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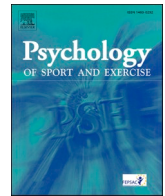
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# Using video docuseries to explore male professional football head coaches' well-being experiences throughout a season

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## ABSTRACT

Football coaches have disclosed how their work environment is unpredictable and demanding, comprising a multitude of stressors which can impede well-being. Additionally, the masculine culture within football often promotes suppression of voice, causing internalisation of thoughts and isolation. Due to professional football head coaches being a seldom-heard group, little is known about how they experience well-being within their given context (i.e., ecological niche). The present study utilised football docuseries and a bioecological framework to explore how four male professional head coaches experienced well-being whilst working in one of the top European football leagues (Premier League, La Liga). Four docuseries were sampled and resulted in the analysis of 31 episodes ( $M^{\text{duration}} = 46.6 \text{ min}$ ,  $SD = 4.5 \text{ min}$ ). The study implemented an adapted interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to illuminate convergences and divergences in contextual accounts. These accounts resulted in five group experiential themes: 'I belong to the game'; 'he belongs to the game'; 'you need the right people around you'; 'it's difficult to describe the manager without describing the person'; and 'people are trying to stab you'. The findings indicate that football coaches may experience identity conflicts and become deeply absorbed in their work. This impacts not only their well-being but also their family's, who they often turn to for social support. Consequently, by unveiling nuanced challenges to coaches' well-being, organisations may be better informed to offer more aligned and bespoke well-being support systems.

Within recent years, professional football players have started to defy the game's hypermasculine culture of silence by voicing their well-being struggles to the media (Nassoori, 2022). In comparison, professional football coaches have not been as forthcoming in the media, though some have implicitly disclosed information about their general well-being struggles. For instance, coaches have described how management is like a drug addiction (Thomas, 2022) and they often feel overwhelmed and consumed due to professional football's demands (Baldock et al., 2021). A probable reason for this is due to the multitude of performance, organisational, and personal stressors they experience when working in the professional context (Baldock et al., 2021). For example, football personnel have voiced concerns about the professional context, such as its micro-political infighting, a need-to-win mentality, and job insecurity (Bentzen et al., 2020; Higham et al., 2021), all of which can thwart well-being due to increased pressure. Thus, football organisations have a duty of care to support their personnel's well-being which can be seen by the psychological and counselling services offered to their players, both within England and Spain (Professional Footballers' Association, 2023; La Asociación de Futbolistas Españoles,

2020). Yet, coaches' well-being has often been neglected in comparison to their players, with an English Premier League coach claiming, 'if you're not a player, you don't get the mental health support that you need' (Whyatt, 2021). Therefore, it is paramount researchers strive to further understand well-being in contrasting professional sport (i.e., working) contexts, as they shape well-being experiences in differing ways (Didymus et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2019).

The male professional football context has traditionally been encompassed within an authoritarian and subservient culture, which has been instilled over numerous decades (Parker, 1996, 2006). Such culture is a significant factor as to why many within the sport conform to institutionally legitimised social norms, such as suppression of feelings and health-related concerns (Manley et al., 2016). One probable explanation for conformity is impression management (cf. Goffman, 1963), whereby coaches will strategically shape their behaviours and identities to navigate their social context. Another explanation is situated learning (Parker, 2006), as many players who have been engrained within football's masculine culture often progress into coaching with hegemonic beliefs and narrowed identities (Champ et al., 2020). A

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potential result of these narrowed identities is coaches dramatising desirable institutionalised identities (e.g., masculinity), which often conflict with their own to gain social standing (Roberts et al., 2019). Consequently, coaches become an inauthentic self which thwarts well-being due to concealing who they truly are (Sarvimäki, 2006). Therefore, it is pertinent that the intense professional football context and its influence on coaches' well-being is explored in further detail, not only for the enhancement of coaches' well-being, but for performance- and athlete-related gains (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). For instance, a coach's poor management of well-being challenges (e.g., stressors) can thwart their own performance, which subsequently can hinder coach-athlete relationships, athletes' mental states, and competitive performances (Fletcher & Scott, 2010). This is a possible result of emotional contagion whereby the coach's stress is transferred to their athletes (Thelwell et al., 2017), hence if football coaches' can better manage their well-being it may optimise the experience of emotional contagion and lead to better player well-being and performances (Rumbold et al., 2022).

