

One event, very different interpretations

The case study of the AC Sparta Praha vs. Rangers FC football match coverage in Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech media

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Abstract

Based on a mixed method approach (content analysis and CDA), this article examines the media coverage of a football game between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC, played in Prague in the autumn of 2021, that was followed by heavily mediated discussion regarding the controversial booing of Rangers FC player Glen Kamara, who was sent off from the game after having been given a red card due to a pair of fouls. The audience in attendance was accused of Kamara's racist abuse, but the UEFA later decided that there was insufficient evidence of racism at the match. This case study focuses on the media coverage in Scottish, Czech, and UK nationwide media, as well as related discussions on Twitter. We revealed competing constructions of reality depending on diverse interpretations of the facts and lack of intercultural understanding.

Keywords

Football, sports journalism, race, ethnicity, content analysis, discourse analysis

Introduction

Much has been written about the sports media construction of reality and its impact on audience reality perception (e.g., Hall, 2001; Hughes et al., 2017; Kertcher, 2021; Theberge, 1993). Still, in the case of controversial situations encompassing nationalism or ethnicity (O'Donnell, 1994), the difference in media coverage and the construction of its meaning for the audience in various national settings can be striking. This article deals with the media coverage of UEFA Europa League football match between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC, played in Prague on September 30, 2021 with a result 1:0. The match caused great debate about whether the audience, made up entirely of children 14 and younger, had behaved in a racist manner when they booed Glen Kamara (who was given a red card in the match for a pair of fouls).

The specific position of this event was caused by two reasons. Firstly, only children up to 14 years were allowed to watch the match at the stadium because Sparta had closed attendance to the adult fans due to their previous racist misconduct in the match in UEFA Champions League with AS Monaco FC. Secondly, in the previous Rangers FC match with another Czech team SK Slavia Praha, the Slavia goalkeeper's skull bone was broken by Kemar Roofe (who later received a 4-game punishment from UEFA), a defender Ondřej Kúdela was banned from UEFA for 10 matches due to the racial abuse of Glen Kamara, and Kamara himself received a 3-game-punishment for attacking Kúdela in a tunnel after the match. Rangers FC were also financially penalised for the team's improper conduct. Therefore, a game between Sparta and Rangers was under close media scrutiny from the very beginning.

In recent years, various authors (e.g., Frandsen et al., 2022; Mauro, 2020) have been calling for the necessity of mega-events analysis, but also a shift of the analytical attention to the smaller-scale remarkable events empowered by the digital environment. Even though this game was not a global sports event, it is an interesting example of an international sports event of medium importance that, in a digital age, can have the impact of a remarkable one due to the "history" behind the event and a controversial situation happening at the stadium. The media, team, and fans' information spread at breakneck speed, and its interpretation creates another dimension of the situation.

The aim of the analysis of 221 texts from the online versions of the Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech newspapers, plus 742 tweets and reactions (in English and Czech), was to map the creation and development of the media portrayal of the event in relevant countries. Formally, the case was closed by the statement issued by UEFA on October 15, 2021, that "there was insufficient evidence of racism or discriminatory conduct at the match" to open disciplinary proceedings against Sparta (UEFA, 2021).

This article perceives the topic through the lens of media constructionism and is grounded in sports communication studies focused on issues connected to nationalism, ethnicity, and racism in both the media content and audience reactions (e.g., Cleland, 2014; Farrington et al., 2015; Kilvington & Price, 2019; Pantti et al., 2019; Price et al., 2013).

Through the mixed method approach (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011), using both quantitative content analysis for quantification of topics and sources in traditional media and Twitter, and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995) of traditional media discourse, we aim to answer two main research questions: How did the constructions of the match between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC and the following events differ in the Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech media? How were the media constructions of the match and following events perceived by Twitter users? We are interested in the main topics, sources, complexity, and development of the information as well as different constructions of meaning and national narratives.

Theoretical framework

Media construction of reality

The constructivist paradigm derives its origin from the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), influenced by many other sociologists, e.g., Alfred Schütz (1967) or William Isaac Thomas (1928). A perception of media as active participants in the process of meaning creation allows us to search for various interpretations of the very same event. As Gamson et al. (1992) put it, media discourse offers a possibility for various social actors to present competing constructions of reality. This perspective has become the dominant paradigm for the analyses of mediated events and topics involving these competing discourses.

In sports communication studies, the constructivist paradigm refers chiefly (but not exclusively) to the issues of race/ethnicity, gender (Hughey & Goss, 2015; Kane et al., 2013; Luque & van Sterkenburg, 2022; Wright & Clarke, 1999), or their combination. According to Wright and Clarke (1999, p. 227): “Media representations of sport are particularly powerful in naturalising and normalising hegemonic meanings about the body and social relations”. Razak and Joseph (2021) apply a term *misogynoir* (anti-Black misogyny) for a mainstream media discourse surrounding four-time Grand Slam winner, professional tennis player Naomi Osaka. On the other hand, Razak and Joseph (2021) highlight a disruption of this dominant narrative via social media.

It has been noted that “it is mainly the rise and evolution of (mass) media which has strongly reduced the importance of ‘physical presence in the experience of people and events’” (Meyrowitz, 1985, as cited in Van den Bulck, 1999, p. 7). This has been further amplified by opportunities offered via online and social media, leading general audiences as well as journalists themselves who were not physically present at the event, more than ever, to anchor their opinion in mediated symbolic reality, which allows the more persuasive from the competing constructions of reality to dominate the media discourse.

