incident: the fact that something was uttered, the utterer covered his mouth (clearly to ensure that words remain entirely private) and the addressee of the utterance felt an instant and deep offence. The rest is speculation: Kamara stated that the utterance was a racist slur, namely “You're a fucking monkey”. Kúdela subsequently denied any racist words, claiming that he said “You're a fucking guy”. In other words, he admitted an act of wilful verbal aggression against the other player, but resisted making any admission that it had a racist content. A month later, UEFA's disciplinary board issued a 10-match ban, suspending Kúdela from team and representative team competition matches, explicitly stating “racist behaviour” as reason for the punishment.²⁰

Incident 3: Ibrox Tunnel altercation

The third incident concerns events that happened after the match. It appears that the Slavia team was not allowed back to their dressing room for a substantial period of time after the match, having been left standing on the pitch without much explanation.²¹ After the team was let into the tunnel, a confrontation is said to have taken place inside, with Rangers' Kamara allegedly physically assaulting Slavia's Kúdela. The circumstances of this event remain unclear because there is no video recording and thus no evidence, even though it appears to have been witnessed by a number of people. Shortly after the match, Slavia issued an official statement in which it described its version of the events as follows:

After the end of the game, the team was not allowed to enter the dressing room. Ondřej Kúdela was assaulted by player Kamara and hit with fists in the head when Rangers manager Steven Gerrard witnessed the incident. Even the UEFA representatives, who were also present on the site of the incident, were shocked by this behaviour²²

In connection with this alleged assault, Slavia Praha filed a criminal complaint with the Scottish police the next day. The official announcement on the team's website stated that the

attack on player Ondrej Kudela was premeditated and planned, including deliberately covering the cameras at the scene of the incident. The brutal and crude attack was conducted with full intensity in order to injure and cause physical damage. The submission contains the names of witnesses, who, in addition to representatives of SK Slavia Praha, were also representatives of the UEFA delegation as well as Rangers FC coach Steven Gerrard²³

Though no comment on what actually happened after the match could be found from Rangers' official sources, a UEFA's spokesperson was reported to have issued a statement that the organization was "aware of an incident which occurred in the tunnel after the end of the match and which involved some players of both teams".²⁴ One month later, after the termination of the disciplinary proceedings conducted by the UEFA into the match, Kamara was punished with a three-match ban from UEFA club team competitions "for assaulting another player",²⁵ without any further information being publicly available.

Incident 4: Gerrard's post-match press conference

The final, and potentially controversial, issue that is relevant for the analysis of the online reader comments concerns the post-match interview with the Rangers' team coach Steven Gerrard. The event was somewhat unusual because, contrary to common practice, there was no representative of Slavia Praha at the press conference. During the solo performance, Gerrard reflected on the match, briefly praising Slavia for being the better team. A substantial part of the 10-minute interview (approximately 8.5 minutes)²⁶ was devoted to a discussion of the Kúdela-Kamara racist issue (Incident 2) and the denouncement of racism in football, with Gerrard expressing his full support and trust in Kamara. However, Gerrard did not – perhaps surprisingly to some – comment on the bloody tackle for which Roofe was sent off (Incident 1) and likewise did not mention anything concerning the controversial events after the match (Incident 3), which happened off camera and became known only subsequently on the basis of Slavia's complaint.

In this paper, the post-match press conference was included among the "incidents" of this match (and to call it that way for the sake of analytical consistency) because a preliminary analysis of the data revealed that Gerrard's media appearance was indeed a relevant and widely discussed issue. It was rhetorically linked by many commenters to the three match-related incidents. As such, it was highly salient in some of the discourses that circulated not only among fans and online commenters, but also football pundits and public figures commenting on the match. For instance, as Slavia's manager Jaroslav Tvrdík stated subsequently when describing the tunnel incident, "Coach Gerrard disappointed me; he did not say a word. This match was everything else but fair play".²⁷

Analysis of online news reader comments

Data for the analysis

Since the focus of the analysis is to explore how the racist incident was discussed in online commenters' public discourses of two linguistic communities, the data in this paper draw on two sets of reader comments in order to establish differences and similarities between the perception of the incident in the national communities of the two teams. To this end, a collection was made of user comments accompanying online news articles in the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic. The data were obtained from the online version of the *Daily Mail* and the Czech online news site

idnes.cz (an Internet version of the daily newspaper *Dnes*), which are roughly comparable in terms of the content and the amount of comments typically accompanying individual articles. Both sites concentrate on providing popular news content and attract commenters whose contributions tend to be more emotive than argumentative; standing in contrast to more intellectually oriented online news sites such as *The Guardian* in the UK and *Lidové noviny* in the Czech Republic.²⁸