The construct of well-being is considered multi-faceted, encompassing hedonic (i.e., subjective well-being), eudaemonic (i.e., psychological well-being), and temporal aspects, like within-person fluctuations (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). Furthermore, well-being is suggested to be ingrained in the life context of an individual, including their spatial-temporal experiences (Lundqvist, 2011). Subsequently, environmental, personal, and relational factors that influence a coach's well-being should be explored in greater depth (Rumbold & Didymus, 2021). Therefore, to understand the multi-factorial nuances of coaches' individualised well-being experiences in greater detail, Bronfenbrenner's (1995; 2000) Ecological Systems Theory, specifically bioecological theory is an appropriate theoretical framework to explore psychosocial and sociocultural influences on well-being. Moreover, Bronfenbrenner's (2000) Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model complements the multi-factorial elements of well-being, placing specific emphasis on interactions within and between an individual and their ecological niche over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). The PPCT model acknowledges how the individual (e.g., age and gender) and temporal reciprocal interactions (i.e., proximal processes) within their ecological niche (e.g., nested systems of all living and non-living objects) shape development (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). For context, a football coach's ecological niche would comprise of interactions within and between microsystems (e.g., workplace, home), mesosystems (e.g., player-colleague and family-club relations), exosystems (e.g., mass media, governing bodies), macrosystems (e.g., club culture, locality), and chronosystems (e.g., sociohistorical events, life transitions). Therefore, a coach's well-being sensemaking and experiences could equally be shaped by interactions at the club, at home, via mass media, and past playing or coaching careers.

In combination with bioecological theory, the phenomenological, hermeneutical, and idiographic foundations of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) are befitting to explore and interpret individual lived experiences and accounts (Smith et al., 2022). For instance, an IPA approach complements the PPCT model as it maintains a contextualist position and a commitment to the individual, which promotes the illumination of personal sensemaking and nuanced experiential accounts (Smith et al., 2022). Thus, IPA's ideographical nature is well suited given well-being and coaching are viewed as idiosyncratic (Didymus et al., 2018; Kiefer, 2008). IPA also embraces the interpretative roles both coach and researcher play in making sense of experiences via a double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher tries to make sense of the coach's interpretations to enrich understanding (Smith et al., 2022). Additionally, IPA acknowledges that a coach's sensemaking can be shaped by horizons (e.g., what one can see or understand), which can be influenced by a fusion of horizons (e.g., person-context interactions; Gadamer, 2013). For example, how a coach comes to perceive and comprehend well-being can be narrowed or widened by proximal processes in their ecological niche (Bronfenbrenner, 2000), such as via

persistent exposure to cultural norms (macrosystem) or workplace relations (microsystem and mesosystem). Consequently, for the purpose of this study we adopted a combined IPA and bioecological theoretical approach as they recognise that biopsychosocial and contextual factors collectively shape well-being experiences and comprehension (Kiefer, 2008; Sarvimäki, 2006).

A novel way to explore a coach's ecological niche is through the immersion and interpretation of texts, such as diaries, biographies, autobiographies (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016), and documentaries (McDonald, 2007). Documentaries and docuseries offer an opportunity to do this because they enable researchers to obtain an understanding of the ways in which individuals (coaches) within cultures (professional football), at certain time-points, make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). However, even though documentaries play a crucial role in contextualising sports within society, they have received scant attention from psychology researchers in sport studies (Poulton & Roderick, 2008). This was mostly because their representation of reality was brought into question, but McDonald (2007) argues their "engagement with real life, with issues of power and social change, situates the documentary within the discourse of sobriety" (p. 210). As such, sport documentaries can enlighten wide ranging sociocultural and political issues (Poulton & Roderick, 2008). For instance, BBC Three's 'Football's Suicide Secret' and Sky Sports 'Tackling the Stigma' illuminate the everyday well-being challenges football personnel face to cultivate social change. Moreover, docuseries such as Amazon's® All or Nothing (AoN), like autobiographies, tell stories (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016) and capture first-hand experiences within a coach's given context over time (e.g., a season or career). However, while documentaries provide ideal contexts for exploring social phenomena, it is important to acknowledge that sociocultural issues can be framed and socially construed in certain ways (Poulton & Roderick, 2008). Thus, adapting the view of Sparkes and Stewart (2016), docuseries offer a window through which phenomena can be seen. Therefore, documentary data can illuminate sportspeople's complex lives, stories, and experiences (Poulton & Roderick, 2008), meaning they are well-situated to facilitate the exploration of male professional football head coaches' well-being. Consequently, this study aims to use coaching docuseries to illuminate and explore male professional football head coaches' well-being experiences throughout a season.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Research design and philosophical underpinning

