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BEYOND VIOLENCE AND STRESS: HOW FOOTBALL PROVIDES A SAFE(R) SPACE FOR YOUNG MEN IN JAMAICA

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Abstract

This article explores the role of football as a multidimensional safe space for male youths in Kingston, Jamaica, against the backdrop of systemic challenges such as classism, homophobia, and everyday violence. Drawing from extensive ethnographic research conducted with a youth football academy in Kingston, this study investigates the social dynamics that foster care, inclusion, and safety within football teams. It demonstrates how football, as a communal activity, challenges entrenched socioeconomic divides and hypermasculine norms, providing opportunities for mutual support, emotional safety, and identity negotiation. The findings highlight football's potential to temporarily mitigate the effects of societal violence and class-based segregation, promoting an environment of solidarity and empowerment. By examining football through the lens of safe(r) space theory, this article underscores the importance of leveraging sports as a tool for community regeneration and social cohesion in post-colonial societies like Jamaica.

Keywords

Football, Jamaica, Safe Space, Sport, Youths, Care

Introduction

The day I started writing this article, a three-minute video from the Jamaica Premier League in cooperation with the Arnett Gardens FC popped up in my Instagram feed. The video, uploaded for the occasion of International Mental Health Month, aimed to make a statement about the importance of taking care of each other to prevent suicide. It featured two footballers, one apparently successful player and another who struggled with his performance on the field. The end of the clip thematized the unexpected suicide of the supposedly successful player. The video underscored the importance of mental health awareness, not just in society in general, but in football in particular, a theme that resonates strongly within my ethnographic exploration of football as a safer space for young men in Kingston. This article investigates the social dynamics within football teams that challenge entrenched classism and homophobia, fostering spaces of care and inclusion. I want to discuss, through my ethnographic experiences, the potential of certain football contexts providing a safe(r) space[1] for young men in Kingston, Jamaica, and why this might be needed. The guiding question is: Through which social interactions does football become a safe space for youths in Kingston, Jamaica? Drawing from ethnographic data, I argue that football fosters inclusion, mutual care, and resilience against systemic challenges such as classism,

[1] Referring to (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014) *safe space* is conceptualized as a multidimensional process that involves physical, psychological/affective, sociocultural, political, and experimental dimensions. The term "safe" raises some critical thoughts. While "safe" implies an absolute state where harm is entirely absent, "safe(r)" acknowledges that efforts can reduce harm and risk but do not guarantee total safety. The latter framing is considered more accurate and honest since no place can be entirely free of risks, dangers, or discomforts.

homophobia, and societal violence. I am not trying to argue that football provides a space free of homophobia. This is not the case for Jamaica, nor is it the case for Germany, Europe, or elsewhere in the world. Hegemonic ideals of masculinity and sexuality are prevalent and strong within football everywhere.

Methods, Ethics, and Positionality

This article is based on several years of research experience in Jamaica. The overarching interest of my field trips usually concerns topics related to gender, especially masculinities in Jamaica. For a little over a year, I have been collaborating with a football academy in Kingston. There, I accompanied one under-seventeen team to games, training sessions, and many other activities. The team consisted of players with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of them came from well-educated, affluent, and privileged social backgrounds, others from inner-city areas with difficult social and financial circumstances. This team composition is because members of the football academy have to pay an annual fee that typically only financially well-off families can afford; however, the coach occasionally accepted boys in his team who perform extraordinarily well in football but whose parents cannot afford the membership fee.

Through participant observation, informal interviews with players and parents, and detailed documentation of training sessions, I examined how football contexts shape social interactions and identity formation. I normally attended three training sessions a week, each lasting two hours. I always tried to get to the football field first and be one of the last to leave so I could "chill" with the boys before and after training. In addition to the training sessions, there was usually a game on the weekend that I accompanied them to. During the training sessions and games, I took quick notes on my phone that I wrote up as proper field diary entries in the evenings. I also audiotaped some of the conversations I had with the team (after asking for permission). This longitudinal approach allowed for nuanced insights into class dynamics and the negotiation of masculinity within Kingston's football culture. Given the sensitive nature of topics such as homophobia and violence, building trust with participants was essential. I addressed this by maintaining transparency about my research objectives and ensuring confidentiality in all conversations.