Relevant articles from the two news sites were obtained in two stages. The first concerns articles published the next day after the match (19 March 2021; subset A), when the readers could be supposed to be responding to their immediate experience and perception of the match, formed on the basis of watching the match or reading news about it in the media. The second subset comprises articles published one month later (14 April 2021; subset B), after the UEFA's decision on the disciplinary action to be taken against the two players. The decision to collect data at two different stages is motivated by the perception of this issue as gradually developing over time. Arguably, what remains in public discourse with the passage of time are the salient themes and meanings ascribed to the match and its controversies. These are the “meanings” that are distilled after the immediate impressions and evaluations of the players' performance in the match become weaker (or disappear) with time. At the same time, however, it needs to be taken into account that reader comments are, to a significant extent, also motivated by the actual media text. Since the article serves as a prompt and the comments as follow-up responses, the opinions of the commenters are also closely tied to the media text, with readers positioning themselves not only with respect to the incidents but also their media coverage.²⁹

From the news articles in question, all reader comments were manually extracted by means of downloading and transferring them into a text file. In the case of the Czech data, the first 150 comments from each article in the subset were included in the datasets for further processing. The reduction was done, on the one hand, to ensure a manageable size of the data and, on the other, to create a subset more easily comparable to the British data. The comments were manually processed and coded for the presence of one or more of the four incidents. Where the users commented on other issues or reframed the discussion in broader terms (e.g. racism in general), the comments were classified as “Other”. This category includes such topics as evaluation of the players' performance, second-order follow-up comments expressing agreement/disagreement with others, references to other (future) matches, the recounting of personal experience, speculations on UEFA's subsequent steps, etc.

Since the actual linguistic forms referencing a given topic can be quite varied, the coding inevitably involves a degree of subjectivity; however, the aim of this processing was not only to document the presence in the comments of the four controversial incidents but to go beyond a mere content analysis, namely, to establish the dominant discourses, i.e. the central issues that emerge in the online discussions among users in the two national communities. As mentioned above, the overall findings are thus interpreted as general tendencies found in the data, while attention in the subsequent discussion is also paid to the mutual relation between the various topics, i.e. how the users connect individually the controversial incidents and, thus, how they discursively handle the racist incident in their online talk.

Analysis and discussion of the data

As is evident from the specification of the data in [Tables 1 and 2](#), the two data sets are immensely disproportionate in terms of their sizes. There are 435 comments accompanying the seven articles in the British data set, while the six articles in the Czech data set generated 6,817 comments – more than 15 times as many. While the British subset B contains approximately half of the number of comments in the earlier subset A, which is most likely indicative of commenters' loss of interest in the topic with the passage of time, that situation is quite the opposite in the Czech data: There, the news of Kúdela's “exemplary punishment” by UEFA led to an explosion of commenting activity, with a single news article attracting as many as 2,681 comments. As the qualitative analysis of the

Table 1. British data: Articles and comments from the *daily mail*: subsets A and B (article headlines shortened).

Subset A (19 March 2021)	No. of comments	Comments analyzed
SLAVIA PRAGUE FOOTBALLER ONDREJ KUDELA 'IS ATTACKED AND BEATEN IN THE TUNNEL' AT IBROX ...	248	248
SLAVIA PRAGUE PLAYER 'CALLED RANGERS STAR GLEN KAMARA A F***ING MONKEY' ...	34	34
ONDREJ KUDELA CLAIMS HE TOLD GLEN KAMARA 'YOU'RE A F***ING GUY' ...	3	3
UEFA OPEN PROBE INTO RANGERS STAR GLEN KAMARA'S CLAIM ...	4	4
Total subset A	299	299
Subset B (14 April 2021)	-	-
'A 10-MATCH BAN TO FULFILL PERVERTED EXPECTATIONS OF A FEW ACTIVISTS': CZECH PRESIDENT'S OFFICE CLAIMS ...	128	128
SLAVIA PRAGUE PLAYER ONDREJKUDELA IS SLAPPED WITH A TEN-MATCH BAN ...	10	10
GLEN KAMARA'S LAWYER SAYS 10-MATCH BAN HANDED TO ONDREJKUDELA FOR RACISM IS 'TOKENISTIC' ...	8	8
Total subset B	146	146
Total (subsets A+ B)	445	445

Table 2. Czech data: Articles and comments from *idnes.Cz*: subsets A and B (article headlines shortened).

Subset A (19 March 2021)	No. of comments	Comments analyzed
KUDELA ACCUSED OF RACISM AND ASSAULTED ...	1,470	150
RANGERS AND RACISM. PREVIOUS ACCUSATIONS OF HOMOPHOBIC ABUSE. ...	333	150
I TOTALLY DENY ANY RACISM. I SAID 'YOU'RE A F***** GUY' TO KAMARA ...	584	150
SLAVIA GOALKEEPER SUFFERS A FRACTURE IN GLASGOW ...	786	150
Total subset A	3,173	600
Subset B (14 April 2021)	-	-
EXEMPLARY PUNISHMENT. KUDELA GETS A 10-MATCH BAN FOR RACISM ...	2,681	150
KUDELA SHOULD NOT HAVE APPROACHED HIS OPPONENT, I APOLOGIZE ...	963	150
Total subset B	3,644	300
Total (subsets A+ B)	6,817	900

data indicates, this appears to be the result of the general perception of the punishment as unjust and extraordinarily harsh. At the later stage, public perception appears to shift from the circumstances and the unacceptability of racist abuse to the punishment, which is linguistically accompanied by a reversal of social roles from active to passive: Kúdela appears to be re-positioned from the role of the perpetrator into that of a victim.

