1   # When it crosses the line: Professional footballers' perceptions of the
2   # conceptual divide between bullying and banter

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12   ## Abstract

13   This study explores professional footballers' perceptions of where banter crosses the conceptual line into
14   bullying. The study's focus is of importance, given the impact that abusive behaviors have been found to
15   have on the welfare and safeguarding of English professional footballers. A phenomenological approach
16   was adopted, which focused on the essence of the participants' perceptions and experiences. Guided by
17   Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) individual semi-structured interviews (MDuration =
18   44.10 minutes, SD =10.81 were conducted with 18 male professional footballers (Mage=19.83 years,
19   SD=2.96) from three Premier League and Championship football clubs. The findings from this study
20   revealed several key superordinate themes in relation to the dividing line between bullying and banter.
21   These themes included "perception," "intentionality," "detecting the line," and "having a bit of banter."
22   The findings demonstrate how perceptions of bullying and banter are nuanced by individual differences
23   among the players and the culture of the professional football context. Specifically, it was found that the
24   professional football context can legitimize forms of humor blurring the lines between bullying and
25   banter, challenging the typically positive view of the concept of banter in this environment. From an
26   applied perspective, these findings highlight the need for coaches, players, and football clubs more
27   broadly to address cultural expectations around banter in their environment, whilst educating individuals
28   around their own perceptions of bullying and banter.

29   ## 1   Introduction

30   Recent findings of discrimination at Yorkshire County Cricket Club demonstrate serious concerns
31   around the perceptions of what is acceptable in UK sport culture, given behaviors such as "racial
32   harassment and bullying" were passed away as "friendly, good-natured banter" (BBC, 2021a). The
33   findings in cricket echo those in professional football (or soccer), where a plethora of allegations have
34   been linked to the safeguarding and welfare of its players (BBC, 2018; 2021b; c). More specifically, these
35   allegations have often centered around allegations of bullying within this context (BBC, 2019; 2021b).
36   Although research has started to respond to concerns around bullying in professional football (Newman et
37   al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2021b), it has highlighted the need for a greater understanding of the
38   perceptions of this behavior in this context. Furthermore, given the extent to which more severe forms of

39 banter can be normalized in professional football (Parker, 2006), it is important to explore when this
40 behavior crosses the line into bullying.

41   A potential explanation for limitations in understanding around bullying, as well as banter,
42 revolves around the conceptualization of these terms in sport. Currently, research tends to favor Olewus'
43 (1993, p.8) much cited definition (Volk et al., 2014) that bullying is "an intentional, negative action which
44 inflicts injury and discomfort on another." Olewus' (1993) definition also highlights an imbalance of
45 power whereby an individual finds it difficult to defend themselves. Given football's position as a
46 profession, it feels noteworthy to state that workplace research echoes this view of bullying, whilst also
47 outlining the persistent nature of this behavior and the inherent power differentials between the bully and
48 victim (Sischka et al., 2021). In contrast, though significant efforts have gone into defining bullying,
49 much less work has been invested in defining banter. To date, banter has been described as an interaction
50 which serves to improve relationships (Dynel, 2008). Although this behavior can be aggressive, banter is
51 seen to be challenging, yet playful, and generally occurs between friends (Steer et al., 2020). From a
52 definitional stance, it appears that bullying and banter are clearly separate concepts. Though findings in
53 professional football demonstrate concerns that banter may be more severe in this context, with players
54 legitimizing various verbal and relational bullying through this term (Newman et al., 2021b). This may
55 create ambiguity around the degree to which banter is separate from bullying. In part, this ambiguity may
56 be reinforced by professional football's 'hidden curriculum' which teaches players they need to put up
57 with bullying as a show of their masculine worth (Cushion and Jones, 2014). In this light, it is potentially
58 unsurprising that welfare and safeguarding issues may be present in professional football. These issues
59 may also be compounded by whether bullying is viewed from the victim's or perpetrator's perspective
60 (Kowalski, 2000) within professional football. It is important to highlight that perpetrators, for example,
61 often view their behaviors as more benign, humorous, and less severe than their victims.

62   As a response to issues in practice with understanding terms such as bullying, researchers have
63 sought to develop models which conceptualize this behavior. Within the sporting literature examples of
64 such models remain relatively sparse, though Stirling's (2009) conceptual framework of maltreatment in
65 sport provides a guide. This model illustrates how maltreatment can be categorized into two forms:
66 relational and non-relational, depending on whether this maltreatment occurs within the context of a
67 "critical relationship" or not. A critical relationship is determined by whether it has significant influence
68 over an individual's sense of safety trust, and fulfillment of needs, with examples in sport including
69 athletes' relationships with their parents and coaches (Stirling, 2009). According to Stirling, bullying acts
70 as a form of non-relational maltreatment because it occurs in the context of a 'non-critical' peer-to-peer
71 relationship, due to the bully not being in an official position of authority over the victim. This is
72 contrasted with abuse which is the result of a 'critical relationship' situation where one figure is in a
73 position of authority, such as a coach. While this model supports our understanding of bullying in sport,
74 subsequent research has highlighted potential issues with how some terms within the model are
75 conceptualized. For example, in both sport and the wider workplace, bullying has been found to emerge
76 in the context of a "critical relationship" due to the behavior of those in formal positions of power such as
77 coaches and supervisors (Hershcovis, 2011; Newman et al., 2021b). Moreover, Stirling's (2009)
78 conceptual framework was not extended to concepts such as banter, which in its 'bad' form has been
79 found to have the same repetitive, harmful hallmarks of bullying (Steer et al., 2020). Therefore, it would
80 appear that research may be warranted to explore this "grey area of interpretation" around bullying and
81 banter (Steer et al., 2020), specifically in cultures which legitimize derogatory forms of banter such as
82 professional football (Parker, 2006).

83   In relation to derogatory behavior, it is worth noting that findings in sport illustrate a culture
84 whereby abusive and bullying practices are normalized (Alexander et al., 2011; Papaefstathiou et al.,

85   2013). Within professional football, abusive and intimidatory behaviors are commonplace (Kelly and
86   Waddington, 2006), whilst bullying is often "celebrated" as a show of an individual's masculine worth
87   (Parker, 2006). Set within this context, it highlights the potential for welfare and safeguarding issues to
88   occur in football. In response to this, the English Football Association (FA) sought to address these
89   cultural issues by commissioning research around child protection (Brackenridge et al., 2004) through to
90   the implementation of a network of Designated Safeguarding Officers (DSO; The FA, 2021). While these
91   have been encouraging steps, the reported cases of bullying within professional football (e.g., BBC, 2019;
92   2021a) appear to demonstrate a preference remains to adhere to the 'sport ethic', which prioritizes
93   performance over wellbeing (Hughes and Coakley, 1991). Furthermore, cultured beliefs in sport that
94   performance is based on mental toughness, resilience, and perseverance (Kerr and Stirling, 2019), may
95   also mean that player welfare around aspects such as bullying and banter is not considered to the extent it
96   should be.