When thinking about possible influences on the construction of mediated reality, it is vital to consider journalists’ and audiences’ biases (McQuail, 2013), both conscious and unconscious. As McQuail (2013, pp. 112–113) reminds, a bias can be caused by, e.g., geo-

graphic and cultural/linguistic factors, the consideration of some nations or people/actors to be powerful, and the other peripheral, framing, and stereotyping – or individual as well as institutional – values and ideologies.

Nationalism and racism in football media coverage and audience reactions

The issues of nationalism and racism have been thoroughly addressed in the Western European and the U.S. press, in social media as well as in scholarly journals, partially in reaction to societies' shift towards multiculturalism, a necessity to cope with the colonial past and many years of institutionalised racism in sport and sports media (Jacobs, 2022).

As Farrington et al. (2015) or Hughey and Goss (2015) describe, the media have been stereotyping athletes of colour for many decades, due to the white supremacy belief system. Media discourse has been replicating, among others, a powerful narrative of natural black athletic superiority leading to the misconceptions that black people can succeed only through sports or that there is not enough hard work or thinking behind their success, merely genes and natural abilities. While white athletes have been a norm (Dyer, 1997, as cited in Farrington et al., 2015), anyone “deviant” from this norm has been considered the Other. The same applies to sports journalistic discourse regarding sports events where athletes compete internationally, representing their countries. Then, the stereotypes of other nationalities, used also to downplay their achievements in comparison to the national, “our” norm, appear in the media content (Delgado, 2003; Farrington et al., 2015; Luque & van Sterkenburg, 2022; O'Donnell, 1994).

Even though the situation has been improving, problematic cases still exist, especially within the polarising online environment (Kilvington & Price, 2019). Due to its enormous popularity, football stands at the forefront of media and audience interest, and the incidents happening in its games raise the greatest discussions and analytical concerns. Cable et al. (2022) even argue that despite the improvement of the atmosphere at UK football stadiums following the implementation of the 1991 Football Offences Act, the situation has been again “on a downward trajectory as overt racism, and other forms of discrimination in football, and wider society, is increasing” (Cable et al., 2022, p. 881).

As Cleland (2014) proved with a discourse analysis of more than 500 posts on two prominent UK association football message boards, the online environment has “allowed racist thoughts to flourish [...], in particular by rejecting multiculturalism and Islam through the presentation of whiteness and national belonging and an outright hostility and resistance toward the Other” (2014, p. 415). At the same time, he points out that “the majority of posts that contained some form of racist discourse were openly challenged” (2014, p. 415). However, online racist abuse worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic because of stadiums' closure (Cable et al., 2022).

The booing of Glen Kamara in the respective game resembles an affair from the English Premier League described in Cable, Kilvington, and Mottershead's 2022 paper. After a controversial sports situation on the field in a game against Tottenham, Chelsea's

player Antonio Rüdiger reported to referees that he had heard racist chanting from the audience. The organisers asked the audience to stop and after the match investigated the allegations, even cooperating with police and professional lip readers (Cable et al., 2022), but nothing was ever proven. Nevertheless, Tottenham issued a supportive and understanding statement for Rüdiger's complaint.

As described by the authors and found in the online discussions, this statement was accepted differently by various groups of people, some arguments almost mirroring those from the analysed media in our sample. Some posters accused Rüdiger of playing the racism card just to transfer attention to an issue other than his behaviour, some of them supported him due to previous racist abuse (Cable et al., 2022).

Regarding the situation in the Czech Republic, Rudwick and Schmiel (2023), in their analysis of online discourse on kneeling in football and the Black Lives Matter movement, identified three disturbing narratives in the discussion posts involving certain types of self-victimisation. All of them are connected to the perspective that, as Czechia did not have any colonies in the past, it is in no way guilty of causing the suffering of black people and has nothing for which its citizens, particularly the athletes, should feel guilty. Rudwick and Schmiel (2023) point out that these feelings are caused by a misunderstanding of these campaigns' aim and meaning. All the above-mentioned concepts are useful for the following analysis of AC Sparta Praha versus Rangers FC match's coverage in Scottish, Czech, and UK nationwide media.

Methods

Research questions and data selection

Considering the complexity of analytical results presented in the researched literature and various possible meanings of media content, according to different media constructions of reality, two explorative research questions were posed:

RQ1: How did the constructions of the match between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC and the following events differ in the Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech media?

RQ2: How were the media constructions of the match and following events perceived by Twitter users?

To answer these research questions, we applied the mixed method (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011) approach. Firstly, we adopted quantitative content analysis that allowed us to detect and count the topics and identify the sources both in traditional media and Twitter. For an in-depth understanding of the discourse imprinted into the traditional media, we further used critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; Fowler, 1991). The adoption of the aforementioned methods in the sequential explanatory design was proven to be effective in previously published studies (e.g., Olsen, 2022; Witschge, 2008).

The observation period runs from September 23, 2021 to October 22, 2021, which includes one week prior to and after the match, which took place on September 30, 2021. This allowed the previews and reactions to be incorporated.