On a very practical level, I had a great experience spending time with the boys. They were funny, charming, entertaining, joking, intelligent, inspiring, and very talented. I enjoyed every minute that I spent with them. From my first encounter with them, it was less than a week before I got my first fist bomb as a greeting, another few days until they called me "auntie," just a few more training sessions until they told me I was part of the team, and another month until they were braiding my hair on car rides. Even though I am not very useful when it comes to football, I tried to help wherever I can. I shared my water, food, and sunscreen; I eventually paid for bus fares, or took care of their valuable belongings during matches or training; I brought back missed balls during training, sewed ripped apart bibs, offered my care to injured players, or carried and prepared the water, ice, and other things they needed on the field during game day. But most importantly, I took pictures. I brought a small but decent digital camera to the training sessions and games, with which I took pictures of the boys. In the beginning, I asked for permission and explained my plan to later upload the pictures to an online cloud where they could download them from. They loved the idea and agreed to me taking pictures.

Nevertheless, there was a certain power dynamic that is apparent, as I am a white, European researcher doing research in a postcolonial setting. I needed to be aware that my presence

potentially evoked situations or statements that needed to be understood in relation to my person and position. It was crucial to identify and reflect on the multiple, diverse, and even contradictory positions of power and privilege that I occupy in the field. Identifying my position and the characteristics that situated me both inside and outside my research site are important factors in scientific inquiry and interpretation. Further, there is the question of representation, responsibility, and entitlement. Who am I, and what gives me the credibility to represent and write about the lives of my interlocutors? To write about the everyday life experiences, dreams, challenges, and aspirations of teenage boys in Kingston?

Here, the hierarchy and the power of the academic came into play. Some dynamics unfolded in the field that are specific to each of the mentioned "characteristics" of mine, which affected the way people interacted with me in multiple dimensions. Those dynamics were predominantly to my advantage, since I was seen as an outsider most of the time. This excluded me from representing a threat, as I was not seen as competing with them for status, reputation, career, or material values. Most of the time, people were interested and open about interacting with me and discussing topics and ideas with someone from a different social and cultural context. While being white is the most apparent feature of me, it was not necessarily the most outstanding. The boys "are used" to white people. Most of them have white classmates, white teammates, and the coach is white. So, while being white is outside the norm, it is still normal. Even being a woman on (or next to) the football field is nothing unusual. Being a foreigner doing research was the most special feature and issue of interest for my surroundings. Usually, at the beginning of every encounter, I was assumed to be a scout. After clarification, the boys and their parents were usually really interested and open to talking to me.

Doing research with underage persons (rather than on them, about them, or without them) comes with special theoretical, ethical, methodological, and legal requirements (Christensen and Prout 2002). Theoretically, beginning with the Chicago School of Sociology that rose to importance in the early twentieth century and continued throughout the 1960s, interest in youth began to emerge but tended to reinforce the view of youths as primarily passive agents (Kaya 2001). In more recent studies (Bucholtz 2002; Marshall 2016; Stodulka 2017; Lancy 2018; McAteer, Loudon, and Higgins 2023), notions of young people have changed. Youths are no longer seen as passive receptors of parental culture but rather as active agents who are capable of producing, reproducing, and articulating their cultures (Kaya 2001). It has even been argued that the study of children and adolescents is crucial to understanding key cultural values and conflicts (Gilliam and Gulløv 2022; Hardman 2001 (1973)). This line of thought influences my analysis, in which I attempt to understand Kingstonian adolescents not just as passive respondents to social pressures, but rather as active agents in reproducing and bargaining values and cultural practices.

