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# Investigating Online Fan Responses to the Rooney Rule in English Football

Daniel Kilvington, Jonathan Cable, Sophie Cowell, Glyn Mottershead and Chris Webster

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This work critically investigates online fan responses towards the implementation of the affirmative action policy, the Rooney Rule, within English professional football. It explores systemic and structural racism and the history of the Rooney Rule, before analysing football fans' Twitter comments concerning the policy within English football across an 18-month period.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This research utilised a bespoke search programme to identify and analyse Tweets which focused on the Rooney Rule in English football. A total of 205 posts were thematically analysed and a series of codes were created.

**Findings:** The findings illustrated that fans were generally divided over the Rooney Rule. Over half of the participants welcomed counter measures against structural racism although many caveated responses by critiquing the Rule's approach and scope. For others, however, the policy is yet another example of 'reverse racism' and 'political correctness gone mad'. The findings illustrate that there is an undercurrent of hostility towards anti-racist action and a belief that sport is inherently meritocratic and fair.

**Originality/value:** While much research has focused on examining online reactions to 'trigger events', this chapter provides an empirical insight into contemporary football fan responses towards anti-racist action in the 'beautiful game'. It demonstrates that there are a series of common misconceptions and misunderstandings towards affirmative action policies in sport. Once we become aware of such misunderstandings, we can attempt to remedy them in order to aid the efficacy of anti-racist action.

**Keywords:** Football; racism; anti-racism; Rooney Rule; policy; social media

## Introduction

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 re-ignited the Black Lives Matter movement as marches subsequently rippled across the globe to highlight and challenge racialised injustice. This arguably marked a turning point in race relations and the anti-racist struggle. Mainstream media outlets across the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US), alongside other nations, began to focus on systemic and/or structural racism while governments and institutional organisations began to critically reflect on their operations and practices.

Until relatively recently, the focus in sport has historically been on highlighting and challenging overt expressions of racism and discrimination as opposed to combating structural issues, especially within UK football. Overt racism, for example, has been well-documented and publicised in English professional football as it was commonplace on the terraces during the 1970s and 1980s. Although incidents of overt racism still exist in the so-called, 'beautiful game', and are in fact rising once again, the frequency of such incidents is much lower than in previous decades. Farrington, Kilvington, Price, and Saeed (2012) note that when expressions of overt racism are witnessed in sport, they are often considered to be the actions of the individual 'hooligan', 'yob', or 'thug'. In other words, overt racism is relegated to the behaviour of social outcasts, the outsiders who stand on the fringes of mainstream sporting cultures. In Farrington et al.'s (2012) critique of the press' coverage of overt racism in sport, they accuse them of hypocrisy as racism is often presented as a problem 'over there', in another country, while the United Kingdom presents itself as being more advanced, tolerant and inclusive.

Whiteness and systemic racism, the processes and mechanisms in which racialised inequalities exist and perpetuate have historically remained largely ignored by sport governing bodies and the sport media. For the predominantly white bodies that dominate such spaces, these racialised processes remain invisible, difficult to grasp and uncomfortable to learn about. The concept of systemic or structural racism, and how it differs from individualised acts of racism, was first outlined by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967 emphasis added):

When a black family moves into a home in a white neighborhood and is stoned, burned or routed out, they are victims of an overt act of individual racism which most people will condemn. But it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. *The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.*

Hence, challenging systemic racism through affirmative action, or positive action policies, is fundamental as the problem is far greater, deeper and more complex than just overt expressions of racism and discrimination.

This particular article centres on the affirmative action policy, the Rooney Rule, which was implemented in the National Football League (NFL) in 2003 and later modified and passed within English football some 13 years later. There have been comprehensive academic investigations into overt forms of discrimination in professional English

football (Back, Crabbe, & Solomos, 2001; Crawford, 2004; Critcher, 1979; Taylor, 1971; Turner, 1990; Williams, 2006) while research on structural racism has been explored in more recent years (Bradbury, 2018; Burdsey, 2007; Kilvington, 2016, 2019a; King, 2004). What has been scarcely captured, however, is contemporary fans' response to affirmative action policies in sport. This research seeks to address this gap and illuminate modern day attitudes, understandings and perceptions towards the Rooney Rule since its implementation in English professional football. By focussing on this policy, it provides us with a critical case study to help showcase fans' belief systems around 'race'/ethnicity and anti-racist initiatives. This analysis is useful as it helps illustrate the policy's efficacy, whether it is embraced or dismissed, what the potential limitations of the Rule might be and what the common misconceptions are. These findings will be noteworthy for those responsible for enforcing the Rule and those who adhere to it. This is important because if affirmative action policies are misunderstood, misconstrued, or misused, they can often be dismissed as tokenistic and gestural which compromises the efficacy of such policies.

The chapter begins with a discussion around systemic and structural racism and how they operate within sporting contexts. We will then outline what the Rooney Rule is and why it was implemented in the NFL. We will then critically reflect on the policy's efficacy before exploring its adoption within English professional football in 2016. Because this chapter examines empirical work using Twitter, it is important that we contextualise and discuss the nature of communication between offline/online spaces. Therefore, not only will we outline how factors such as anonymity, invisibility and rapidity are exacerbating online hate and abuse, we will examine how social media is adding a new dynamic to football fan cultures and how the internet has become a new platform for football-related abuse. A methodology follows which focuses on our research design, sample and data analysis. In our penultimate section, we will critically discuss the findings of our Twitter analysis, focussing on the key themes and sub-themes which were identified. Broadly speaking, our findings demonstrate that the Rooney Rule divided the Twitter users within the sample, as around half displayed support for anti-racist action in football while the other half subscribed to more meritocratic and colour-blind perspectives which downplayed and ignored the significance of institutionalised racism. Finally, we end with some concluding thoughts summarising the key findings, acknowledging our research limitations and highlighting possible avenues for future research.

