

Kicking against online hate

A qualitative study on online hate experiences and perceptions among football players in the Dutch football community

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ABSTRACT

In this study, light is shed on the experiences of football players in the Dutch football community concerning their reception of online hate. Previous research has explored how online hate in the Dutch football community manifests itself through sports media and hate derived from social media platforms. Even though evidence for the serious impact that online hate has on an individual's well-being exists, no research is done on the impact that online hate experiences have on football players themselves. In order to address this research gap, in this study, seven interviews were conducted with Dutch football players to examine their experiences with online hate and the impact that it had on their emotional well-being, performance and online hate concern. In addition, participants were asked if they used certain coping mechanisms to deal with the regular reception of online hate. The findings of this research reveal that various different types of hate themes and hate practices are experienced by Dutch football players. Participants do not report any sort of effects of online hate on their emotional well-being. Online hate also does not impact their performance in a negative way, rather participants mention that online hate serves as a source of motivation to perform better. Also, their hate concern seems to be determined by the process of adaptation. The most used coping mechanisms reported by the participants were ignoring and avoiding, followed up by talking to others about their experiences.

Keywords: *football, athletes, online hate, well-being*

Table of contents

Abstract and keywords

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Theoretical framework.....	6
2.1 Online hate definitions and manifestations	6
2.2 Social demarcations provoking online hate.....	9
2.3 The effects of online hate	12
2.4 Hate concern	16
2.5 Coping mechanisms	18
3. Method.....	19
3.1 Sampling.....	20
3.2 Data gathering.....	21
3.3 Operationalization.....	22
3.4 Analysis	23
4. Results.....	25
4.1 Performance.....	25
4.2 Social demarcations	26
4.3 Online hate practices	27
4.4 Adaptation	29
4.5 ‘We are professionals’	30
4.6 Coping mechanisms	31
5. Discussion	34
5.1 Overall experiences with online hate	34
5.2 Impact on emotional well-being and performance	37
5.3 Online hate concern.....	38
5.4 Essential characteristics and coping mechanisms.....	39
5.5 Limitations.....	40
6. Conclusion	42
References.....	44
Appendix A - Interview guide	48
Appendix B – Selective coding scheme	51
Appendix C – Informed consent form.....	53

Introduction

The lives of professional athletes in general, and football players in particular, is continuously highlighted. Public figures' behaviors are constantly scrutinized by fans because of the overt role they play in the society (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2). Football is a sport that is known to have a passionate fanbase (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2; Kitchin et al., 2020, p. 67; Sanderson & Kassing, 2014, p. 3). Especially in the age of social media where every action is magnified, athletes are observed by fans both off and on the pitch (Sanderson & Traux, 2023, p. 337; Kavanagh et al., 2022, p. 187; MacPherson & Kerr, 2021, p. 103).

The strong dedication that sport fans have to their favorite club or players contributes to the intense scrutiny of players' lives (Sanderson & Traux, 2023, p. 334; Kavanagh et al., 2022, p. 187; MacPherson & Kerr, 2021, p. 103). This scrutiny may stem from the deeply engaged fan culture and competitiveness that is prevalent in many sport communities (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2; Kitchin et al., 2020, p. 67; Sanderson & Kassing, 2014, p. 3). Fandom itself is rooted in the broader concept of group identification, wherein individuals incorporate attributes or characteristics of a group into their own identity, shaping their social identity (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011, p. 60). Family, peers, and community also contribute significantly to the formation of sport fandom, underscoring how the personal life of a sports fan is often deeply intertwined with his fandom. Sports fandom for example is often transferred over from parent to child, and sports fandom is often a mutual interest from which friendship circles arise. The connection between sports fandom and the personal life of sports fans reveals how deep sports fandom can be integrated into an individual's social identity (Hirt & Clarkson, 2011, p. 62).

Especially in football, fans demonstrate exceptional commitment to their favorite clubs and players. The typical football fan is described as one who lives and breathes the game, with football serving as the central pillar in their life (Porat, 2010, p. 280). Their familiar and social relationships often revolve around football, and they dispose of profound knowledge of the sport, its jargon and its players. This dedication to football can manifest in various ways, from watching every match to actively participating in the sport themselves (Porat, 2010, p. 280). In some extreme cases, this devotion to a specific club or sport can even lead to involvement in hooliganism, underscoring the intensity of football fandom and its impact on fans' lives (Chovanec, 2023, p. 943).

Fans closely monitor players' behaviors, and any deviation from social norms can lead to the expression of disagreement with a player's behavior (Sanderson & Traux, 2023, p. 334; Kilvington, 2021, p. 2). The heightened scrutiny of football players' behavior is amplified by the vast reach that fans have on the internet. This large reach enables fans to target a greater audience and mobilize their opinions and disapproval quickly. (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258; Sanderson & Traux, 2023, p. 334; Kilvington, 2021, p. 2). Consequently, football players are more susceptible to reputational damage as online platforms facilitate the rapid spread of criticism and online hate (Cheung, 2014, p. 316). Because reputational damage can be harmful for a public figure's perceived credibility, negative spill-over effects on endorsed brands like clubs and sponsors can occur (Sato et al., 2019, p. 386). This is why most research on athletes transgressions of specific norms is business-oriented, focusing on harm-reduction and image repair rather than the effects that online hate has on athletes' well-being (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2). Additionally, because of the passionate nature of sport fans and the extensive publicity surrounding athletes' lives, they are significantly more likely to be called out for transgressing social norms compared to other public figures (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 3).

Practices of online hate have significantly broadened since the rise of social media (Cheung, 2014, p. 302; Kearns et al., 2023, p. 403). With hate speech not only being confined to offline spaces anymore, the shaming and hating of public figures is now also carried out in large numbers via electronic devices (Kilvington, 2021, p. 259). Because online hate can be spread anonymously via different social media platforms, not only the amount but also the seriousness of online hate has increased (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258; Williams, 2019, p. 19). Internet users feel more safe and secure to spread hate because of the privacy that the online environment offers (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). As a result, online hate practices directed towards football players have become more prevalent and severe (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258).

Online hate is present in football cultures all around the world (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 806; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 430; Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834; Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 65). The spread of online hate in both national and international football communities has been investigated extensively (Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 64). Themes like racism (Back et al., 2001, p. 8; Pelak, 2005, p. 53; Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 826; Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 65; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019, p. 195; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424; Kearns et al., 2023, p. 403), homophobia (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 797) and sexualization (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 6; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 343; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 3) are shown to

be common topics that are discussed in football commentary both offline and online and both by professional sport journalists and ordinary social media users.

Just like other football communities, the Dutch football community is known to face controversies regarding racism, sexism and antisemitism (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2019, p. 195; Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834; Van den Bogert, 2021, p. 1845). No research on homophobia in the Dutch football community has been done, however research in the German football community might indicate the potential presence of homophobia in other national football communities (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 800). In December 2023 the most prominent football club in the Netherlands, Ajax, launched a campaign that addressed the seriousness and impact of online hate in the Dutch football community. The players of their first men's and women's team all wore a shirt without their name on the back to ask attention for the 1500 hate comments that players received weekly (RTL nieuws, 2023). By means of the quote "See it. Report it." the club called out their fans to stand up against online hate speech towards football players. The campaign aimed to raise awareness and promote a culture of respect, underscoring the seriousness and impact of online hate within Dutch football culture.

Numerous studies have explored the phenomenon of online hate within football communities, primarily focusing on its manifestations and shaping factors (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021, p. 103; Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834; van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 430; van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, p. 32; Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 65), rather than the influence that online hate has on football players. There is a lot known about motivations of fans that share online hate speech (Cheung, 2014, p. 303; Massaro, 1997, p. 647; MacPherson & Kerr, 2021, p. 103; Sanderson & Traux, 2023, p. 334; Kavanagh et al., 2022, p. 187), types of online hate speech (Willard, 2007, p. 5; Kearns et al., 2023, 404), and the different themes of online hate speech that color the football cultures of different countries (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2; Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 826; Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 430; Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 65). For example Seijbel et al. (2022, p. 834) analyzed antisemitic rhetoric among Dutch football fans within a collection of tweets. Van Sterkenburg et al. (2012, p. 430) investigated the construction of racism through televised soccer commentary. Kilvington and Price (2019, p. 65) interviewed different football institutions, organizations and clubs about their experiences with the problem of racism on social media. More interviews on the topic of racial stereotypes was done by Van Sterkenburg et al. who examined Dutch sports media professionals (2012, p. 424; 2021, p. 31) and the Dutch

multiethnic football media audience (2019, p. 195) to investigate how diversity in the Dutch sports community manifests itself. By means of a literature study Kassimeris et al. (2022, p. 826) contribute to the understanding of football cultures, considering digital racism as an phenomena impacting the functioning of social relationships within the football community. Hence, there is a lot known about how online hate is formed and shapes the football landscape and how different stakeholders like sport media professionals contribute to the formation of this landscape. However, existing literature tends to overlook the impact that online hate in football discourse has on the emotional well-being and performances of football players.

Research shows that the serious repercussions of online hate on individuals' emotional well-being cannot be overstated. Regular exposure to online hatred can induce negative emotions and cause psychological distress, affecting confidence, mental health and overall qualities of life (Bernier, 2017, p. 180; Perry & Alvi, 2012, p. 69). The detrimental effects of online hate extend beyond mere criticism, posing significant challenges to the mental health and resilience of football players. Therefore, understanding the impact of online hate on football players' emotional well-being is crucial for addressing the issue that football culture is facing.

This research aims to supplement the already existing information regarding online hate in the Dutch football community with qualitative data that shows how football players are influenced by online hate. In doing so this research will answer the following research question: *what are the experiences and perceptions of online hate among professional football players in the Dutch football community?* This will be answered based on four sub questions. First, the experiences and perceptions of online hate of football players concerning their emotional well-being will be examined according to the following sub question: how do the experiences and perceptions of online hate among professional football players in the Dutch football community influence their emotional well-being? Second, their experiences with and perceptions of online hate regarding their performance will be examined according to the following sub question: how do the experiences and perceptions of online hate among professional football players in the Dutch football community influence football players' performance? Third, the level of hate concern among football players in the Dutch divisions will be examined. Hate concern is described as the extent to which an individual is concerned, moved and has doubted himself according to received online hate. Hate concern can help determine to what extend an individual is affected by the reception of online hate. The third sub question will thus be: how do the experiences and perceptions of online hate among

professional football players in the Dutch football community determine their level of hate concern? Lastly, to gain more insights into the essential characteristics that might be relevant for an individual to cope with online hate the final sub question reads: what are specific personal characteristics or coping mechanisms used by professional Dutch football players, that have been effective in managing or overcoming their experiences with online hate?

Theoretical framework

This theoretical framework aims to explain the current situation regarding online hate in the Dutch football community, while also explaining key concepts that are essential as they provide an initial understanding for this research. First, will be explained how online hate manifests itself in different contexts and how it is studied in different researches. Online hate is a broad concept that is defined differently in a variety of studies. The definition of online hate, and various online hate themes will be discussed. In addition, different types of online hate practices will be highlighted to outline several techniques used by online haters. Second, the effects of online hate will be discussed, focusing on the impact that online hate has on emotional well-being. Third, the concept of hate concern is further explained. Different processes that potentially influence an individual's amount of hate concern are explained. Lastly, the use of coping mechanism is explained and earlier research on this concept is discussed.