97   In addition, various limitations in sports' safeguarding systems against bullying and more severe
98   forms of banter appear to be evident. While important safeguarding work has been targeted at children,
99   strategies in this area do not tend to focus on participants over the age of 18 (Rhind et al., 2015). This is
100   problematic as allegations of bullying have been linked to under 23 team professional football players
101   (BBC, 2019). These allegations reflect systemic issues around the safety, wellbeing, and welfare of
102   football's participants highlighted within the UK's "Duty of Care in Sport" report (Grey-Thompson,
103   2017). Such allegations also suggest that Grey-Thompson (2017) recommendations for sports various
104   stakeholders (e.g., coaches, parents, clubs, national governing bodies) to care for athletes are still not
105   being fully implemented. To compound this, research has shown even individuals who may be expected
106   to inform, educate and address wrongdoing such as sport psychologists, have been found to only possess
107   a moderate understanding of safeguarding policies (Kerr and Stirling, 2019).

108   Overall the findings suggest that issues around bullying and a lack of awareness around when
109   banter becomes inappropriate may result from the organizational culture of the sport, coupled with a lack
110   of education of the various stakeholders in this context (Owusu-Sekyere and Gervis, 2016). It is apparent
111   that despite some initial findings from coaches around how these terms may be separated, these
112   stakeholders play a significant role in inadvertently blurring the lines between these behaviors, shifting
113   the borderlines around what is acceptable behavior (Kerr et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2021a). These shifts
114   are already problematic in terms of protecting footballers' welfare, given that banter has been found to
115   mask discriminatory behavior such as racism and homophobia (Adams et al., 2010; Hylton, 2018). The
116   consequence is that this may feed a discourse among footballers where bullying and banter are used
117   interchangeably and the conceptual divide between the two is unclear (Newman et al., 2021b). As a result,
118   the potentially prosocial aspects of banter in sport may be lost and a more severe version of this behavior
119   is enacted. To lose this potentially more "inclusive" form of banter, may be unfortunate as banter has
120   been found to be central to male friendships in sport, fostering a sense of community and solidarity,
121   whilst increasing cohesion and bonding (Wagstaff et al., 2017; Lawless and Magrath, 2021)

122   Thus, it is apparent that further work is needed to establish how professional footballers
123   conceptualize bullying and banter and specifically the convergence and divergence in these concepts
124   given the degree to which players discuss them interchangeably (Newman et al., 2021b). Moreover, by
125   exploring the degree to which bullying and banter are perceived as distinct (or not), there is the potential
126   to extend research which has shown that the a grey area between these concepts, leads to
127   misinterpretation (Steer et al., 2020). Finally, given the variety of views expressed by coaches in relation
128   to banter and how this may be distinguished from bullying (Newman et al., 2021a), it is important to
129   explore whether players' perceptions are equally mixed. Exploring these perceptions offers the potential
130   to develop understanding which may safeguard players against bullying and more problematic forms of

131 banter. Concurrently this may also provide an opportunity to work with professional footballers, to
132 develop their critical awareness of bullying and banter in professional football to enable long-term
133 positive behavioral change.

134   Therefore, due to uncertainty around how professional footballers conceptualize bullying and
135 banter the present study sought to explore the dividing line between these concepts. Specifically, the
136 study aimed to explore players' perceptions of these concepts and their views around the point at which
137 banter crosses the line into bullying. Moreover, the present study set out to explore how bullying and
138 banter were framed in the professional football context.

139 **2   Materials and Methods**

140 This study was part of a larger research project which explored bullying within professional football.[1]

141 **2.1   Research Design**

142   The present study adopted a qualitative, cross-sectional, semi-structured interview design that was
143 guided by the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA, Dwyer et al., 2019). IPA was
144 regarded as the ideal approach to address the study's aims, given its focus on how the person (e.g.,
145 players) makes sense of their experiences (Larkin et al., 2011) of bullying and banter in the context of
146 professional football. Here both the researcher and participant were engaged in a "double hermeneutic" in
147 order to make sense of the player's lifeworld (Dwyer et al., 2019). Furthermore, IPA was appropriate for
148 addressing the taken-for-granted assumptions of professional football, whilst offering a detailed, nuanced
149 analysis of bullying and banter (Newman et al., 2021a). By focusing on these nuances, the present study
150 unearthed convergences and divergences within and across the participants' accounts, maintaining the
151 idiographic commitment of IPA (Smith et al., 2009). In addition, by exploring the conceptual divide
152 between bullying and banter within professional football, the study was also consistent with the
153 "contextualist" position of IPA (Larkin et al., 2006).

154 **2.2   Participants**

155   Professional football was selected as the context for the present study due to the potential severity
156 of banter, as well as celebration of bullying in this environment (Parker, 2006; Newman et al., 2021a). On
157 this basis, it was felt that exploring the conceptual divide (e.g., the point at which one behavior is viewed
158 as crossing into another) between bullying and banter was imperative to help safeguard the future welfare
159 of those within football. Participants were recruited from three professional football clubs in the English
160 Premier League and Championship divisions. In accordance with IPA guidelines (Smith, 2016), a
161 purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify a homogenous sample of eighteen male professional
162 footballers (M = 19.83, SD = 2.96, range = 18-31 years). The sample size was consistent with previous
163 research identified as displaying good practice of IPA in sport (McDonough et al., 2011; Smith, 2016).
164 Players were formally contracted to their club and had between 2 to 14 years of experience as a
165 professional. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics.

[1] To date a previous research article focusing on conceptualizing bullying in football has been published from this research project (Newman, J.A., Warburton, V.E., and Russell, K. (2021b). Conceptualizing bullying in adult professional football: A phenomenological exploration. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 101883. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2021.101883) and a further paper is under review. The data presented in the present study are unique from this previously published/submitted research, as is the focus of this work.

166 **2.3   Procedure**

167   Following institutional ethical approval, a range of potential gatekeepers were contacted to
168 identify which English professional football clubs were willing to take part in the study. These
169 gatekeepers were sports science and medical staff who provided support to the players but who were not
170 responsible for their selection to the team. Once gatekeepers indicated that clubs were willing to take part,
171 a briefing meeting was held with players who were interested in participating. After this, participants who
172 agreed, were supplied with an information sheet and completed consent forms.

