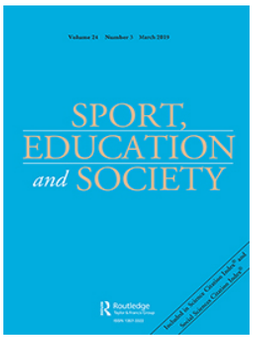

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Crossing the line: conceptualising and rationalising bullying and banter in male adolescent community football

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how bullying and banter are conceptualised and rationalised by those in male adolescent community football. The authors employ a social constructivist, interpretative phenomenological analysis approach using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. These methods explore the meanings behind the perceptions and experiences of male players ($N = 8$, M age = 15.4) and coaches ($N = 4$, M age = 39). Evidence demonstrated that intent was not synonymous with bullying and that bullying and banter behaviours are highly ambiguous depending on the shared understanding of learned barriers despite participants concurring with most aspects of the definitions. Moreover, banter and bullying behaviours in community football have been experienced by participants, with acts being rationalised through moral disengagement and hypermasculinity. The research indicates that although bullying and banter are conceptualised similarly to popular definitions, concrete definitions may be limited due to the fluid nature of bullying and banter and the influence of shared social understandings. Additionally, the findings gathered show bullying and banter being experienced and rationalised in male youth community sport through moral disengagement and masculinity. The implications of these findings for safeguarding players and coaches in community football are discussed.

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Safeguarding; abuse; grassroots football; masculinity; moral disengagement

Introduction

This study explores how bullying and banter (BB) are conceptualised and rationalised in male adolescent community football. Hartill et al. (2021) found that 66% of people experienced bullying in sport as children, with a higher figure of 79% for males. Hartill et al. (2021) highlighted the need for research into the complexities around bullying, including explorations into banter in male youth sport. Studies looking at BB should adopt a pluralistic view across different settings to obtain greater conceptual clarity (Newman et al., 2021a, 2021b; Newman et al., 2022). The present study addresses an important gap in the literature by exploring the youth community football population. This is a key context given that 4.5 million young people currently participate (The FA, 2021).

Research on how BB are conceptualised in football has suggested that bullying acts may be disguised as banter and normalised within football (Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2022). There have been studies on bullying regarding the more elite levels of male football (Adams, 2020; Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2021b; Newman et al., 2022), yet research on bullying in

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community sport has lacked comparative depth. Therefore, an investigation into the conceptualisation and rationalisation of BB in this context is merited.

Conceptual BB literature

Research into bullying in sport generally accepts or compares against Olweus's (1993) definition of bullying as 'an intentional, negative action which inflicts injury and discomfort on another' (p. 8) (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009; Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2021b; Newman et al., 2022). Olweus (1993) reiterated the inclusion of intention and negative behaviours but also added the importance of the behaviour repeatedly occurring and over time with an imbalance of power. Olweus clarifies that aggression can be considered synonymous with intentionally inflicting injury or discomfort and that an imbalance of power is visible when an individual struggles to defend themselves against negative actions. The commonality and inclusion of fundamental constituents of bullying included in the Olweus (1993) definition of bullying has provided conceptual clarity for practitioners by allowing them to compare and contrast findings on largely applied bullying factors (Volk et al., 2014). Volk et al. (2014) consider power imbalance, goal-directedness and harm as key theory-driven factors when defining bullying. Most noteworthy, Volk et al. (2014) explain that goal-directedness can be a beneficial way to differentiate between intentional or accidental behaviours. Goal-directedness can do this by understanding whether or not the individual was internally motivated to carry out the adverse action. Despite the extensive research in this area, the ambiguity of how individuals view bullying as the receiver, provider and bystander suggests there is no static definition of bullying (Hymel & Swearer, 2015).

Bullying literature remains contested with uncertainty about how BB correspond with each other (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009). Steer et al. (2020) identify banter as a prosocial, challenging, playful, and aggressive behaviour primarily within established friendships. Notably, the theme of aggression carries across both BB's definitions, which demonstrates how the line between BB may lie in how participants view, experience and cope with micro-inequities, microaggressions and micro-affirmations. These three acts are differentiated by microaggressions relating to targeted verbal or non-verbal slights towards marginalised groups which can relate to bullying behaviours that occur in sport (Lee et al., 2018). Micro-inequities are concisely defined as small, often ephemeral and unintentional events that go unrecognised by perpetrators and are hard to prove (Rowe, 2008). Thus, micro-inequities fall within the grey area between challenging banter and bullying. Micro-affirmations are small, inclusive acts that aim to foster positive outcomes to thrive within the environment (Rowe, 2008), which relates to more light-hearted banter that aims to encourage social behaviours. Though these terms help one gauge the range of behaviours occurring in sport, there is a dearth of evidence on synergies between the concepts mentioned and BB. The BB dilemma has received recent and prolonged media attention around cricketer Azeem Rafiq as he fears that discriminative forms of microaggressions or bullying have been framed as 'friendly banter' (BBC, 2021). Conflating the two terms is problematic when little is known about the BB relationship resulting in diluting bullying behaviours (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009). This lack of clarity is problematic as many regard teasing as a positive and functional act of communication to which bullying cannot relate (Myers et al., 2013).