Football—Context of Care

It was on a very hot morning in February 2024 that I went to a football game of the under-fifteen team of a football academy in Kingston. They played in a friendly game against one team of another Kingstonian football academy. After the game, the coach distributed new jerseys to the boys. They had an upcoming Europe trip, where they would play against different teams of European clubs. Therefore, it was important to have new and good-looking training suits and jerseys. They were given three sets of clothing, varying in color and sleeve length. This was a good occasion for the boys and the coach to shoot some pictures for social media, the team's

homepage, and any other occasion footballers would need pictures of themselves for. I had the honorable task of helping out and taking the pictures, which meant that I was taking the pictures of the boys in arrangements that the coach was directing me to do. Individual pictures, whole team pictures, pictures in groups according to the position of play, and so on. The whole action turned out to be a lot of fun for the boys. They could pose, make fun of each other, and showcase their new pieces of clothing.

Then, the coach and the boys decided it was time to take pictures of the boys according to the high schools they attended: one picture with the Kingston College boys, one with the boys from Ardenne, one with the boys attending Jamaica College, one with the Campion College boys, and so on. Finally, the turn was to take a picture with the students from Vauxhall High School. It was only one boy. Vauxhall High School is known as an inner city, or "ghetto," school. Out of all the boys on the football team, this student was the only one who attended a school known for its less privileged and affluent social context. The boy went in front of the camera to get his picture taken. Just before I could take the picture, another boy jumped beside the first boy and said with a big smile on his face, "I stand with Vauxhall." I found this remarkable. With this small interaction and sentence, he challenged Kingston's deeply entrenched classism, symbolizing football's potential to bridge socioeconomic divides. In a city and a society that is highly classist, as well as spatially and socially segregated, this boy had no problem publicly supporting his friend, who was obviously from a less privileged background. This moment underscored the disruptive potential of football in challenging Kingston's socioeconomic segregation.

When considering that in Jamaica in general, and Kingston in particular, society is highly classist, where there is spatial-local class segregation, it is, to my knowledge, not usual to have youths from different socioeconomic backgrounds in one place, building one team. Kingston is a post-colonial city, Jamaica's capital, and home to around eight hundred thousand people. It is still generally divided into Uptown and Downtown. Downtown comprises the districts south of the city center of Half-Way-Tree. Uptown is the name given to the districts in the north of the city above the Half-Way-Tree. "Uptown" and "Downtown" are commonly used as synonyms for socioeconomically better and socioeconomically deprived social strata (Clarke and Howard 2008, 137). Even after emancipation and independence, the city remains highly segregated by neighborhoods and spatial districts.

After taking the Vauxhall picture, it was time to take the Hillel picture. Hillel is a private Uptown school. Due to high fees, only students from extraordinarily affluent backgrounds can afford to attend the school. The boys joked that only the white people could go in this picture. It was the coach, who is white, the goalkeeper of the team, and one other light-skinned boy. One darker-skinned boy tried to sneak into the picture, and all the other boys laughed and told him he was "one shade too dark" for the Hillel picture. The connection between skin color, class, spatial segregation, and unequal access to education and careers remains to this day[2]. The symbolic gesture of solidarity ("I stand with Vauxhall"), as well as the common joking about skin color and Uptown-belonging within the football team, contrasts sharply with the stark socioeconomic divisions in Kingston, as outlined by Clarke and Howard (2008). Such interactions may momentarily challenge the entrenched class hierarchies that dominate Jamaican society.

[2] It is important to mention that *skin color,* as well as *race* and *class,* are invented social categories that were implemented to manifest "white" supremacy during colonial times in Jamaica. They persist to this day .

On another occasion, a few weeks later, I attended a training session of the U17 team. It was a hot and sunny afternoon. I took my usual place on a wooden bench under a tree next to the training ground, to observe the boys' training session and talk to the parents in the meantime. One training exercise immediately caught my attention, where the boys had to run towards each other, hold on tight, and hug each other. The boys who were too late had to perform push-ups. The exercise seemed to cause a lot of fun and entertainment with the boys, since their waves of laughter were easily audible across the football field. I have never, in six years of visiting Jamaica, seen teenage boys hug each other, let alone grown men.