Figure 1 illustrates the results of the content analysis of the data, based on the identification of explicit thematic references to the four controversial incidents. The graphs were created on the basis of normalized data in order to make the four subsets, each with a different number of comments, comparable.³⁰

All in all, the data reveal several noteworthy differences. First of all, the Czech commenters paid a significantly higher attention to the injury of their goalkeeper than British readers, both right after the match and when UEFA issued the punishments. Right after the match, the Czechs also commented almost twice as often as the British on the racial slur controversy, which suggests that the incident provided the central point of their discussions of the match. By contrast, the British commenters paid a significantly higher attention to the incident involving a physical attack by the Rangers player in the Ibrox Stadium tunnel; however, the higher incidence may, at least partly, be the result of the framing of the article (the most commented on in the British dataset): its headline highlighted that particular incident, thus providing the focus for the readers' subsequent reactions. Interestingly enough, there is an almost identical frequency of reference, in the British and the

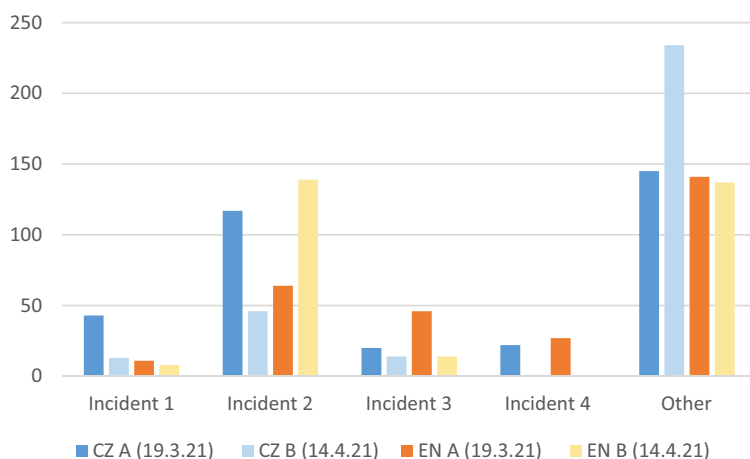


Figure 1. Thematic references in the datasets (normalized data).

Czech data, to the coach's post-match interview (Incident 4), though the references are slightly higher in the British data set.

The extent of attention paid by the readers to all four incidents changed once the UEFA published its decision on the punishment. For the British commenters, this meant an almost exclusive focus on the key incident, i.e. the alleged racist statement. In the case of the Czech data, much less attention was paid to that incident; instead, Czech commenters tended to mention Roope's dangerous tackle and Kamara's physical assault more often. The three incidents were typically linked and contrasted, which was also the pattern in the British data (see below). However, since one of the Czech articles in subset B concerned the verbal reactions of Slavia Praha's manager, many commenters expressed their opinions on the manager's reaction, introducing a new topic into the debate – hence the significant increase of posts classified as “Other” in the Czech dataset B. Perhaps not surprisingly, no attention whatsoever is paid in either the Czech or the British data to Rangers' coach's responsibility for the match (save for a single mention in the Czech subset).

As regards the qualitative analysis, the findings showcase how the individual topics are mutually related in the comments, and what kinds of discursive strategies many of the commenters adopted in relation to the key incidents. The commenters' recurring discursive strategies that were identified during the coding of the content, typically in both British and Czech comments, include: (1) the interlinking of multiple incidents; (2) the reframing of the issue in terms of international politics; (3) the critical evaluation of the coach; (4) the use of intertextuality; (5) the creation of humour through fictionalized scenarios and irony; and (6) metalingual observations.

Connecting the main incidents

A frequent strategy in both data sets appears to be the cumulative mentioning of several (or all) key incidents and building one's argument around that. Thus, in Ex. 1 the reader expresses his indignation by calling for a criminal investigation, while in Ex. 2, the commenter combines all three incidents in a causative manner, extrapolating from the particular incident to a general cultural/political situation in the West:

- (1) *What a way to lead by example hey. Racist abuse so take matters into his own hands and beats the guy up. Then his manager supports it because god forbid he condemns his actions as he would then be accused of being racist too. The west is crumbling and we talk about understanding etc but then stand toe to toe with someone beating up someone for apparent racist abuse. I'm not condoning the racism I am though calling out the response to it. (EN A-1)*
- (2) *The Glasgow coach Gerrard does not know anything, he was not present when Kúdela verbally assaulted his player, but he was present at the physical assault and did nothing to prevent it. But the tackle on Slavia's goalkeeper was on the level of a criminal assault; they definitely should not let it just peter out. (CZ A-1)*³¹