Online hate definitions and manifestations

This research will refer to online hate as a collective name for various hateful activities that take place in the online environment. There are many different definitions given to activities concerning online hate. All definitions have in common that online hate activities always consist of the disapproval of an individual via online media. For example, the definition of public shaming – which is a meaning related of online hate – is described as the act of holding an individual publicly accountable for the transgression of a norm (Cheung, 2014, p. 302; Massaro, 1997, p. 667). These norms are often based on psychological and cultural principles that inform whether behavior is legally, socially or communally accepted (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2). Examples of sport related transgressions are poor performances, missing practice, or misbehavior in an athletes personal life (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2).

Kilvington (2021, p. 258) defines online hate speech, which serves as another relative term of online hate, as the expression of hatred, violence and discrimination towards an individual's social demarcations such as race, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Kearns et al., 2022; Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). Concepts like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender that are used to categorize people are called social demarcations (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). In this research will be referred to various social demarcations that contribute to the categorization and hate spread in the online environment. In the definition of online hate

practices by Kilvington (2021, p. 258), there is the necessity of a hateful message to address certain personal aspects of an individual rather than attacking their behavior. Hate speech in comparison to public shaming thus differs on the basis of social and behavioral aspects. Examples of different types of hate speech that occur in football communities are racial categorization (Back et al., 2001, p. 8; Pelak, 2005, p. 53; Kaelberer, 2019, 343; Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 826; Kilvington & Price, 2019, p. 65; van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, p. 42), homophobia (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 797), antisemitism (Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834) and sexism (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 6).

Whereas online public shaming is defined as an online hate practice that does not necessarily refer to discrimination towards an individual's characteristics, but rather to the transgression of social norms (Cheung, 2014, p. 302; Massaro, 1997, p. 667; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2), the definition of online hate speech requires a discriminatory nature of hate statements online (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). Different social demarcations that can provoke online hate are gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 10; Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 5; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 342; Pelak, 2005, p. 57; Kaelberer, 2020, p. 796). Online public shaming is more commonly focused on behavioral aspects that a public figure displays (Cheung, 2014, p. 302; Massaro, 1997, p. 667; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2), whereas online hate speech focuses more on the hatred and violence expressed towards social demarcations of an individual (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). What both definitions have in common is the expressing of disapproval that is shown in both online public shaming and online hate speech. This research will refer to online hate as the umbrella term for every online activity involving disapproval of certain behavior or social demarcations. In addition, it's essential to recognize that public shaming and online hate speech may co-exist as forms of online hate practices. For instance, behaviors disapproved of may draw upon social identity characteristics such as race or gender, contributing to the perpetuation of discriminatory attitudes.

While different definitions and different categories of online hate exist, online hate also manifests itself in several different practices (Willard, 2007, p. 5; Kearns et al., 2023, p. 405). The practices in which hate speech manifests itself online are defined as the types of activities that online haters participate in (Willard, 2007, p. 5). It is important to be aware of the fact that some practices might overlap with or correspond more to specific existing definitions of online hate. Other types of online hate practices might be implemented more often in specific categories of online hate such as gender, sexuality or race and ethnicity. Willard (2007, p. 5) distinguishes seven types of online hate in his work on cyberbullying:

flaming, harassment, denigration, impersonation, outing and trickery, cyberstalking and exclusion. These types of online hate show how internet users make practice of spreading hate comments in different ways with different purposes.

Denigration, outing and trickery are practices that are used to support humiliation or social punishment, which can be linked to public shaming. Denigration consists of harmful speech about an individual with the intention to damage their reputation (Willard, 2007, p. 7). In various football communities players with a specific race, religion, gender or sexuality often encounter derogatory language (MacPherson & Kerr, 2022, p. 2; Chovanec, 2023, p. 942; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424; Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 5; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 342). When an individual behaves in a way that is not publicly accepted denigration can be used to publicly shame this individual. Outing and trickery consist of revealing sensitive information about a person. Which is the process of public shaming by means of leaked information (Willard, 2007, p. 8). Examples of outing and trickery in the football community are cases where a football player's sexuality is made public without their permission or against their wishes.

Flaming and harassment are forms of online hate practices where offensive language towards an individual is expressed (Willard, 2007, p. 5). In comparison to denigration and outing and trickery there is no communal aspect connected to flaming and harassment practices. These practices do not focus on belittling individuals in front of others or spreading misinformation about them, but rather on offending the targeted individual. Flaming and harassment practices of online hate can contain derogatory language but are not necessarily used to publicly shame individuals. The difference between flaming and harassment is determined by the consistency in which the online hate practices occur. Flaming is considered as a practice where heated short-lived arguments are shared (Willard, 2007, p. 5). In harassment practices offensive messages are sent in a continuum manner (Willard, 2007, p. 6).

Impersonation, cyberstalking and exclusion are forms of online hate practices that are aimed at invading the personal feeling of security and privacy of an individual. These types of hate practices seem to be the most impactful types of online hatred to an individual because they create feelings of unsafety (Hubbard, 2020, p. 16). Impersonation happens when an online hater pretends to be someone by badly reflecting this individual (Willard, 2007, p. 8). This can happen when a fake account is created from a specific public figure. Cyberstalking looks like harassment practices but it extends itself in including the spread of online threats towards an individual. When an individual is confronted with cyberstalking, feelings of

unsafety might occur (Willard, 2007, p. 10). Exclusion is an online hate practice that regards purposefully excluding an individual from an online community. In different societies, exclusion is a very harsh punishment that has emotional impact individuals (Willard, 2007, p. 9). Being designated as an outcast may create feelings of disbelonging.

When researching online hate in the Dutch football environment it is important to be aware of the different forms of online hate practices that exists. All these different types of online hate practices can have different effects on individuals and are perceived differently because of their nature. Denigration, outing and trickery are implemented when the public shaming of an individual is aimed for. These hate practices respond to feelings of shame and honor of the victim. Impersonation, cyberstalking and exclusion respond more to feelings of unsafety.

Social demarcations provoking online hate

As was already explained while discussing the definitions and manifestations of online hate speech, there exist various topics that received a significant amount of hate in the online environment. These topics are often based on demarcations that divide individuals into social categories. Gender, sexuality and race are examples of social demarcations that online hate in football communities often focuses on (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 5; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 342; Kaelberer, 2020, p. 800, Kearns et al., 2023, p. 406, Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 370; Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424; Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834). There has been done several researches on online hate regarding these specific social demarcations. To gain more insights into why online hate concerning these topics is so common and what serious effects it can have on an individual and society, the manifestation of online hate regarding these topics will be discussed in more detail.

Gender is considered as a personal aspect that is ascribed to an individual based on someone's composition of characteristics that most people consider as masculine or feminine as socially determined in the context of a society. Because believes about gender in societies are often very divergent, gender has found to be a social demarcation of an individual that creates disagreements among individuals which in turn can stir up hatred (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 8). Gendered hate towards athletes was found to be prominent in many different sports cultures (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 8). Especially in sports that are specifically male or female dominated, gendered discourse persists. MacPherson and Kerr (2020, p. 8) found that fans who participate in online hate possess controversial believes about gender. Discussions of athletes appearance, attractiveness and sexualization of athletes induce the

objectification of women (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 9). The exaggeration of typical manly characteristics was represented in online discourse about hyper-masculinity. Words like ‘gay’, ‘pussy’, ‘lame’ et cetera, were used as belittling terms to shame or dismiss the perceived hyper-masculinity of athletes. In contrary, the position and power of the male was reinforced by using words that heightened hyper-masculinity (Macpherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 10). Both the objectification of women and discourses about hyper-masculinity bring along social issues concerning the proliferation of misogyny and victim-blaming which in turn contribute to the perpetuation of rape culture (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 10; Jane, 2014, p. 559). In rape cases that leak to the public, fans often play own judge and absolve male athletes of blame, minimize the reported details of the case or insinuate that the victim is lying (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 10).

Within the football community ideological discussions about gender roles are prominent (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 5; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 342). Football is often seen as a masculine sport that maintains men’s dominance (Cox & Thomas, 2000, p. 5; Pelak, 2005, p. 57). Female football is often treated differently than male football and even looked upon as inferior. The most famous football competitions are male competitions. When someone refers to a female competition the gender of the players is always specified: ‘Women’s World Cup’, ‘Women’s Champions League’ (Kaelberer, 2019, p. 343). The objectification of women and hyper-masculinity are a part of the football community (Cox & Thompson, 2000, p. 5; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 342). Female football seems to be subjected to the rules of the hyper-masculine football environment (Kaelberer, 2019, p. 349), and women are often sexualized and seen as ‘amateur’ football players (Kaelberer, 2019, p. 346).

Another social demarcation that has faced online hate in different sports communities is sexuality (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 800, Kearns et al., 2023, p. 406, Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 370). Similarly to online hate regarding gender, online hate towards someone’s sexuality is often caused by hegemonic masculinity. In hegemonic masculinity, heterosexuality is seen as a part of ultimate masculinity in comparison to homosexuality which is perceived as inferior to the hegemonic man (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 372). Also for women, heterosexuality and femineity are often considered as the norm. When female athletes deviate from this norm in regards of their sexuality, online hate regarding their sexual orientation can occur. Research shows how hegemonic masculinity and the generalization of heterosexuality creates a hierarchical structure of masculinity and femininity, which puts homosexuals at the bottom of the list (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 271).

In football communities discourse about hegemonic masculinity and homosexuality often occurs (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 800, Kearns et al., 2023, p. 406, Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 370). Research shows how hegemonic masculinity created a hierarchical structure of masculinity throughout football history. Characteristics like strength, heterosexuality and hostility against homosexuals were part of the traditional notions of masculinity in the football environment (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 371). Nowadays it seems like the football community has become more acceptant to the co-existence of multiple masculinities in the football environment, however online hate based on sexuality still remains to coexist (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012, p. 371; Kaelberer, 2020, p. 796). How both acceptance and persistence of the two can simultaneously continue to exist in the football community is clarified by Kaelberer (2020, p. 806). Kaelberer (2020, p. 806) explain how the German football community has become increasingly acceptant to the idea of inclusive masculinities while the persistence of homophobia in the German soccer culture is acclaimed to be structural (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 796). This is caused by the fact that homophobic discourse remains present in epithets and chants that are used by football fans, and the fact that no German football players have ever come out as being homosexual (Kaelberer, 2020, p. 806).

Race and ethnicity are both constructs that are used to categorize people into groups based on their cultural background or physical characteristics (Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828). Race and ethnicity are two different constructs that can be distinguished from each other but are also conflated in football discourse (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424). Race refers to biological characteristics like skin color and other physical demarcations whereas ethnicity refers to cultural traits such as language, norms and traditions of an individual (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424). The conflation between race and ethnicity happens for example when an ethnic group is discussed as biologically superior or inferior from another ethnic group (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424). For example in Dutch football commentary the ethnic other, referring to Black athletes, were often described as biologically more strong and physically predispositioned to have superior performance in comparison to whites (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 432). It is important to keep in mind the differences between both race and ethnicity when analyzing football discourse. Wrong assumptions about both biological and cultural aspects of someone's identity contribute to the persistence of incorrect stereotypes concerning race and ethnicity.