Jamaica is an extremely homophobic country (Hope 2010; Helber 2015), especially when it comes to male homosexuality. The aggressive rejection of homosexuality manifests itself in three points: Firstly, homosexuality is still a legally punishable offense ("buggery law"); secondly, physical and verbal violence continues to occur in public in Jamaica (and can become life-threatening); thirdly, homophobia is one of the most prevalent narratives in the omnipresent Jamaican popular culture (Helber 2015, 106). Homophobia in everyday life takes on radical proportions[3]. Above all, they would not run towards each other and hug another man. The hugging exercise exemplifies how controlled sports environments can subvert traditional norms of Jamaican masculinity, creating a rare context for physical expressions of care and friendship among young boys.

This resonates with another situation that I observed while talking to a Jamaican footballer playing in Western Germany for a minor league football club. He grew up in Jamaica and spent most of his thirty years of life in Kingston, playing for several Jamaican Premier League clubs. At the time I met him, he had been playing for the German club for a little over a year. The player, his cousin, and I were sitting in the locker room of the German football club, talking about his life story, his experiences in German football, the multiple meanings of sports for Jamaican youth, and how he perceived potential differences between German and Jamaican football culture. Just then, one of his coaches entered the locker room to greet the player and welcome me to the club. He walked up to the player, playfully grabbed his face, and said, "Man, I love you." Both of them laughed while the footballer tried to wind away to escape the physical touches of the coach. After exchanging a few words, introducing ourselves, and having a short conversation about the forthcoming training session, the coach left the room.

The footballer was still laughing when he said, "This is another thing. This cannot happen in Jamaica," clearly referring to the physical display of affection from the coach towards him. His cousin commented with a laugh, "He [the player] had to get used to that first. In football, you know, sometimes you get slapped on your ass, yes… he had to get used to that." I told him that he shouldn't bring this behavior to Jamaica if he did not want any problems, to which the player answered, "I will die. I will die. Here?! They kiss you here [*shows his neck*], they slap you there [*points to his backside*]. In Jamaica, you cannot do that. It's against the law, you know [*all of us are laughing*]. It's against the law." The resistance to physical affection among Jamaican male athletes reflects the entrenched norms of hypermasculinity described by Hope (2010). Football training exercises that challenge these norms may serve as small but significant disruptions to this cultural framework. This highlights what value it can have when boys can move freely among

[3] For further information on homophobia in Jamaica, read Patrick Helber 2015: *Dancehall und Homophobie. Postkoloniale Perspektiven auf die Geschichte und Kultur Jamaikas*.

themselves and leave aside dysfunctional ideas about heteronormative masculinity, at least in training exercises.

Jamaica has one of the world's highest murder rates (Jamaica Constabulary Force 2022), domestic violence rates (Institute 2022), a high number of mental health issues amongst men (Hickling and Walcott 2013), and ranks high in suicide attempts among high school students (McFarlane et al. 2013). A recently published article hinted at the fact that 90 percent of children, by the age of four to five, have experienced physical and emotional violence in Jamaica (Samms-Vaughan et al. 2024). All of these data indicate the dangers, pressures, and often dysfunctional dynamics when it comes to growing up in Kingston.

The reasons for these worrying figures are complex and cannot be fully explained in this article. In short, Jamaica and Kingston have a long history of structurally implemented and politically employed violence and crime. Starting during colonial times, Jamaican society has developed an ambivalent and multidimensional relation towards violence, punishment, and crime. This has led to varying degrees but regular outbreaks of, on the one hand, general crime in public places, and on the other hand, everyday exposure to physical violence that, today, often takes place within families, amongst intimate partners, or in schools/classrooms. To conclude, there are multiple dangers for young children and teenagers. There is an omnipresent threat of being physically punished, robbed, raped, or murdered. Not every boy experiences all of these threats, but no teenager will experience none. And every threat is one too many for young people trying to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Few alternative options to escape from crime (as either victim or perpetrator) are left for young men, especially from the inner cities in Jamaica. Patrick Chukwudike Okpalaeke (2022) described through an ethnographic study in a community-based club how youths in Nigeria's most notorious slum, Ajegunle, have adopted the "football alternative" to actualize their personal aspirations. He argues that irrespective of the myriad challenges that characterized the Ajegunle slum, certain youths who are considered vulnerable to a life of crime have adopted the football alternative as a way out of the typical slum life and make for themselves a life that includes hope. Sport, Chukwudike Okpalaeke concludes, presents "more than a dream of fame; it is a tool for social inclusion, re-engineering, and a beacon of hope for the downtrodden" (Okpalaeke 2022, 69).