The juxtaposition of the two key acts (Incident 2 and Incident 3) was very common in the later data set, particularly in the Czech comments, with many commenters highlighting the discrepancy between the acts and the punishments, as in Ex. 3. In the Czech data, such a comparison much more frequently recycled a reference to Incident 1, as in Ex. 4:

- (3) *He probably deserved the punishment but it's strange that an offence uttered in affect (and without evidence), gets a punishment that's more than three times longer than a physical assault with a fist, carried out with premeditation and before witnesses (CZ B-1)*
- (4) *So one seriously injured player, and another that was provably physically attacked, and everybody deals with unproved racist talk. If I understand it well, it's nothing but a tactic to deflect attention from one's own problems and draw attention to someone else. (CZ A-2)*

Reframing the issue

One common strategy adopted by the commenters is to reframe the issue, either implying hypocrisy or trivializing racism. In the Czech data, there were several instances where the commenters interpreted the outcome (UEFA's punishments) as a case of double standards. This concerns not only the different handling of verbal and physical violence, but the interpretation of UEFA's punishments as "proof" of the differential treatment of Western (or rich) as opposed to other (or less financially viable) teams. The underlying binary perception of "us" vs. "them", defined in broadly political terms as "East" vs. "West", is far from exclusive to this particular situation – it resurfaces in many controversial public debates,³² apparently attesting to some of the commenters' deep-seated sense of inferiority. This discourse is present in Ex. 5, but it is also unmasked, deconstructed and criticized by others, as the comment in Ex. 6 illustrates:

- (5) *The punishment for Kúdela is, in comparison with the punishment for Roofe, who had no decency to even apologize, a manifestation of UEFA's racism. Simply former Eastern Europe is a substandard scum for it [UEFA], and the Rangers' appeal against the punishments only shows the absence of any decency and judgement. (CZ B-1)*
- (6) *This Czech sore losership, crying, whining, wimping and collective hysteria – I've had enough of that! Both of my ears are twisting from it!
Evil UEFA and us, little poor things, whose little sandcastles have been kicked into pieces.
That's so humiliating for me, so miniscule, so poor . . .
Kúdela got the absolutely minimal possible punishment from UEFA; if he still feels unjust about it, he has the right to appeal as a private person. Full stop, end of case. (CZ B-1)*

Interestingly enough, the British commenters have not been found to articulate the theme of alleged cultural superiority/inferiority (or East-West divide). Rather, they pointed out the uniform presence of racism across different societies, see Ex. 7, which is also characteristic of how the particular issue arising from the match is rescaled onto a broader level as a society-wide problem, as in Ex. 8:

- (7) *There's a racism problem here as bad as Eastern Europe, difference is they're less introvert and say it overtly, rather than covertly in alit of cases here* (EN B-1)
- (8) *I think most people understand that there were two wrongs here. One alleged but clear to some parties who were very close to it, one pretty clear. Violence is never the answer, but you seem to be of the view that any sort of violence is an acceptable reaction to an allegation of r'ism. This is how society breaks down and increases the tension rather than solving the problem.* (EN A-1)

Another prominent strategy of reframing the issue, which was found to be salient in the Czech data set, is that of disregarding the seriousness of racism. In Ex. 9, the commenter negatively evaluates the alleged racist incident (“disgustingly provocative”) but refrains from explicitly labelling it as an act of racism. This effectively leads to a normalization of the incident, cf. how an analogy is drawn with other sports:

- (9) *Simply kúdela was disgustingly provocative and got smacked across the face backstage. that's a normal thing in ice hockey. I wouldn't deal with it in any special way – kúdela out for 2 matches, kamara out for 3. another issue is roof (sic),that should be a bit longer punishment.* (CZ A-3)

In cases of belittling racism, it is thus noteworthy that the most scandalous issue, namely the racist utterance, may not be lexicalized at all; commenters use more euphemistic reformulations (cf. “provocation” and “trifle” in Ex. 10), pronominal forms (cf. “it” in Ex. 11) and dummy lexical words (cf. “nonsense” in Ex. 12):

- (10) *A useless provocation that was. But still a trifle in comparison with the swine play by the home team ...* (CZ A-3)
- (11) *Shouldn't it just mask what was happening on the pitch?* (CZ A-3)
- (12) *So Kolář has a fractured forehead bone and here and elsewhere nonsense is dealt with.* (CZ A-3)

Such underlexicalization of the topic of racism is, arguably, highly relevant: the commenters avoid explicitly referring to it, thus attempting to, metaphorically speaking, “sweep the issue under the carpet”.

Criticising the coach

In the two datasets with comments made right after the match, the behaviour of the Rangers' coach Steven Gerrard was subject to strong criticism, both by the British and the Czech commenters. Some show a degree of understanding for the constraints imposed by his institutional role (Ex. 13), others allege his one-sidedness (Ex. 14).

