

Study: Professional football environment legitimizes bullying masked as banter

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A new study exploring the perceptions of banter amongst footballers has found the professional setting can legitimize and normalize bullying, and highlights the need for coaches, players and sports clubs to address the

cultural expectations around banter in their environments.

It follows recent events of discrimination at Yorkshire County Cricket Club demonstrating serious concerns around the perceptions of what is acceptable in UK sport culture, given behaviors such as racial harassment and bullying were passed off as "friendly, good-natured banter."

The research, which has been carried out by sports psychology experts from Sheffield Hallam University and University of East Anglia, challenges the typical view that banter is a positive influence on the culture of sports teams.

The study acknowledges the ambiguity around what is defined as bullying and banter. To date, banter has been described as "an interaction which serves to improve relationships and, although this behavior can be aggressive, it is seen as playful and generally occurs between friends." The ambiguity is compounded by whether bullying is viewed from the victim or perpetrator perspective, as "perpetrators often view their behaviors as more benign, humorous and less severe than their victims."

It calls for individuals to be educated around their own perceptions of bullying and banter. The findings demonstrate how notions are nuanced, with four key themes emerging: perception, intentionality, detecting the line and having a bit of banter.

Dr. James Newman, senior lecturer in sport and exercise psychology at Sheffield Hallam University, said: "The findings provide an important insight into how professional footballers see the difference between bullying and banter, yet they highlight that this difference can be very thin or non-existent. In addition, the findings also show the boundaries about what might be regarded as 'banter' can be stretched in a more severe direction in [professional football](#). This highlights important

implications around the culture in football as well as other sports."

Dr. Kate Russell, associate professor in [physical education](#) and sport at University of East Anglia, said: "The findings provide an indication of the continued need for awareness around workplace culture in all levels of football, and in particular at the professional level. Instilling in early experiences of playing football, as well as all sport, that negative and damaging behaviors under the banner of 'banter' needs to be critiqued from all players, coaches, board members and fans alike. Sports need to work harder to facilitate this and support those who have had negative experiences; a cultural shift is required."

The study has been published in *Frontiers in Psychology*.

More information: James A. Newman et al, It Can Be a "Very Fine Line": Professional Footballers' Perceptions of the Conceptual Divide Between Bullying and Banter, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.838053](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.838053)

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