This study is informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which adopted a social constructionist epistemology (i.e., a coach's well-being knowledge is constructed via sociocultural interactions), and a relativist ontology (i.e., multiple interpretations of coaches' well-being exist). A combined bioecological and IPA approach also guided the current study due to the phenomenological, hermeneutical, ideographical, and ecological underpinning, which facilitated the exploration of how individuals make sense of their personal and social world (Bronfenbrenner, 2000; Smith et al., 2022). For instance, complementing the study's epistemological and ontological underpinning, IPA draws upon Gadamer's (2013) horizons, which are an individual's assumptions, beliefs, and cultural background that shapes understanding and interpretation of the world. As the bioecological approach (e.g., PPCT model; Bronfenbrenner, 2000) would suggest, horizons are not fixed and are constantly shaped due to proximal processes within and between one's ecological niche. Thus, horizons can be widened or narrowed by interacting with people, objects, languages, and cultures over time.

Due to the novel nature of this study, the IPA approach and its analysis process were adapted so that it aligned with video documentary data. For example, because of sampling video docuseries, IPA's contextualist position (Smith et al., 2022) allowed for not only the interpretation of participant speech but their given behaviour and context at

certain timepoints. Therefore, like a longitudinal interpretative phenomenological analysis (LIPA) approach (Farr & Nizza, 2019), each docuseries episode which captured a different timepoint was analysed to explore the contextual and temporal aspects of well-being experiences (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). In addition, equal to traditional IPA workings, comprehension and sensemaking was explored by exercising the double hermeneutic, whereby the lead author tried to interpret how the football coaches attempted to make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, an ideographic and detailed examination of each head coach and their corresponding docuseries was conducted prior to tentative cross-case analysis.

### 1.2. Docuseries context and procedure

Documentary film can be viewed as the “creative treatment of actuality” (Nichols, 2017, p. 5), which comprises of three assumptions; (1) Documentaries are about reality (e.g., something that happened); (2) Documentaries are about real people; (3) Documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world. Therefore, docuseries can be viewed as any tv series about reality, containing real people, and unscripted content which is produced in its natural context (e.g., place of work or home). Typical documentary models within the sport genre are biographical and ethnographical, with the former providing “an account of someone’s life or a significant part of it”, and the latter representing a “culture or subculture in an illuminating manner” (Nichols, 2017, p. 156). Moreover, documentaries can reside within observational (i.e., follow and observe social actors as they go about their lives) and participatory (i.e., feature engagement between the filmmaker and subjects to draw them out in revealing ways and to develop a story or perspective) modes (Nichols, 2017). Additionally, documentaries and docuseries are easily accessible via platforms like Netflix® and Amazon® which can provide useful and nuanced insights from various populations. A population which can be considered seldom-heard (Smith et al., 2023) are professional top tier (e.g., English Premier League and La Liga), first team football head coaches, hence docuseries are well placed to capture their contextualised lived experiences.

After ethical approval was obtained, four Amazon® Prime docuseries, three AoN series and season one of Simeone Living Match by Match (LMM) were selected (see table 1). Inclusion criteria was informed by Nichols (2017) as docuseries had to: (1) have a professional football head coach as a focal point; (2) document a football head coaches’ contextual lived experiences (i.e., reality) over time; (3) exhibit biographical and ethnographical components, plus observational and participatory documentary modes. The sport documentary genre is “key to placing sport in their social context and in the process reveal that sport is more than simply about the performance on the field of play” (McDonald, 2007, p. 222). For instance, the AoN series captured head coaches’ lived experiences over the course of an entire football season and the LMM series focused on lived experiences over the course of a career and season. Whereas the LMM and Arsenal’s AoN series had a nuanced focus on the head coaches’ home context and social relationships. A homogeneous sample of docuseries was included to align with the principles of a LIPA approach (Farr & Nizza, 2019) as the docuseries comprised of 24.4hrs worth of data across several timepoints (i.e.,

episodes). Therefore, multiple datasets (episodes and docuseries) were brought together, analysed, and discussed to unveil convergences and divergences in experiences (Smith et al., 2022).