## Systemic and Structural Racism

First, it is important to note that systemic and structural racism are often synonymous and used interchangeably. What they both acknowledge is that racism is institutionally woven into the systems and structures that control and govern opportunities and life chances. This invisible, concealed and hidden racism, which operates both consciously and unconsciously, infects policies, practices, socio-economic and political systems to benefit ethnic majority groups at the expense of minoritised<sup>1</sup> ethnic groups. In other words, by focussing on the systems of racialised oppression, it allows us to understand 'the big picture of how society operates, rather than looking at one-on-one interaction' (O'Dowd, 2020). Likewise, and akin to Carmichael and Hamilton (1967), Feagin and Elias (2013) note that systemic racism 'involves much more than individual racial prejudices and discrimination' (p. 937). In short, these systems tacitly assume white superiority and dominance individually, ideologically and institutionally.

Feagin and Elias (2013) conceptualise systemic racism within four core tenets. First, they suggest that *racialised discrimination is designed and perpetuated by white people* as racism is manifest and engineered into major institutions including housing, education, healthcare, the labour market and legal systems. Sport does not operate in a vacuum, and research has similarly highlighted how systemic racism continues to be intrinsic within sports such as cricket (Fletcher, 2012), football (Kilvington, 2016) and American football (Duru, 2008). While black players are over-represented in on-field roles in football and American football, for example, they are marginalised and excluded in coaching, management and governance positions. Cashmore and Cleland (2011) add that, 'If it were a circus, black players would be part of its main attraction: like lions, perhaps, but rarely lion tamers and never ringmasters' (p. 1605–1606). Racialised discrimination is therefore maintained through systems of whiteness which help protect and toughen the so-called 'glass ceiling'. Second, whites have benefitted, and continue to benefit, through *unjustly gained resources and power*. Writing in a US context, Feagin and Elias (2013) state, 'Since USA's founding, whites have been the most powerful, resources-laden, socially, politically and economically influential US group' (p. 939). Racist laws and policies have thus helped whites gain and protect their lasting advantage over minoritised groups. Third, *social reproduction* of the racial hierarchy is resultant of the economic resources and power that has been generationally passed down. This breeds hierarchical and alienated relationships across all institutions (see Feagin, 2006). As Feagin and Elias (2013) note, 'Systemic racism has routinely reproduced major societal institutions and networks that uphold asymmetrically structured material and social-psychological relations among racial groups' (p. 936).

This is particularly relevant within the context of affirmative action as it attempts to resist social reproduction by challenging networks, or 'meso' level issues (see Cunningham, 2020). Fourth, the *white racial frame* refers to whites' collective memories and histories. Kilvington (2019a) states that racial framing, 'has long included not only negative racial images, stereotypes, emotions, and interpretations, but also distinctive language and imaging tools to describe

and enforce the racial hierarchy' (p. 144). In the context of sport, racialised stereotypes manifest within the dominant white racial frame often position black athletes as athletically superior and 'naturally gifted' while lacking the cognitive abilities of intellect, discipline and hard work (Boyle & Haynes, 2000; Brookes, 2002; Farrington et al., 2012; Hoberman, 1997). Athleticising the black body results in reduced social status which may disadvantage career opportunities for black people not only within sport but in other domains such as management and leadership in sectors including academia, politics and business (Van Sterkenburg & Blokzeijl, 2018).

This brief section on systemic/structural racism has attempted to illustrate that racism is much more insidious and complex than the behaviour and actions of individual agents. It has also highlighted that social reproduction and white racial framing, in particular, can be challenged through affirmative action policies such as the Rooney Rule.

## **The Rooney Rule**

The use of mandatory interview rules within professional sport coaching began with the Rooney Rule in the NFL in the United States, where, prior to its introduction, 70% of NFL players but only three of 32 head coaches were from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011). The Rooney Rule was introduced following a campaign by two civil rights attorneys, who commissioned a report analysing the performance of head coaches between 1986 and 2001, 'to compare the success of the five black head coaches... against the success of the 86 white head coaches' (Duru, 2008, p. 186). They found that, 'the black head coaches outperformed the white head coaches' but despite 'superior performance' they received 'inferior opportunities' (Duru, 2008, p. 186). With this information and the threat of legal action, these attorneys convinced the NFL action was needed. A Workplace Diversity Committee, chaired by Pittsburgh Steelers President Dan Rooney, was established in October 2002 and in December that same year, issued its recommendations. The Committee proposed the NFL should commit to interviewing, 'minority candidates for every head coach opening', except where teams had made a prior commitment to recruit internally (Proxmire, 2008, p. 1). After a series of discussions, the NFL accepted the recommendations, agreeing, 'any club seeking to hire a head coach will interview one or more minority applicants for that position' (Proxmire, 2008, p. 3).