173   The interview guide was developed and refined in accordance with best practice guidelines for
174 IPA research within the sporting context, such that it provided a stimulus to get the participants talking,
175 yet it was used flexibly throughout as it could not be predicted what each participant would say (Smith,
176 2016). Specifically, the guide was driven by the phenomenological commitment to meaning-making, with
177 key questions being used as the basis for starting the discussion with the players (e.g., "can you tell me
178 what banter in football is?", "how do you recognize when it is banter rather than bullying?"). Where
179 appropriate probing techniques (e.g., "can you tell me more about that?") were used to explicate the
180 question (Dwyer et al., 2019). Piloting of the initial interview guide with the first three participants
181 revealed that the questions were clear and yielded appropriate data. Therefore in accordance with
182 previous IPA research, these interviews were included in the final analysis (Mawson et al., 2011). In
183 order to replicate the context of the study interviews lasted between 35-70 minutes (*MDuration* = 44.11,
184 *SD* = 10.81) and were conducted at the matchday venue or training ground of the participants. After the
185 completion of the interviews, participants were reminded of how their data would be kept confidential
186 and their rights to withdraw. Following this, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants'
187 names were replaced by pseudonyms.

188 **2.4   Data Analysis**

189   In order to maintain the idiographic commitment of IPA interviews were analyzed in turn using
190 the guidelines set out by Smith et al. (2009). Firstly, audio files were listened back to and then transcripts
191 were read and re-read in order to immerse oneself in the lifeworld of the participant (Dwyer et al., 2019).
192 The next step involved a close analysis of the text, noting exploratory comments in the right margin of the
193 transcript. These comments were either descriptive, linguistic or conceptual in nature, in order to identify
194 potential meaning in the account (Smith and Osborn, 2006). Next, emergent theme titles were developed
195 in the left margin of the text, using psychological concepts where appropriate, to capture the essential
196 meaning in the account (Smith and Osborn, 2006). Then emergent themes were clustered via a process of
197 abstraction and subsumption which ultimately ended with a specification of superordinate themes for each
198 case (Conroy and de Visser, 2013). This process was repeated for each participant. Finally, the combined
199 superordinate themes from across the participants' accounts were verified against the original transcripts,
200 in order to ensure that the appropriate range of convergence and divergence had been captured (Conroy
201 and de Visser, 2013). At all stages of the analysis, regular discussions were held between the authors who
202 were all experienced in publishing IPA research. The first author completed each stage of the analysis
203 with the other authors acting as "critical friends" (Smith and McGannon, 2018). As Smith and McGannon
204 (2018) describe, the role of "critical friends" was not to help achieve consensus but to act as a theoretical
205 sounding board to encourage reflection on multiple and alternative interpretations within the analysis and
206 subsequent writing.

207 **2.5   Research Quality**

208   The present study adhered to recently published guidance on achieving excellence in IPA (Nizza
209 et al., 2021). Specifically, Nizza et al. (2021) set out four quality indicators of IPA, which the present

210 study followed. Firstly, a "compelling, unfolding narrative was conducted" within the analysis. Here
211 carefully interpreted extracts were selected from the participants, which told a persuasive, coherent story
212 of how perceptual elements underpinned the conceptual divide between bullying and banter. Secondly, a
213 "vigorous experiential account" of the participant's extracts was developed by exploring players' views of
214 bullying and banter within the professional football context. Thirdly, "close analytic reading" and
215 interpretation took place, which avoided letting quotes speak for themselves and instead inspected them
216 for the choice of words and phrases, for their linguistic tone, use of emphasis and for any ambiguity
217 within them. Finally, the present study "attended to convergence and divergence" by presenting themes
218 which showed similarities and differences between players, whilst also highlighting the idiosyncratic
219 characteristics of the participants (Smith et al., 2009). The convergence and divergence are presented in
220 the results in such a way that information on "similarities and differences and idiographical details enrich
221 the study themes".

3 Results

223 Following best practice recommendations for high quality IPA studies present study identified
224 themes at the superordinate level. These four superordinate themes were 'perception', 'intentionality',
225 'detecting the line', and 'having a bit of banter'. The notion of perception connects with the other themes
226 creating a rich, cohesive narrative (Nizza et al., 2021) around how views on bullying and banter are open
227 to interpretation. In this section each theme is described and illustrated with quotes (Conroy and de
228 Visser, 2013), as well as a supporting interpretative commentary.

3.1 Perception

230 Perception was at the heart of the individual players' perspectives regarding whether behavior was
231 seen as bullying or banter. In a lot of cases footballers discussed perception from the victim's perspective
232 but they also highlighted how the perpetrator's perception of their own intentions is vital. From a victim's
233 perspective, extracts such as James' revealed that perception drives whether behaviors are seen as
234 bullying, "the big thing for me is individual perception. What some people class as banter, some people
235 class as bullying. What some people find funny, other people don't find funny." This account highlighted
236 the importance of an individual's perception of their line, yet showed how the placement of this varies.
237 James' view of the divide between bullying and banter was categorical in the sense that he used language
238 around "some people's classification," as a means of clearly separating these concepts.

239 For younger players such as Greg however, the divide between bullying and banter was seen as
240 more nuanced and less clear-cut:

241   Oh…. I dunno….it's hard…I find it [the divide] is difficult to describe unless you gave me
242   different scenarios, situations. Then I can probably say yeah, I think that's bullying or no, that's
243   not. But I think it's hard for me to say it because you don't know. People deal with things in
244   different ways and there'll be some people who'll be happier with things being done to them or
245   said than others. So, it's a hard one to say.

246   Greg's reference to not knowing and finding it "hard" portrayed a certain anguish and complexity
247 with identifying these behaviors, raising questions about whether there is a line between banter and
248 bullying. Moreover, this account echoed James' view that these terms can be categorized. However, given
249 Greg could not clearly distinguish the two concepts, highlighted the challenges for players to conform to
250 professional football's expectations regarding behavior. Latterly his quote also implied that some
251 individuals are regarded as being able to 'take' behaviors better than others. This fueled a sense that
252 bullying in football is a result of a potential 'problem' on the victim's side.

253   This problem of perception was furthered by Ed, when he discussed the differences in
254 perspectives around bullying and banter from both the victim's and potential perpetrator's side:

255   Cos they may feel like I'm being picked on and when they speak to [the] person, they say "oh no
256   it's not that it's only banter" [but] he [the perpetrator has] taken it way too far.