Socially acceptable acts of teasing can be beneficial in team sports such as football to aid cohesion, affection, and a sense of meaning and belonging within a group (Swain, 1998). Contrarily a range of anti-social behaviours such as physical abuse, rationalised insults and adult banter have been conflated under the term 'teasing', demonstrating the interrelated nature of teasing and bullying acts (Keltner et al., 2001). Bishop-Mills and Muckleroy-Carwile (2009) reviewed the terms finding that aggression is an essential factor of bullying, yet non-essential factor of teasing. This research identified where the fault-line between bullying and teasing fell at the extent to which individuals are involved in non-serious joking. The ambiguity of the shared relationship and social situation was a key factor to consider, and the research concluded that the terms were interrelated but not interchangeable.

Social and psychological background of BB

Football is a male-dominated sport with perceived expectations, which are essential factors to consider when examining the experiences of BB. The Alexander et al. (2011) report for the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children indicates problematic issues concerning gendered sport beliefs that have led to bullying through acts of harmful banter, such as mocking a male participating in a sport deemed feminine (Alexander et al., 2011). The autoethnography of male youth footballers by Adams (2020) emphasises the presence of a hidden hegemonic masculinity issue within youth football culture. Adams (2020) observed this through players and coaches encouraging each other to engage in hypermasculine behaviour, disregarding feminine traits and ambiguous acts of humour. Hypermasculinity describes the traits reflected within hegemonic masculinity being employed through heightened levels of assumed overt sexuality, male dominance, and a willingness to engage in acts of violence, with little room for subversive performances (Zaitchik & Mosher, 1993). However, from a different perspective, Chase (2006) proposes that hegemonic masculine norms are also resisted rather than accepted, particularly in female rugby, by openly speaking out against traditionally masculine sport norms. Thus, resisting norms is critical to consider when seeking to understand how players rationalise BB behaviours.

Sport-based evidence demonstrates a shift to non-hierarchical inclusive masculinity where multiple masculinities exist within football culture (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012). The evidence base concerning masculinity in sport suggests that the masculine traits utilised for strength and power in sport can be mistaken for hostility (Clark & Paechter, 2007). The evidence suggests behaviours necessary for strength and power further demonstrate the ambiguous nature of BB acts in sport. The individualistic element of BB behaviours only adds to the blurring of the conceptual line that divides the terms. These BB behaviours work synonymously with the coaching hierarchy and power problems embedded within the football culture (Newman et al., 2021a). The acts of encouraging inclusive and exclusive hypermasculine acts committed by coaches are often disregarded as just part of the sport (Duncan, 2018). Such evidence signifies the need for coaching awareness to help create a healthy and enjoyable environment. It is vital to apply coaching management techniques that curb social microaggressions in sport, targeting characteristics such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion (Gearity & Metzger, 2017).

Having demonstrated sociological considerations of BB, the concept of moral disengagement (MD) (Traclet et al., 2014) is discussed to employ a social-psychological lens when aiming to understand BB behaviours. MD argues that people rationalise immoral behaviours using various social-psychological mechanisms (Bandura, 2002). For example, believing that the ends justify the means, that it is the norm for the given context or using language to downplay the severity of the behaviour (Bandura, 2002). Steer et al. (2020) considered adolescents' opinions on the relationship between cyberbullying and banter and found that banter is used to euphemistically label cyberbullying. Euphemistic labelling describes the cognitive process within MD theory that involves deemphasising damaging behaviours while also lessening one's accountability for the act (Bandura, 2002). For example, framing bullying behaviours as helping to improve individual performance in sport (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). Alongside euphemistic labelling, the conservation of resources theory (COR; Halbesleben et al., 2009) demonstrates the cost benefits of using morally disengaging behaviours. COR does this by negating the anticipated costs of unethical behaviour affecting the individual's social relationships, attention, and emotional energy (Halbesleben et al., 2009). Manipulating social situations in this way can have harmful social repercussions for victims and hinder their ability to report abuse (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017; Steer et al., 2020). However, it is important to consider that athletes have also chosen to resist the social norms displayed in their sport rather than accepting and rationalising them (Chase, 2006).

Knowing there are welfare issues in football, The Football Association (FA) established the Respect campaign in 2008 (The FA, 2018) to create a safe and inclusive environment. The FA Respect campaign has run fluidly, changing priorities on the need for specific behaviour change in football.

The campaign recently modified its emphasis to 'We Only Do Positive'. This move aims to address The FA Strategy 2020–2024, which prioritises creating an environment free of discrimination (The FA, 2020). Notably, since 2008 The FA mandated the need for a safeguarding officer at all FA Chartered community football clubs. Despite this mandate, there is no reference to how banter is embedded and conceptualised within football culture.

The present study

Research has outlined the importance of understanding BB behaviours in male football (Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2021b; Newman et al., 2022). Examining how BB behaviours are rationalised is necessitated to seek new conceptual avenues in community football. An inductive, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework will ensure valuable perspectives on the conceptualisation and rationalisation remain authentic and contextualised to avoid external influence from current literature.