The Rooney Rule operates by seeking to counter what Collins (2007) contends is the main reason behind the under-representation of minority ethnic head coaches: 'unconscious bias' (p. 872). He argues the NFL's hiring practices have allowed decision-makers to avoid interacting with minoritised ethnic coaching candidates, resulting in reliance on racial stereotypes, which depict 'African Americans as natural born athletes whose success is attributable to their innate physical gifts rather than their hard work and intellect' (Collins, 2007, p. 872). This stereotype of intellectual inferiority is said to be maintained by minoritised players disproportionately playing in so-called 'workhorse' positions, which demand more, 'physical ability than intellectual ability' than positions like quarterback, which is largely reserved for white players (Corapi, 2012, p. 182). Because of this, Collins (2007) argues the exposure of most decision-makers to African Americans 'consists of interactions with athletes [stigmatised] by the image of the so-called "African American Athlete"' (p. 875). This perceived intellectual inferiority leads to minoritised ethnic coaches being seen as less capable of handling the significantly complex coaching structure, and the resulting lack of minoritised ethnic head coaches means these racial stereotypes are maintained (Collins, 2007). The Rooney Rule seeks to address this by requiring teams to grant a minoritised candidate a 'meaningful' (face-to-face and in-person) interview. Although 'meaningful' consideration is far from certain, Duru (2008) argues, 'a face-to-face, in person, interview with [decision makers] begets meaningful consideration' (p. 195), as discussing a common interest can help to overcome any racial stereotypes or prejudice. Supporting this, research by Celis et al. (2021) found the Rooney Rule 'enables a significantly faster reduction in implicit bias' (p. 1).

In challenging racial stereotypes, the Rooney Rule also seeks to address 'Old Boy' Networks Collins (2007) argues hiring practices within professional sports are 'fraternal', with lists of candidates drawn up from 'Old Boy' networks, which often exclude minoritised ethnic candidates (p. 882). As the majority of decision-makers and established coaches are white and have limited contact with minoritised ethnic coaches, Shropshire (1996) stated that when drawing up candidate pools, generally the coaches recommended will be white. Shropshire (1996) further argued many white coaches have relationships to positions of power, for example, through family, but if minoritised ethnic coaches are not given the chance to become well-established, they will not be able to create these relationships themselves. This results in a Catch-22 that effectively excludes aspiring minoritised head coaches because if they are rarely hired, they cannot break down this unfamiliarity and form networks. As interviewing a minoritised ethnic candidate is mandatory under the Rooney Rule, it helps to stop the reliance on 'Old Boy' networks and has arguably caused each team looking to fill the role, 'to make extensive contact with a minority candidate who may impress the decisionmakers' (Proxmire, 2008, p. 6). Even if candidates are not selected for that role, they may be considered for future positions, helping them to break into the networks and overcome this Catch-22 (Proxmire, 2008).

## **The Rooney Rule: Success or Failure?**

The extent to which the Rooney Rule has been successful is debatable. A statistical analysis of data from 1970 to 2009

found limited evidence, ‘for the proposition that the Rooney Rule has been successful at increasing the number of minority head coaches in the NFL’, but noted the, ‘scarcity of minority head coaches makes it difficult to draw strong inferences’ (Solow, Solow, & Walker, 2011, p. 337). However, as outlined above, prior to its introduction, 70% of NFL players but only three of 32 head coaches were from minoritised ethnic backgrounds (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011). By 2015, 17 of 87 vacancies (20%) had been filled by minoritised ethnic candidates (Fox, 2015), with minoritised ethnic candidates now 19–21% more likely to fill an NFL head coach vacancy than prior to its introduction (DuBois, 2015). Whilst the extent to which this was attributable to the Rule can be argued, Duru (2008, p. 195) states it has ‘undoubtedly played a role’. Further, there has only been one identified breach, occurring shortly after its inception in 2003. The Detroit Lions’ General Manager was personally fined \$200,000, and the then-Commissioner promised the next breach would result in a \$500,000 fine, showing the Rule had ‘teeth’ (Duru, 2008).

Recently, some commentators have argued that any initial success has now levelled off, with Graves Jr. (2013) contending that ‘owners of the 32 NFL franchises have essentially disregarded the Rooney Rule’ (p. 10). In 2020, the Rule came under increased scrutiny and, following ‘another hiring cycle where minority candidates were significantly bypassed’ was expanded (Patra, 2020). The Rooney Rule now requires NFL teams to interview at least two minoritised ethnic candidates for head coaching positions, one minoritised ethnic candidate for coordinator positions (Patra, 2020) and applies to women applying for head office positions (Strackbein, 2020).

### **Across the Pond: the Rooney Rule and English Football**

Twenty-five percent of players within English professional football, which encompasses all four divisions from the Premier League to League, are from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic backgrounds, significantly higher than the general minoritised ethnic population within the United Kingdom of 14% (Sports People’s Think Tank (SPTT), 2015). Despite these circumstances, the number of black managers and coaches, for example, employed within senior positions in professional football remains disproportionately low at 4.6% (SPTT, 2017). The SPTT (2015; 2017), Bradbury (2018) and Kilvington (2019a) have identified a plethora of barriers to minoritised ethnic coaching career progression within English football, including the over-reliance of networks, racial bias and stereotyping, access to coach education courses and the resulting lack of minoritised ethnic role models. Given the Rooney Rule’s perceived relative success in overcoming similar barriers to increase the number of minoritised ethnic coaches, for several years there were widespread calls for a version of the Rooney Rule to be introduced into English football.