257   Ed's extract was indicative of a feeling that speaking out around bullying behavior may be
258 especially difficult for victims in football. Seemingly the power to determine what is banter or not is held
259 by the perpetrator, posing significant concerns for the welfare of other individuals. In this case labelling
260 this behavior as a more acceptable term of "banter" may also legitimize the bullying within the
261 professional football culture. This was a view which Phil elaborated on:

262   Um…it's tough to say. I think you've got to be the person [the perpetrator] who's saying it to
263   understand what they say. So, you could be sitting in the changing room and hear something come
264   flat out of someone's mouth and you might think to yourself "well hang on a minute I don't think
265   that's banter". But to the person saying it, "I'm only joking." I think you can only really understand
266   whether its banter or not from the person who's saying [it]. So, if you mean it in a certain way, you
267   will put it across as I'm saying it that way. But you've really gotta understand, understand the
268   person and the tone of voice and then understand well are they that type of person to say in a
269   spiteful way and to understand whether it's banter or not.

270   Phil's view appeared to reemphasize a belief in football, particularly among the younger players in
271 this study, that the perpetrator's view is critical in determining whether behavior is seen as bullying or
272 banter. This appears to warrant more education on these concepts to all involved in the game. The
273 adoption of the perpetrator's view also excuses this individual to some degree and takes the focus away
274 from the importance of the victim's perspective. It raises interesting questions about whether this is a
275 view shaped in the academy environment which these players have recently progressed through or reflects
276 individual maturation. Moreover, the stress placed by players such as Phil on "needing to understand" the
277 perpetrator, conveyed a sympathy for this individual rather than any potential victim of their behavior.
278 This is especially problematic for any potential victims of "banter" in football, as by framing behavior
279 this way, it creates an expectation this behavior must be accepted. Seemingly, excusing the perpetrator
280 may be more important than safeguarding other individuals' welfare.

281   Oli offered an interesting alternative view around the degree to which the perpetrator's view may
282 be supported, depending on insider versus outsider perspectives of banter in football:

283   I think on social media it would be banter, but I think people from the outside, if they've seen that.
284   If they've seen that, they might think it's bullying and so on.

285   This view was reflective of an element of seclusion in professional football (Parker and Manley,
286 2016) whereby the individuals within the perimeter walls or fences of the club (e.g., players and coaches)
287 are "insiders," whereas others interested in the sport (e.g., the media and public) are "outsiders." Despite
288 his status as an "insider," Oli made references to people on the "outside" of football seeing bullying and
289 banter in a different way, implying that players know that their behavior would not be appropriate
290 elsewhere. Established communities of practice in professional football (Parker, 2006) appear to permit
291 players to carry on behaving as they wish, whilst also allowing a more extreme version of banter and
292 bullying. This creates a potential blindness to wrongdoing for professional football's "insiders." However,
293 the advent of social media has changed the nature of professional football's inner environment, insofar as
294 players' behavior can be observed by a much broader audience. Unwittingly, this creates a situation
295 where potential wrongdoing in the form of bullying can be observed and the behavior of professional

296 football's "insiders" can receive greater scrutiny. Though this does highlight an important finding that
297 safeguarding of players may only occur when wrongdoing is observable through outside channels such as
298 social media.

299 **3.2   Detecting the line**

300   An important perceptual element of what separated banter from bullying was the participants'
301 views on the point at which the line starts to be crossed between these behaviors. Many of the participants
302 highlighted how this metaphorical line is crucial in discriminating between these concepts. Yet the
303 concept of the "line" revealed a range of perspectives on its precise identification and whether it can even
304 be located. Kevin's view was reflective of this:

305   But I think there's a line with banter. And some people don't know the line, some people's lines
306   are further away and some people's lines are very close…You can overstep and that's when you
307   can see confrontations in football in the changing room.

308   Kevin's various references to "the line" was symbolic of the importance placed on this
309 hypothetical divide between banter and bullying in football, though the differences he alluded to outline
310 the individualistic nature of perceptions of bullying.

311   In a similar vein Eric highlighted the varied nature of perceptions around the dividing line
312 between banter and bullying. As an Irish player, he illustrated something more profound around a
313 potential passive acceptance of racism, framed as banter: "(if someone said) *****[2] or something like
314 that, another person could be like that's racist, that's the line for him, so that's where you draw the line
315 for him." This demonstrated a worrying example of the permitting nature of sport whereby victims of
316 potential bullying accept behaviors described as 'casual racism' as part of 'humorful banter' to ease racial
317 tensions (Cleland, 2016; Hylton, 2018). Furthermore, the ways in which Eric highlighted differing
318 perspectives around whether a racist term crossed the line or not, was indicative of an awareness within
319 professional football that this behavior is inappropriate. Yet it also suggested that this could continue
320 without sanctions, posing significant concerns for the welfare of players from minority ethnic groups in
321 football.

322   Though Kevin and Eric discussed the "line" between banter and bullying as being quite variable,
323 other players discussed something much more precise. Paul articulated that "once it goes to that line,
324 there's not a lot of width in it and it could quickly transfer to other side." On the surface Paul's references
325 to there being "not a lot of width" appeared a lot clearer about when banter transitions into bullying, but
326 on closer inspection his extract still did not identify objectifiable means of identifying either concept in
327 football. To this end the players' identification of a line felt somewhat tenuous, presenting significant
328 challenges related to safeguarding players in football, as problem behaviors are hard to identify.

329   Others though, were more categorical that this was possible:

330   If you noticed someone constantly picking on the same person you could realize that maybe
331   they're taking it a step too far and if they're outright criticizing them in front of someone then you
332   could notice it. (Rob).

8

[2] The term used by the participant is a racial slur referring to people who are from the Traveller community.

333   In addition to this, Dave proposed that coaches may detect the line being crossed: "Coaches would
334   know really well by your body language, whether you're interested or not. Whether you're not having a
335   good time or if you've [not] got loads of confidence." In both these cases, players outlined clear
336   behavioral information such as repetitive criticism and observable body language to establish bullying
337   rather than banter.

338   Although the previous extracts provided some means to uncover bullying, Kevin expressed a
339   divergent view around ease of detection using behavioral information:

340   Some people's lines they don't make clear to people. And sometimes people… laugh back and
341   really, they're not happy with the fact of what someone said but they're laughing to try and cover
342   their insecurity. And that's when people think that guy's line's not here and they take it a bit
343   further, and it gets to a point…that's too much and then everyone sees it in the room.

344   Here, Kevin's mention of the term "insecurity" came with a connotation that those in football may
345   pathologize wrongdoing as the victim's problem. In this light it is potentially unsurprising that these
346   individuals do not "make their lines clear" or blow the whistle on wrongdoing as Kevin described.
347   Despite this, Kevin did give the sense that the onus is still on the victim to flag these inappropriate acts.
348   Meanwhile, this account also highlighted the fallibility of relying on behavioral cues to identify bullying
349   as opposed to more prosocial banter in this context, as football's participants learn to emotionally
350   suppress negative feelings resulting from others' behaviors. This results in a situation where it becomes
351   "too much" as Kevin outlined and threats to individuals' welfare become more pronounced.