The community football perspective is critical, given that this population represents most participants in England (The FA, 2021). Furthermore, the FIFA (2019) Guardians safeguarding programme emphasises the international importance of providing young people with a voice to speak out about normalised bullying behaviour. FIFA (2019) demonstrates the imperative nature of including young football participants in the study to allow safe youth sport to occur. Thus, this study asks, how are BB behaviours conceptualised and rationalised within male adolescent community football?

Methodology and methods

Methodology

An IPA approach involves a double hermeneutic strategy to answer the research question whereby the researcher seeks to understand participants' social world surrounding BB and then analyses the 'lay' comments to relate to social scientific metalanguages to construct theory (Smith & Osborn, 2006). The researcher makes sense of the adolescent community football environment through the lived experience of players and coaches. The experience-driven evidence provided by participants ensures that the study maintains a social constructionist position through an IPA contextualist lens. This philosophical stance allows the researcher to engage in an in-depth analysis of the normalised views and behaviours within community football. In developing this rich analysis, individual and group divergent and concurrent beliefs on each factor are provided from the participants' experiences (Brown et al., 2018). Researchers employed qualitative research methods to obtain detailed accounts of experiences, perspectives, feelings, and behaviours to gain meaningful knowledge on BB (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

Collaborating with community football

Following IPA guidelines (Smith, 2016), the need for a specific population of adolescent community football players and coaches justifies using purposive sampling (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This sampling method ensured that rich, contextualised views in the setting were obtained from those consistently involved with youth community football (Etikan et al., 2016). The research took place with an under sixteen-year-old community football team (Community FC) based in Southeast England. Community FC was situated within a community district-level league in the top division and met twice a week for a competitive football match and a training session. Sampling was also based on convenience as the researcher had been coaching the team intermittently over six years, having developed rapport with players and coaches. Previous rapport could be perceived as a negative for the study due to possible bias from the researcher. However, a prior relationship

can enhance the psychological safety of the participants to explore deeper meanings around sensitive topics, including experiences of bullying in football (Dutton, 2003).

Ethical considerations

This study was given university ethical approval before data collection commenced. The research was conducted in line with the COVID-19 government guidelines at the time, and hence interviews were conducted via 'Zoom'. First, the researcher sent the players and coaches participant information sheets and an assent form, each of which they signed to indicate they would like to participate. Then, parents/guardians were sent an information sheet and a consent form asking whether they were happy for their child to participate. Although it was made clear that participation was voluntary, some participants may have felt obligated to participate. The researcher verbally reemphasised these ethical statements at the start of the interview. Nonetheless, it can enable a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, developing trust and rapport. Participants were made aware that the interviews may contain intrusive questions regarding bullying experiences. Participants were reminded that they were not obliged to answer all questions in the participant information sheet and verbally before the interview. The participants were advised to take the interview in a location where they felt comfortable speaking on sensitive topics.

Data collection

Twelve interviews lasting 23-41 min were conducted with eight adolescent community football players (M = 15.4, SD = 0.5, range = 15-16 years old) and four coaches (M = 39, SD = 19.8, range = 18-63 years-old) (for participant information, see Table 1). Sampling size remained consistent with IPA studies of a rigorous standard (Newman et al., 2021b; Newman et al., 2022; Smith, 2016). Each interview was conducted online and recorded on the voice memo application on an Apple iPhone 12. Interviews took place in the participants' natural environment, ensuring they felt comfortable and able to express their thoughts and feelings. Although qualitative criteria outside of the IPA recommendations have not been used due to the problematic nature of the parallel approach, member reflections following interviews were utilised to enhance the study's rigour (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Participants were asked whether anything needed to be added to the findings and voiced any discrepancies. This process differs from member checking, which looks to update and verify the results, not add to them (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

IPA's social constructionist philosophical positionality requires a method to explore BB's complexities and academic inconsistencies in adolescent community football. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain insight into the culture while synthesising perceptions, experiences,

Table 1. Participant age demographics at Community FC.

Pseudonym	Age
Player demographics	
Harry-P	15
Jordan-P	15
Kyle-P	16
Raheem-P	16
Phil-P	15
Mason-P	16
Reece-P	15
Luke-P	15
Coach demographics	
Jack-C	63
Marcus-C	22
Kalvin-C	55
Declan-C	18

and behaviours to create meaningful knowledge (Kallio et al., 2016). The interviews were open and adaptable, with a set of foundational questions on how BB are conceptualised and rationalised to remain on the topic. Probing questions encouraged participants to elaborate on their thoughts by discussing the deeper meanings. The interview guides were grounded in the study's aims rather than previous literature to ensure the findings reflect the authentic perceptions and experiences held within a community football context. The interview was piloted with adolescents and adults before implementation to ensure the questions were clear and coherent. The pilot process ensured the refinement of questions to ensure leading questions were avoided and the logical flow of the interview was fluid. The guide asked open-ended questions regarding the participants' perspectives on the conceptualisation and rationalisation of BB in football.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, using pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. The IPA coding occurred through a process of initial noting, in which the researcher illustrated their original observations of the data, recorded in the wide margin of each transcript (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This initial observation provided a brief review of the data and recognised emerging themes for each participant, further developing into superordinate and subordinate themes (Smith, 2016). The themes identified were then reviewed and collated across the data set. From there, the researcher reviewed the individualised and grouped findings to create the overarching themes. These inductively developed themes are employed in the discussion to contrast with the known concepts and theories on the conceptualisation and rationalisation of BB, which serve to inform theory and knowledge generated in this study. This double hermeneutic process, through abductive discourse in the discussion, develops theory by comparing the participant's contextualised language of their perceptions and experience, and the known concepts and literature known to the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2006). IPA was considered a suitable analysis technique by providing an inductive, rich synthesis of themes presented by participants for creating meaning beyond description through probing techniques and considering individual and grouped themes (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). The analysis was conducted by one researcher grounded in the data collection and then reviewed by two others with an external view. This approach allows a contextualised and outsider view of the results, developing themes from different perspectives on the experiences and opinions of the participants.