The biological characteristics attributed to race and the cultural traits attributed to ethnicity serve as social demarcations on which online hate is often based. Racial discrimination is an example where biological characteristics like someone's skin color

contribute to the unequal treatment of a specific racial group (Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828). Ethnicity discrimination is defined as the unequal treatment of specific ethnical groups that attribute specific language, norms and traditions as cultural aspects of their ethnicity (Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828). Both racial and ethnicity discrimination contribute to the promotion of race-related and ethnicity-related stereotypes and the institutionalization of race relations (Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828). The categorization of individuals based on their race or ethnicity brings along societal issues such as the revival of extreme nationalism and fascist formations (Kassimeris et al., 2022, p. 828).

The societal issues that are fueled by both racial and ethnicity discrimination are reflected in discourse about sports in general and in football particularly (Chovanec, 2023, p. 942; Van den Bogert, 2021 p. 59; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424). The expressing of openly discriminatory epithets and chants, racist jokes among team members and verbal abuse of players, color the football community (Chovanec 2023, p. 942).

In Dutch football a wide variety of players with different ethnical and racial backgrounds is represented as reflected in research by Van Sterkenburg et al. (2012, p. 430) on sport journalists use of racial categorization in their sports commentary. The researchers found that Dutch sport journalists ascribe different qualifications to players of different ethnicities. This shows how Dutch football commentary contains dominant racialized themes (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 436). Antisemitism also plays a big role in Dutch football hooliganism with the existence of many antisemitic chants that are openly sung in stadia but also expressed online (Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834). This antisemitism is targeted to the biggest Dutch football club, AFC Ajax, because this club associates himself with Judaism (Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834).

The effects of online hate

Despite the growing presence of hate in online environments, not much research is done on the psychological effects that online hate has on a victim's emotional well-being. Emotional well-being is the ability to successfully handle life's stresses and adapt to change and difficult times (Stewart-Brown, 1998, p. 1608). Emotional distress can lead to physical illnesses like viral infections, cardiovascular diseases and can affect immune responses. To relieve emotional distress unhealthy lifestyle choices like smoking, drinking and malnutrition can be triggered (Stewart-Brown, 1998, p. 1608). Because someone's emotional well-being is a very important aspect to determine someone's overall health, it is important to monitor the

emotional well-being of football players in order to see if experiencing online hate contributes to a decrease in the overall health of football players.

There is a general understanding that online hate has a negative effect on emotional well-being. Research shows that online hate provokes negative emotions, can cause distress and can create a loss of confidence (Bernier, 2017, p. 180; Perry & Alvi, 2012, 69). Hateful discourse that targets an individual's identity can create all sorts of emotional, attitudinal and behavioral changes. Both short-term impact like shock, embarrassment, anger and isolation and long-term impact like low self-esteem, a defensive attitude and an increased awareness of difference can be consequences of online hate (Williams, 2019, p. 17). This research will thus focus on finding out whether football players have experienced any of these short-term and long-term complications due to their experiences with online hate.

Research on online hate based on sexuality in the UK shows how different negative feelings are consequences of the reception of online hate (Hubbard, 2020, p. 16). Anger was found to be the most experienced emotion that respondents acclaimed to experience when receiving online hate regarding their sexual orientation. Other reported emotions were sadness, anxiety, stress, fear, depression, shame, social isolation and self-blame. People who experienced shame and social isolation mentioned that they felt guilty for having their sexual orientation which resulted in internalized homophobia. Self-isolation from both online and offline spaces also made victims cope with online hate on their own. Even self-harm and attempts of suicide were consequences of some's online victimization (Hubbard, 2020, p. 16). Even though the research of Hubbard (2020, p. 16) was conducted among a fairly specific topic in regards of online hate, it can help to give insights in how different feelings that might be activated by online hate can have negative effects on a person's emotional well-being.

Humiliation is an important concept that should be discussed when researching the impact of online hate practices on individuals. To be humiliated means to be described as inferior to others in a deliberate and destructive way (Palshikar, 2005, p. 5428). In online public shaming humiliation is often applied to publicly call out or humiliate an individual. Humiliation creates feelings of distress and doubts about self-worth to individuals who face humiliation often. Because public figures like athletes face humiliation in the online environment on a regular basis (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2), this research aims to investigate the experiences of athletes with humiliation in a specific context, namely the Dutch football community, to map out how the reception of humiliation through public shaming affects emotional well-being.

Everybody can be humiliated, however, the powerful and the weak do not get affected by humiliation the same way. Palishikar (2005, p. 5428) finds that public figures often seem to experience humiliation as offensive or rude because their privileges and superiority are being threatened. In contrast, those who are less known experience humiliation as callousness or neglect, and instead of feeling threatened they will ask for compassion and kindness. The difference between the reception of humiliation is attributed to the existence of a social hierarchy. Individuals who are higher in the social hierarchy often are afraid to lose their position when they are humiliated. This is why online public shaming can create a threatening feeling to someone's social identity (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2). To protect someone's position in the social hierarchy, more powerful individuals tend to react to humiliation defensively (Palishikar, 2005, p. 5428). This difference is interesting to keep in mind when investigating the impact of online hate practices such as humiliation on football players. Football players are generally higher in the social hierarchy. Based on the findings of Palishikar (2005, p. 5428) this higher position in the social hierarchy might play a role in determining how football players are affected by humiliation differently in comparison to non-public figures.

The concept of humiliation is often linked to feelings of embarrassment and social isolation. Online hate practices that involve public shaming cause negative impact on an individual's emotional well-being by making them feel embarrassed and socially isolated. When someone's self-image is publicly being shamed, a tension between the ego and the ideal ego is created (French, 2002, p. 5). The ideal ego exists of social expectations regarding behaviour and morals. When an individual is publicly exposed of falling short of important standards that he has, an identity crisis causes shame to occur (French, 2002, p. 5). The existence of shame shows how individuals attach certain honour to their personal standards and identity. Violating their personal identity or ideal ego lowers their opinion about their selves and thus their feeling of self-honour (French, 2002, p. 5).

Honour and shame are not only a personal attribute but also a public one. Honour and shame are not only affected by how we think about ourselves, but also by how others think about our behaviour. Validation of others is very important for human beings to justify their social worth (French, 2005, p. 6). Individuals create a social ideal they want to live up to. The ideal can be maintained by society when validation for this ideal is given. Validation and honour in turn lead to status within a society. Public shaming serves as a threat to the validation of someone's behaviour or moral standards. Because public shaming rejects instead

of validates the ideal ego, public honour is violated and public shame is arises (French, 2005, p. 6).

The answer to the question why public shaming has such negative impact on an individual's well-being lies within the interconnectedness between shame and honor. Public shaming can create a feeling of embarrassment which affects an individual's perception of one's personal and public honor (French, 2002, p. 6). Feelings of isolation from one's self and social isolation are consequences of these feelings of decreased honor and increased shame. When shame occurs, isolation from one's self-image is experienced. When an individual does not meet the standards of their ideal ego, a feeling of the loss of one's self occurs (French, 2002, p. 5). This also happens on the public level. When the social identity of an individual is being publicly shamed, social honor is lost, and social isolation is of consequence (French, 2002, p. 6). As public shaming induces feelings of embarrassment, it directly impacts both personal and public perceptions of honor. Consequently, the experience of shame leads to feelings of isolation from one's self and society as individuals grapple with the loss of personal and social honor. To find out whether football players are actually confronted with feelings of shame and dishonor due to the reception of online hate, and whether those feelings actually have a negative impact on their emotional well-being, this study will aim to create insights into football players experiences with such feelings.

Online flaming and harassment are online hate practices that expose an individual to offensive language about one's self or one's behavior (Willard, 2007, p. 5). Even though flaming and harassment do not necessarily aim to publicly shame an individual, they still have similar effects on the perceptions of one's identity. When negative messages on the internet do not align someone's personal beliefs about himself this can create a feeling of cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is described as the unpleasant experience of contradicting beliefs, ideas or views (Deavours et al., 2023, p. 2458). This theory is further supported by the earlier discussed research of French (2002, p. 5) where he talks about the tension between the ego and the ideal ego creating feelings of distress. When an individual experiences online hate that does not correspond to the idea that they have of their own identity, cognitive conflicts occur. The automatic reaction that most individuals have is to resolve this feeling of cognitive dissonance, because it creates psychosociological discomfort. Unresolved cognitive dissonance can lead to a decrease in mental health (Deavours et al., 2023, p. 2458).

Gosse et al. (2021, p. 277) explain how scholars experience contradicting thoughts about their identities as academics due to received online hate. Two different types of identities are being distinguished by Gosse et al. (2021, p. 277); someone's professional

identity and someone's epistemological identity. Experiencing harassment as a result of someone's professional identity exists of being harassed for one's performance at work. Experiences of harassment as a result of someone's epistemological identity exists of being harassed for one's opinions or moral/ethical stance (Gosse et al., 2021, p. 277). Gosse et al. (2021, p. 277) found that according to the importance of opinions and moral/ethical stance of scholars it was most impactful when scholars were harassed according to their epistemological identity. Because of the spread of thoughts and ideas online that were contradicting to the thoughts and ideas that scholars had of their own identity, cognitive dissonance occurred. But this only seemed to happen for the epistemological identity that scholars attached more value to (Gosse et al., 2021, p. 277). These results indicate that there might be nuances to the impact that online hate has on someone's perceived identity, due to the significance that is attributed to different aspects of someone's professional identity. It is potential to assume that football players might also experience differences in the impact of online hate according to which identity is being harassed, and how much value they attach to that identity. For example, if online hate is spread concerning a player's private life, this might impact feelings of cognitive dissonance more than when someone's professional career is being attacked.

There exist various assumptions about the potential effects that online hate might have on the emotional well-being of individuals. Both short-term and long-term effects of online hate on emotional well-being were found with victims reporting to have experienced feelings of anger, shock, embarrassment, isolation, low self-esteem, loss of confidence, and a defensive attitude. There are several concepts that help explain why these feelings occur. Humiliation, shame and honor that often occur in public shaming practices, seem to contribute to feelings of embarrassment and distress, while cognitive dissonance seems to attribute to feelings of discomfort and identity crisis. Because the summation of all these different consequences of online hate are concerning, it is important to investigate to what extend football players have experienced similar feelings due to their lives being publicly exposed and vulnerable on the internet.

Hate concern

Online hate concern is described as the declarative extent to which an individual is concerned, moved and has doubted himself according to received online hate (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 3). Hate concern is an important concept that provides evidence for the impact that online hate can have on an individual's well-being. Creating insights about the level of

hate concern that football players in the Dutch football environment have, can contribute to more knowledge about their concern with receiving hatred. When online hate concern is low, an individual is not easily affected by the reception of online hate. However, when an individual has a relatively high concern with online hate, the individual will be affected by online hate more. This means that the well-beings of individuals with higher online hate concern are affected more in comparison to individuals with a lower online hate concern (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 3).