352   **3.3   "Having a bit of banter"**

353   Through their discussions around the themes of perception and the detection of the line, the
354   players discussed the necessary yet debatable element of humor, resulting in a unanimous theme around
355   the dividing line of "having a bit of banter." This was characteristic of the humor deployed by players,
356   which was largely seen as facilitative to their cohesion as a group and performance, despite it
357   occasionally crossing the dividing line into bullying. In the main, "having a bit of banter" was articulated
358   in relation to players' conceptualization of banter itself:

359   Funny stuff, that everyone finds funny. That's when it's banter like if somebody said something to
360   me and I found it funny about me. Say if someone was bantering me and I found it funny, like fair
361   enough like, that's banter. (Charlie).

362   Charlie's account was indicative of a playful view of banter, which appears equal for both parties
363   in the exchange, as the receiver of the joke finds the interaction "funny." However, a deeper inspection of
364   his account demonstrates a fragile assumption that "everyone" will find certain jokes "funny" in football.
365   This statement conflicts earlier parts of the participants' accounts where the individualistic nature of
366   perception around banter and bullying was stressed. Despite players' awareness that banter and bullying
367   are individually experienced and perceived, it may be that professional football shapes a belief that humor
368   is *always* ok. Jamal hinted to this, "it's like, there's always banter, there's always jokes being made. But
369   then here it's like, everyone's kind of cool with everyone kind of thing." The belief that "everyone's kind
370   of cool, with everyone," demonstrates a prosocial view of banter which separates it from bullying
371   behavior, yet there are risks to this assumption given players may mask the negative sides of banter, as
372   discussed within the detecting the line theme. Furthermore, it highlights concerns about who determines
373   what is a joke and by what means in potentially severe contexts such as professional football.

374   Nonetheless, players from other clubs, such as Eric continued the positive view of banter,
375 suggesting that these views are grounded across football contexts, rather than at particular clubs:

376   Someone would be can you breathe in that? Are you ok breathing…? You know, just the clothes
377   they're wearing, or they messed up in training or you know anything as small as that like you
378   know.

379   This extract was more revealing of some of the content of this banter, which typically revolves
380 around essential components in professional football such as identity and performance. While Kevin
381 agreed that this process contained positive essence, he felt it needed to be treated cautiously:

382   ["Having a bit of banter" it is] to try and bond with the team to try and get team cohesion about,
383   even though that might be at one person's expense. I think it gels the team more banter, it can be
384   positive and healthy, it is important. But I've seen it can…cos it's a very fine line; it can easily be
385   pushed too far. So, it can be a very delicate subject.

386   Although Kevin continued the positive theme of banter in relation to bonding and team cohesion,
387 the degree to which this behavior is "healthy" as he outlined, could be questioned from the divergence
388 within his own account. The precariousness around the "very fine line" he alluded to which can be easily
389 transgressed, suggested something more troublesome for safeguarding players' welfare. This appeared to
390 stretch beyond one player at a particular club, given Oli's view that "whereas banter is, can be light, it can
391 obviously cross the line to bullying." Oli's language was especially noteworthy here, as while he
392 described banter as "light" the apparent ease for this behavior to "cross the line into bullying" would
393 suggest something different. Moreover, describing banter as "light," is reflective of a potential discourse
394 in professional football which may downplay the severer side of this behavior. This perhaps questions
395 more broadly the overwhelmingly positive view of banter, which is shaped by the identity required of a
396 professional footballer.

397   This potential for banter to cross the dividing line into bullying was expressed more graphically by
398 James:

399   (When the) word "fatty" is associated with somebody, they would never show that is affecting
400   them because if they did then they would get it more because its classed as funny…It would be
401   having a joke at their expense, to make them look better in front of everybody and not really
402   caring about the effect it had on the individual.

403   This account provided a more sinister, severe perspective on the process of "having a bit of
404 banter." It once more reaffirmed the degree to which players feel the need to suppress negative feelings
405 associated with this form of "humor." More disturbingly it depicted a scenario where if these feelings
406 were revealed that this banter would become a more active form of bullying, with a blatant disregard for
407 the welfare of its recipients. As the most experienced member of the sample, it is possible that this view
408 was grounded in James' longevity in the sport or may have been shaped by a different expectation for
409 players as he came through the football system. Regardless of this though, it provided enough of a sense
410 that the positive view of banter needed to be treated cautiously, given the degree to which others
411 expressed that the line to bullying can be crossed.

412 **3.4   Intentionality**

413   One of the most significant perceptual markers of the dividing line between bullying and banter
414 involved intentionality. Previous research has highlighted this as a cornerstone of definitions of bullying

415 (Olewus, 1993), including how coaches view this concept in professional football (Newman et al.,
416 2021a). However, several contradictions were found within and between the players' accounts here,
417 whereby acts of bullying could be seen as accidental in nature. Furthermore, the notion of intentionality
418 was also linked to banter behaviors. This was illustrative of something important, that it is very difficult
419 to separate concepts and the dividing line between them is blurred. Nonetheless for some players such as
420 Lenny, they were unequivocal that bullying was intentional:

421   When you know it's affecting them. Cos if you don't know it's affecting them then, you're still in
422   the wrong either way but it's difficult for you to then know, he's not enjoying this banter and it
423   needs to stop. But if you know it's affecting him and you do something about it by stopping then
424   that's fine. But if you keep doing it and you know it's affecting him, then that's not right and it
425   shouldn't happen.

426   Lenny's account separated bullying from banter based on bullying being a highly targeted act that
427 carries clear intent despite obvious harm on behalf of the victim. It also included clear judgement about
428 the behavior being "not right," showing the seriousness of this bullying. Perhaps concerningly though,
429 Lenny's articulation of the distinction of bullying was still framed from the perpetrator's perspective. In
430 football it appears that if the perpetrator thinks the behavior is not affecting the victim, then it is
431 acceptable, rather than considering the victim's perspective. This reinforced a troublesome sense that the
432 professional football workplace may shape a view that perpetrators hold the power to frame potential
433 wrongdoing as socially acceptable "banter." This strong sense of importance placed on the combination
434 of targeted and repetitive behaviors underpinning bullying, was also reinforced by Kevin, "I think it's
435 consciously targeting that person…I think doing on them several, more than several times, it becomes
436 bullying."