Discussion of the results

Overview

This study aimed to examine how BB are conceptualised and rationalised by coaches and players within male adolescent community football. This section presents the findings from the IPA of the semi-structured interviews that delves into the meanings behind the data. Accordingly, the section is sorted into themes of; '*Bullying is multifaceted*', '*Ambiguous banter*' and '*Crossing the line*' when understanding the conceptualisation aspect of the study. Following the conceptualisation section, the rationale evidence is split into themes of; '*Normalised bullying and masculinity*' and '*Just a bit of banter?*'. These themes, along with their subordinate themes, are italicised and outlined in Table 2, Table 3. The themes amalgamate to tell the story of how BB are conceptualised and rationalised at Community FC. Coach pseudonyms end with '-C' while player pseudonyms end with '-P' for clarity.

Conceptualising BB

Bullying is multifaceted

This theme covers the multiple complexities to consider when conceptualising bullying in male adolescent community football. Across the theme, the following subordinate themes are discussed;

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes conceptualising BB from interviews with Community FC.

Conceptualising BB	
Superordinate	Subordinate
Bullying is multifaceted	Repeated and harmful
	Aggressive
	Power imbalance
	Intention
Ambiguous banter	Prosocial joking
	Light-hearted communication
	Predominantly verbal but occasionally physical
	Non-harmful
Crossing the line	Banter can be a pathway to bullying
	Interrelated
	Repetition can overstep the line
	Joking inside friendships
	What is 'bad' and 'good'
	The victim's reaction

'Harmful behaviour and the power struggle', 'Repetition and isolated occurrences' and 'Purposeful or accidental?'.

Harmful behaviour and the power struggle. Participants' perceptions of the critical constituents of BB were important to compare with the commonly used and trusted Olweus (1993) definition of bullying. As shown in Table 4, perceptions from both players and coaches construct an idea of how they define bullying. An extract from Raheem-P is among participants interviewed who indicated the need for the bullying behaviour to be physical or verbally *aggressive* acts. *Aggressive* verbal and non-verbal actions within the bullying definition reveal the synergies between bullying and micro-aggressions. Additionally, Reece-P and Jack-C note that bullying is also *repeated and harmful*, often associated with a *power imbalance*. This evidence relates to the results of Newman et al. (2021b), which indicate a link between how bullying is conceptualised in professional and community football. The relationship between the two different levels of football indicates that, to an extent, views held within football culture are similar regardless of level, signifying conceptual clarity in understanding bullying in football. The data supports the Olweus (1993) definition on levels of repetition (*repeated*), injury and discomfort (*harmful*), *power imbalance* and *aggressive* behaviour (negative action), endorsing the use of these factors in research and continuing broad theoretical transparency. The findings also agree with Volk et al. (2014) by asserting the importance of including an element of *power imbalance* and hurt in the definition. These findings suggest that those within adolescent community football consider a *power imbalance* to exist within the context through a physical and social hierarchy indicated by coach-centred literature (Newman et al., 2021a). The *power*

Table 3. Superordinate and subordinate themes rationalising BB from interviews with Community FC.

Rationalising BB	
Superordinate	Subordinate
Normalised bullying and masculinity	Commonly experienced bullying
	Comments on individual football performances to mask bullying
	Excluding teammates
	Assert dominance and aggression
	Masculinity to aid performance
	Step from inclusive masculinity into hegemonic masculinity
Just a bit of banter?	Widespread incorporation of banter
	Important and learned nature of banter
	'Banter' is used to mask bullying
	Euphemistic labelling is used to avoid punishment
	Embody a 'lad' figure

Table 4. Factors of the Community FC bullying definition with evidenced examples.

Community FC conceptualisation of bullying:	Participant quotes:
Repeated and harmful	'repeatedly doing something verbally or physically to annoy another person or upset them and hurt them'. (Reece-P)
Aggressive	'It's like being aggressive at someone when you shouldn't and doing it over and over again'. (Raheem-P)
Power imbalance	'Bullying is power and control. Directed at people where there is a perceived weakness, whether that be a physical weakness or any other form of social weakness'. (Jack-C)
Intention	'I think sometimes it's intentionally done, but sometimes it's accidental like some people don't know they're actually bullying'. (Mason-P)

imbalance between teammates and coaches to their players is something to be aware of in conceptualising bullying and coaching practice to openly speak about these issues and how they affect individuals' experiences in the game.