The extend to which individuals are concerned with receiving online hate is found to be determined by someone's self-esteem and someone's resilience (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). When someone has a high self-esteem this individual is less concerned with receiving online hate. A person with high self-esteem is better at distancing himself from the received online hate because they know their self-worth. Higher resilience is also found to be associated with lower online hate concern. When a person is resilient, this person can bounce back from negative incidents fairly easy. This creates lesser concern with online hate because they are over it quickly (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). Self-esteem and resilience might be characteristic traits that can influence to what extend football players are concerned with the possibility of receiving online hatred.

Because football players are more prone to the reception of online hate than regular internet users (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2), the process of adaptation might also affect the level of hate concern that public figures like athletes have (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). Jedryczka et al. (2022, p. 8) found that despite the lower amounts of online hate that ordinary internet users receive, they were found to be more concerned with receiving online hate in comparison to public figures. Exposure to the same stimulus for a longer amount of time can decrease sensitivity for this stimulus (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). Because football players' are more used to receiving online hate, they might be more resistant to it.

It is important to be aware of the concern an individual has with online hate when investigating the impact of online hate on a person's mental well-being because there might be personal differences in levels of hate concern among individuals. When investigating the perceptions and experiences of football players concerning received online hate it is interesting to keep aspects like self-esteem, resilience and adaptation in mind. These aspects might influence the ways in which football players experience online hate and may serve as an explanation on why they deal with it differently than other people.

Coping mechanisms

When individuals face a stressful situation, they seek to lessen or eliminate its negative impact. This process is known as coping, which involves efforts to manage stress and the resulting emotions (Wachs et al., 2019, p. 1). It is important for individuals to be able to cope with interpersonal conflicts to maintain a healthy emotional well-being (Bath, 2024, p. 342; Wachs et al., 2019, p. 1).

Coping mechanisms can serve as a protective factor against the reception of online hate (Wachs et al., 2019, p. 1). Research on adolescents coping mechanisms for online hate show several tactics used to respond to online hate. The most frequent coping mechanism that adolescents use was ignoring the online hate, followed by reporting the hatred, followed by talking about it to friends or family, followed by blocking the perpetrator, and what was least used was replying to the online hate (Wachs et al., 2019, p. 3). Online coping strategies for dealing with racism were found to be seeking for social support, engaging in resistance and advocacy (Keum & Volpe, 2023, p. 499). Bhat (2024, p. 342) found that news reporters reacted to the reception of online hate by strategic social media disconnection which involves strategically avoiding specific interactions on social media. Limiting who can respond and comment, blocking or muting users and taking breaks from digital media for several days are strategies that are involved in social media disconnection (Bhat, 2024, p. 347). All these different coping mechanisms are used to fight against online hate in different online environment. There is no research done on footballplayers' coping strategies with online hate yet. This research will investigate whether football players use specific coping mechanisms to deal with received online hate.

Method

This research aimed to investigate professional Dutch football players' perceptions on and experiences with online hate. The study was executed via a qualitative methodology. Quantitative research is characterized by its focus on numbers and statistical data which creates possibilities for more standardized conclusions (Fryer et al., 2018, p. 56). Qualitative research on the other hand is characterized by its focus on meaning-making, beliefs and thoughts of individuals (Boeije, 2012, p. 22). Qualitative research is often implemented when the aim of a study is to gain more in-depth information about individual perspectives (Morse, 1997, p. 13; Boeije, 2012, p. 22). Since this research's purpose was to support already existing quantitative research on the subject and to investigate perceptions and experiences of football players, a qualitative research approach was most suitable to allow a thematic subject discovery to examine the research question.

The data to answer the research question and to make the thematic analysis possible was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews. Interviews are a qualitative research method that helps collect in-depth insights about participant's thoughts, feelings and beliefs on a specific topic (Hopf, 2003, p. 203). The participant's observations in interviews are important to impart expert knowledge about the field of study (Hopf, 2003, p. 203). In semi-structured interviews the researcher follows a research guide but has plenty of freedom to formulate new questions and follow-up questions (Hopf, 2003, p. 204). Proceeding according to an interview guide makes it possible for the interviewer to collect data that is consistent over the several interviews that are conducted. The freedom that semi-structured interviews offer creates more openness for input from the participants (Boeije, 2012, p. 180). This creates the perfect combination of standardized but personally motivated data.

When interviews are used as a form of method for qualitative research there are a few important aspects concerning validity and reliability that should be taken into account. First there always is a form of researcher subjectivity that might influence the results. There might be inconsistencies in the evaluation of results when the interviewer's judgements vary over time or across different interviews and personal beliefs, and biases of the researcher might influence question formulation, interpretation and response (Alsaawai et al., 2024, p. 154). To guarantee as much consistency as possible in all interviews and question formulations, the semi-structured nature of the interviews will help provide the interviewer with a set structure while being open to new input. Second, interviewees might provide responses that are socially desirable because of the personal setting that interviews are held in (Alsaawai et al., 2024, p.

154). Additionally, with interviews a small sample of the population is often used (Alsaawai et al., 2024, p. 154). When the sample is not representative for the target group, the generalizability of the results may be limited.

Sampling

The research subjects for this study were conducted using a criterion-based sampling method. In a criterion-based sampling method the subjects of research need to adhere to specific predetermined criteria (Hox & Boeijs, 2005, p. 595). The predetermined criteria in this study were the conditions that a participant was a professional football player in the Dutch football community and that he or she had experiences with receiving online hate. There were no further criteria for age, gender or ethnicity because this research aimed to investigate experiences and perceptions of football players with varying backgrounds in order to collect diverse experiences and perceptions surrounding online hate. The following of a criterion based sampling method created a purposeful selection because the sample was intentionally selected according to the research question (Boeijs, 2012, p. 172).

The sampling process consisted of three stages. First, a selection of individuals and organizations was made to send recruitment messages to. It was important that the clubs and players that were contacted were part of Dutch top football and that the players had experiences with online hate. Second, a recruitment message was created that informed potential participants on the research, research criteria and different conditions of participating. Third, this recruitment message was spread out to different individuals and organizations in the Dutch football ecosystem. Individual players were contacted via LinkedIn, and football clubs were approached via their media departments or team managers. Also football or sports management agencies were contacted to ask if their contract players were interested in participating in the research. Additionally, the researcher used her own network to get in touch with team managers of Dutch football teams.

Eventually seven research subjects from six different football clubs in the Netherlands were selected. The sample consisted of 6 male players and 1 female player. The ages of the male players were between 20 and 27 years old with an average of 23 years. The male players originated from five different Dutch clubs. Two players operated in the '*Eredivisie*' which can be considered as the Dutch Premier League and four players operated in the first division which is the first level below the Eredivisie. All male players had at least one year of experience in paid football with a maximum of eight years. The only female participant was 20 years old and operated in the first division of the Dutch female competition. She had one

year of experience in paid football. All participants are given a pseudonym that they will be referred to in the result section.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years of experience as a paid football player	Division
Bart	27	M	8 years	Eredivisie
Ryan	25	M	7 years	Eredivisie
Wout	20	M	1 year	First division
Sander	23	M	2 years	First division
Laura	20	F	1 year	Frist division
Tom	20	M	3 years	First division
Matthijs	20	M	3 years	Frist division

Data gathering

The interviews were collected between February and May. The interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format at the location of the clubs of the players as well as via phone calls. Four interviews were conducted face-to-face and three interviews were conducted by phone. The interviews took between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were first introduced with the researcher, the subject of the study and the conditions of participation. It was emphasized that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from participation at any given moment without any consequences. They were explained that their data was treated confidentially and would be used for research purposes only. They could skip any question if they did not feel comfortable answering this question. After the explanation of the conditions of participation the participants were asked – if agreed upon – to sign the informed consent form (Appendix C).

An interview guide was used to make sure that every important topic had been questioned consistently to all participants (Appendix A). The interview guide consisted of 22 questions. All questions had several prescribed potential follow-up questions regarding the adjacent topics. These follow-up questions made it possible for the interview to dive further into the answers that an individual participant gave. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interview there was no need to follow the specific order of the interview guide. The

interviewer was free to choose the order of questions that the interview naturally flowed in. Also, due to the natural flow of the conversation, some questions that were not part of the interview guide were asked during the interviews.

Operationalization

The negative effects of online hate on professional Dutch football players was examined by questioning five different sub themes that partially correspond to the sub questions of this research. In the first sub theme, participants were asked about their overall experiences with online hate. The questions regarding the second sub theme focused on the impact that online hate has on the participants' emotional well-being. The third sub theme questioned the impact of online hate on the performance of the players. The fourth sub theme's questions were about self-esteem, resilience and the amount of hate concern that players experience. Finally, the questions of the last sub theme consisted of questions about the coping mechanisms that players implement to deal with the reception of online hate on a regular basis. All questions that were used, were gathered in an interview guide (appendix A).

To collect insights in the experiences that football players generally have with online hate several questions were asked, aiming to encourage the sharing of personal stories and opinions. To break the ice, the first question that was asked regarded a description of the player's first experience with online hate. After this participants were asked more about the nature of the online hate that they received. For example, the participants were asked to explain what content of hatred they receive and whether they encountered online hate regarding the themes gender, race and sexuality. Afterwards questions about their most received type of online hate and their most impactful experience with online hate were asked. Participants will not only be asked which themes of online hate were experienced as most harmful but also which specific types of practices impacted them the most.

To examine the second sub theme, participants were asked how online hate impacted a player's emotional well-being. Conversations about this sub theme concerned questions about players' feelings and emotions in regards to the reception of online hate. Participants were asked about the short term and long term impact that online hate had on their feelings and emotions. For example, several questions about the immediate feeling that occurs when receiving online hate were asked. Participants were asked if online hate provokes feelings of distress, anxiety, unconcern or other types of feelings that might come up in their mind, and whether a participant took this feeling along with them throughout their day.

To examine the third sub theme, participants were asked whether receiving online hate had any impact on their performance on the field. The questions about players' performance concern their thoughts of online hate comments during practices or games. Players were asked if they ever thought about received online hate during a game or practice and if it ever made them feel less motivated to perform.

The fourth sub theme of the interview regarded players' beliefs and opinions about online hate concern. Participants were asked what kind of characteristics they thought were essential to be able to deal with receiving online hate on a regular basis. Self-esteem and resilience are important factors that determine the amount of concern that an individual has with online hate (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). This is why participants were asked if their level of confidence and resilience could perhaps influence the amount of hate concern that they experienced as a public figure. Questions about players' self-image and ability to bounce back after impactful events could give insights on whether character traits like self-esteem and resilience contribute to a person's level of hate concern.

The last sub theme contained questions about the ways that players deal or cope with regular exposure to online hate. Players were asked which coping mechanisms they utilize to deal with online hate in their own unique way. They were asked if they tend to have an avoidant coping style or if they rather chose to confront online haters with the destructive behavior that they display. Participants were also asked what they think would be the most effective strategy to cope with the constant reception of online hate, and how individuals and different organizations within the Dutch football community could contribute to a decrease in online hate.