In 2016, English Football League (EFL)<sup>2</sup> clubs agreed to introduce a mandatory recruitment code for academy football, and 10 teams agreed to pilot a voluntary recruitment code for first-team football (EFL, 2016). While there was criticism of the extent to which the recruitment code was followed during this pilot, the EFL found the approach to have ‘the potential to deliver the right outcomes if operated by all clubs over a period of time’ (EFL, 2017). Therefore, it was announced that all 72 clubs in the EFL had agreed to follow the voluntary code from January 1, 2018 to the end of the 2018/19 season (EFL, 2017). In June 2019, following the trial, the commitment to interviewing at least one minoritised ethnic candidate was formalised in the EFL’s rules and regulations. The recruitment code for academy positions states that any club recruiting for a specified role shall ‘invite one or more Minority Candidate(s) to interview for that Specified Role’ where an application is received, and at first-team level, clubs are required to interview one or more ‘Minority Candidate(s) for the role of Manager’ in instances where they operate a full recruitment process and an application is received (EFL, n.d., paras. 115–116). However, it should be noted that the recruitment code does not require clubs to operate a full recruitment process for first-team manager positions and the frequency at which clubs recruit for first-team positions in this way can be questioned. As such, this caveat can be seen as a significant limitation on the extent to which the recruitment code is likely to help overcome the reliance on ‘Old Boy’ networks.

Following the EFL’s introduction, in 2018 the English Football Association (FA) introduced a measure requiring at least one minoritised ethnic candidate meeting the minimum criteria to be interviewed for national team positions (Associated Press, 2018). While the Premier League was said to have ‘no plans’ to implement a Rooney Rule equivalent in June 2020 (Ames & Steinberg, 2020), in October 2020, the FA launched the Football Leadership Diversity Code, which includes the requirement to interview at least one suitably qualified male and one suitably qualified female Black, Asian or minoritised ethnic candidate (FA, 2020). The Premier League itself, and clubs from across the Premier League, EFL, Barclay’s Super League and FA Women’s Championship adopted this code as founding signatories, thus agreeing to implement the Rule (FA, 2020).

These opening sections focussing on the history, aims, critiques and adoption of the Rooney Rule in English football offer valuable contextualisation for the following discussion and analysis. Before outlining the methodology and showcasing our empirical findings, however, the following section attempts to provide a critical insight into contemporary football fandom. This is paramount as it will further contextualise our findings and analysis.

## Football Fandom and Social Media: A New Platform for Hate?

English football harbours a history tainted by racism and hooliganism (Kilvington, 2017). During the 1960s, far-right racist and fascist political groups would campaign and distribute leaflets outside football stadiums in attempts to mobilise, and reify, young, white working-class men's racial fears (Fawbert, 2011). As more black and minoritised players succeeded on the pitch, stadiums throughout the 1970s and 1980s became intimidating and aggressive spaces as overt racism was routinely performed within football fan culture. Robinson (2008) notes that football became a societal mirror throughout the 1980s as many fans perceived black players with discontent as the United Kingdom grew ethnically diverse and economically unstable.

As social and cultural norms advanced, along with the implementation of the 1991 Football Offences Act, whereby indecent or racist chanting was made illegal, overt discrimination began to decline in the 'beautiful game' (Back et al., 2001). Yet, football's chequered past has always bubbled beneath the surface, and in recent years, overt expressions of racism in football have resurfaced (Kilvington, 2019b). The Home Office (2019) reported a 47 percent increase in football-related hate crimes in England and Wales during the 2018-2019 season. Of the 193 reports relating to hate speech, 79 percent were racist, which is a 51 percent increase on the previous season. Moreover, reports of hate speech have risen consecutively over the last seven seasons. But, while offline hate and abuse inside and outside of football is rising, we must acknowledge the unsettling fact that online discrimination is increasing at an alarming pace. Kick It Out (2015) reported that during the 2014-2015 season, 134,400 discriminatory posts across social media platforms were directed at EPL players and clubs, which averages 16,800 discriminatory posts every month. Moreover, a recent study commissioned by the PFA (2020) found that 43% of Premier League players involved in the study had 'experienced targeted and explicitly racist abuse on public Twitter' (p. 1). During the 2020-2021 season, with fans largely absent from the stadiums due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online racism directed at players has become a weekly, or even daily, news story with players including Paul Pogba, Marcus Rashford, Axel Tuanzebe, Anthony Martial, Ivan Toney, to name but a few, speaking out about the racist abuse they have received on social media platforms. This racism is overt, visible and clear and is rightly and quickly condemned by the players, key stakeholders and sports media. We are accustomed now, unfortunately, to these types of stories.

Yet, it is equally important to examine the more subtle, nuanced discourses of racism among football fan groups. In particular, rather than focus on 'trigger events' such as a player accidentally hitting the ball in their own goal, missing a penalty kick, or getting a red card which exacerbates the likelihood of online abuse, it is important to critically explore football fans' comments and conversations away from triggers by focussing on a critical case study, the Rooney Rule, across an extended period of time. Of course, we understand that the Rooney Rule itself, for some, can act as a trigger for 'knee-jerk' abuse. Analysing football fan responses to the Rule across an 18-month period allows for a deeper sociological look at contemporary understandings of racism and anti-racism in football, and beyond. In other words, this research is interested in gauging fans' perceptions of structural racism and anti-racist action.