Repetition and isolated occurrences. Declan-C reveals, 'Like I guess on a one-off occasion like something happened in football I don't think that is classed as bullying'. This statement from Declan-C reinforces the necessity of the repetitive nature of bullying but, more notably, reduces the emphasis on recognising isolated, one-off bullying behaviours. However, the use of 'I guess' highlights the uncertainty of this statement and the lack of clarity on whether bullying must be repeated or a one-off occurrence. Considering Declan-C's position as a coach, being uncertain about bullying can be problematic for the setting due to their responsibility to deal with bullying behaviour and positively affect the environment (Duncan, 2018). Although, in Declan-C's case, this uncertainty may indicate that whether the act is deemed bullying depends on the context, which is hard to capture when speaking hypothetically. Regardless of the meaning behind the uncertainty, it seems one-off instances are a grey area in conceptualising bullying at Community FC, requiring more certainty through future research to inform coach safeguarding practice.

Purposeful or accidental?. Mason-P in Table 4 also demonstrates how bullying can either be on purpose or accidental, which contradicts Olweus's (1993) definition of bullying that necessitates the need for *intention,* which relates to goal-directedness (Volk et al., 2014). Mason-P, instead, focuses on the misunderstanding or lack of awareness of the boundaries of social interaction and feelings between individuals in sport, demonstrating the ambiguous nature of similar behaviours. However, it is crucial to consider that the ambiguous nature of bullying does not present itself as binary, but rather dependent on how people percieve it with different relationships and in various social settings (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). The inclusion of unintentional acts demonstrates Community FC's bullying definition links to unintentional factors within micro-inequities, indicating this layer of the definition can often be hard to prove in practice (Rowe, 2008). The evidence thus indicates that the definition should be fluid in the intent aspect of the definition that depends on the context of behaviours instead of the intent (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). A fluid, context-dependent definition may, however, further confuse the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in settings propping up discrepancies in identifying bullying behaviours in sport. However, assuming the behaviour must be intentional is to view bullying from a perpetrator position rather than the perception and agency of the victim. For example, suppose an unintentional perpetrator's act hurt a victim. In that case, a definition employing *intention* as a compulsory constituent could suggest that the act would not be classed as bullying despite causing hurt to the victim.

Ambiguous banter

This theme addresses the conceptualisation of banter by acknowledging its ambiguity at Community FC. Across the theme, 'Positive perceptions' and 'a bit of a joke' subordinate themes have been discussed.

Positive perceptions. Steer et al. (2020) identify banter as a prosocial, challenging, playful, and aggressive behaviour. As shown in Table 5, perceptions from both players and coaches develop an idea of how Community FC define banter. All participants conceptualised banter in a broadly similar way to Steer et al. (2020). Jordan-P exemplifies the *prosocial joking* stance on banter from a player's point of view, while Jack-C, as a coach, supports Jordan-P and adds the need for *light-hearted communication*. The interview extracts demonstrated the need for the banter behaviour to be a *positive joking* remark that encourages *light-hearted communication* that widens social connections between players and coaches. The *light-hearted*, *prosocial joking* aspects of the definition included in the Community FC relates to micro-affirmations showing the intention to foster direct, positive outcomes within the environment rather than bullying (Rowe, 2008). However, participants mentioned little concerning the challenging and aggressive factors in the Steer et al. (2020) definition, which relate more to micro-inequalities that relate to ephemeral unintentional events unrecognised by perpetrators (Rowe, 2008). Findings thus concur with notions made by Bishop-Mills and Muckleroy-Carwile (2009) that aggression is not an essential factor of the banter definition.

'a bit of a joke'. Reece-P mentions that banter is *predominantly verbal but occasionally physical,* while Declan-C also highlights that the behaviour must be received as *non-harmful*. If others involved in the situation do not share the understanding of what is 'a bit of a joke' or 'fun', this causes discrepancies in common understanding among peers. Evidence points towards the ambiguity of social situations feeding into the conceptualisation of banter as how the act is received depend on shared knowledge of humour boundaries. The findings highlight that the ambiguity of shared understandings defining banter only adds to the blurred state of the conceptual line between BB.

Crossing the line

This theme addresses BB comparatively while recognising the boundaries at Community FC. In addressing BB boundaries, subthemes including 'Taking the step' and 'What is bad and good?' have been considered.

Taking the step. Stepping over the line from banter into bullying due to confusion or conflation of the terms has frequently occurred across sporting cultures and the media resulting in the highly problematic dilution of harmful bullying acts (BBC, 2021; Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009; Myers et al., 2013). Evidence from both player and coach interviews agrees that *banter can be a pathway to bullying*. Reece-P and Kyle-P show the notion of banter 'easily' transitioning into bullying, thus, having an *interrelated* nature when declaring, 'But banter could easily turn into bullying because they're similar things' (Reece-P) and 'So yeah, if you're not careful the jokes can turn into bullying' (Kyle-P). Consequently, this evidence shows the similarities between BB as concepts and practice, and they can be easily merged under the same term demonstrating their *interrelated* nature (Keltner et al., 2001).

From a coach's point of view, Declan-C shows that *repetition can overstep the line* from banter into bullying when acknowledging; 'too much banter could be taken badly like you're actually hating on

Table 5. Factors of the Community FC banter definition with evidenced examples.