Football as a Safe(r) Space

> I know a lot of youths. I train youths in Jamaica. As long as I am in Jamaica I am a trainer. And for some youths, football help[s] them a lot. Because their dad is a criminal or their mum is not home, playing football gives them an alternative to being at home. That way there is less of an opportunity for them to turn bad themselves. And football in Jamaica is not just to play football, it is trying to achieve something in the highest level. […] My mother has six kids. When I was growing up she didn't have time for everyone. So, when I was playing football at least she had one person off her back. So, I can play football and she know[s] that I am on the ball field. It's easier. So, a lot of people play football just to take stress away. Or because of their family, they try to reach a high level so they can earn money to send back home. (Personal Conversation, November 2024)

This is what the Jamaican footballer who plays in Germany answered to my question about whether football in Jamaica can be seen as a safe space. Even though I wasn't sure if he fully

understood what I meant by "safe space," his response did answer my question in a very rich way, combining several aspects that scholars would subsume under the concept of "safe space."

While the concept of safe spaces originally came from feminist and educational scholarship, it found its legitimacy in wider academic fields, such as sports sciences. Here, recent research has explored sport as a tool in community regeneration and development, social inclusion, peace interventions, and reconstruction efforts in post-conflict situations. The actual meaning and definition of safe spaces is still contested.

> A useful starting point for conceptualizing safe space is to imagine it not as a physical space, but as a figurative, psychosocial space constructed through social relations. Thus, safe space refers to a way of acknowledging and relating to others. (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014, 634)

According to Spaaij and Schulenkorf (2014), who worked on how sports events and sport-for-development projects can create and sustain a positive social impact on communities, "safe space" refers to a way of acknowledging and relating to others. They detect five dimensions of safe spaces (Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014):

1. The physical dimension of safe spaces relates to safety from physical harm and the provision of a secure, accessible, and accommodating environment.
2. The psychological/affective dimension refers to the protection from psychological or emotional harm.
3. The sociocultural dimension of safe spaces is based on familiarity, acknowledgment, and recognition, such that participants feel comfortable and supported as part of the group.
4. The political dimension refers to an environment based on mutual acceptance, tolerance, and respect for one another.
5. The experimental dimension is concerned with the feelings of being safe enough to take risks and be creative.

In my own observations on the football field in Kingston, this multidimensional nature of safe spaces is evident: the football field becomes a place where young men, through the promotion of teamwork, respect, and mutual care, can develop their athletic abilities and experience social belonging and protection. By creating such spaces in football, the negative effects of violence and social exclusion can be at least temporarily mitigated. An example of this is the training session mentioned earlier, where young men were able to show physical affection through hugs—something rare in a society like Jamaica, where homophobia is deeply entrenched. This form of care on the football field not only serves as support but also as a foundation for empowerment and social change. Research on safe spaces and social belonging through relating to others highlights how mutual care plays a central role in creating safe(r), supportive environments where people experience belonging, recognition, and protection. These spaces are especially important for marginalized groups who face discrimination and violence in other social contexts. In Kingston, a city with deeply rooted social class divisions, as Clarke and Howard (2008) describe, such acts of solidarity on the football field are significant. The football field, in this case, becomes a space of inclusion where, through care and mutual support, social bonds are formed that transcend the socioeconomic and geographical boundaries of the city.