437   The characterization of bullying as an intentional act was not common to all the players within the
438 study. For Eric there were contradictions with other accounts of bullying, as he described an accidental
439 act as ignorance, "I think if there was bullying going on at a club it would be just out of ignorance I think,
440 cos I think that person's just like that guy's obviously a bit like whatever." Eric's ignorance may not seem
441 as severe as a targeted bullying attempt, yet it does imply that there may be a passive acceptance of
442 bullying acts in football, rather than active attempt at challenging these behaviors. A similar contradiction
443 was illustrated by Grant:

444   Obviously, they know they're gonna go deep. So, I think they know, maybe, maybe they don't
445   know but I think most people know when they go over the line and they hold their hands up…
446   They don't mean to do it like. There's no wake up in the morning and thinking I'm going to bully
447   this player, it's just the way they are.

448   Both Eric's and Grant's attempts included a degree of uncertainty around how intentional bullying
449 is. This was interesting, given these players were from the same club, leading to potential considerations
450 for making sure education and welfare is delivered effectively at a local level in football. For example,
451 Grant's reference to "thinking they know" or "maybe they don't know" conveyed vagueness in
452 perceptions of intentionality, though it could be questioned whether adopting this position provides some
453 protection for the perpetrators of bullying, rather than concentrating on the welfare of the victims.

454   In contrast to those who clearly viewed the separation of bullying from banter to involve
455 intentionality, Rob outlined an unintentional theme to wrongdoing

456   But it's not like you're doing it on purpose sometimes, but you're not realizing you're doing it… It
457   might not even be intentional, it might just be how you act to that person but you don't realize how

458   they are feeling… But I think sometimes you don't even realize you're bullying someone, cos
459   everyone, everyone treats other people on the scale of how they can be treated.

460   Rob's account further questions the centrality of intent as a component of bullying. At the same
461   time though it highlights the danger in assuming that banter is distinct from bullying, as individuals' non-
462   intentional bantering or joking on behalf of the perpetrator, may be significantly impacting the recipient
463   of this behavior in football. This problem is exacerbated by the way some players conflated bullying and
464   banter.

465   Um…and just not involving them in your banter or in activities you're doing away from the club
466   and stuff like that and if they're being victimized, they're gonna try and be somebody that they're
467   not. Like I've said numerous times, it's difficult to know when to stop the banter and the teasing
468   and when you can have it and when you can't. (Lenny).

469   Interestingly, Lenny's combination of discussion around players not being involved in the
470   "banter" and "being victimized" suggested something more targeted than his following point about
471   finding it hard to know when to stop banter. These forms of ostracism and targeting sounded more like
472   bullying, yet Lenny projected a sense, through reiterating the "numerous times" he made this point, that it
473   is hard to determine when a joke ends and more abusive behavior begins.

474   This confusion between bullying and banter was maintained in other participants' accounts:

475   I'd say the negatives would be, the negative would be just hurting, going out to intentionally hurt
476   someone. Cos if your banter is doing it in spite of someone or to try and get to someone, then
477   that's a really bad thing. (Phil).

478   While Phil directly quoted the concept of banter, the process he described in terms of an intent to
479   harm, portrayed a sense that he was describing bullying. His acknowledgement that banter could be done
480   "to try and get to someone, then that's a really bad thing," divulged a concerning depiction of this
481   behavior in professional football. It hinted at a feeling that banter camouflages bullying behavior and the
482   dividing line between these concepts may not even truly exist.

483   Peter continued this theme by describing a targeted process in relation to both bullying and banter
484   adding, "um…you're picking someone out and you're going out of your way to bully them or banter them
485   in some kind of way." The mixing of the word bully and banter further conflated these concepts. What
486   was evident in Peter's eyes was that both behaviors were targeted, however what was less clear was the
487   degree to which he felt these concepts are distinct. Nonetheless this account raised further concerns about
488   the use of banter in professional football. This was supported by Oli, "probably crosses (the line) but I
489   think like bullying, you can accidentally bully someone, 'cos obviously the banter." Despite attempting to
490   define bullying this participant showed how it can be an accidental process, which is intertwined with
491   banter. It would appear that banter is seen by some professional footballers as a vehicle for behaviors that
492   may drift into bullying. Overall, this suggests a darker side to the general positive view of banter in
493   football, raising questions about the degree to which a conceptual divide with bullying exists.

494   **4   Discussion**

495   The main purpose for the present study was to explore the dividing line between bullying and
496   banter. Specifically, the study aimed to explore players' perceptions of these concepts and their views
497   around the point at which banter crosses the line into bullying. Moreover, the present study set out to
498   explore how bullying and banter were framed in the professional football context. Within their accounts,

499   players highlighted a range of different means by which bullying and banter may be distinguished. This
500   included views on the perception of bullying and banter, the degree to which the line between these
501   concepts could be detected, the process of "having a bit of banter," and how much each concept carried an
502   intent to harm. Nonetheless, these accounts were not consistent across participants, carrying clear
503   implications for the safeguarding and welfare of players in professional football. On this basis, it is hoped
504   that the findings will provide important information to professional football's key stakeholders around
505   managing player welfare.

506   Central to the participants' accounts of the differences between bullying and banter was the
507   importance placed on the perceptual divide between these concepts. While on the surface players
508   described that these behaviors could be separated, the nuances within their accounts demonstrated that
509   this is more difficult than first imagined. In relation to bullying, these findings fitted in line with previous
510   research which has described the individualistic perception of this behavior (Thornberg and Knutsen,
511   2011; Thornberg et al., 2012), whilst extending work in this area by providing a similar conceptualization
512   of banter. Taking these findings into account it may provide some explanation why attempts to protect
513   player welfare in football remain limited in their success (Parker and Manley, 2016). The individual
514   nature of players' perceptions of bullying and banter, and the relative lack of agency players have had in
515   expressing their views (Pitchford et al., 2004) when codes of conducts have been designed, results in
516   safeguarding attempts which lack efficacy.

517   The lack of success of safeguarding approaches in professional football, may also be partly
518   explained by a consistent finding across the participants' accounts that the perpetrator frames the decision
519   around what bullying and banter is in this context. Players expressed potentially misguided views around
520   needing to understand the perspective of the perpetrator, giving rise to a sense that perceived bullying is
521   the victim's "problem." For example, players expressed the view that if the perpetrator did not mean
522   harm as part of their humor (Kowalski, 2000), then this must be viewed as banter. This revealed concerns
523   that for some players, they may not recognize that banter can be offensive and cross the line of
524   acceptability (Steer et al., 2020) and also raised doubts around the extent to which they would reflect on
525   their potentially inappropriate actions. The results is exclusionary forms of banter which "cross this line"
526   (Lawless and Magrath, 2021), being masked in professional football. Here players seemingly appear to
527   accept and reproduce a disciplinary form of humor (Edwards and Jones, 2018) which previous research
528   suggests (Parker, 2006) they may have observed from their coaches.