Community FC conceptualisation of banter:	Participant quotes:
Prosocial joking	'like saying something funny that everyone laughs at and makes people closer'. (Jordan-P)
Light-hearted communication	'For the banter, it's a way of communicating with each other in a light-hearted way. Bit of fun where you can make friendships'. (Jack-C)
Predominantly verbal but occasionally physical	'I suppose someone could verbally or physically go up to another person and have a bit of fun'. (Reece-P)
Non-harmful	'having a bit of a joke around in a nice way which could be speaking or something physical that won't hurt them'. (Declan-C)

them and can kinda be a … like pathway to bullying'. Declan-C emphasises how repetitiveness is a vital constituent of the bullying definition and something that can indicate when the banter boundaries are exceeded. However, Reece-P notes that the repetitiveness of banter should not limit the boundaries when stating, 'Banter can be repeated, but it has to have that shared knowledge of that it's just a bit of a joke, and it shouldn't be taken badly'. Thus, from a player's perspective, an adequate knowledge of *joking inside friendships* should allow repetitive banter to occur without transitioning into bullying. This finding feeds into the importance of building relationships within Community FC that allow both parties to be equally involved in the humour (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009) to ensure it does not become a pathway to hostile acts such as bullying (Duncan, 2018).

What is bad and good?. Nevertheless, Phil-P identified distinct differences between BB as behaviours by affirming, 'Banter is a positive thing and bullying is a bad for people so they're definitely different'. Phil-P shows that banter is positive, and bullying is negative conceptually, which raises issues of ambiguity around *what is 'bad' and 'good'* within the grey area of micro-inequities. Luke-P shows that there is a shared understanding among male youth community football of the positive and negative boundaries of socialising when explaining, 'People know when its bullying and not banter when it gets a bit too far and its obviously annoying the other guy'. The evidence concerning the similarities and differences of BB supports the notion that although the terms are *interrelated*, they are not interchangeable (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009). In Luke-P's comment, 'when it gets a bit too far and its obviously annoying the other guy', he suggests that the decision of whether an act is bullying or banter lies on *the victim's reaction* to events. This consideration further advocates further research into a victim-centred view on defining bullying rather than focusing on the intent that centres on the perpetrator.

Rationalising BB

Normalised bullying and masculinity

This theme focuses on the experiences of bullying being normalised through masking behaviours and demonstrating masculinity. Therefore, subordinate themes of 'Confronting and masking bullying experiences' and 'Showing your masculinity' have been reviewed.

Confronting and masking bullying experiences. Following the conceptualisation of BB, participants discussed the rationale behind BB behaviours in male adolescent community football. The findings from players and coaches opt to show mixed experiences of facing explicit bullying acts. Eight of the players stated they had *commonly experienced bullying* in adolescent community football, exemplified by Raheem-P and Kalvin-C making the affirmations; 'I have experienced it, and I've also seen other people like experienced it quite a bit' (Raheem-P) and 'I have actually experienced it myself and it's definitely more common than you think in football for sure' (Kalvin-C). Not only do the statements from Raheem-P and Kalvin-P indicate how they have personally experienced it, but also how others face bullying behaviours in community football. This evidence uncovers how behaviours linked to microaggressions occur in community football and other sports and continents (Lee et al., 2018). Additionally, the quotes indicate how common bullying acts are in the eyes of players and coaches in male adolescent community football. Evidence from this study agrees with the case data indicating that bullying issues are prevalent across youth sport (Hartill et al., 2021), further contributing to the normalisation of bullying acts in football (Newman et al., 2022). The common presence of bullying acts at Community FC signifies the need for continuing research in this area to understand these issues from a youth grassroots sport perspective as well as elite sport. Additionally, it is necessary to consider a broader picture of community football by speaking to parents, welfare officers and policymakers and engaging a pluralistic approach using observational methods to

gauge a practical understanding of BB behaviours. In doing this, the football community has a foundation to resist negative normalisation within the sport.

Jordan-P and Kalvin-C spotlight the *comments on individual football performances to mask bullying,* thus, aiding bullying normalisation (Fisher & Dzikus, 2017). Jordan-P shows this when stating, 'It is constant, like taking the mick out of someone usually about their bad performance that can upset them'. Jordan-P thus suggests that despite the participatory level of football at Community FC, performance and ability can influence the likelihood of being bullied in male adolescent community football. Kalvin-C adds, 'bullying is usually like 'don't pass to him he's not good enough' it is quite based on how well you play'. Kalvin-C indicates that not only can performance-focused bullying impact verbal or physical interactions but also their inclusion in participating by teammates being reluctant to pass to them. *Excluding teammates* from the game demonstrates a marker that moves against the participation focus of community football and the behaviour of which coaches and players should be wary.