Analysis

To analyze the experiences and perceptions of Dutch football players on online hate a qualitative thematic content analysis was used. This thematic analysis was carried out by implementing both an inductive and deductive approach. In the theoretical framework of this research a few preconceived themes were expected to be found based on existing theories concerning online hate in the football environment. In appendix B a coding scheme is provided where some concepts that were explained in the theoretical framework are presented as codes. Hate concern and adaptation are examples of some deductive concepts of this analysis, as well as several earlier discussed hate themes and practices that were expected to be found in the results. In addition to these deductive elements this research also aimed at providing an inductive analysis of the results. By allowing the data to determine new patterns

and themes, additional new knowledge was conducted. The combination of both theory based themes and data-driven themes helped provide support for or rejection of existing literature and at the same time helped provide new findings and explanations (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

With the help of a computer aided software called *Atlas.ti* the transcripts of the interviews were coded into themes. The transcripts were analyzed by implementing the three steps of thematic coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Boeije, 2012, p. 144). In the first stage the transcripts were divided into different fragments and every fragment got assigned to a specific code. These codes are all data-driven and researcher-subjective. In the open coding stage 80 codes were found. In the second stage, patterns and connections are made between the codes that were found in the open coding stage. These patterns and connections form main themes and sub themes. In the axial coding phase ten main themes and eight sub themes were found. In the last coding stage the number of themes that were created in the axial coding stage are narrowed down to a selection of the most relevant themes to answer the research question. This resulted in a total of five themes that will serve as the results of this qualitative study. The analysis of this research proved that a point of saturation was met because no additional themes were found when analyzing new interviews. On the contrary, new interviews confirmed the findings in former interviews.

Results

There were seven themes found that will contributed to answering the research question and sub questions: performance, social demarcations, online hate practices, adaptation, ‘we are professionals’ & coping mechanisms. First, the experiences of football players regarding online hate about their performance and effects of online hate on their performance will be discussed. Second, some social demarcations that were reported to provoke online hate will be highlighted. Third, several different types of online hate practices and their impact will be discussed according to participants experiences. Fourth, the participants’ opinion on the process of adaptation will be sketched. Fifth, the level of hate concern that participants reported will be explained according to the trust they have in their personal professional abilities. Lastly, participants reported several coping strategies that will be discussed to paint the picture about how participants cope with online hate.

Performance

The most occurring online hate theme was hate based on performances. Reporting of participants concerned online hate speech against both individual performance of a player and collective performance of the team. Examples of these were poor team performances, missed chances, missed balls and poor performance in general. Four out of seven participants indicated that they only received online hate that accorded to their performances. Most of the time, this online hate was originated from rival clubs. Ryan explains when he receives online hate based on his performance: “[...] when we for example win from one of our direct opponents”. But online hate could also be derived from own supporters. When Bart made his debut for his current club he received online hate and envy from their own supporters. Bart explains:

We had another *player-position* at the time who always said to supporters: ‘ I am the second *player-position* and I have to play and if the first *player-position* gets injured, then I am allowed to play’. That didn't make sense in the end, because I was allowed to play. And then my surname came out, that I was going to make my debut and yes, I did have some unpleasant reactions to that. Yes, ‘it's scandalous’ and that I should not be playing.

Bart explained that this event made him feel insecure at that time:

You are finally allowed to make your debut and then you receive all those messages. A bit annoying, yes anyway. I was very sensitive to that. Even then yes. I was new to everything, but also sensitive to it. Yes, that does make you insecure.

While Bart explains how his experience with online hate concerning his performances made him insecure at that time, no participants report a decrease in their athletic performance due to their experiences with online hate. All participants mention that their performances do not get impacted in any way by the reception of online hate, Bart: “[...] no I do not have that, at that moment I can block it.” When participants are asked whether they are ever reminded of online hate that they had received during training or a game, their answers were all no.

In contrast to what might be expected, some participants indicated that online hate can be used as a source of motivation to deliver better performances. Bart: “I would just like to prove otherwise or perhaps the opposite. [...] You try to get a positive force or energy out of it.” Participants mention that online hate can serve as a positive force to perform even better than expected, and to prove online haters are wrong.

The significant presence of online hate concerning footballers performances and the fact that all participants report that their performances are not impacted by the reception of online hate is an interesting finding. While every participant indicated to have experienced online hate regarding performance, only one participant mentions to have experienced feelings of insecurity due to the reception of hate on his performance. Participants even indicate how online hate makes them feel more motivated to perform better. These findings indicate that online hate concerning performances does not consequence any negative effects on emotional well-being and performance but might even have a positive effect.

Social demarcations

The online hate experiences that participants had, did not only focus on performance but also on specific social demarcations of the participants. For example the only female participant, Laura, was the only participant to report experiences with sexism. She explained how male and female football are constantly unjustly compared to each other in the Dutch football environment: “Most people are used to watch the level of male football. Almost everybody compares this to female football, but this cannot be compared to each other. Women are very different in terms of speed, strength, et cetera.” This systematic comparison causes sexism to occur. Sexism against female football players in the online environment often manifests itself by means of derogatory language, used to publicly shame women

players for their sex often in relation to their profession. Laura explains: “There is a lot of hatred towards women about the fact that they do not belong on this stage and for example reactions as an example that women should wash and cook at home instead of appearing on TV.” Even though these comments are considered as ridiculous by Laura she also mentions that she is not affected by the reception of these types of comments. She explains: “I do not really mind. Look, it is part of it.”

While the only female participant indicated to have experienced sexism, all male interviewees indicated to not have any experiences with online hate concerning their sex or masculinity. Even epithets like ‘pussy’ and ‘gay’ that were considered a part of hegemonic discourse in many sports environments – especially male dominated ones – (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 8) did not get reported by any of the male participants.

In addition to online hate directed to women’s sexes, one participant also mentioned to have experienced online hate regarding his appearance and ethnicity. When he is asked about what kind of themes he receives online hate about he mentions: “That can be everything, football, my appearance, what I look like, how I dress. That I do not work hard enough for my money.” Ryan was the only participant with a non-Dutch ethnicity. His ethnicity can be linked to his experiences with the reception of epithets like the word ‘ape’ that he explains he has encountered in the online environment. Ryan explains that he does not feel affected by the online hate that he receives. The participants that had a full Dutch ethnical background did not report that they had ever faced online hate based on their ethnicity, race or appearance.

Online hate practices

In addition to the different types of online hate themes that are found within the results of this research concerning performance and social demarcations, there are also different types of online hate practices found. Derogatory language and outing were forms of public shaming that participants confirmed to have experienced within their careers. Laura experienced derogatory language in forms of sexism as already explained above. Ryan had several experiences with individuals that tried to damage his reputation and tried to online publicly shame him by leaking information that was acclaimed by him to be untrue. He explains how he visited an acquaintance’s birthday party where people were spotted using drugs. The next day Ryan got accused by his trainer who told him that words were going around that he used drugs the day before training. Ryan explained to his trainer that this story was not true, and that someone made this story up. Also, the incorrect announcement of an

upcoming transfer is a frequently occurring falsehood spread about many footballers as Tom explains: “For example he says, *name* wants to leave *club*.”

The most reported form of online hate practices by all participants was the use of epithets and threats. Bart explains, “The word cancer is of course thrown at you a lot.” He describes how negativity often impacts his emotional well-being more than positive online comments. “If ten people say something and nine are positive and one is negative, you will automatically keep the negative ones in your mind. [...] negativity can break a person.” These results show how negative epithets and hatred can wander around in the heads of victims. Even on the long term Bart explains that his image of people has changed because of the football environment that he is in: “Everybody wants to be your friend, or they want something from you. I find it hard to let people in.” He gives an example of how people will say bad things about him online but later on will ask for a t-shirt or another favor.

Two participants mentioned to have experienced threats. Ryan even indicates that his family became victim of online hate messages:

Well, I have received death threats and I do not know what else. Yes, it does not make me hot or cold, but family and people around you, for example, find that a bit scarier. They don't really know how that works. [...] Also, for my mother or other family members, because they have *surname* in their bio, they also sometimes receive messages. But that is not that often. But that is more when they see people saying something about me, for example. They find that difficult.

As also explained above, Ryan mentions that he is not affected by the reception of death threats. He does explain that he is sorry for his family that they have to go through this. But he tries to tell them: “Barking dogs seldom bite.”

The last online hate practice that was reported was stalking. Ryan explains that he experienced a period where one specific account messaged him that he had seen him at several places. The claims that this follower made were always correct. “It would be an anonymous account, ... that would say ‘you have been here and there, and you have did this and that.’” When Ryan was asked how he feels about the fact that his privacy is invaded so deeply he explains: “Well, I of course know that when I am walking around in *city* centrum that people will recognize me. I think I might just be used to it or something.” Even when the interviewer stressed the seriousness of scenes as insistent as stalking, Ryan noted that he was not impacted in any sort of way by this event.

Adaptation

When participants were asked to what extent they were concerned with online hate the most occurring reactions had everything to do with adaptation. The results show how every participant indicates that habituation is an important and unescapable process that every football player is confronted with during their career. For example like already mentioned above, Laura does not get influenced by sexist comments on social media anymore because she describes it as “part of it.” The participants mention several different forms of adaptation. For example Ryan explains how he gets used to people recognizing him in places and sharing on social media where they have spotted him:

Ultimately, I am used to the fact that if I go out in *city* this weekend, so to speak, I probably know that people will hear about it online, so I am just a bit used to that. That I cannot do things without other people knowing.

Matthijs explains how, during his career, he developed the habit of not reading everything that has been told online: “[...] I have improved in that over the years. At first I was like, oh, I will take a look.” He explains how he now keeps in mind that supporters and journalists will write about him online, and how he consciously made the choice to adapt to this by shielding himself from online comments and articles.

The process of adaptation seems to have everything to do with the experiences that the participants have in paid Dutch football. The results show how the participants with the most years of experience indicate the highest level of adaptation. Bart has seven years of experience in paid football and explains how online hate used to make him insecure but during his career it did not affect him anymore: “[...] But at the moment it does not bother me anymore. It used to do, but not anymore.” Indicating a shift of his online hate concern during his career. He also gives an explanation for adaptation to occur:

Yes, I was indeed 18, 19 when I started playing. [...] Yes, then you may not be so sure about yourself yet. No experience in football about what can happen and then over the years, the more you play, the more experience you gain in football and what can be written, how easily people can talk. [...] And then it is important that you try to find a way to let it go.

Wout who had a significantly shorter career mentioned that he could imagine how adaptation during someone's career could occur, but did not indicate any form of adaptation influencing his personal level of online hate concern. This shows how the years of experience

are an important indicator for the amount of adaptation that has taken place for a football player.

'We are professionals'

Another reoccurring theme that has been found was the level of confidence that football players had in themselves as being a professional in their discipline. This had not so much to do with their personal self-confidence, because players did indicate that their confidence could get affected by the reception of certain online hate. But moreover about the trust that football players had in their own capabilities as a professional football player. In regards of online hate, this was mainly conveyed in the way that football players believed they knew better than the information that was spread online by online haters and even critical sports journalists. For example Wout explains how he ignores online hate comments regarding his performance because he is confident in his abilities as a football player: "[...] because I know I am a good football player. So then I just put it aside." Ryan also mentions how he believes that you should not take any advice from people who do not know anything about the game or were not at the time and place when something happened.

I have always had the opinion that if you are a specialist in your field, then I listen to you and if I do not think you are a specialist in your field or do not have expertise, then I also take your opinion, so to speak, with a grain of salt. And I always have had that.