For Kilvington (2021), the nature of communication differs between offline and online spaces so greatly that factors including anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination and rapidity encourages disinhibition which thus exacerbates the frequency and intensity of online abuse. Due to the unregulated world of social media and the paucity of sanctions and other deterrents, online hate is sadly becoming normalised as online users are psychologically freed from their moral and ethical constraints that so often guide their practice and performances within the offline world. In turn, views once reserved for 'backstage' spaces are now being projected 'frontstage' for all to observe, illustrating that prejudicial views have certainly not disappeared (Goffman, 1959). In fact, social media have provided a new platform for hate and abuse to prosper (Cleland, 2014). Drawing on aspects of online ethnography through the method of asynchronous 'lurking' (Cleland, Dixon, & Kilvington, 2019), this investigation into football fans' reactions and responses to affirmative action policies can help us illuminate wider perceptions and understandings related to anti-racism inside and outside of football, therefore further illustrating the value and importance of sociological research.

## Method

The data gathered have been used to investigate issues around racial diversity in UK football management and how Twitter users discussed the implications of an NFL style Rooney Rule in the league pyramid. The data were obtained from Twitter's webpages using a Python library designed for open-source intelligence investigations, adapting a model developed by Chorley and Mottershead (2016). Twint<sup>3</sup> allows researchers to gather public-facing data that cannot be accessed via an API,<sup>4</sup> due to Twitter's rules which block historic data. A Twint search script was written to focus on the use of variations of the term 'Rooney Rule' within the body of Tweets published on the open web.

The initial pilot searched for uses of the term from 2009, when the rule was widened in the United States, to June 2020 to explore potential issues around terminology. A total of 118,990 tweets were gathered using these criteria. The date range was then narrowed to cover from January 2019 to June 2020 for a second pilot. This generated 22,672 tweets which had a reference to the search term during the trial period. A pilot analysis using the R programming language looked at the substantive subject of the tweets and what kind of language was used to describe the Rule.

These descriptions were primarily focussed on issues relating to the implementation of the Rule in the NFL. A second, more targeted search was conducted using the hashtag #rooneyrule to ensure that the discussion specifically related to the area of research under investigation. This was done because hashtags allow Twitter users to share information thematically by linking tweets together as part of a wider corpus of comments on a particular topic (Chang, 2010; Kim, Cho, & Kim, 2021).

This second exploration was focussed on the period from January 2019 to June 2020 and generated 7,600 tweets. This was significant as, during this time period, the EFL formally adopted the Recruitment Code into their rules and regulations (EFL, 2019). Further, the re-ignited focus on Black Lives Matter meant that the Rooney Rule came under renewed focus, with the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) calling for the EFL's Recruitment Code to be expanded (PFA, 2020). In order to reduce this sample so that qualitative analysis could take place, the tweets were filtered to include UK soccer terms (including EPL, Premier League, Premier, footy, EFL, Football League, England and Premiership) and to remove those focussing on American football terminology. These were then analysed for a user's location or country supplied in their biography to look at their locations where specified. This returned 790 tweets that could be clearly identified as fitting into the area of research. However, upon closer inspection, 585 tweets were omitted from the sample because the participants' intention was ambiguous. By this, we mean that the intentions of the author were unclear, or their opinion was not explicitly expressed, and thus it could not be included within the sample. In total, 205 posts were qualitatively analysed. The project team have decided to quote Twitter users' posts verbatim within this work because Twitter is a public platform and users generally post expecting to be judged, challenged or critiqued. Despite the ethical sensitivities around this, this standpoint is largely embraced and accepted (see The Association of Internet Researchers, 2019).

The research employed a qualitative content analysis approach which 'focuses on the characteristics of language as communication' and pays particular 'attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text' (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). A four stage approach, as outlined by Bengtsson (2016), was utilised which began with *decontextualisation*. This primary stage enables the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data. During this stage, a lengthy list of codes was generated. Second, *recontextualisation* allows the researcher to clarify whether the codes correspond to the project's aims and objectives. It is during this phase where irrelevant codes are dismissed. The third stage involves *categorisation*, and all categories are evaluated. A spider diagram was created to find common themes and connections. The final stage, *compilation*, is achieved when a document summarising themes and categories has been finalised. A total of eight categories were established across the 205 posts. Themes one to four broadly stem from an anti-racist position whether it be in support of the Rule or critiquing that it should do more to further address racism. Alternatively, themes five to eight display critiques of the policy, showcasing either overtly racist responses or thinly veiled racism which disregards whiteness and white privilege. The compilation phase saw the construction of these eight themes which will be divided into two distinct sections: *Articulations of the anti-racist position* and *the denial of structural racism*.

## Analysis

### Articulations of the Anti-racist Position

Encouragingly, over half of the responses were supportive of English football taking structural anti-racist action although many participants qualified their comments by offering scepticism and critiques of the policy. The sub-themes included within this overarching theme were an acknowledgement of structural racism in football; an agreement that meritocracy is a myth; suggestions that the policy could go further (and beyond football) and an awareness that the policy can be easily abused. Participants displayed a recognition of the paucity of minoritised ethnic managers and coaches in the professional game when compared with players. Some participants noted that the lack of diversity was 'disgraceful' while others commented that several black managers who had been sacked was the result of 'boardroom racism'. This latter point was noteworthy as an array of tweets argued that the Rule can be a powerful mechanism in resisting and challenging unconscious racial bias at boardroom level:

The Rooney rule doesn't guarantee a job to BAME candidates, it just gets them through the door. In effect it targets subconscious bias as well as more overt forms of racism. I'm in favour.