- (13) *He has no choice but to stand by him or he loses the dressing room ... He could however be backing the wrong horse* (EN A-1)
- (14) *Gerrard should have condemned the Slavia player for the abuse and also condemned any actions that may have happened in the tunnel. Not just say he was “proud of his players”: when I doubt he has all the facts from both incidents.* (EN A-1)

The Czech data show commenters implying that Gerrard might have an issue with truthfulness (Ex. 15), but often they describe his fall from grace: the commenters' loss of respect for someone they had previously valued (Ex. 16), echoing some of the public statements made at the time by football pundits. That gives rise to a discourse of disillusionment:

- (15) *Gerrard has donkey's ears.* (CZ A-2)
- (16) *That most "footies" are a bit "simpler" is something I know (also from personal experience), that some football players are, due to their nerve system, incredible cattle is clear (also personal experience) but that Steven Gerrard is not such a gentleman as I had thought him to be for many years is something that makes me feel sorry.* 😊 (CZ A-3)

The British commenters also shared references to a controversial event involving Gerrard's support of the Liverpool player Luis Suarez, who was punished in 2011 for alleged racial abuse of Manchester United defender Patrice Evra.³³ No such references are found in the Czech dataset. In Ex. 17, the reference to the events from 10 years before could be to imply Gerrard's disingenuity, while in Ex. 18, the commenter's critical stance is expressed by means of mock praise, appearing as a message from Suarez:

- (17) *Stevie G pulls out the victim card he earned at Liverpool, remember when he supported Suarez?* (EN A-1)
- (18) *Always good to stand by the player Stevie. Yours with love, Luis Suarez.* (EN A-1)

Communicating indirectly through intertextuality

Another discursive strategy found in both datasets consisted of references to folk wisdom. Sayings, proverbs and fixed phrases are sometimes referred to in order to legitimate views and express opinions with a varying degree of explicit evaluation. In the British data, there was a recurrent presence of the saying "sticks and stones" in various forms (Ex. 19), even in a playfully modified manner allowing the readers to draw additional ironic inferences (Ex. 20), with the message sometimes being less explicit and more open to interpretation (Ex. 21). Other fixed folk phrases were used in the Czech dataset, e.g. the saying "Co je šeptem, to je s čertem" [Whispered words – devil's words], most likely used to imply Kúdela's vicious or even devilish intention, implicating him in the racist talk (Ex. 22):

- (19) *What happened to "sticks and stones...". Ten game ban for verbals and three games for assault!* (EN B-1)
- (20) *"Kicks and punches might break your bones but words are much, much, much worse". I think that's how the saying goes.* (EN B-1)
- (21) *Talk's cheap. An empty vessel makes the loudest noise!* (EN A-1)
- (22) *Whispered words, devil's words. I don't get it why Kúdela would say it in a whisper.* (CZ A-1)

Adopting a humorous stance through fictional scenarios and irony

Another way of discursively handling the controversial issue of alleged racism concerns its humorous treatment, and, thus, an inevitable trivialization of its seriousness. Although the four incidents are all highly serious issues, some users commented on them by means of attempts at creating humour. This involves various strategies, such as a "fictionalization" (a made-up and usually humorous scenario that can be used to express one's stance or evaluation by indirect means³⁴; (Ex. 23), expressing absurd humorous exaggeration and irony (Ex. 24) and making sarcastic statements (Ex. 25). Sometimes comments incorporate emojis and textspeak³⁵ as contextualization cues to indicate the commenters' humorous intent (cf. the emoji in Ex. 23 and the expression "lol" in Ex. 26; see also the smiley in Ex. 28 below):

- (23) *Pity that the boys don't have inside them the vaccine chips from Bill Gates, one could ask for a transcript of the talk in the Microsoft headquarters and it would be clear* 😊 (CZ A-3)

- (24) *The only possible solution is Slavia's loss by default and a disqualification from UEFA competitions. Yeah, and ban Kolář for 20 years from all UEFA competitions* (CZ A-3)
- (25) *The Rangers. The Champions.* (EN A-1)
- (26) *Big men lol* (EN A-1)

Ironic discourse is also occasionally present, sometimes amounting to sequences of ironic posts. This kind of humorous chaining of posts is common in the genre of online news comments,³⁶ as well as in other kinds of social media, where individuals jointly develop a topic by means of verbal humorous interaction. This is online joking, albeit on a serious topic, see the comments in Ex. 27, 28, and 29, which show three users jointly contributing to a quasi-humorous “re-analysis” of the key incidents of the match:

- (27) *Anyway Kolář will be accused of committing an assault with his head . . . !* (CZ A-4)
- (28) *yes, with his head he brutally kicked into the opponent's boot full of studs 😊* (CZ A-4)
- (29) *And Kúdela attacked, with his head, the fists of several Rangers players . . .* (CZ A-4)