Showing your masculinity. Sport literature has indicated hypermasculine acts relating to the heavily male-gendered sport of football (Alexander et al., 2011). All interviewees who have experienced bullying accept that bullying relating to masculinity is often used in community football to *assert dominance and aggression* is linked to sports performance. Luke-P shows this when stating that 'bullying is used to show you're bigger and more masculine, but to be fair, you do need some aggression and strength to show you're good'. Reece-P agrees and adds to the importance of masculinity in football when explaining that 'being manly it's quite important part of the sport really to come across as quite a big man because you need those sorts of players in football to assert dominance and put in the big tackles without it being bullying'. The evidence suggests that players within community football can rely on *masculinity to aid performance* by employing strength and dominance synonymous with masculinity. However, Luke-P and Reece-P highlight that although these behaviours are needed, there is a difference and fine line between performing masculinity for good performance and bullying. This evidence also showcases the ability to *step from inclusive masculinity into hegemonic masculinity* within a community football setting (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012), thus, navigating the accepted and resisted aspects of masculinity seen in women's sport (Chase, 2006). In this instance, discrepancies in the type of masculinity experienced depend upon the knowledge of what constitutes an acceptable level of masculinity needed in some forms of strength and power for performance (Cashmore & Cleland, 2012; Clark & Paechter, 2007). Nevertheless, due to the ambiguity of bullying acts, this acceptable level of masculinity can be problematic to identify, particularly in newly established relationships where social barriers have not yet been learned.

Just a bit of banter?

This theme discusses the intricate experiences of navigating the BB divide and community football culture. Thus, subordinate themes including 'Banter as a culture and learning experience', 'Evading learned barriers' and 'The 'lad' hierarchy' have been addressed.

Banter as a culture and learning experience. Banter has been reported as a frequent form of communication embedded within football by various ages and levels (Adams, 2020; Newman et al., 2022). Interviews with both coaches and players supported this *widespread incorporation of banter* from a community football perspective. For example, a brief quote from Jack-C from a coach's perspective supports the notion of banter's importance and commonality within football culture by declaring that 'I think banter is important and generally very common in football'. Consequently, Community FC concurs with the adult and youth literature on the prevalence and integrated nature of banter in football (Adams, 2020; Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2022). Raheem-P clarifies that 'Banter is a big part of football culture that you kinda learn as you go'. In stating this, Raheem-P exemplifies the *important and learned nature of banter* when emphasising the contextualised nature of understanding and navigating the related interactions. Raheem-P implies that banter

is based on knowledge of accepted humour that develops over time, with those joining the team making a conscious effort to learn where the conceptual line is situated.

Evading learned barriers. The evidence brings to light instances where the learned barriers are evaded or disregarded by those within youth community football. Notably, all participants stated that the term '*banter' is used to mask bullying* acts due to similarities in the behaviours. Kalvin-C and Raheem-P reveal this when they claim; 'Banter is very often used to hide bullying because they're similar and people try and show what they're saying is a good thing when it isn't' (Kalvin-C) and 'I suppose because they're quite similar so sometimes people will use that to make bullying look like banter when something has hurt someone' (Raheem-P). Evidence from this study supports other evidence suggesting that banter is used as a term to disguise bullying in football (Newman et al., 2021a; Newman et al., 2022). The intent to hide and rationalise negative bullying actions as positive banter indicates the presence of MD (Steer et al., 2020; Traclet et al., 2014). Specifically, participants demonstrate that euphemistic labelling is utilised in adolescent community football by using banter as a term to frame a negative behaviour as a positive one (Bandura, 2002; Steer et al., 2020; Traclet et al., 2014). Additionally, as all participants explain that MD occurs in football, some contradict their own statements previously made explaining that they had not experienced bullying in community football. Contradiction within the evidence indicates the disconnect between experiencing bullying holistically and the specific bullying behaviours framed as banter. The disconnect further demonstrates the normalisation of harmful acts within community football, in this case utilising MD techniques to mask bullying behaviours. Naturally, the hidden characteristic of this behaviour makes this hard for coaches to recognise in practice. Nevertheless, this specialised act should be questioned if a coach is aware of this behaviour to ensure MD is not being negatively employed and normalised.

Players in this study suggest reasons for using euphemistic labelling to distort bullying acts as banter. Speaking specifically to this, Declan-C and Mason-P outline, 'A lot of the time someone will bully someone else but will try to kind of hide it as just banter so they don't have to get punished and make themselves feel and look better' (Declan-C) and 'I think they're trying to avoid punishment and getting kicked out of the football team and they want to try and avoid looking like a bad person so their friends will still like them' (Mason-P). These comments from Declan-C and Mason-P show how *euphemistic labelling is used to avoid punishment* from coaches, maintain social relationships and feel better about themselves. These factors coincide with the conservation of resources theory (Halbesleben et al., 2009) ideology, which states that the individual wants to negate the anticipated costs of being an overt bully.

The 'lad' hierarchy. Additional reasons behind banter's use at Community FC include factors around masculinity. Research across youth football has previously identified different forms of masculinity relating to banter (Adams, 2020). All players and coaches at Community FC stated that banter is used to *embody a 'lad' figure*. Luke-P and Phil-P notably revealed this need for masculinity when affirming, 'Banter can definitely be used to show you're more of a lad or a big man by joking about things and taking the mic out of someone's girlfriend or something' (Luke-P) and 'So, like he's down here and I'm above him. I'm speaking down on them and giving them a little kick or make a joke that might be a bit sexist or something' (Phil-P). This evidence suggests that players use banter to demonstrate their ability to use humour through occasional hypermasculine acts that accept masculine norms rather than resist them. These behaviours included sub-aggressive physical contact and sexist jokes to maintain social standing among teammates. The inclusion of these acts by those at Community FC indicates the synergies between the *interrelated* nature of BB in practice and conceptually (Bishop-Mills & Muckleroy-Carwile, 2009) through ambiguous acts of what is deemed as playful for banter (Steer et al., 2020) or negative for bullying (Olweus, 1993). The data thus concurs with Adams's (2020) findings that indicated problematic signs of hegemonic masculinity through an apparent social hierarchy based on banter behaviours that can venture into

hypermasculine acts. This social hierarchy requires coaches to adopt a level of self-awareness in practice to the broader power dynamics in community football, therefore setting a positive environment for players and other members. Looking further into the social hierarchies, navigation of BB instances and the common learned barriers in youth community football are merited to further knowledge in this area.