Ryan further explains this by presenting a metaphor: "I am not going to tell the baker how to do his job. He will not get any far with that." He also mentions that he considers his trainer and teammates as better sources of feedback in comparison to for example sports journalists: "[...] for example, if my trainer or my teammates have an opinion about something and they say something, then I value it much more than when sports journalists say something." This is mainly because he explains how sports journalists often are not physically present, so they do not exactly know what happens on an off the pitch. Sander also explains that the source where the online hate is originated from is important for him to determine how touched he will be by online hatred: "I think it mainly depends on where the hate comes from, and that you keep in perspective for yourself who says things." He explains how the opinion of his family and friends is more important to him than anything that is said online.

Also, in case of public shaming participants mention that people often do not know where they are talking about. Often, online haters who participate in public shaming do not

get their information from reliable sources. Matthijs mentions: “If someone spreads an untruth about me I would think; I know better.” The earlier described incident where Ryan was accused of using drugs is an example of public shaming where information was spread by unreliable sources. Ryan also mentioned that in this situation, he was the one who knew the real story. That was why he did not feel affected by the public shaming.

Even though all participants mentioned that they had a certain amount of confidence in their abilities as football players, Ryan mentioned that some of his teammates lacked this type of confidence. He explains that confidence is not the key to becoming immune to online hate:

[...] because you can have self-confidence, but if you are very susceptible to what other people say, then it gets into your head. There are a lot of boys who find it difficult when journalists say something negative about them, even though they have a lot of self-confidence. And self-confidence comes and goes. I already said self-confidence is never 100% your entire life. Self-confidence, sometimes it is 80, other times 60 then 90, it varies every day.

Tom also agrees that strong self-confidence is not a determinant for lower levels of online hate concern. He explains how some online hate is so heavy that even with a huge amount of self-confidence you will get affected by it. The five other participants however did mention that confidence played a role in the amount of online hate concern that an individual had. They stated that confidence could be beneficial in the process of distancing yourself from online hate. Wout:

If you naturally have less self-confidence and you read things online about people who try to bring you down. I think you can deal with it better if you stand strong and do not really care what other people think. I think hate comments will affect you less.

Coping mechanisms

Several coping mechanisms to deal with online hate in the Dutch football environment were listed by the participants. Ignoring and avoiding were the coping mechanisms that were mentioned by all participants most often. Participants explain how it is effective to try and avoid reading online hate targeting you as a player by not reading articles about yourself and skipping the comment section on your social media accounts. As Bart explains: “I have stopped reading social media and articles on the internet. I do not read the reactions anymore or the articles itself. I stopped doing that.” In comparison to Bart who actively tries to avoid reading comments, Matthijs mentions how he was never really up to date about what was

written about him online because he did not use social media often anyways: “I do not spend a lot of time on there. I do not really see the point in it, I actually just want to play football and the rest is fine.”

The participants gave several reasons why ignoring these online hate messages was the best solution in their opinion. Sander explains: “For me the best solution is to just ignore it. You do not know those people anyway. They do not know me. So then I do not take it that serious, because they have no idea who I am.” Tom mentioned how most online haters are eager to receive a reaction from you. In his opinion ignoring would be most beneficial to not give online haters the podium they want: “If you react on it, then they catch on that. They want you to react.”

Even though Ryan mentions that ignoring is an effective solution for dealing with hate in the online environment:

It is just like a child that is getting bullied. If he reacts, the bullies will continue bullying. If he stops reacting, the bullying will stop. If you do not react, then they can hate message you as much as they want, but at a certain point they will stop.

Ryan also mentions how he sometimes reacts to the messages that he receives online. He explains how he sometimes tries to get in contact with someone who sends him online hate messages: “I might be a unique person with that because when I see a message on Instagram and I think that messages goes a bit too far. Then I just call them.” He explains how he phoned a person that had scolded him for ‘*kanker aap*’ which means cancer ape in Dutch:

[...] so I called him and then I said... At first he was a little angry. But then I said, what exactly is it? So I told him: ‘I am not an ape and I hopefully do not have cancer’. So I say: ‘do you want to warn me? What uh?’ ... ‘Yes, I belong to the opposing team’ he said. ‘It is important to me that we win’. ‘Hey, yes, and also for me to win, you understand?’ And then eventually the conversation turns around. [...] I have never actually had it become a negative conversation.

Ryan describes his confronting method as a form of realization for online haters to make them realize what they are exactly achieving by spreading hatred. He also explains that he always stays calm and positive in such conversations,

If you are going to react to them it is important that you end on a positive note and that you are not going into the conversation with emotions. You want to get the other person out of his emotions to make him realize, yes, what is the point of what you are doing?

The last coping strategy that is used by Ryan is deleting comments. He mentions that he does not use this strategy very often. There was only one incident where he found it necessary to delete some comments. This was after a championship party where he made a major misstep that was widely reported in the news. After this incident he received a lot of backlash on social media. This is when he deleted some comments beneath his Instagram posts and even disabled the ability to comment under his Instagram pictures.

Another way of coping with the reception of online hate was talking to others about it. Participants particularly mentioned that they often laughed about hate comments they received with family members or team members. Wout explains: “You hear about it in the dressing room sometimes. But then we make fun of it.” Matthijs also explains how they discuss the reception of hate comments with teammates: “Then they show it, like, look what this guy is saying, and then we laugh about it.” Bart also mentions that he sometimes shows hateful messages to his family. When he is asked whether him and his family laugh about these comments he answers: “Yes, and then they tell me, just let it go. You know for yourself what is true.”

Ryan also mentions that it is important to react to online hate with a smile. When a hateful message is sent to him he often plays along with the messages and will make fun of himself:

If you do it with a smile. [...] At first I will say things like; ‘yes, you are right I cannot play football very well, but I am still playing so you might have to talk to the trainer’. ‘I cannot do anything about it. I am also just doing the best I can’. ‘Today I was not wearing my shooting boots’, for example.

Another factor that could help coping with online hate according to Laura was to stay sober. She explains: “The best character trait to have is that you do not stress too much about it and you stay sober about the fact that it happens.” Tom also explains: “I am pretty neutral about it. For me, things that are said... They often do not bother me very much. But I do think it is different for everyone.” Ryan even mentions stoicism to be an important character trait that can help cope with the reception of online hate as a football player: “I think you must be a bit realistic. Also a bit stoic and also a bit humorous, so that you can wave everything away with a bit of a joke. That's how I deal with it.”

Discussion

The seven themes that were conducted from the reports of participants in regards of their experiences with online hate in the Dutch football community will provide answers to the research question and sub questions. These answers will be discussed while incorporating results of former research on the topic. In addition, the academical and social implications of the findings, and the limitations of this study will be reviewed. Afterwards, an conclusion and recommendations for future research will be provided.

Overall experiences with online hate

Former research has investigated how online hate manifests itself in the Dutch football community but overlooks how football players themselves experience online hate. To examine whether former research on the manifestations of online hate in the Dutch football community correspond to the results of this research, a picture is painted of the general experiences and perceptions that participants reported in regards to online hate. This general understanding of the experiences and perceptions of participants will contribute to sketching an image of the current situation that Dutch football culture is under right now, and how football players themselves experience this culture. These findings could contribute to examining the effectiveness of the current focus in Dutch football on online hate campaigns and policies. In addition, participants experiences will contribute to the investigating whether alignment between former research on the topic of online hate in football cultures and the findings of this research exists.

First of all, the findings show how the years of experience and the level of professional football that participants had, plays a role in the experiences that football players have with online hate. Participants with a higher amount of years of experience and a higher level of professional football all reported a wider variety of experiences with online hate incidents. Ranging from online hate concerning multiple different hate themes to multiple different online hate practices. Players with a significantly lower amount of years of experience and a lower level of professional football reported lesser experiences with online hate. Hate themes concerning their social demarcations and more serious hate practices like public shaming and stalking were not experienced by these participants.

According to the participants of this research most online hate that was received concerned team- and individual performance. In addition, sexism and racism where social demarcations that served as a basis on which online hate was experienced by participants.

Antisemitic comments and discourse about hegemonic masculinity where concepts that any of the participants reported to have experiences with. These online hate themes are discussed in former research extensively. The findings of this research will therefore be discussed in light of former research and new implications will be provided.

While former researches on racism in football communities claim that there is a structural presence of racism (Chovanec, 2023, p. 942; Van den Bogert, 2021 p. 59; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424), this study weakly supports those findings. The reasoning behind this is that there was only one participant in the interview sample that reported to have experiences with racism. The participant that reported experiences with hate was the only participant within the sample that had a non-white background, while all other participants were white. Former research explains how especially colonially informed racial stereotypes and culturally/religiously informed ethnic stereotypes form the basis of Dutch racism in football media (van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 209). The experiences concerning the reception of epithets like '*ape*' and comments about appearance support former findings that non-white football players in the Dutch football community face racialized stereotypes and receive significantly more comments referring to their physical demarcations (van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 209).

Experiences with online sexism were reported by the only female participant that took part in this research. There seems to exist a constant comparison between male and female football in the Dutch football environment which causes female football to be underappreciated by supporters. These findings correspond to research by Kaelberer (2019, p. 343) who states that female football is treated differently than male football in the German football context. In addition, comments about the traditional role that women should fulfill were part of the sexualization of women in football discourse. These findings seem to support findings of earlier research on how sports that are dominated by a specific gender often are susceptible to online hate based on gender (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 8). These findings confirm the presence of sexism in Dutch football and address that sexism is still a problem that is present in online discourse about Dutch football.

However, former research on gender in sports/football culture did not only acclaim that the objectification of women is part of online sexism, but also points out the presence of discourse about hyper-masculinity (MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 9). The absence of reported experiences with discourse about hegemonic masculinity implies that there is a contradiction in former research in football communities and findings of football player's reported

experiences. This difference might be due to the fact that football is a sport where masculinity is highly present and appreciated by supporters. Maybe football players feel ashamed to talk about comments concerning their masculinity. It could also be possible that participants did not experience certain comments like ‘pussy’, ‘weak’ or ‘gay’ as comments that threatened their masculinity.

While Seijbel et al. (2022, p. 834) found that antisemitism was present in the Dutch football community, this research did not find any support for experiences of participants with antisemitism. The reason for the absence of anti-semitic comments is the sample that was used in this research. The antisemitic comments in Dutch football are almost always directed to one football club in the Netherlands that is associated with Judaism (Seijbel et al., 2022, p. 834). There were no participants interviewed from this club, which serves as the explanation on why participants did not indicate any experiences with this type of online hate.

Together with the findings on different online hate themes, the presence of six out of seven hate practices that are being distinguished by Willard (2007, p. 5) found support in this research. Relatively intense hate practices such as stalking and death threats got denoted by participants. Surprisingly, participants indicated to not be affected by these types of hate practice. Again, addressing a contrasting finding in comparison to former research that claims that stalking and threats are hate practices that invade personal security and create feelings of unsafety (Hubbard, 2020, p. 16). The absence of impact that those hate practices have on participants might narrate how football players experience such practices differently than other individuals.