Keywords “Sparta” and “Rangers” were searched for in the media-monitoring services, online versions of print media themselves, and in an advanced Twitter search. The results of the search process were then considered according to their relevance. In the case of tweets, only items published by accounts managed by Czech, Scottish, or British entities were included.

The context of the match influenced the selection of the media. The sample consisted of 229 articles published on the online versions of the Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech newspapers (we included all the original articles from media of various political leaning, both serious and tabloid), plus 742 tweets and reactions (in English and Czech) were further analysed. The Czech, Scottish, and UK nationwide tweets and reactions were selected from the machine-drawn and manually cleared collection for the analysis; hence, the differentiation was made on the basis of the declared nationality of the account and the geolocation. The tweets published by the analysed media were also included.

Content analysis

In this study, the content analysis of the traditional and social media in the selected countries is used to uncover which information sources are being drawn upon by the authors, and if they cited the provided facts and statements directly or paraphrased them. As stressed by Kilvington et al. (2022), the contextualisation of the coded content is essential. Besides the number of quotations and paraphrases, we also considered the types of sources and their origin.

In the case of social media, quantitative content analysis was the only method applied because of the number of tweets and reactions recorded by various sources. The results of the coding are able to provide insight into the Twittersphere, and possibly uncover the patterns in the users' reactions to the topic. Moreover, the efficiency of the content analysis was proven in the previous research of online racial abuse (e.g., Cable et al., 2022; Farrington et al., 2015). Due to this fact, the coding book took into account more contextual variables, such as authorship, language, and covering, or mentioning the topic of sport, racism, children, or politics (Kilvington et al., 2022).

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis can be conducted in various ways; this article follows Fairclough's (1995, 2010) and Fowler's (1991) approach. It perceives discourse (re-)production through the language being used and its contextual and ideological frames, even though it acknowledges the multidimensional essence of this process on the level of text, process of production and interpretation (discourse practices), and institutional/societal level (Fairclough, 2010).

The power of the language and the presentation of selected parts of any event strongly contribute to the construction of meaning and, with the information shortcuts, can fuel misinterpretation and hatred in sensitive cases. In correspondence with our previous research on racism in the discussions of sports articles in the Czech media (Fialová et al., 2016), we devoted attention to Fairclough's (1995) scale of presence of any topic (ranging from absent to foregrounded), and the difference between represented and representing discourse in our analysis (that can be best mapped in this case by giving the attention to a variety of information sources, their country of origin, and parts of their statements which made it into the media texts).

Findings

Czech, Scottish, and UK nationwide newspapers published 221 original articles concerning the football clubs AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC in the selected period on their online platforms. The vast majority (203 texts, representing 92% of the chosen sample) cited at least one relevant source (see Table 1). The rest, without any quotation or paraphrase, were, for example, the articles announcing the match before the kick-off, the reports describing the game, including the critical moments like the only goal or red card and the atmosphere at the stadium (praising the children cheering or criticising the young supporters), or the commentaries with personal opinions. Approximately every third or fourth article (from 28% in the Czech Republic to 35% in Scotland and 36% in the UK) referred to just one source, most of which corresponded to the media's country of origin.

Table 1: Total number of published articles and number of texts with/without sources

	Total number of articles	Articles with at least one quotation or paraphrase	Articles without any mentioned sources
Czech media	99	90 (91%)	9 (9%)
Scottish media	97	88 (91%)	9 (9%)
UK nationwide media	25	25 (100%)	0 (0%)

While the number of articles published in the countries of competing clubs' origin seems approximately the same (99 texts in the Czech Republic versus 97 in Scotland), the Czech journalists referred to more sources than the Scottish reporters (287 versus 185). The proportion of domestic and foreign sources varied; however, specific national priority was trackable in all three cases (visualised in Table 2).

The Czech, Scottish, and UK media more or less favoured the sources from their respective countries. The Czech news websites cooperating with daily newspapers preferred the native respondents in 52% of cases, and 46% of quotations or paraphrases were from the UK. The difference became even more evident in the Scottish and the UK

nationwide media. The opinions of Rangers FC, their manager, players, or the other actors from the British Isles appeared more often in the Scottish and UK nationwide press than the Czech statements (55% versus 37% in Scotland; 60% versus 33% in UK nationwide media).

Besides the respondents from both competing countries, the media also cited the official statements of the UEFA, considered in this research as a neutral source. The UEFA intervened in the case as the international sports authority: Its officers investigated the potential racist abuse. This neutral perspective was represented among the other sources from 2% to 8%.

Table 2: Origin of sources cited in published articles

	Total number of cited sources	Sources from the UK	Sources from the Czech Republic	Neutral sources (UEFA)
Czech media	287	133 (46%)	149 (52%)	5 (2%)
Scottish media	185	102 (55%)	68 (37%)	15 (8%)
UK nationwide media	55	33 (60%)	18 (33%)	4 (7%)

Focusing in detail on the type of sources in the published articles (presented in Table 3), four significant situations were identified. First, all the selected media referred mainly to the official club communication. They differed on who is the most frequently used source, whether it is a coach/manager, a player, or official statements released by PR departments. Nevertheless, in total, Czech media cited these sources in 44% of all cases, the Scottish in 45%, and the UK in 51%.