529   Perceptions around inclusionary and exclusionary forms of 'banter' also linked to how
530   participants determined the line between bullying and banter. Worryingly, players in some cases appeared
531   to suggest that casual racism may even be accepted in some cases (Cleland, 2016; Hylton, 2018)
532   suggesting a more extreme form of banter may be acceptable in professional football. This even contrasts
533   with other masculine sporting contexts such as cricket, where racism is seen to transgress acceptable
534   forms of banter (Lawless and Magrath, 2021). It would appear that as part of professional football's
535   established community of practice (Parker, 2006), players learn that diversity almost acts as an excuse for
536   bullying behavior to be disguised as banter. In turn, the word banter legitimizes these discriminatory
537   behaviors as socially "acceptable" in the professional football context. Furthermore, in comparison to
538   findings with professional football coaches who highlighted discrimination as clearly identifying bullying
539   in football (Newman et al., 2021a), the present study shows that for players the dividing line between
540   bullying and banter may be shifted in a more severe direction.

541   The more severely positioned divide players articulated, may go some way to explaining why
542   welfare concerns exist in football around the use of peer-group "banter," which may otherwise be
543   interpreted as bullying (Oliver and Parker, 2019). Indeed, this idea of a dividing line itself, may allow

544   players to protect themselves from being accused of inappropriate banter, so long they stay within the
545   perceived territory of what professional football deems "acceptable" behavior. In this light, it is
546   understandable why participants highlighted that detecting the line between banter and bullying may be
547   difficult as victims learn to "laugh off" inappropriate actions towards them. Consistent with findings with
548   coaches (Newman et al., 2021a), the need to conform to a masculine identity within professional football
549   leads players to feel the need to "perform" a masculine identity (Connell, 2008). This results in them
550   hiding forms of banter which they have found unacceptable.

551   Given players may hide the negative effects of banter, there was also a concerning assumption in
552   some of their accounts that it would be observable when behavior crossed the line between banter and
553   bullying. Given previous research in football has shown that victims of wrongdoing may not display signs
554   that it is happening (Newman et al., 2021b), players may not be in the best position to detect lines
555   between more appropriate forms of banter and bullying. Likewise other players felt coaches may be in a
556   good position to identify these behaviors instead. Though once more this belief may be problematic, as
557   coaches have been found to be susceptible to blurring the lines between bullying and banter and may
558   overestimate their ability in addressing these types of behaviors (Baar and Wubbels, 2013; Newman et al.,
559   2021a).

560   Although the conceptual divide between bullying and banter may be difficult to distinguish at
561   times, players did identify a more prosocial form of banter. In line with previous research, banter can
562   fulfill an important role in creating camaraderie (Kennedy, 2000) among male footballers, whilst at the
563   same time players in the present study highlighted the positive impact this has on team cohesion. As such
564   banter in this form offers the potential to aid bonding and ultimately performance in football, in a similar
565   fashion to other sports such as Rugby Union (Wagstaff et al., 2017). Therefore it would appear that banter
566   in professional football is not necessarily a negative act, akin to bullying and instead can be seen as a
567   playful, jocular interaction which unites friendship (Steer et al., 2020).

568   It should be noted though that despite the more positively framed view of banter, within the
569   "having a bit of banter" theme, players offered cautionary points about the potential for this humor to
570   quickly cross the line into bullying. Thus, the potential warning signs around when this line of
571   acceptability is being approached appear not to be observable to players. They highlighted examples such
572   as how a focus on individual appearance can lead to a process of "banter" which would target an
573   individual regardless of their feelings. From a contextual stance it highlighted the need for individuals to
574   achieve a particular identity in football remains (Parker, 2006) and if players do not achieve this they can
575   expect to receive greater levels of derogation. From a theoretical stance it would appear that this may
576   drive a process of negative downward social comparison (Wills, 1981), through the use of banter, when
577   players do not conform to these ideals. This carries a worrying implication for the welfare of players from
578   a self-presentation perspective (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Here there is the potential for individuals to
579   become preoccupied by concerns around managing their impression and leading them to carry a strong
580   protective motivation to avoid being seen as different. This may have a significant bearing on their overall
581   sense of self and wellbeing.

582   The potential harmful impact of the often positively view of banter, linked to the final theme
583   expressed around intentionality. In line with previous conceptualizations within both the mainstream
584   psychological literature (Olewus, 1993), as well as in football specifically (Newman et al., 2021a), this
585   marked a clear differentiation of bullying from banter for some participants. In other cases, bullying and
586   banter were both framed as intentional acts which set out to hurt individuals or exclude them from the
587   team, further blurring the conceptual divide between them. From a contextual standpoint this can be
588   understood through a process of "situated learning" in professional football, where players learn how to

589 behave as part of the sport's culture (Parker, 2006). Utilizing the lens of this conceptual model of learning
590 (Lave and Wenger, 1991), players in this study may have socially learned within football that banter may
591 need to be more targeted than in other domains. This appears to provide support for the notion in
592 professional football that for individuals to achieve peer group credibility, they need to give insults often
593 framed in the form of banter, to the point at where the recipient snaps (Parker, 2006). The result is a form
594 of "bad" banter which manifests itself in professional football.

595   Finally, the more "accidental" form of bullying described by some players further blurs the
596 conceptual line with banter. This mirrors other findings in sport that argue perpetrators do not
597 intentionally carry out hurtful actions, which nonetheless are viewed as bullying (Kerr et al., 2016). As
598 such these findings challenge previous definitions of bullying (e.g., Olewus, 1993; Volk et al., 2014),
599 which have highlighted the importance of a hostile form of intent in identifying this behavior. Sport and
600 football specifically may be unique in this regard, in normalizing and potentially celebrating bullying
601 behaviors (Parker, 2006; Kerr et al., 2016), meaning this harmful intent is much more difficult to discern
602 and may occur by accident. Moreover, by viewing these behaviors as accidental it may indirectly
603 legitimize players to continue using them, creating concerns that serious wrongdoing may be challenged
604 or addressed. In terms of the safeguarding of welfare of individuals in these contexts, this presents a
605 worrying picture around conceptual ambiguity and the normalization of inappropriate behaviors in
606 football and wider sport.