### 1.3. Data analysis

The data were analysed using adapted IPA (Smith et al., 2022) and LIPA (Farr & Nizza, 2019) guidelines, comprising of nine stages, as outlined in table 2. The stages were acknowledged as fluid, which allowed the lead author to navigate back-and-forth between stages.

### 1.4. Qualitative rigor

Due to the nuanced nature of our work, we adopted a relativist

**Table 2**  
Adapted interpretative phenomenological analysis stages.

Analysis Stage	Description of Process Undertaken
Stage 1: Immersion	The lead author watched the entirety of one docuseries to firstly immerse themselves in the context of the head coach, and secondly to decide the scope of analysis which was useful in determining the appropriate data (i.e., segments of video) to transcribe. Therefore, only parts of the docuseries which included the head coach or referred to them were included in the transcription and analysis process. Contextual sensitivity was given to the use of music, visual angles, and clip transitions used, but this was omitted from the analysis process as IPA grounds itself in human experience. Thus, raw speech and visible behaviour was prioritised as opposed to producer audiovisual edits.
Stage 2: Transcription	Adhering to the idiographic commitment of IPA, the relevant video segments were transcribed verbatim and then re-read individually by the lead author, which allowed for further immersion into the data of the participant.
Stage 3: Organisation	The lead author created a five-column analysis document, which comprised from left to right of, experiential statements, context, transcribed segment, exploratory notes, and time stamp.
Stage 4: Reading, watching, and note taking	Afterwards the lead author began line-by-line analysis of the transcribed segments from the docuseries noting exploratory comments (e.g., descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual). The corresponding video segments were rewatched to aid notetaking on behavioural and contextual aspects.
Stage 5: Formulating experiential statements	Experiential statements were then formulated by capturing the conceptual and psychological essence of the exploratory and contextual comments, whilst also remaining grounded in the data.
Stage 6: Clustering experiential statements	The experiential statements were then clustered into a coherent structure representing homogeneous and conflicting concepts, which was a repetitious and laborious process.
Stage 7: Establishing personal experiential themes	Once the clustering of experiential statements was agreed upon between all authors, a table of personal experiential themes (PETs; cf. Smith et al., 2022) was created, where each cluster was named to identify the relevant information from all the experiential statements residing under it.
Stage 8: Replication	The above process was then repeated for all docuseries and respective head coaches to establish their own PETs, which aided the identification of parallels and distinctions between all participants.
Stage 9: Establishing group experiential themes	Group experiential themes (GETs; cf. Smith et al., 2022) were then created to represent the convergences and divergences across the whole sample, which facilitated the investigation and illumination of sample nuances.

**Table 1**  
Characteristics of docuseries.

Docuseries title	Duration	Head coach
AoN Manchester City FC	8 episodes. <i>M</i> episode length = 48.9 min	Pep Guardiola
AoN Tottenham Hotspur FC	9 episodes. <i>M</i> episode length = 48.9 min	José Mourinho
AoN Arsenal FC	8 episodes. <i>M</i> episode length = 48.9 min	Mikel Arteta
Simeone Living Match by Match (Atlético Madrid FC)	6 episodes. <i>M</i> episode length = 39.8 min	Diego Simeone