Related to that strategy are intertextual references, which are – to a bigger or lesser degree – grounded in the cultural context and shared by the members of a given speech community. Thus in Ex. 30, the commenter offers a humorous, fictionalized account of what Kúdela may have whispered to Kamara, possibly in allusion to the infamous act of verbal aggression between the Italian player Materazzi and the Frenchman Zidane during the 2006 World Cup final. In Ex. 31, the commenter uses a quote from a famous Czech football comedy that is based on transcripts of phone conversations between football officials manipulating match results. By using the quote, the commenter makes a widely culturally recognizable intertextual reference. However, arguably, such a practice simultaneously trivializes the incident (i.e. the racial abuse) to which that particular humorous quote is applied:

- (30) *I guess it's known that he offended his sister :D* (CZ A-3)
- (31) *As a classic states: “You said it well to him”. Specifically Kamara shouldn't have finished the first half . . .* (CZ A-3)

Metalingual observations

The above examples are also instances of metalingual comments, i.e. utterances whose subject matter is language itself. They relate to speculations on what may or may not have been stated during the key incident on the pitch. The comment in Ex. 32 questions the lack of idiomaticity of the utterance that Kúdela admitted he said to Kamara. Needless to say, this caused much speculation and discussions about the player's (lack of) proficiency in English. The complexity of the multilingual situation is – once again perhaps in an attempt at producing a humorous comment – captured in the post in Ex. 33. The bizarre – and thus hardly believable – collocation in the swearing phrase has been repeatedly pointed out by the British commenters as well (e.g. in Ex. 34 and 35):

- (32) *If he had told him “You f*****g guy”, then the players would have had to burst laughing at his English. I have never heard that phrase in my life.* (CZ A-1)
- (33) *A Czech [speaking] in English to a Finn, playing for a Scottish team – a language conundrum.* (CZ A-2)
- (34) *Kudela is the definition of a coward. Covers his mouth, whispers in the guy's ear, then hides behind his teammates and pretends he called him a “guy”?? Embarrassing. Hope he gets banned for a long time* (EN A-3)

(35) *Makes absolutely no sense to walk over to someone, cover your mouth and shout in their ear “you’re a fu***ng guy”* (EN A-4)

Last but not least, the metalingual debate in the data sets also concentrated on the issue of factuality of the verbal abuse, i.e. the lack of any conclusive evidence for Kamara’s claim. It is no wonder many users used heavily modalized and speculative language in order to emphasize the non-factuality of the alleged racial slur, calling for a higher standard of proof – namely certainty. That, however, was impossible to achieve given the circumstances of the case; as a result, the issue has remained unresolved, with the controversy never reaching a conclusive closure for the commenters.³⁷

Conclusion and interpretation

All in all, the comparative analysis of the users’ public discourses in the online news comments has revealed several interesting findings. On the one hand, the reflection of the verbally racist incident in users’ comments tends to over-elaborate race-related issues, but, on the other, there are also discourses and narratives that challenge the dominant views. These discourses are grounded in local cultural and communicative norms, which are different in the two national/linguistic communities who adopt different perspectives as a result of rooting for particular teams. However, there are also clear social divisions among the commenters within their communities.³⁸ These social divisions and fan tribalism are also linked to the users’ recontextualization of the original racist incident that is responded to, and heightened by the indeterminate nature of the alleged racist incident. The commentators adopt various discursive strategies and introduce new aspects to the entire situation. As a result, the issue of racism in soccer becomes re-framed in terms of cross-national politics, morality and fairness, intertextual references relying on shared knowledge, and even fictionalizations and irony. All these discourses, though, may assume different relative salience with the passage of time.

The analysis indicates that the discourses present on online news commenting sites go beyond merely expressing fan tribalism; instead, they reveal an intricate network of complex relations between various social actors, connecting sport, language and culture in sometimes unexpected ways by means of intertextuality, political recontextualization, but also humour and metalingual discussions. In this particular case, all those serve to deconstruct the inherently indeterminate nature of the key incident – the alleged racist verbal abuse,³⁹ which was only whispered by Slavia’s Ondřej Kúdela to Rangers’ Glen Kamara. The data show the users’ tendency to juxtapose acts of physical and verbal abuse, leading them to relativize and belittle the seriousness of racism by pointing out the non-factuality and context-dependence of racist talk.

In this way, the findings also show that while the commenters tend not to see themselves as racist,⁴⁰ they may be using some subtle as well as more explicit forms of excusing and discounting their own prejudicial positions. Further research will be needed to address how such forms of “liquid” or “casual” racism⁴¹ are discursively constructed and managed in users’ reactive discourses triggered by soccer-related racist talk.