Too many people with unconscious racist tendencies patrol the corridors of power in football which is why this @EFL Rooney Rule initiative was needed in the first place.

Structural racism exists: to believe we live in a true meritocracy is naive imo. Implementing to try to tackle it is great. Will it work? Who knows?

These comments resonate with Putnam (1999, p. 27 in Cashmore & Cleland, 2011, p. 1599) who argues that white

board members tend to ‘pass over qualified blacks and hire whites with whom they are familiar ... and to conform to their long-held ideal about what a successful coach should be’. Bradbury (2018) adds that professional football clubs tend to overlook potentially problematic minoritised candidates, instead favouring ‘safe’ white options with whom ‘club owners and senior executive staff have greater levels of social, cultural and professional familiarity and comfort’ (p. 22). Considering that ‘less than 1% of senior governance positions at professional clubs, league associations, and national federations across Europe and at UEFA are held by minority staff’, it is somewhat unsurprising that whiteness is socially reproduced within hiring (Bradbury, 2018, p. 12). White privilege in the hiring and re-hiring of managers and coaches was thus acknowledged in the following tweet:

And yet white managers fail all the time and get re-hired? And we have no Rooney Rule in the UK. We should of course. And I stand by what I said. Only white people have the luxury of believing in a level playing field, it goes hand in hand with white privilege.

According to the LMA (2015), 49.1% of all managers manage only once compared with 64.3% of Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic managers who manage only once. Rather than opening the doors to minoritised ethnic personnel, the current, and growing, pool of white managers are statistically more likely to be employed and re-employed. The LMA (2015) also note that black managers are more likely to be sacked sooner in comparison to white managers. Regan and Feagin’s (2017) research on the experiences of black head coaches in the American National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) mirrors this trend as they found that black coaches were terminated significantly sooner than their white counterparts, despite showing no statistical differences in performance.

Participants also suggested that the Rooney Rule was not sufficient, and that affirmative action should go beyond this policy – claims that relate to wider critiques of liberal diversity initiatives that serve power interests rather than challenge them. Our critiques of the Rooney Rule and how it can be bypassed, which was discussed earlier, were highlighted by several participants:

I don’t necessarily agree with the Rooney rule if I’m completely honest. I can see why it would be a good idea but there’s probably ways to ... get around it.

In practice it can give management the excuse that they are doing something while making no real change and so hinders real progress.

These tweets are supportive of anti-racist action but are simultaneously critical of the policy as it can be abused too easily. These views resonate with a number of participants who argued that the Rooney Rule is merely a ‘box ticking’ exercise which essentially works to ‘paper over the cracks’. One tweeter advocated for ‘long-term [anti-racist] approaches ... involving all stakeholders in power,’ while another welcomed the policy but labelled it as ‘lip service’. These critiques are poignant and valid as during the policy’s first season, 123 academy jobs were listed on the EFL website but the EFL received data relating to just 76 of these jobs. In response, former chair of Kick It Out, Lord Herman Ouseley stated: ‘For maximum effectiveness, [The Rooney Rule] would have to be backed up by penalties and sanctions for non-compliance... clubs have got away with doing little or nothing to achieve fair outcomes’ (in BBC Online, 2017). If clubs and enforcers are able to bypass this policy, it is unlikely to have a significant impact in the game and therefore sanctions can help ensure it is uniformly adopted and adhered to. Crucially, if stakeholders similarly perceive the Rule as ‘box ticking’ and ‘tokenistic’ and can navigate seamlessly without penalty, then the policy will become redundant and discarded. With greater sanctioning, alongside education, the policy may be taken more seriously thus enhancing its efficacy.

## **The Denial of Structural Racism**

Less than half of the total tweets analysed rejected anti-racist movements in sport and beyond. The sub-themes included accusations of ‘reverse racism’ and positive discrimination; the belief that success is always based on talent, hard work and merit; suggestions that minoritised ethnic managers and coaches are simply underqualified or less interested in pursuing such careers; and calls that this policy panders to a hyper-sensitive, ‘politically correct’ and ‘woke’ culture. One of the most potent themes inferred is that the Rule is itself ‘racist’ and that white people are increasingly victimised by contemporary anti-racist policies. Rather than ‘re-addressing the balance’, the following tweets fail to acknowledge the existence of racism and white privilege as many of the tweets implicitly assume that minoritised ethnic candidates are underqualified and underserving of potential job roles.

How do we combat racism? Let’s have a policy that’s racist in itself. #RooneyRule

So they say managers can’t get jobs because of the colour of their skin, so we introduce a rule so that they get interviewed because of the colour of their skin.



So is the Rooney rule racist then? That is positive discrimination based on race alone.

Other participants labelled the policy ‘ridiculous’ and ‘an absolute joke’. Lusted (2017), whose research assessed the equality consensus in sport, examined online forum responses concerning the Rooney Rule in English football but prior to its implementation, finding that many responses demonstrated anger towards the policy citing that it advocated inequality. For Lusted (2017), rejecting the Rooney Rule ‘gives little recognition to the existence of underlying disadvantages’ (p. 53) that some groups may face in competing for coaching and management jobs. In other words, ‘by downplaying or denying the indecencies of racism, it exonerates those accused of engaging in such acts’ (Kilvington, 2016, p. 120). In this rejection of the policy, some participants claimed that minoritised ethnic communities are now privileged at the expense of white groups:

Black people in today’s society are given MORE privilege than any other demographic. Look at the Rooney rule in football, clubs MUST interview a Black candidate for a job whether or not they have qualifications or experience, just because of their skin colour.