Second, Glen Kamara's lawyer Aamer Anwar, who had already accused the children of racist behaviour during the match, was a significantly used source. His quotations and paraphrases, mostly cited from his Twitter profile, represented 12% and 14% of all Scottish and Czech media sources. In the British nationwide media, it was even 20%. Third, this situation had a social and political dimension; the media most frequently quoted the

Table 3: Type of sources in published articles

	Club official	Coach/manager	Player	Lawyer	Politician	Other media	UEFA	National sports authority	Anonymous	Other sources
Czech media	57 (20%)	52 (18%)	17 (6%)	40 (14%)	38 (13%)	32 (11%)	5 (2%)	23 (8%)	4 (1%)	19 (7%)
Scottish media	24 (13%)	37 (20%)	23 (12%)	22 (12%)	26 (14%)	3 (2%)	15 (8%)	16 (9%)	5 (3%)	14 (7%)
UK media	25 (46%)	0	3 (5%)	11 (20%)	8 (15%)	0	3 (5%)	4 (7%)	1 (2%)	0

Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jakub Kulhánek, who summoned the UK Ambassador. Finally, the Czech media more frequently than others referred to articles published in Scotland or generally in the UK. The Czech journalists criticised their foreign colleagues, as the discourse analysis explains.

Czech media's resolute defence of children and firm rejection of racism

The upcoming encounter between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC garnered substantial attention from the Czech media well in advance of the actual match, primarily due to its unconventional setting – a stadium solely occupied by children. The initial article pertaining to this match was published on the sports website iDnes.cz a full six days prior to the scheduled event, with a primary emphasis on the exclusive presence of children as the sole potential spectators (Novák, 2021). In addition to this topic, the Czech media outlets under observation reported previous incidents of racism perpetrated by fans of AC Sparta Praha. As a result, several journalists not only made references to the cup match but also brought attention to the issues prevalent in the Czech top competition.

Moreover, Czech journalists supplemented their coverage with additional information concerning Sparta's longstanding commitment to fighting racism. They highlighted the educational materials included in the pre-match magazine specifically designed for children. Both coaches, Pavel Vrba and Steven Gerrard, expressed their appreciation for the young fans prior to the game. Aamer Anwar, the lawyer representing Rangers' player Glen Kamara, advised Scottish fans against travelling to Prague, expressing concerns about their safety. As indicated on Sport.cz on September 18, 2021, Anwar expressed, "I hold concerns for the safety of individuals, be it players or fans, travelling to Prague" (ČTK, Sport.cz, 2021).

Subsequent to the match, the Czech media swiftly commended the vibrant atmosphere created by the schoolchildren in the stands, placing emphasis on their enthusiastic support. Dávid Hancko, the goal scorer, expressed his profound admiration for the extraordinary ambiance following the game, remarking, "It was a deeply moving experience. When I stepped onto the field, I was overcome with goosebumps. I am unsure why; perhaps it was the perfect energy emanating from the stands. I have never encountered anything quite like it" (krm, iSport.cz, 2021).

At the same time, the Czech media underscored that while the children whistled at Kamara, they attributed these expressions of disapproval to Kamara's previous altercation with Ondřej Kúdela during the Rangers' spring match against Slavia. From the outset, the media discourse in the Czech Republic linked the booing directed at Kamara to his lack of popularity and perceived unjust conduct. The notion of racism motivating the children's booing was solely ascribed to them by the quoted lawyer, Aamer Anwar, who accused the children of displaying unacceptable behaviour.

Although Aamer Anwar's statement and Steven Gerrard's criticism were quoted by the Czech media, they did not endorse this particular interpretation. However, Czech

Minister of Foreign Affairs Jakub Kulhánek wrongly translated a tweet from Scottish Football Association advisor Marvin Bartley. He tweeted that Bartley had equated children to rotten fruit, which was factually incorrect. In fact, Bartley tweeted: “In no way is this the fault of the CHILDREN because they’re behaving in a way they see adults do/encourage. What chance do they have when placed in a bowl with rotten fruit” (Bartley, 2021).

Czech journalists mediated Kulhánek’s translation without a correction, vehemently defended the children, and put forth the following arguments:

- The children’s cheering and whistling were deemed as normal expressions of dislike and disapproval, rather than signs of racism.
- Gerrard did not immediately address racism after the game and initially claimed to have not noticed anything, only to later change his stance.
- Gerrard and others were accused of deflecting attention from the Rangers’ poor performance by levying accusations of racism.
- The Czech media highlighted that Scotland itself grapples with racism, writing about a Scottish league match between Dundee United and Ross County.

As the situation developed, more emotional statements began to appear among the occasional balanced messages. The Czech media began to publish articles quoting from the Scottish media with the most radical views or picking out the most anti-child statements from articles, as evidenced by this headline: “Another Czech abomination! reporting in Britain on events at Sparta. Even the referee hurt Kamara, they write” (roj, Sport. cz, 2021). The Czech media demonstrated a notable selectivity in its negative portrayal of foreign news, noticeably omitting information regarding the critical stance taken by the mainstream media in the UK towards the Rangers’ performance and Kamara’s behaviour. Only a minority of articles attempted to explain the issue from more of a UK perspective and wrote about cultural differences and historical context.

Certain Czech media publications adopted a personal stance, employing terms such as “activist”, “dubious”, or even “psychopathic” to describe Aamer Anwar, while frequently highlighting his Pakistani background. Furthermore, journalists accused him of unfairly assigning blame to the young Sparta supporters despite his absence from the match. This implies they believed Anwar lacked sufficient evidence or first-hand knowledge to make such accusations, and this lack of evidence was potentially undermining the validity of his claims.