Notes

1. The Rangers coach Steven Gerrard used this phrase when talking about the key incident during his press conference on 18 March 2021: “You could say it’s been a test. I’ve tried to handle the situation in the best way I can but one thing that’s non-negotiable for me is the support for my players. I said last night that some things happen along your way as a player, a coach or a manager that aren’t really football related; they’re bigger than football or a different issue from football”. (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfkc9NfIoy5>, time 8.22)
2. Schmid, “The Definition of Racism”; Weaver, “Liquid Racism and the Ambiguity of Ali G”.
3. van Dijk, “Racist Discourse”.
4. Back et al., “Racism in Football”, 77.

5. Gavins and Simpson, “Regina v John Terry”.
6. Wolfers et al., “Just Because He’s Black”; Wolfers, “Self-directed Racialized Humor”.
7. Back et al., “Racism in Football”, 77.
8. Or, what Johansson (“Everyday Opinions in News Discussion Forums”) refers to as “everyday opinion” or “public vernacular discourse”.
9. See Wrench and Garrett, “Constructions of ‘Whiteness’”; Kroon, “Recontextualizing Racism and Segregation”.
10. See, for instance, Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”.
11. Scholarly interest in online newspaper reader comments boards typically adopts a CDA perspective and concentrates on a single set of data (e.g. British) in order to identify racist themes and discourses (cf. Rowe and Goodman (“A Stinking Filthy Race of People”), Santana (“Virtuous or Vitriolic”), Harlow (“Story-chatterers Stirring Up Hate”), Catalano and Fielder (“European Spaces and the Roma”), Chovanec (“Irony as Counter Positioning”); and similar studies on social media data, e.g. Breazu and Machin (“Racism Toward the Roma”) for comments on Romanian Facebook). An example of a contrastive approach using comparable datasets from two different languages/cultures includes Chovanec, (“Re-educating the Roma?”) on anti-Roma racism in British and Czech discussion forums, and Weizman and Fetzer (“The Discursive Construction of Accountability”) on Israeli and British discourse.
12. Gavins and Simpson (“Regina v John Terry”) describe several such cases from the English league, as well as the subsequent legal proceedings concerning the 2011 incident between John Terry and Anton Ferdinand.
13. See, for instance: <https://www.sportbible.com/football/football-news-horrific-photo-of-keepers-injuries-emerge-after-kemar-roofe-head-kick-20210318>. Accessed on January 14, 2022.
14. UEFA’s decision was appealed by the Rangers, but the appeal was dismissed by UEFA’s decision of 10 May 2021, which cited “dangerously assaulting another player” as the reason for the four-match suspension (Source: “AB: Rangers FC v SK Slavia Praha”, Last updated May 10, 2021, 18:30, <https://www.uefa.com/updates/>)
15. When describing the incident later on, Kolář stated: “If you ever kicked a ball, you know that a foot can always be pulled back. He said that he was the first at the ball. But he did not add that he kicked it out of my hand, straightened his leg and hit me in the head. All the time he could see me. I waited for Roofe to maybe message me on Instagram but instead I was reading hateful messages from Rangers fans” (“Kdo někdy kopal do míče, ví, že noha se vždycky dá stáhnout. Řekl, že byl u balonu první. Ale už nedodal, že mi ho vykopl z ruky, propnul nohu a trefil mi hlavu. Celou dobu mě viděl. Čekal jsem, jestli mi třeba Roofe nenapíše na Instagramu, místo toho jsem si četl nenávislné vzkazy od fanoušků Rangers”). (Source: <https://www.ruik.cz/kolar-poprve-o-zraneni-nechteli-me-pustit-z-kabiny-roofe-se-neomluvil-proti-sparte-mi-bylo-zle/>, published on April 14, 2021.)
16. Jason Cundy and Andy Goldstein on Sports Bar (Source: <https://talksport.com/football/851905/rangers-kemar-roofe-tackle-ban-rangers-racism-slavia-prague/>). Some other descriptions were less emotional, e.g. Thomas Duncan wrote in his post-match report for the BBC that “Roofe was clearly just trying to win the ball, but his foot was so high as to be reckless, and Kolar’s injury looked serious. The goalkeeper had to be replaced, but he returned to the bench for the closing moments after receiving treatment” (Thomas Duncan, BBC Scotland, March 18, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/56375487>.) It eventually turned out that the goalkeeper did sustain a serious injury to the head – a frontal sinus fracture – forcing him to wear a protective face mask and a helmet in future matches similar to the one another former Czech goalkeeper (Chelsea’s Petr Čech) had to wear throughout his career following an injury.
17. Source: <https://talksport.com/football/851905/rangers-kemar-roofe-tackle-ban-rangers-racism-slavia-prague/>
18. The Guardian live text commentary, minute 85, time 21.48, *The Guardian*, March 18, 2021, the commentators for the live football blog were Rob Smyth and Simon Burton, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/live/2021/mar/18/europa-league-arsenal-v-olympiakos-dinamo-zagreb-v-tottenham-milan-manchester-united-rangers-slavia-praguelive>
19. The Guardian live text commentary, minute 87, time 21.50, *The Guardian*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/live/2021/mar/18/europa-league-arsenal-v-olympiakos-dinamo-zagreb-v-tottenham-milan-manchester-united-rangers-slavia-praguelive>
20. UEFA disciplinary decision, issued on April 13, 2021 and made public on April 14, 2021 (Source: UEFA Europa League: Rangers FC v SK Slavia Praha, Last updated April 14, 2021, 18:02, <https://www.uefa.com/updates/>)
21. There is a short smartphone videorecording made by a member of the Slavia team documenting this event. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5DN-pQ88K4>).
22. “Club Statement: Slavia Denies Allegations of Racism”, March 19, 2021. (Source: <https://en.slavia.cz/clanek.asp?id=Club-statement-Slavia-denies-allegations-of-racism-807>). A part of the statement is also included in the BBC’s report on the case (“Rangers Want UEFA Action after Glen Kamara Allegedly Racially Abused by Slavia Player”, March 19, 2021; source: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/56451935>).