People go on about BAME people not wanting to be labelled or treated different and all this s\*\*\*e. Saying 1 black guy needs to be interviewed for a manager’s job is basically labelling them. The Rooney rule can f\*\*k off.

This staunch rejection and dismissal of the Rooney Rule arguably stems from the mythical belief that sport, more so than other sphere in sociocultural life, is meritocratic within its fabric (Hylton, 2013; Kilvington, 2016; Lusted, 2017). These influential meritocratic ideas illustrate the role of the individual in controlling their sporting destiny and can downplay attention of the social structures which have the capacity to grant and deny entry to sporting opportunities. This constructs a natural order whereby individuals are seen to control their destinies and are therefore responsible for their achievements in sport – free from social barriers or influences. Meritocracy is commonly linked with ‘colour-blindness’, whereby sport is perceived as intrinsically open and accessible, denying the existence of racialised inequalities and ignoring the significance ‘race’ plays in shaping people’s experiences (Bimper, 2015). Moreover, it serves to elude a focus on the racialised power arrangements that can exist in sport, including in sport coaching contexts, where white people dominate and minoritised people are often under-represented and excluded (Bradbury, 2018). Despite this, the following tweets advocate the meritocratic position as they assume that football is a level-playing field and success or failure is purely the result of hard work, determination and talent.

This Rooney Rule is surely a joke? Are we really living in a world where you are interviewed based on your ethnicity? Surely if an ethnic individual was the best candidate for a job they would get it?

I’m dead against the Rooney rule, not because of the race side of things. But just don’t understand the purpose of it, if they’re good enough, they’ll get the interview/job.

If a white coach is better than a black coach, why wouldn’t you employ the white coach? Just like players. You chose the player on ability, not the colour of their skin. Black, white or brown, ability over skin colour. Stick the Rooney Rule up your ass.

An undercurrent of such views illustrated a tendency to ‘blame the blamed’. In dismissing structural racism, some participants claimed that the under-representation of black managers and coaches was due to a lack of talent rather than racism.

This Rooney rule – how many black or Asian managers are out there that are top draw? Ok, what’s the ratio of white and ethnic minority managers that even have badges? My point is will the white manager lose his place because he is white.

[There are] problems with the rule being applied in the EFL. The need was far more imperative there [NFL]. At the end of the day I didn’t agree with Hughton [black manager] going [being sacked], I’d love more BAME managers but come on, the list of real quality appears to be limited.

Shifting the blame onto excluded groups themselves (or another country or sport) is another way in which anti-racist action can be criticised and resisted. This correlates with Kilvington’s (2016) research on the exclusion of British South Asian communities in English football as footballing gatekeepers often take aim at the British South Asian ‘insular culture’ and their perceived lack of interest in football, as well as their weaker ‘physical frame’ (Kilvington, 2012), in order to make sense of and justify the under-representation. Similarly, as the above tweets demonstrate, by alleging that minoritised coaches do not ‘even have [coaching] badges’ or that the talent pool is ‘limited’, it negates the need for action which helps protect the racial status-quo. While alluding to ‘talent’ offers a subtle rejection or dismissal of anti-racist action, the following tweets are more explicit:

Right, it's plain and simple, if a black/white/yellow/blue manager doesn't get a job, it's probably cos they're not good enough! Got nothing to do with the colour of skin! PC gone mad again!

It's 2019 now you know they have to introduce the Rooney Rule just to keep the snowflakes quiet. RIP to Bond now.

Both posts are emblematic of an array of tweets which displayed overt hostility towards the Rule, claiming that such policies are symptomatic of a hyper-sensitive politically correct culture. This backlash against anti-racist responses denies the existence of racialised power structures inside and outside sporting contexts. The former tweet once again illustrates the hegemonic notion that sport is deeply meritocratic while the latter tweet goes further, criticising wider calls for equality and diversity by suggesting that the next James Bond actor might be black, a role that is considered characteristically British (meaning white) at its core. In other words, minoritised ethnic communities are perceived by some to be taking opportunities away from white people as a result of their 'race' leading to 'reverse racism' accusations. Put simply, policies such as the Rooney Rule have a tendency to be considered unjust, unfair and unwarranted which leads to a backlash (Lusted, 2017; Kilvington, 2019a).

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored contemporary anti-racist approaches within sport and has focused on capturing and analysing football fans' response to the implementation of the Rooney Rule in English professional football. In parallel with Lusted's (2017) findings, we report similar results as the policy has divided fans. Encouragingly, a little over half of the sample welcomed anti-racist action, but the thematic analysis demonstrated a critical undercurrent which judged the Rooney Rule to be a 'light touch' and too easy to bypass. For some, additional policies and action is required if football's key stakeholders are to signal their true commitment to challenging structural racism in football. Conversely, many tweets in the sample were vehemently opposed to the policy, arguing that it is 'reverse racism' and panders to the 'woke' culture. These responses, which offered a combination of subtle and explicit racist rebuttals, were largely framed within a meritocratic and colour-blind lens thus negating the insidiousness of structural racism.