Similar criticism was directed at British journalists for making allegedly snap judgments without concrete evidence. The BBC television station was mentioned in particular. In an article by Jan Palička, Ondřej Kasík, the director of communications for AC Sparta Praha, expressed a highly critical opinion: “You find that the media, which we were given as an example in our media studies at university, absolutely do not respect the basic principles of journalistic work” (Palička, 2021). Journalist Jan Vacek drew a parallel between the case of Kamara’s booing and the situations experienced by some Czech play-

ers, when two archrivals face each other and play a derby: “The same emotions are raining down on Jan Bořil and Tomáš Malínský, just as similar sentiments are targeting Ladislav Krejčí Jr. at the Eden Arena”. He further described the atmosphere of the match as follows: “People in the Czech Republic just don’t like Kamara. Yes, it’s that simple” (Vacek, 2021).

As the discourse surrounding the incident extended into a wider societal dialogue, notable personalities such as the Prime Minister, Interior Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, lawyers, and experts on racism voiced their opinions.

Scottish media’s focus on the ongoing problems with racism

The Scottish media had already highlighted the topic of racism in connection with Czech football clubs in the game previews during the week before the concerned game. Most of these articles specifically mentioned the six-month-old case of the “shocking racist abuse of Rangers midfielder Glen Kamara by Slavia defender Ondřej Kúdela” (Halliday, 2021a), which had resonated strongly in the Scottish discourse and had been revived again as the game approached.

But when recalling this game, the Scottish media always used “alleged” for Kamara’s attack (if they mentioned it at all), while taking Kúdela’s abuse as a given – even though both players were later acknowledged as guilty by UEFA and punished. These articles also pointed out the recent misconduct of Czech fans, which was described in connection with a previous Champions League qualifier of Sparta versus AS Monaco FC, when midfielder Aurelien Tchouameni was a target of racist chants, claiming that “Sparta Prague have one of the longest and most depressing charge sheets for similar conduct by their fans down the years” (Halliday, 2021a).

After a warning from Glen Kamara’s lawyer, Aamer Anwar, who stated, concerning the Rangers visit to Prague, that “it will be dangerous for the players and the fans, I think it is a genuine risk to their lives” (McKay, 2021), Czech and former Rangers’ player Libor Sionko was quoted by *Daily Record*:

Players from both teams will focus on football, and what’s more, the incident happened against Slavia [...] What bothers me more is Kamara’s lawyer stirring up hateful passions over in Scotland [...] I don’t know if he really said: “Don’t go to Prague,” but it’s nonsense, the hysteria of a man who some have given space to talk to the media. (McKay, 2021)

Before the match, the Rangers’ manager, Steven Gerrard, expressed he was not worried that any further racist behaviour would occur (Jack, 2021), and his pronouncement was further supported by AC Sparta Praha’s player Ondřej Čelůstka, who insisted it would be wrong if the animosity between the Rangers and Slavia caused further acrimony during the upcoming match (Friel, 2021b).

Promptly after the game, the Scottish media discourse developed into the narrative of racist Czech children, and racist Czechs in general. Bringing phrases such as “vitriolic Glen Kamara abuse” (Friel, 2021a), “sickening racism storm in Prague” (Sports Hotline, 2021),

or “a nightmare in the toxic Prague environment” (Pirie, 2021), the immediate outcomes focused primarily on the alleged racist behaviour of the young Czech fans rather than the teams’ performance.

According to *Daily Record*, “the abuse of Kamara along with Kemar Roofe and some of the other black players in Gerrard’s side was clearly audible” (Berry, 2021), and the racist manners of the kids were also trackable – as one of the young fans was captured while holding up a poster displaying “Kúdela team” (Galloway, 2021), which the Scottish media automatically assessed as supportive of Kúdela’s racist misconduct from the last season. Even though the Rangers’ coach Steven Gerard admitted he was not aware of the booing during the game, he eventually stated that it made him “extremely disappointed – but not surprised” (Halliday, 2021b).

Kamara’s lawyer, Aamer Anwar, whose analysis shows to be one of the most quoted sources within this case, stated that racism was deeply rooted in the Czech Republic and the kids just “carried on the abuse” (Fisher, 2021b). Subsequently, the official statement of AC Sparta Praha – *Stop abusing our children!* – was fully published across the Scottish media landscape and was regarded as an escalating row from the Czech side. The reactions of the Czech government, namely Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jakub Kulháněk and Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamáček, included both calling for the end of the “disgusting attack [...] on Czech children and the Czech Republic in general” (Paton, 2021), to the previously mentioned tweet of Marvin Bartley being seen as a “bizarre twist” (Mahood, 2021).

A significant part of the discourse in the Scottish media included the perspective of influential figures, primarily former Rangers’ players, who perceived the targeting of Glen Kamara by schoolkids as “one of the most troubling incidents to have touched the Scottish game” (Jackson, 2021a). Rangers’ icon Ally McCoist highlighted in an interview for BT Sport Scottish Football Extra (subsequently taken over by *The Scottish Sun*) the danger Czech kids were exposed to when growing up in this country:

What really disturbs me is a group of schoolkids doing what they did last night. That actually terrifies me to be honest with you in this day and age. What learning must they be getting from their peers and their adults to do that? (Mahood, 2021)

Only 1 out of the 97 Scottish articles analysed admitted the manners of the school kids in the Sparta stadium might not have been racist in nature (Halliday, 2021c). However, it still pointed out that Kamara had been targeted by youngsters as a consequence of the previous clash with Slavia.