23. The original statement in Czech: “Napadení hráče Ondřeje Kúdely bylo připraveno a promyšleno včetně vědomého zakrytí kamer na místě incidentu. Brutální a surový útok byl veden s plnou intenzitou s cílem zranit a způsobit fyzickou újmu”. (Source: <https://www.slavia.cz/clanek.asp?id=Slavia-podala-trestni-oznameni-za-fyzicke-napadeni-18257>). Information about the criminal complaint appeared in the local Scottish media as well (<https://www.glasgowlive.co.uk/sport/football/football-news/slavia-prague-lodge-rangers-assault-20217878>)
24. Source: <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/sport/football/6843784/rangers-slavia-prague-incident-ibrox-glen-kamara-kudela/>
25. UEFA disciplinary decision, issued on April 13, 2021 and made public on April 14, 2021 (Source: “UEFA Europa League: Rangers FC v SK Slavia Praha”, Last updated April 14, 2021 18:02, <https://www.uefa.com/updates/>).
26. The press conference is available from Rangers Football Club’s channel on YouTube. (Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfkC9NfloyS>)
27. His full statement was: “We had never before in the history experienced a similar situation. After the match, UEFA called the coaches and the players involved to attend a meeting to clarify the dispute. But before the discussion started, Kamara hit Kúdela in the face with a fist and ran into the cabin. Coach Gerrard disappointed me; he did not say a word. This match was everything else but fair play”. (“Podobnou situaci jsme nikdy v historii nezažili. UEFA svolala po zápasu trenéry i oba zúčastněné hráče k mítinku, aby se spor vyjasnil. Ještě než ale jednání začalo, Kamara před zraky delegace UEFA dal Kúdelovi pěstí do obličeje a utekl do kabiny. Trenér Gerrard mě zklamal, neřekl ani slovo. Tento zápas byl všechno jiné než fair play”.) (Source: CNN Prima News, 19 March 2021, <https://cnn.iprima.cz/hracum-rangers-neslo-o-obrat-ale-o-pomstu-gerrard-me-zklamal-rika-sef-slavie-tvrdik-21357>).
28. In the *Guardian*, for instance, the online discussion on the day of the match concentrated largely on the performance of the teams, and Roofé’s violent tackle. Out of the 57 comments that are available on the *Guardian* site, only three mention the racist incident; several comments, however, are not available due to moderation (deleted due to “breach of community standards” (Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/mar/18/rangers-slavia-prague-europa-league-match-report>))
29. See Weizman and Fetzer, “The Discursive Construction of Accountability”.
30. The data in the Figure are calculated to the threshold of 300 comments for each subset, i.e. the British subset B and the Czech subset A were recalculated, each using a relevant quotient.
31. All translations into English have been done by the author of the article. No spelling mistakes and typos have been corrected in the British data.
32. See Chovanec, “The Othering of Roma Migrants”.
33. See, for instance: “Liverpool Players support Luis Suarez After FA Race Verdict”, BBC Sport, December 21, 2011. (Source: <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/16291583>).
34. For the notion of humorous fictionalization, see Kotthoff, “Coherent Keying in Conversational Humour”; Tsakona, “Online Joint Fictionalization”.
35. Vásquez, *Language, Creativity and Humour*.
36. Chovanec, *The Discourse of Online Sportscasting*.
37. See also Gavins and Simpson, “Regina v John Terry”.
38. See also Back et al., *The Changing Face of Football*.
39. When describing the key incident, I prefer to use the expression “alleged” in order to avoid any implication of assigning blame or guilt or diminishing the seriousness of the offence in any way. Being aware of the highly contested nature of the verbal act in question, which has had legal consequences that have not been concluded yet, I wish to remain academically objective and disinterested, simply drawing on, discussing and interpreting data from mainstream media and users’ online contributions on the topic. It is not my intention to pass any judgement and nothing in this text should be interpreted as favouring one or the other side of the conflict.
40. Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”.
41. Weaver, “Liquid Racism and the Ambiguity of Ali G”; Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”.

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