The internet provides researchers with an opportunity to gauge fans' immediate and unfolding reactions to developments in the 'beautiful game'. However, our methodology contained a number of limitations. First, our sample only included Twitter responses – a platform which has been the focus of many studies to explore online hate and abuse because of the ease of access in 'data scraping' when compared with other sites such as Instagram and Facebook (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Second, the sample size was considerably reduced between the pilot search and the final sample. Yet, qualitative thematic analysis is less concerned about sample size and more interested in rich and deep qualitative analysis. It must also be highlighted once again that the overall results within the sample were relatively binarised. In filtering the tweets to ensure they were directly relevant to English football, we omitted a large number of tweets which referred to the Rooney Rule. To offer some nuance, we analysed the thread of three news articles on Twitter which focused on the policy within the 18-month timeframe. Although this analysis was excluded from our sample, it is worth noting that almost three-quarters of responses tended to be critical of the Rooney Rule and anti-racist action in general. Despite some posts being more explicitly racist within these threads, the overall codes generally reflected those found within our sample. Third, the majority of our 18-month Twitter sample preceded the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, and due to the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, there has been a heightened understanding and consciousness around structural racism which may have impacted on the online responses. On the other hand, online hate and abuse has exploded during the COVID-19 pandemic meaning that fans might be more emboldened now to display their 'true', concealed and 'backstage' feelings publicly on social media (Kilvington, 2021).

We propose that further research should investigate potential shifts in attitudes towards anti-racist action in sport since the Black Lives Matter movement has gained considerable traction in recent times. Moreover, we suggest that future research endeavours should attempt to explore fan responses and behaviours across different social media platforms. Lusted (2017) examined Rooney Rule discussions on online forums while we explored Twitter, but how do such conversations differ on Reddit, Instagram, Facebook and Tik Tok? And, how can we use these investigations to further critically understand contemporary football fan cultures and movements in the context of anti-racism? Finally, we would welcome future research that investigates how football, and the sport media, can better articulate what affirmative action is and why it is necessary within sport.

We have illustrated that meritocracy and colour-blindness have been utilised to dismiss positive action approaches. If fans, and football's workforce who are supposed to enforce and adhere to the Rule, do not understand it, then its success will always be questionable. These findings could be used to help shape educational material to assist in people's understanding of racism, structural racism and positive action strategies. Like some of the tweeters involved in this study, we welcome the Rooney Rule and the newly implemented Diversity Code, but argue that these policies must be part of a wider anti-racist framework while clubs who abuse such policies should be held accountable and

sanctioned.

## Five Key Readings

- (1) Cunningham, G. (2020). The under-representation of racial minorities in coaching and leadership positions in the United States. In S. Bradbury, J. Lusted, & J. van Sterkenburg (Eds.), *'Race', ethnicity and racism in sports coaching* (pp. 3–21). London: Routledge.  
Cunningham's chapter critically discusses institutional racism within coaching and leadership positions within sport in the United States. He explores macro-, meso- and micro-level factors to illustrate the complexities surrounding institutionalised racism in sport.
- (2) Duru, N. J. (2008). The Fritz Pollard Alliance, the Rooney Rules, and the quest to 'level the playing field' in the National Football League. *Virginia Sports and Entertainment Law Journal*, 7(2), 179–197.  
Duru's article firstly summarises the history of racial inequality within the NFL in the United States, detailing both the racial exclusion and racial re-integration seen in its development. Duru then provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the Rooney Rule and the Fritz Pollard Alliance. He offers a consideration of the practical application of the Rooney Rule and concludes that the Rule has been a success in increasing diversity throughout the League.
- (3) Feagin, J., & Elias, S. (2013). Symposium on rethinking racial formation theory: A systemic racism critique. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36(6), 931–960. Feagin and Elias' article attempts to theoretically outline systemic racism and offers a critique of related theories such as Racial Formation Theory (RFT). Although acknowledging the contribution and influence of RFT, the authors note that it fails to adequately account for layered complexities and institutionalised operations within the United States. The article is an excellent read for those wanting to theoretically grapple with institutional and systemic racism.
- (4) Kilvington, D. (2021). The virtual stages of hate: Using Goffman's work to conceptualise the motivations for online hate. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(2), 256–272.  
Kilvington's article critically examines the motivational factors encouraging online hate speech. He notes that anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination and instantaneous responses encourage online hate and abuse. Kilvington draws on Goffman's work on the performative self and re-models it to help understand online communication and derogation.
- (5) Lusted, J. (2017). Understanding the varied responses to calls for a 'Rooney Rule' in English Football. In D. Kilvington & J. Price (Eds.), *Sport and discrimination* (pp. 44–57). London: Routledge.  
Lusted's chapter employs the 'equality consensus' to understand the interpretations levelled towards the Rooney Rule in English football. Therefore, formal, liberal and radical approaches to social equality within football are critically explored, and Lusted argues that understanding these three positions may lead to less resistance around anti-racist policies and practices.

## Notes

1. The term minoritised is used throughout this chapter to refer to a person or groups of people from 'racial', ethnic and/or religious backgrounds that are differentiated from a perceived 'white' majority. It is used in preference to other terminology, notably, 'minority', as it reflects the socially constructed process by which indicators such as skin colour have become racialised, leading to some people receiving less access to power, representation and resources than others (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017).
2. The three professional leagues below the Premier League.
3. Twint uses Twitter's own search operators to scrape tweets using set parameter such as specific users, topics, hashtags and more <https://github.com/twintproject/twint>.
4. <https://www.infoworld.com/article/3269878/what-is-an-api-application-programming-interfaces-explained.html>.

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