As the majority of the Scottish outputs had no doubt that the behaviour of the young audience was racist, the final decision of UEFA, claiming “there was insufficient evidence of racism or discriminatory conduct” during the game (UEFA, 2021), was considered inadequate, shocking, surprising, and above all, a failure. Some of the Scottish media agreed with Anwar’s statement that UEFA just gave a green light to racism (Jackson,

2021b), while reminding the readers once again of the recent racist violations committed by Kúdela or Czech soccer fans.

UK nationwide media discourse more based on facts and less on emotions

Contrary to the Czech and Scottish media coverage, the first articles in the UK nationwide media outlets were published after the match between Sparta and Rangers. The initial reactions to the match were, with the exception of *The Times*, *The Sun*, and *The Telegraph*, mainly about the sports side of the game. A good play of Sparta and the inability of Steven Gerrard's team to react to it were highlighted. Regarding the situation around Glen Kamara, *The Daily Mail* wrote:

Somewhat understandably, given his history with Sparta's rivals Slavia and the fact that he was disgracefully jeered by many of the 10,000 children in attendance here, the Finn did not look at ease but his ill-discipline was still inexcusable. (McGarry, 2021)

McGarry (2021) also described the atmosphere as very calm and without any louder audience support, using a metaphoric comparison:

In an atmosphere that felt more suited to a swimming gala as a consequence of UEFA permitting kids to fill the stands in the wake of a ban for racism, the [Rangers] game was open and error-strewn. (McGarry, 2021)

As the actual game passed further into the past, a noticeable change in the UK nationwide media discourse took place, with criticism of the Rangers' gameplay all but evaporating from the media outlets while a strong defensive position of Kamara appeared. At the same time, there was a marked rise in the labelling of the children's behaviour as racist. In general, there was a tendency to more balanced and neutral coverage than in Scottish or Czech media, almost all of the UK nationwide media, for example, quoted the AC Sparta Praha post-match statement without ironic comments; still, some bias revealing issues persisted.

Mainly, it was the same omitting (or avoiding) of the Scottish players' offences from the previous Rangers' match with SK Slavia Praha, as in the Scottish media discourse, but definitely not as frequent. Only some media outlets left this information out completely, e.g., *Morning Star* (Yousif, 2021; Morning Star, 2021) or *The Times* (Palmer, 2021). It was more about the slight shifts of meaning, as in the article written by Stewart Fisher for *The Sun*. Fisher (2021a) described the incident when Kemar Roofe was "accosted and labelled" by an unknown man at the airport: "Hey mate. Have you come to injure another goalie? Butchers from Glasgow". Fisher (2021a) then went on to explain that it was inadequate for what happened in the game against Slavia and did not mention the consequences for either the highly popular Czech goalkeeper Kolář (misspelling his name), nor Roofe: "The comment referred to Rangers' Europa League tie with Sparta's great rivals Slavia Prague earlier this year when Roofe was sent off for kicking goalkeeper Ondrej Kular in the head".

That UK nationwide press was only briefly engaged in the events after the game. After a few days, journalists lost their interest, as visible from the marked decline in media coverage when compared to the Czech or Scottish media. Additionally, reporting about the information surrounding the end of the case and UEFA's decision was almost invisible in the UK nationwide media discourse.

Contrast with traditional media discourse and topics on Twitter

Besides the traditional media, we were interested in Twitter and the way the topic evolved in an environment that has been perceived as more polarising. Table 4 shows that the majority of tweets related to the case were posted on Scottish accounts (67% of the total). Tweets were published almost exclusively in the users' native language. A slightly different approach was observed in content from the Czech Republic, where a significant part (22%, 23 tweets) was in English. In some cases, these tweets contained links to media with an international reach. Still, interestingly, more than half of the tweets in the English language published by Czech accounts were produced by ordinary users (not media, celebrity, or team profiles).

Table 4: Number of tweets and the language of the publication

	Total number of tweets	Language of tweets			
		Czech	English	Czech and English	French
Czech accounts	107	80 (75 %)	23 (21 %)	2 (2 %)	2 (2 %)
Scottish accounts	500	0	500 (100 %)	0	0
UK (nationwide) accounts	135	0	135 (100 %)	0	0

XY Twitter account = account established in XY country and managed by XY entity

Scottish users were most likely to share the external source of information (in 72% of tweets, 359 tweets out of 500), while Czech accounts were more reserved (42%, 45 out of 107). The vast majority of users added the source from their country of origin. In the Czech environment, compared to other countries, the topic was also expressed quite frequently (7%, 7 times) by politicians, for example, by the Czech Prime Minister or Minister of Foreign Affairs. In the UK Twittersphere as well in the Czech, ordinary users (47%, 64 tweets) led in the frequency of contributions over the media (36%, 49 tweets) and journalists (10%, 14 tweets). There was a different distribution of authorship for the Scottish accounts, with more than half of the postings coming from the media (54%, 270 tweets), while the ordinary users created 15% (76 tweets) of the content.