607   Overall, the present study's findings provide an important conceptual and contextual addition to
608 the research literature on bullying and banter. Given the variety in perceptions around bullying and banter
609 it highlights a blurred line between these concepts. This adds evidence to claims (Kerr et al., 2016) that
610 classifying behaviors as bullying and banter based on strict definitional criteria may be less useful in
611 professional football. Instead the focus should be on the behaviors enacted by individuals within this
612 environment, as well as their perceptions of how these behaviors impact their wellbeing (Kerr et al.,
613 2016). The findings in relation to banter in sport specifically, appear to fit with this viewpoint as
614 participants construed this behavior in many ways. In line with the theoretical propositions of Benign
615 Moral Violation theory (McGraw and Warren, 2010) players outlined how this banter can be offensive,
616 yet also occurs in a situation among friends within a team. Thus the present findings added further weight
617 to claims banter is a complex and contradictory phenomenon in sport (Lawless and Magrath, 2021).

618   From a contextual standpoint the present study also highlights the importance of sport and
619 particularly football, in framing views of bullying and banter. Due to the tendency of players to frame
620 both behaviors on the peer-to-peer level, the findings extend Stirling's (2009) conceptual model of
621 maltreatment in sport by suggesting that banter also occurs as part of a "non-critical" relationship in the
622 same way as bullying. The present findings also tend to reaffirm that bullying (and banter) occurs in sport
623 within relationships where there is a power imbalance but the perpetrator is not in a position of authority
624 (Stirling, 2009). This may make the detection of this behavior challenging, as the players highlighted
625 bullying occurs through the social and emotional means (e.g., excluding other players and excessive
626 banter) proposed by Stirling (2009), rather than through overt physical actions. Moreover, the findings
627 give credence to the persistence of the "sport ethic" (Hughes and Coakley, 1991) in professional football
628 which focuses less on player wellbeing and potentially more on performance. The degree to which players
629 appeared to legitimize more severe forms of banter, as well as the degree to which the perpetrator's view
630 on what may or may not be acceptable behavior is upheld, still presents significant issues in this context.
631 Ultimately this might explain how and why reporting wrongdoing through safeguarding channels may
632 remain difficult, posing continued concerns for welfare in football.

633 **4.1   Applied implications**

634   As a result of the findings within the present study around how the participants conceptualized the
635 dividing line between bullying and banter, two implications are set forward. Firstly, football's key
636 stakeholders (e.g., coaches, players, sporting directors and shareholders) need to be educated around the
637 blurred conceptual line between bullying and banter, as well as the subsequent impact this may have on
638 individual welfare. Specifically, education needs to realize the fluid, rather than binary nature of banter in
639 professional football (Lawless and Magrath, 2021). This fluidity means that individuals need to realize at
640 what point the line between banter and bullying might start to be approached, as banter can quickly cross
641 the line from acceptable, inclusionary forms of this behavior to unacceptable, exclusionary actions which
642 mimic bullying. Education programs in professional football need to reaffirm that exclusionary forms of
643 banter cannot be legitimized within this sport, as they transgress "acceptable" behavior (Lawless and
644 Magrath, 2021). Similarly, more effort is needed to identify "loaded" forms of banter with professional
645 football's stakeholders, given harmful comments are often knowingly masked as being inoffensive.
646 Secondly, linked to the previous point, perceptions of bullying and banter need to be challenged at all
647 levels of professional football. Interventions need to address the normalization of severe behaviors and
648 "banter" in this environment and provide clear channels for individuals to be able to speak out about their
649 concerns. More work needs to focus on the actual behavior of football's various stakeholders, challenging
650 the sense that the acceptability of actions is framed from the perpetrator's perspective. This needs to
651 target individual, club and wider organizational level perceptions of bullying and banter, to proactively
652 manage wellbeing in this context. For example, work focused on academy contexts may be useful to
653 create a different culture around these concepts for new players as they enter and develop through
654 professional football.

4.2   Limitations and future research directions

656   Although the study made an important contribution to further understanding the conceptual divide
657 between bullying and banter, it does present limitations that need consideration. Firstly, while the present
658 study addressed an important issue by exploring players' perceptions of the divide between bullying and
659 banter, there is still a need to engage other stakeholders' perspectives of these concepts, to better
660 safeguard individuals in football. A focus on the views of individuals who are employed to protect
661 wellbeing in football such as safeguarding leads, player care officers and sport psychologists may be
662 particularly useful in this regard. Secondly, although the present study has identified important
663 information about the often-blurred conceptual divide between bullying and banter, it did not focus
664 specifically on the outcomes of these behaviors. Future research may seek to explore the outcomes for
665 both perpetrators and victims of bullying and banter in sport, to understand the impact more fully on
666 wellbeing. Thirdly, the present study may present linguistic issues which may be worth consideration.
667 The use of the concepts bullying, and banter were relevant to UK professional footballers, but it is less
668 known whether these concepts are applicable within other languages or other versions of the English
669 language. Therefore, future studies may explore the relevance of these terms both within and outside of
670 professional football, to explore whether there are similar issues in distinguishing between them. Finally,
671 the present study remained limited to the perspective of male professional footballers. Future studies may
672 engage the perspectives of other players such as women professionals and male and female grassroots
673 participants, to explore whether the findings are systemic across football as a sport.

4.3   Conclusion

675   The present study makes an important contribution to the literature on bullying and banter in
676 various ways. Firstly, we identified the often-blurred conceptual divide between bullying and banter. This
677 serves to challenge potential misconceptions around banter being seen as a solely prosocial behavior in
678 football. Secondly, we unearthed the importance of individual perceptions in determining what

679 appropriate behavior is. This provides important information around the need to focus on these
680 perceptions and avoid binary classifications of bullying and banter. Finally, we identified the importance
681 of the culture of professional football in shaping perceptions of these behaviors. It is hoped that the
682 present findings provide important information which can educate those in sport around the concepts of
683 bullying and banter, whilst at the same time informing the future development of safeguarding and
684 welfare programs.

685 5 Data Availability Statement

686 The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because of the nature of this research,
687 participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not
688 available.

689 6 Conflict of Interest

690 The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial
691 relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

692 7 Author Contributions

693 All the authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work, and
694 approved it for publication. The lead author prepared the original draft of the manuscript and led the
695 study's administration and investigation. The other authors supervised, reviewed, and edited this work.

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788 **Table 1**

789 Participant ages and years of experience as a professional football player

Participant	Age	Years as a professional	Club	Division of club
James	31	14	A	Championship
Oli	21	6	A	Championship
George	20	3	A	Championship
Charlie	19	4	B	Championship
Alfie	19	2	B	Championship
Ricky	19	2	B	Championship
Peter	19	2	B	Championship
Jamal	19	9	B	Championship
Paul	18	4	C	Premier League
Ed	18	7	C	Premier League
Dave	18	2	C	Premier League
Grant	20	5	C	Premier League
Eric	20	3	C	Premier League
Greg	20	3	B	Championship
Lenny	18	2	B	Championship
Rob	19	2	B	Championship
Kevin	21	3	B	Championship
Phil	18	2	B	Championship

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