A reason for the contradictions between former research and findings of this study might be that former research mainly focused on sports media while these findings are based on personal opinions of football players themselves. This is why findings might imply that there exists a difference between the experiences that football players have with online hate and the way that other people experience the seriousness of online hate spread online. It might be possible that outsiders perceive hate themes like racism and sexism and hate practices like stalking and threatening as more problematic than football players’ experience them. This indicates that the seriousness of the problem surrounding online hate may need reconsideration.

Impact on emotional well-being and performance

The first sub question of this research aimed at providing information about the experiences that football players in the Dutch football environment had with online hate in regards to their emotional well-being. The results of this study indicate that all participants generally did not experience any negative nor positive impact of received online hate on their emotional well-being. Despite the reported presence of humiliation and public shaming, no participant indicated to experience feelings of embarrassment, social isolation or other consequences that were acclaimed to be consequences of humiliation and public shaming (Palishkar, 2005, 5428; French, 2002, p. 5; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020, p. 2). Even the theory stating that public violation of honor ensures that an individual's social ideal is not met (French, 2005, p. 6), is not supported by this research. Participants indicate that they do not worship the social validation from supporters or sports journalists at all. They acclaim to rather be validated by people who matter to them like family and friends, or people who have expertise in their field like trainers and team members.

The fact that participants did not report any negative impact on their emotional well-being due to the reception of online hate, while simultaneously reporting experiences with sexism, racism, threats, stalking etc. is an interesting finding. The absence of impact that online hate has on the emotional well-being of football players – as indicated by the participants - might be due to the amount of hate concern that players have. When less concerned with online hate, the impact of the reception of hate can decrease. Due to exposure to the same stimulus for a longer period of time, the sensitivity to online hate could decrease and negative side effects like distress, anger, anxiety, et cetera. could be experienced less heavily (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). The fact that some participants indicate that they have undergone a change during their career in terms of the emotional impact that online hate has on them might indicate that adaptation could be a process influencing the impact of online hate on emotional well-being. Future research should focus on investigating what exactly is the reason that football players who have experienced serious forms of online hate, report to not be affected by this on an emotional level while former research strongly supports the existence of serious negative effects individuals' emotional well-being. In addition, it would be necessary to investigate what role adaptation could play in this relation.

The second sub question of this research aimed at answer how the experiences of football players in the Dutch football environment influenced their performances. The findings of this research show that participants were unanimously in agreement that their

experiences with online hate had no negative impact on their performances. Participants rather indicated that online hate could serve as a source of motivation. When something negative was said about their performances, participants explained that this motivated them to perform even better. In comparison to all the expected negative effects of online hate (Bernier, 2017, p. 180; Perry & Alvi, 2012, 69; Williams, 2019, p. 17; Hubbard, 2020, p. 16), these findings seem to imply that it is possible to derive positive effects from online hate. Not much research is done on the positive benefits of online hate. These findings imply that the academic and societal focus on the negative sides of online hate potentially overshadow some possibly positive effects.

Online hate concern

The third sub question of this research aimed at explaining how the experiences of football players in the Dutch football environment determined their levels of online hate concern. Former research stated that online hate concern was determined by three factors: resilience, self-esteem and adaptation (Jedryczka et al., 2022, p. 8). In general all participants reported low levels of concern with the possibility of receiving online hate. The findings of this study show two reasons for this low level of online hate concern to exist: confidence in their professional abilities and adaptation.

Self-esteem was perceived by participants as an character trait that was useful but not determinative for lower levels of hate concern. While some participants noted that high self-esteem could be useful to become unaffected by online hate, others acclaimed that high self-esteem could only decrease hate concern to a certain amount. When violation of personal beliefs or your self-image occurs, high self-esteem would not be persistent according to participants.

Participants did however indicate that their confidence in their professional abilities influenced their levels of hate concern. All participants had a high amount of trust in their own professional abilities, and did not take performance related comments of others very serious. Even though the concept of self-esteem seems to align with the concept of confidence in one's professional abilities, the explanation for the contradicting findings between the reported effects of self-esteem and the high trust in professional abilities might lie in the difference between both concepts.

It could be possible that football players attach different values to their professional identity and their social identity. Earlier research on scholars show how they experience differences in the impact that online hate has according to the specific identity that is violated

(Gosse et al., 2021, p. 277). Just like scholars, football players might react differently to different identities being violated. It could be possible that football players are less impacted by their professional identity being violated in comparison to their personal identity being violated. This might be due to the fact that football players acclaim to be specialists in their field and consider others as layman. Moreover, it might be possible that football players attach more value to their personal identity in comparison to their professional identity. This could be due to the fact that when someone's personal identity is publicly shamed, a loss of honor and feelings of embarrassment might occur (French, 2002, p. 5).

Adaptation was already mentioned to potentially be a process responsible for a decrease in the impact of online hate on emotional well-being. Adaptation has a prominent role in determining the level of hate concern that participants had. Participants mention how they are used to receiving online hate. Hateful discourse, the spread of untruths, and people exposing what places they visit are all described as 'part of it' by participants. These findings seem to imply that public figures like athletes get used to their lives being in the spotlights. The process of adaptation might serve as an explanation on why a paradoxical relation is found between results of former research and results of this study. The reason that football players do not report any negative impact of the reception of online hate on their emotional well-being and performances can be due to the fact that football players are overly exposed to online hate, or acceptant over the consequences of being a public figure.

Essential characteristics and coping mechanisms

The last sub question of this research aimed at answering what were the specific personal characteristics or coping mechanisms that would be effective to have when managing or overcoming experiences with online hate. The most occurring types of coping mechanisms were ignoring and avoiding. This corresponds to earlier research by Wachs et al. (2019, p. 3) who found that ignoring was the most used coping mechanisms by adolescents and Bath (2024, p. 347) who found that strategically avoiding specific interactions on social media was used by news reporters to cope with online hate. According to the results participants ignored or avoided online hate by limiting their social media use, actively avoiding to read articles and comments, and sometimes deleting specific comments.

Another coping strategy that was mentioned by participants was talking about it with others. This also corresponds with findings of Wach et al. (2019, p. 3) who found that talking to others was the third most used coping strategy of adolescents who were confronted with online hate. The football players explained how they showed online hatred to family and team

members, and often laughed about it together. Participants mentioned that humor was often involved in these types of conversations. Humor was not yet found to serve as a possible coping mechanisms for online hate in earlier research. This research indicates that humor might be a potential helpful concept that is used by football players to talk about their experiences with online hate to family and team members.

Reacting to online hate was both in this research and in the research of Wach et al. (2019, p. 3) found to be the least used coping strategy. However, findings of this research do show that one participant used this method to cope with the reception of online hate. He used reacting on online hate as a form of confrontation for online haters to make them realize what they were participating in. These results imply that there might be some players that do feel comfortable reacting to online hate. It would be interesting to investigate what determines the difference for a preferable coping mechanism per individual player, to broaden the understanding of coping strategies used by football players.

Limitations

This study gave many insights into the experiences that footballers in the Dutch football environment have, and how their emotional well-being, performances, online hate concern and different coping mechanisms color these experiences. While this research contributes to new insights into the yet undiscovered experiences of football players in the Dutch football environment, there are still some limitations to this study.

First, the sample that was used in this study was not diverse enough to sketch an accurate representation of all football players in the Dutch football environment. Interviews are a time-consuming method of research because there is a lot of in-depth information derived from interviews. Because of this, there are limitations in the amount of football players you can interview. Above that, professional football players are a difficult target group to get access to. The target group often concerns people with busy lives and tight schedules that are generally managed by managers instead of the football players themselves. Connections are very important in the football world and are almost the only effective way to get in touch with football players. Because of both reasons the sample was not as diverse as possibly hoped for. There were only one female participant and one participant with foreign origins represented in this sample. Because, according to former research (van Sterkenburg et al., 2012, p. 424; Kaelberer, 2019, p. 343), these are the minority groups that face different and more severe forms of online hate in comparison to white male football players, the

findings of this research might not tell the full story of the experiences and perceptions of football players in the Dutch environment.

Second, the years of experience that football players had and the division in which they played might influence their experiences with online hate. For example adaptation seemed to be an important factor in determining the impact that online hate had on the emotional well-being and online hate concern of participants. Players with significantly more years of experience noted to have received more online hate but also were less concerned with the reception of online hate. Also the level of professional football played a role in the experiences that football players had. Participants that played in the first division reported significantly lesser online hate experiences than participants in the Eredivisie.

Third, there might be a self-reporting bias, meaning that participants might under- or overreport their experiences with online hate either consciously or unconsciously. Participants mentioned to not be affected by online hate very much. They often reported that it did not bother them or that they did not care what other people said about them. Whether this is true or not is always difficult to discover because you are not able to infiltrate in the heads of participants. The reliance on self-reported data from participants always introduces a form of bias due to social desirability and personal factors that might have influenced the results of this study. Because former research shows that the reception of online hate does have an effect on emotional well-being, it might be interesting to investigate what the drivers are behind the reported undisturbedness of football players concerning the reception of online hate. Possibly the football culture might be an environment where participants do not feel completely safe to express feelings of sadness and shame. Additionally adaptation might be a process that influences the impact that online hate has on certain aspects of a footballer's wellbeing.

Fourth, with interviews as research method there always exists a form of researcher subjectivity. While interviewing but also while analyzing the results the personal perspectives, biases and experiences of the researcher might influence the results of this study. While research subjectivity is a problem that cannot be avoided since a human being cannot be entirely objective and detached from the research process, interviews and thematic analysis are highly susceptible for researcher subjectivity. The interaction with the participants is influenced by the researcher in the way that questions are framed, and how is responded to participants. Also within the data interpretation process the researcher might emphasize certain findings over others or interpret ambiguous data in ways that align with their expectations.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this research contributes to various insights that are worth investigating further in future research. The findings of this research reveal that various themes of online hate that manifests itself in various different hate practices are present in the Dutch football community. No experiences of a decrease in emotional well-being were reported by any of the football player's in these interviews. This is an interesting result that may require further investigation because many former studies indicate that online hate does have an effect on emotional well-being. It may be possible that footballers are a target group that finds it difficult to talk about emotional well-being, or that they indeed become emotionally immune to online hate through the process of adaptation. Online hate also appears to have no negative impact on performance, but rather, it would provide extra motivation to perform better. These findings are new and not yet supported by any other research. This is why the concept of motivation is an interesting one to further investigate in future research.

Football players' online hate concern was reported to be low by participants in this research. This might be due to confidence in one's own professional qualities and to the process of adaptation. However, previous research claims that resilience and overall self-esteem should also have an influence on online hate concern. Support for this claim was not found in this research. It seems that there is a separation between the violation of a professional identity and a social identity. Future research on online hate concern regarding different identities may reveal whether there is more hate concern for a particular identity compared to another. In addition, the absence of high levels of hate concern could indicate that the problem of online hate in the Dutch football community is not that big as it is. This contradicts the fact that Dutch football clubs and other football organizations campaign massively against online hate. It would be necessary to investigate the experiences of football players more extensively to find out whether the reception of online hate really influences football players' well-being negatively, and whether campaigning against it is meaningful.