The most noteworthy result of the conducted analysis was the disparity between the interpretation of events on Twitter compared to their portrayal in traditional media

coverage. Of the sports content, the post-match case attracted the most attention in all countries, while the pre-match situation was the most intensively showcased by Scottish users (at 34%, often performance-related, but, e.g., *The Herald* tweeted: “Steven Gerrard in ‘no apprehension’ stance as Rangers boss is quizzed on Sparta Prague racism punishment”, or STVNews returns to Sparta’s punishment: “Rangers’ match against Sparta Prague will be played in front of schoolchildren after adults were banned due to racial abuse – and Steven Gerrard says his players have ‘no apprehension’ about the Europa League test”).

Especially at the beginning of the incident, the main battle in the traditional media was over racism and whether the audience’s behaviour towards Glen Kamara was or was not racist. Contrary to that, in 38% (tweets from nationwide UK accounts) up to 60% (tweets from Czech accounts) of posts, racism was not mentioned. Some Twitter posts were captured by the traditional media and referenced as sources of information or opinion (see Table 5). Typical tweets from ordinary citizens were, e.g., as follows:

AC Sparta Praha - Rangers FC 1:0 🏆 Attendance 10 000 kids 🧒 30. 9. 2021 #acs #acsparta #sparta #acspartapraha #spartapraha #1893 #acs1893 #groundhopping #groundhopper https://www.instagram.com/p/CUdMgAToAB8/?utm_medium=share_sheet. (Mottl, 2021)

Chastening night for Rangers against a fairly average Sparta Prague team. Another flat performance all round. Something collectively amiss. Not matching the levels of last year in quality and intensity. Bit of a bounce factor and a disrupted prep to the season possible reasons. (calummclurkin, 2021)

Table 5: Number of tweets and the relation to the mentioning of racism

	Total number of tweets	Racism rejected	Racism not proved	Racism discussed (both opinions presented)	Bad behaviour mentioned (e.g., booing)	Racism explicitly mentioned	Racism not mentioned
Czech accounts	107	22 (20%)	6 (6%)	7 (6%)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	64 (60%)
Scottish accounts	500	6 (1%)	16 (3%)	57 (11%)	82 (17%)	51 (10%)	288 (58%)
UK (nation-wide) accounts	135	4 (3%)	6 (4%)	11 (8%)	36 (27%)	27 (20%)	51 (38%)

XY Twitter account = account established in XY country and managed by XY entity

The different tendencies from those presented by traditional media also applied to the topic of “rotten fruit”, as Table 6 confirms. While in the traditional media much discussion focused on the actions of the children in attendance, both excusing and defending them, regarding the country of publication, the majority of relevant tweets discussed issues con-

nected to the game itself and/or explained their owners' positions in this case. Contrary to the traditional UK nationwide media coverage, information about the final UEFA decision was frequently mentioned on Twitter, such as in the case of Sky Sport News deputy producer Andrew Dickson (2021): "Following an investigation by an ethics and disciplinary inspector, UEFA have concluded there was 'insufficient evidence of racism or discriminatory conduct' at Sparta Prague v Rangers to warrant the opening of disciplinary proceedings against the Czech club".

Table 6: Number of tweets mentioning children

	Total number of tweets	Children mentioned	Children not mentioned
Czech accounts	107	41 (38 %)	66 (62 %)
Scottish accounts	500	77 (15 %)	423 (85 %)
UK (nationwide) accounts	135	41 (30 %)	94 (70%)

XY Twitter account = account established in XY country and managed by XY entity

Discussion and conclusion

As described by previous research (Cable et al., 2022; Cleland, 2014; Luque & van Sterkenburg, 2022), mediated reactions to any incidents occurring during sports events – above all football matches (due to the enormous popularity of this game) – can be full of emotions, stereotyping, nationalism, and even racism. Distinctions in their construction can be based on societal environment, affiliation to particular communities, or interested sides (Rudwick & Schmiedl, 2023). Dissimilar historic evolutions of the societies can be connected to different experiences, sensitivities, and perspectives regarding any societal issues, with various implications and standards for the media content production.

For our article, we set two research questions. The first one asked: How did the constructions of the match between AC Sparta Praha and Rangers FC and the following events differ in the Scottish, nationwide UK, and Czech media? UK nationwide media dedicated the least space to the event and, because of particular distance from the topic, were generally able to stick more to facts than emotions. Still, they mostly featured sources from the UK while underrepresenting voices from the Czech Republic, which cannot be explained by the language barrier, since the Czech official statements, as well as players' quotations, were issued in both Czech and English. This leads us back to Fairclough's (1995) difference between represented and representing discourse because, generally, Czech voices were more interpreted here than being given the power to speak for themselves. The almost invisible final decision of UEFA (2021), which found no racist behaviour or discriminatory conduct during the game, left an incomplete media picture (which was in contrast with the situation on Twitter).

The bias in the Czech media's umbrella discourse was characterised by defensive and protective formulations towards the children's behaviour and frequent publication of emotional stances against accusations of racism. The focus on the young audience added more emotions to the media discourse, especially when the word "children" was generally used in both Czech and English, not "youngsters" or "teenagers", who the present young people, according to the videos and photographs, mainly were. Children are usually the first to be protected and should be the pride and future of a nation. Therefore, their defence is always fiercer, and conversely, disappointment in their behaviour is even greater than in the case of adults.