In addition to understanding football as a potential safe(r) space, anthropological perspectives on embodiment and performativity offer valuable lenses through which to interpret the dynamics I observed on and around the football field. Embodiment, as theorized by Thomas Csordas (1990), centers the body not merely as a vessel for social experience but as the very site of cultural production and meaning-making. In Kingston, where dominant ideologies of masculinity often suppress physical vulnerability and emotional expression, football drills that involve touch—such as the hugging exercise—allow young boys to engage in embodied practices that defy normative masculine codes. These bodily acts are not incidental but central to how care, camaraderie, and affiliation are communicated. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990) helps illuminate how masculinity is not a fixed identity but something continuously enacted through socially sanctioned—and occasionally subversive—practices. On the football pitch, when boys laugh, touch, joke, or position themselves within social hierarchies (e.g. in the Vauxhall photo incident), they performatively reconfigure class, gender, and kinship norms. These are not just symbolic gestures; they are performative acts with material consequences, momentarily remaking the social world they inhabit. Spaces such as the football field can become sites of both social reproduction and transformation. Here, training exercises, team photos, and sideline conversations are performances through which boys both reproduce and contest hegemonic norms. Rather than merely being a backdrop for athletic development, the football field becomes a performative arena where alternative masculinities and solidarities are imagined and embodied.

To conclude, safe(r) spaces offer a spatial, ideological, psychosocial, and figurative space that provides protection from physical, emotional, and psychological harm. They foster opportunities where participants feel safe enough to openly express their individuality (Holley and Steiner 2005), feel supported and socially integrated, are empowered to take risks, and playfully negotiate tensions (Hunter 2008).

Conclusion

These specific snippets of my experiences within football in Jamaica are not meant to generalize the experiences of young boys within football. My research took place almost exclusively in one specific context, which is not representative of every football setting in Kingston. And as mentioned in the beginning, I do not try to make a statement about the absence of homophobia during my research or within the team; my aim was to highlight that the boys felt safe enough to share physical touch, which is due to homophobia, not the usual mode of interaction. So, while the football field may not eliminate systemic issues such as classism or homophobia, it can, under specific circumstances, offer a temporary and spatial reprieve—a safe(r) space where young men can redefine masculinity, question classism, and avoid violence through collective care and mutual respect.

Football, I argue, emerges as a safe(r) place for male youths in Kingston for five main reasons.

1. Football appears as a critical arena where young men can engage with and negotiate local ideals of masculinity. It provides a space to fulfill certain social expectations and strategically navigate or even subvert others, ultimately allowing individuals to define their path through complex social and cultural landscapes.
2. The physical football field offers a spatial space and distance to (potential) violence and stress.
3. Young boys who are busy playing football cannot engage in crime or roam around in the

streets, which would potentially mean physical danger to them.

4. Football enables youth to become self-effective and individually successful. This is important in societies where academic and career chances and opportunities to create one's future are limited.
5. Last but not least, the football team provides a safe(r) space of social inclusion and belonging, and can create an atmosphere of mutual care and fun. This is important since "safe" does not only mean the absence of trauma, stress, violence, abuse, and fear, but also includes emotional and psychological safety (Brady 2005).

To conclude, understanding football as a safe(r) space requires not only recognizing its protective and relational dimensions but also appreciating how it functions as a stage for embodied and performative negotiations of identity. The moments of physical closeness, playful gender transgressions, and class solidarity observed in training and competition are not just anecdotal—they are embodied practices and social performances that reveal the capacity of youth to reshape social norms. Football, then, is not only an escape from violence or stress; it is a cultural site where bodies, emotions, and identities are continually rehearsed, reimagined, and sometimes transformed.

Coming back to the Instagram reel with which I started this article, I believe there is more to the connection between football and mental health than the clip originally intended to show. It is not just that footballers are public figures with a certain role model function when it comes to (financial) success, but by relating to each other and caring for one another, they create an example of social cohesion. It is up to institutions, organizations, clubs, or individual persons to be aware of the social potential of sports in communities and to create, implement, and foster opportunities for youths to feel safe(r). Football clubs in Kingston and beyond could actively implement practices that encourage inclusion and care.

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