The findings regarding coping mechanisms imply that humor might be an important aspect that is involved in conversations about the reception of online hate with friends and family members. The concept of humor as a form of coping mechanisms used for online hate is not yet investigated. The results of this study imply that humor might be a concept that needs further investigation to discover potential benefits on coping with online hate.

In addition, further research should focus on investigating the experiences and perceptions of minority groups in the Dutch football environment more extensively to discover what certain experiences individuals belonging to these groups have, concerning their emotional well-being, performances, online hate concern and coping strategies in response to online hate. The extension of this research by means of a more diverse sample can give a voice to football players with backgrounds that are overlooked in this research. Also, future research should take into account how several contextual factors such as the years of experiences and the level of professional football influence the experiences that football players have with online hate.

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Appendix A - Interview guide

ERVARINGEN MET ONLINE HAAT

- Wat was jouw eerste ervaring met online haat?
Bijv. wanneer dit gebeurde, wat was de aanleiding, hoe oud je was, waar het over ging?
 - o Wat voor gevoel had je bij deze ervaring?
 - o Wat voor emoties kwamen naar boven?

ONLINE HAAT

- Wat versta jij onder online haat?
- Waarom denk je dat mensen online haat verspreiden?
 - o En waarom specifiek richting voetballers?
- Hoe kijk jij aan tegen mensen die online haat verspreiden?
- Wat is voor jou het verschil tussen online en offline haat?
 - o Welk type ervaar je als erger?

SOORT EN VORM ONLINE HAAT

- Over wat voor soort onderwerpen of thema's ontvang je online haat?
Bijv. over je prestaties, je uiterlijk, je privé leven, je afkomst, je vrouwelijk-/mannelijkheid etc.
 - o Heb je daar voorbeelden van?
- Is er een bepaald onderwerp of thema waarover jij de meeste haat ontvangt?
 - o Wat is hiervoor de reden denk jij?
- Welke onderwerpen of thema's doen het meeste pijn om daar haat over te ontvangen?
 - o Waarom raken deze thema's of onderwerpen jou?
- Ben je wel eens in aanraking gekomen met intimidatie en/of cyberstalking?
 - o Hoe speelde dit zich online af?
- Zijn er wel eens onwaarheden verspreidt over jou via het internet?
 - o Wat voor gevoel geeft je dat?
 - o Kun je hier iets aan doen?

ONLINE HAAT EN WELZIJN

- Hoe voel jij je direct nadat je online haat hebt ontvangen?

- Welke emoties komen bij je omhoog?
- Blijf je hier nog lang aan denken?
- Blijf je in dit gevoel hangen?
- En in hoeverre heeft het ontvangen van online haat effect op jouw gevoel op langere termijn?
 - In hoeverre heeft het ontvangen van online haat blijvende implicaties op hoe je bijvoorbeeld naar de wereld/mensen kijkt of hoe je je voelt?
 - Heeft het effecten op je zelfvertrouwen?
 - Heeft het effecten op je motivatie?
- Heb je een bepaalde strategie om om te gaan met online haat?
 - Hoe uit jij je emoties?
 - Reageer je bijvoorbeeld op comments of onderneem je actie? Verwijder je ze?
 - Praat je over online haat met anderen?
 - Met medespelers?
 - Met familie?
 - Ontwikkel je angst, verbitterdheid, wraaklustig?
 - Probeer je het te ontwijken?

ZORGEN OM ONLINE HAAT

- In hoeverre maak jij je zorgen over het ontvangen van online haat?
 - Ben je er mee bezig dat je mogelijk haat kan ontvangen als je bepaalde dingen doet?
 - Probeer je het te voorkomen?
 - Accepteer je het?
 - Trek je het jezelf aan? Of juist de ander?
 - Presenteer je jezelf anders?

ONLINE HAAT EN PRESTATIES

- Wordt je wel eens herinnerd aan online haat tijdens een wedstrijd of training?
 - In hoeverre beïnvloedt dit je prestaties?
- Zijn er momenten geweest waarop je de online haat hebt kunnen omzetten in motivatie om nog beter te presteren op het veld?
- Hoe beïnvloedt het ontvangen van online haat jouw privé leven?

Bijv. voor je vrouw/vriendin, kinderen?

- Zijn zij ook wel eens de dupe van online haat?

ZELFVERTROUWEN

- Welke karakter eigenschappen denk je nodig te hebben om goed met online haat om te kunnen gaan?
- In hoeverre speelt zelfvertrouwen volgens jou een rol in hoe een individu omgaat met online haat?

AANPASSING

- Denk je dat je als publiek figuur in zekere mate gewend kan raken aan het ontvangen van online haat zodanig dat je er geen negatieve effecten meer van ervaart?
 - Hoe komt dit?
- In hoeverre zijn er veranderingen geweest gedurende je carrière over je bezorgdheid over het ontvangen van online haat?

OVERIG

- Hoe denk je dat online haat het beste gestopt kan worden?
- Denk je dat er een rol is weggelegd voor voetbalorganisaties en clubs om spelers te ondersteunen bij het omgaan met online haat?
 - Wat zou hiervan de rol moeten zijn van voetbalorganisaties en platformen?
 - Wat vond je bijvoorbeeld van de campagne van Ajax die in december 2023 uitkwam?

Bedankt voor het delen van je ervaringen en jouw perspectief! Heb je zelf nog iets toe te voegen of vragen voor mij?

Appendix B – Selective coding scheme

Selective coding

Coping mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignoring <i>“Ik moet heel eerlijk zeggen dat ik daar niet naar kijk.”</i> • Avoiding <i>“Dan kijk ik het, en dan doe ik het gewoon weg. Of blokkeer ik diegene.”</i> • Reacting <i>“Ik ben ook wel een bijzonder persoon in dat opzicht ik bel ze meestal ook gewoon op.”</i> • Positivity <i>“Meestal lachen we er dan wel over. Dan laten ze het zien, zo van: ‘kijk wat deze jongen zegt’. Ja we lachen er dan om.”</i>
Hate concern	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adaptation <i>“Ik heb daar geen last meer van. Ik heb het wel gehad maar nu niet meer.”</i> • Essential characteristics <i>“Nou, je moet wel een stukje zelfverzekerd zijn, denk ik. Ook gewoon misschien een stukje schijt aan je de rest en iedereen.”</i>
Hate practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cursing <i>“Het woord kanker wordt natuurlijk vaak naar je gegooit. “</i> • Stalking <i>“Ik heb ook nog wel een periode gehad, dat ik ja, soort van gestalkt werd.”</i> • Threats <i>“Nou ja doodsbedreigingen gehad, en weet ik veel wat allemaal.”</i> • Public shaming <i>“Dan zeggen ze bijvoorbeeld naam gaat club verlaten.”</i>
Hate themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance <i>“Of ja als je een keer misschien een fout maakt dat je daarin helemaal afgestraft wordt.”</i>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Race <i>“Toen schelde een groep mij volgens mij uit voor kanker aap.”</i> • Appearance <i>“Dat kan van alles zijn, over voetbal, mijn uiterlijk, hoe ik eruit zie, wat ik draag.”</i> • Behavior <i>“Dat ik niet hard genoeg werk voor mijn geld. Weet ik veel wat. Dat soort dingen allemaal. Lui lekker leven.”</i> • Sexism <i>“Er komt veel haat op vrouwen dat ze niet thuishoren op dit podium en bijvoorbeeld reacties als voorbeeld dat vrouwen horen te wassen en koken thuis in plaats van op tv te komen.”</i>
Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private life <i>“Ja mijn familie heeft er best veel last van gehad.”</i> • Insecure <i>“En ja, daar word je wel onzeker van ja.”</i> • Sad <i>“Ja wel vervelend ja sowieso wel... Ik was daar heel gevoelig voor.”</i> • Long term <i>“Ik heb sowieso wel al heel snel dat ik niet snel iemand toelaat.”</i> • Image of people <i>“Nee dus, dat kan dan wel een beetje je beeld van mensen. Misschien beïnvloeden.”</i> • Motivation <i>“Je probeert er een positieve kracht of energie uit te halen.”</i> • Stuck in negativity <i>“Negativiteit kan een mens toch breken.”</i> • Annoying <i>“Niet perse dat ik het vervelend vond. Maar wel gewoon dat het voor mij beetje ja, dat het wel gewoon hard aankwam.”</i>

Appendix C – Informed consent form

CONSENT AANVRAAG VOOR DEELNAME AAN ONDERZOEK

VOOR VRAGEN OVER DE STUDIE, CONTACT:

Hilde Priems, 667258hp@student.eur.nl

OMSCHRIJVING STUDIE

Je bent uitgenodigd om deel te nemen aan een onderzoek over de ervaringen en waarnemingen van professionele voetballers in de Nederlandse voetbalgemeenschap over online haat. Het doel van de studie is om inzichten te verzamelen over de ervaringen en waarnemingen van voetballers met betrekking tot de online haat die zij hebben ontvangen tijdens hun carrière. Vragen over hoe deze ervaringen en waarnemingen het welzijn en de prestaties van spelers hebben beïnvloed zullen worden bevestigd.

Je toezegging tot participatie in deze studie betekent dat je accepteert om geïnterviewd te worden.

Tenzij je voorkeur geeft aan dat er geen opnames worden gemaakt, zal ik een audio opname maken van het interview.

Het materiaal van de interviews zal enkel gebruikt worden voor onderzoeksdoeleinden, zoals vervolgt onderzoek en academische publicaties.

RISICO'S EN VOORDELEN

Voor zover ik kan vertellen, zitten er geen risico's vast aan het deelnemen aan dit onderzoek. Ik zal uw naam of andere identificeerbare informatie niet gebruiken in de studie.

TIJDSBESTEDING

Uw deelname aan het onderzoek zal ongeveer 45 minuten duren.

DEELNEMERSRECHT

Als u besloten heeft om deel te nemen aan dit project, begrijp dan dat uw deelname vrijwillig is en dat u het recht heeft om uw toestemming op elk moment in te trekken of de deelname stop te zetten, zonder gevolgen. U heeft het recht om te weigeren bepaalde vragen te beantwoorden. Indien u dat wenst, wordt uw identiteit kenbaar gemaakt in alle schriftelijke gegevens die uit het onderzoek voortkomen. Anders blijft uw individuele privacy behouden in alle gepubliceerde en schriftelijke gegevens die uit het onderzoek voortvloeien. Er wordt uitsluitend verwezen naar de deelnemers van het onderzoek met pseudoniemen en met algemene kenmerken zoals leeftijd, geslacht etc.

CONTACT EN VRAGEN

Als je vragen heb over je rechten als deelnemer aan dit onderzoek, of ontevreden bent met een aspect van het onderzoek, contact dan – anoniem, als je dat wenst – Hilde Priems, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, 667258hp@student.eur.nl

CONSENT AANVRAAG ONDERTEKENEN

Als je deze consent aanvraag ondertekent, dan zal je handtekening de enige documentatie van je identiteit zijn. Mocht je vanwege die reden deze consent vraag niet willen ondertekenen, dan mag je ook mondeling je toestemming geven voor participatie.

Ik geef toestemming voor het opnemen tijdens het onderzoek:

Naam

Handtekening

Datum

Ik geef voorkeur aan het onthullen van mijn identiteit in alle geschreven data van dit onderzoek

Naam

Handtekening

Datum