Conclusion

Research has indicated the importance of understanding how BB is conceptualised and rationalised within adolescent community football. Therefore, this study aimed to qualitatively examine how players and coaches conceptualise and rationalise BB in adolescent community football in contrast with critical definitions, moral disengagement, and masculinity theory.

The evidence predominantly focuses on the ambiguous and interrelated nature of BB behaviours on a spectrum, highly dependent on existing shared knowledge of learned barriers. When seeking to establish how players and managers define BB in adolescent community football, participants largely agree with standard definitions showing clear relations to microaggressions. However, participants differ by stating that bullying acts can be accidental and intentional, demonstrating synergies with micro-inequities and indicating that this factor should be fluid within the definition. Thus, a victim-centred definition is necessitated to ensure that the intention of the perpetrator is not at the forefront of the definition. A coach's perspective also stated how one-off negative occurrences are a grey area in interpretation between BB. Additionally, aggressive and challenging aspects of defining banter were not identified as attributable to the term. Participants highlighted that banter acts can be verbal and physical and that banter must be viewed as a 'joke' or 'fun', which are naturally attributable to micro-affirmations but are also inherently ambiguous terms. Evidence suggested banter can transition into bullying easily and postulates that BB are interrelated but not interchangeable. Coach data pointed towards repetitiveness as the cause of crossing the conceptual line from banter to bullying. Although player evidence suggested repetitive banter is accepted as long as the relationships between parties involved are well established. The findings concerning conceptualisation show how this should be considered on an individual basis of existing relationships and knowledge of learned barriers.

Banter is an integrated constituent within male community football culture, with participants also experiencing bullying in football, which was becoming noticeably normalised. This normalisation of behaviours leads to the disconnection between experiencing specific bullying behaviours and recognising that they have, in fact, experienced bullying. Evidence revealed that BB are commonly based on performance-related aspects of football to demonstrate masculinity and dominance but also to increase peer rapport. BB are not only interrelated conceptually but also in practice. This finding came to light when the ambiguity of tactile behaviours revealed a fine line between inclusive and hegemonic masculinity when choosing between resisting masculine norms or accepting them. Participants highlighted the disguising of bullying behaviours as banter to establish themselves on the social hierarchy, maintain social relationships and increase personal enjoyment. The process that players commonly use to disguise bullying was identified as morally disengaging from bullying through euphemistic labelling to avoid coach and peer social punishment.

Limitations

This study did not consider other stakeholders, such as parents, welfare officers and policymakers. Another limitation may be the singular use of interviews rather than additional observations that provide practical evidence to reference the perceptions (Krane & Baird, 2005). However, this was not possible due to COVID-19 governmental restrictions, and the researchers felt that inductive focussed IPA interviews elaborate sufficiently on the personal thoughts and experiences of BB. The focused nature of the interviews could also affect the generalisability of the findings.

Nevertheless, the study achieved naturalistic generalisability differently by exploring a phenomenon's deep meanings while comparing the findings to similar theories (Smith, 2018). This study decided to avoid parallel criteria due to the vast difference of focus in qualitative studies compared to quantitative studies, and are thus problematic (Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Implications

This research contributes to a body of knowledge that suggests that while BB definitions in literature are broadly accepted, the terms are heavily interrelated and ambiguous depending on the shared understanding of learned barriers. Repetition acting catalyst when overstepping the conceptual line from a coach position, bullying being classified as intentional or accidental, and the need for a victim-centred definition provide new conceptual avenues to pursue. Moreover, this study contributes to knowledge by showing that BB is experienced while being rationalised through moral disengagement and demonstrating masculinity. From this, organisations can better understand the complex area surrounding BB to consider both positive areas to promote and challenging factors to address. These findings can be incorporated into coach education (Gearity & Metzger, 2017). Additionally, this study addresses the dearth of literature on male masculinity issues in community sport, making up the majority of 4.5 million young people in football (The FA, 2021). The research has also provided young people with a platform to speak out on crucial bullying issues in sport supported internationally by the FIFA (2019) Guardians programme. Lastly, the findings elaborate on complexities around common behaviours that have a divergent impact on participant experience, inform critical decision-making in community football and tailor interventions dealing with bullying in football. For example, the evidence on the intricacies of BB can inform The Respect Programme (The FA, 2018) or the next FA strategy following the current 2020–2024 period (The FA, 2020). Informing these initiatives or developing new ones will help ensure that participants receive the full extent of football's health and wellbeing benefits.

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Data availability statement

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly. Therefore, the supporting data is not available.

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