approach as it allowed for flexibility and contextual consideration in quality criteria (Smith & McGannon, 2018). One concern with archived data, which could be viewed as docuseries stored on a streaming service, is that it may be seen as cleansed of conceptual and interactional contexts in which they were created and through which they should be understood (Mauthner & Doucet, 2008). Consequently, comprehension of why the data was created and the contexts in which it is set was crucial to an authentic understanding and analysis of data (Irwin, 2013). Therefore, significant efforts were made to understand the sensitivity of context for each docuseries (Yardley, 2017), which is why the IPA approach was adapted to incorporate specific exploratory notes on contextual and behavioural observations. Moreover, although the docuseries are ultimately set within the professional football context to capture head coaches' lived experiences over the course of a season and career, we acknowledge that they were fundamentally created by an external producer and edited for informational and entertainment purposes. Caution was thus given to the fact that the docuseries were not created to explicitly focus on coaches' well-being, even though related onscreen discussions and behaviours (e.g., obsessive ruminations, lack of sleep) which thwart performance and well-being were addressed. An example of how we interpreted onscreen interactions can be seen within the LMM series analysis, where Diego addressed how his daughter corrected him, saying family is his life, not football. During this exchange, Diego begins to visibly look upset and tears soon ensue, illuminating how his engrossment with football affected not only his own but his family's well-being. Without the visual footage the emotional context would have been lost, hence acknowledging on screen actions enriches the analysis and interpretation process.

Aligning with a reflexive approach and to provide transparency (Yardley, 2017), the lead author has previously worked with academy players in a professional football club and is actively exploring professional coaches' well-being within football. Consequently, from personal experience the lead author has been exposed to a professional football club's environment and general well-being literature. Attempting to mitigate any preconceptions, the lead author engaged in critical discussions with the co-authors to promote reflexivity and to challenge theoretical interpretations (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For instance, all authors met regularly to critically discuss analytical interpretations, as well as theme formulation. The collaborative meetings were to explicitly progress the lead author's interpretations and not for consensus (Smith & McGannon, 2018). For instance, we were also reflective of the fact that docuseries, as with any qualitative data, cannot represent an absolute objective truth (Sparkes & Stewart, 2016), but still does provide a valuable insight into real-life scenarios and social phenomena (McDonald, 2007). Therefore, contextual sensitivity was given to the editor's use of music, visual angles, and clip transitions used, as well as how docuseries such as Amazon's AoN can sociologically frame an 'all or nothing' portrayal of coaching well-being experiences. However, for the purpose of this study this was not a core focus of the analysis process as IPA grounds itself in human experience (Smith et al., 2022); hence raw speech and visible behaviour was prioritised over audiovisual edits.

## 2. Findings and discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore how male professional head football coaches' experienced well-being in their contexts. Analysis illuminated the experiences of four professional football head coaches, resulting in five group experiential themes, which are interpreted and discussed in relation to relevant literature, incorporating a multivocality of coaches and relational accounts.

### 2.1. "I belong to the game"

This theme represents how coaches displayed signs of being consumed by their coaching role which shaped well-being. For example, during episode one José discloses how being relieved of duty left him

with a lack of purpose:

Too many holidays. Too many football matches watching from spaces where I don't belong. I don't belong to the box ... stands [or] the sofa of my house. I belong to the game. I was empty. I needed my place.

Linguistically, his use of the phrase "spaces where I don't belong" implies being out of place, almost lost, perhaps because his ecological niche has become fragmented due to conflicts within his microsystem (e.g., removal from workplace) and chronosystem (e.g., transition out of football; Bronfenbrenner, 2000). José appears to make sense of his purpose or "belonging" by associating it with being in role, possibly because his perceived identity is being a head coach at a club (Lundkvist et al., 2012). Therefore, to fulfil his "emptiness" and sense of well-being, he needed "belonging" by returning to his role. Having a sense of purpose in life has been associated with positive well-being experiences, whereas a perceived lack of purpose can thwart a coach's well-being as it fuels obsessive passion and subsequent maladaptive behaviours (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). Consequently, José's well-being appeared thwarted due to conflicts (e.g., dismissal) within his ecological niche, which caused a loss of purpose and identity. Similarly, within episode one Diego shares an account of football being his identity, but confessed that an exchange with his daughter widened his understanding:

It's [football coaching] my life. The other day, my daughter corrected me. Because I said this was my life ... [visual emotion] And she said, 'No, we are your life.' She's four years old, but she's right.