Czech media insisted on their stance that the booing of Glen Kamara was because of his bad behaviour and unpopularity, which has nothing to do with his race. At the same time, the Czech media inflamed the situation by publishing quotations almost exclusively from the most radical Scottish and UK nationwide media, which only served to exacerbate the perception of foreign journalists as a more biased "Other". It was further supported by adoption and republishing of statements made by Marvin Bartley, which were incorrectly translated (changing the meaning) by Minister Kulháněk. Although this error in translation could have just been accidental due to the Minister's misunderstanding, it could also have been intentional, and journalists should be careful not to quote it with this semantic shift. Rudwick and Schmiedl (2023) touched on this previously in the analysis of the Czech media coverage of previous causes, where foreign interpretation of the issue was perceived as unjust and implementing extreme and "unhealthy" political correctness. It further deepened when a statement by UEFA (2021) was issued. Regarding the information sources' country of origin, voices from the Czech Republic partially prevailed, but the proportion to UK sources was the most balanced from the sample.

Understandably, Scottish media focused on the topic of racism from the outset, regarding the previous issue with racist abuse of Glen Kamara by another Prague football club player Ondřej Kúdela. On the other hand, even though both Kúdela and Kamara were found guilty of the misconduct by the UEFA and punished, when Scottish media referred to it, they always took Kúdela's abuse as a fact, while prefacing Kamara's involvement with the word "alleged". This highlights the bias (McQuail, 2013) in their approach to reporting on their own versus other players (Luque & van Sterkenburg, 2022). This was further accentuated by the sidelining of the third incident from the previous game in which a harsh penalty was meted out due to a broken skull bone suffered by SK Slavia Praha's goalkeeper. The construction of this past event in Scottish media shows a discourse practice described by Fairclough (1995). As in the case of Czech media, the selected parts of a story that fit comfortably into the pursued narrative were foregrounded, and the unfitting ones were made less salient or absent.

Media coverage after the match was then constructed as a story about proven racist abuse, which was also evident from the large usage (55%) of UK sources (dominated by Kamara's lawyer Amer Anwar and Rangers FC manager Steven Gerrard) and only 37% of

quotations from the Czech side. In contrast to how the Czech (and also UK nationwide) media outlets stressed how the poor performance of the Rangers FC directly contributed to their loss, Scottish media downplayed it. There were only a very few dissenting voices heard in the discourse that mentioned that racism is also an issue in Scotland, and the final statement of the UEFA was received with great disappointment as an unfair decision.

Quite interestingly, when considering the many polarising topics on Twitter, especially those offered in the Czech and Scottish media as well as previous research results (Cable et al., 2022; Cleland, 2014), the discussions and reactions did not fully follow traditional media discourse on either side of the conflict. To answer the second research question – How were the media constructions of the match and following events perceived by Twitter users? –, we analysed 742 tweets and reactions. The battle for the young audience was not as prominent there. Twitter served more as the platform for presenting the general public's own stance towards the quality of game and the situation itself, and even though the atmosphere was heated, it was not as contradictory as that of the traditional media.

It can be documented by statistics: While, e.g., only 1 text out of 97 published by Scottish newspapers did not mention racism, 58% of tweets from Scottish accounts did not mention it. Almost the same applies to the defending of children in the audience and the Czech context. While the traditional media were flooded by texts against the accusation of racism of the young audience, 62% of tweets from Czech accounts was not about children at all. The more polarising environment of traditional media can contribute to the “eventization” of the game, while fans on Twitter seemed to be more interested in football itself.

To sum up, racism and any other kind of discrimination violating human rights do not belong in sports and should be banned, not tolerated. The same applies to any unfair behaviour. Sports journalism discourse is the environment where all these clashes occur. As previous research on the Czech media perception of racism in football revealed (Fialová et al., 2016; Rudwick & Schmiedl, 2023), the media and the audiences are sometimes hesitant to adopt a strong position against it, especially without any concrete proof. This could go so far as to mean that very probably, the above-mentioned unconditional statement of Tottenham Hotspur in Antonio Rüdiger's case (Cable et al., 2022) would not be issued due to the uncertainty of how it would be accepted by some groups of fans.

More than ever, the audiences depend on the media construction of reality (Van den Bulck, 1999), because they cannot always be physically present at the games. Additionally, sports events have been extensively mediated, and the media should take great care with their constructs, e.g., what they highlight about the event and what they suppress (Fairclough, 1995). In the age of disinformation and decreasing trust in traditional media content, credibility and balanced reporting (McQuail, 2013) are crucial not only for the perception of controversial issues but also for the contribution to important human rights promotion.

This case study proved that there were several competing constructions of reality (Gamson et al., 1992) presented by different actors in media discourse, mainly missing

each other due to the lack of understanding for other perspectives. We can only speculate if the mediating of the event would have gone a different way if the Czech media had acknowledged from the beginning the possibility of racist abuse, and especially Scottish, but partially also UK nationwide media, had given more weight to the low-quality of Rangers FC performance and showed more understanding for the final decision of the UEFA. For future research, we would recommend adding interviews with journalists and authors of the analysed articles to shed light on their intentions and ideologies.

Disclosure statement

One of the authors is, besides his academic employment, still an active sports journalist in one of the Czech publishing houses. Therefore, he participated only in the quantitative part of the study, not in the discourse analysis.

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