During his exchange, Diego behaviourally expressed upset, beginning to weep because of the realisation that he is a father and husband first and foremost. His realisation was apparent due to a contrast in views from his daughter, which could suggest a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2013) had taken place within his microsystem, developing his perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). As a result, this momentarily subdued his immersion-in-place (e.g., work; Seamon, 2018), enabling him to re-evaluate his identity and purpose in life. A pertinent reason as to why the coaches appeared consumed by their role was due to an insistent passion, turned obsession to be the best and to win, which created high amounts of pressure:

It's not just about playing or coaching football. It's about winning. If we don't win, it's an empty career ... I won trophies in every club, so I bring the expectation to a certain level, that with other people there is no expectation. It's my fault. And if nobody puts that pressure on myself, I'm the first one to do it. I want to live with that pressure. (José)

For instance, José utilised first person speech "I bring the expectation", suggesting his personal character and internalised high standards fuel contextual pressure, which can thwart a football coach's well-being due to increased perceived stress (Baldock et al., 2021). Drawing on the PPCT model to aid sensemaking (Bronfenbrenner, 2000), it was apparent that coaching characteristics (e.g., passionate identity) fuelled internalised expectations leading to instances of persistent rumination, obsessive-like tendencies, and work-life conflicts. This can thwart well-being as an obsessive passion generates pressure to fulfil specific requirements (e.g., be successful) and can often cause individuals to feel out of control, creating conflict within their wider life (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). For instance, Diego addressed how it is hard to switch off from football, which subsequently affected his personal life and sleep deprivation:

It's very difficult to forget about soccer. There isn't a moment where you can unwind, because there are always thoughts going through your head, situations that you keep thinking about ... The beautiful thing ... is that this is the reality of the job [and] sport, this search for the unknown. And what keeps you alive and won't let you sleep,

because you can't sleep at night. All the players go through your mind, there's one with an injury ... Should we play with three at the back or four? You just don't sleep.

Here, Diego's well-being is thwarted (e.g., sleep deprivation) due to constant rumination, which he details as the "search for the unknown", which possibly represents the unpredictability of his job and environment. However, although it is detrimental to his well-being, he admits that football's unpredictability is also "what keeps you alive", almost providing him with a buzz and excitement that he is addicted to, which is not uncommon for coaches (Thomas, 2022; Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). A possible way to mitigate the addiction and consumption in the role is for coaches to cultivate relationships and interactions outside of football, such as with family and friends, because Mikel discloses the isolating nature of the profession:

The biggest [piece of] advice Pep gave me ... [was] "This is the loneliest profession." When you close that door, it's you and your worries, issues ... decisions that are always there.

As the season progressed Mikel implied ruminations (i.e., worries and thoughts), intensify when closing the door (i.e., being alone). Loneliness can relate to our relationship with ourselves and how our individuation is asserted in the world (Motta & Larkin, 2023). Therefore, when an individual's desire to be understood in their entirety is thwarted, and their ability to reveal their complete uniqueness to others is impeded, they feel lonely. Consequently, Mikel's loneliness may not simply stem from the absence of others in his ecological niche, which can thwart well-being due to a lack of social support (Baldock et al., 2021) but because he cannot reveal himself and his thoughts in their entirety to others, such as colleagues (e.g., microsystem), fans and media (e.g., exosystem) through fear of cultural (e.g., macrosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2000) masculine non-conformity (Manley et al., 2016). This illuminates how proximal processes between systems can shape a coach's authenticity and well-being experiences.

## 2.2. *He belongs to the game*

Some docuseries provided novel insights into the head coaches' personal lives by entering their homes and obtaining accounts from family and friends, which provided nuanced perspectives as to how they manage their role and well-being. For instance, Mikel's wife Lorena and two sons spoke to the camera in episode six about Mikel's work-life balance:

Lorena: If he's on his own at home, he will be 24/7 in the office. [Clips of Mikel working in his office]. It is hard for him, even when we are on holidays in the summer ... he sees kids playing, he would get up and start ... coaching them.

[Transitions to his children] Producer: What do you think of your dad's job?

Son 1: It's good, although sometimes I don't like it because he's like, up there [points to the office] for like two hours straight and he's not with us but when he's with us, I really enjoy it.

Son 2: [jovially holds hand to ear mimicking Mikel on the phone] Five more minutes.

The insights from Mikel's family provide their nuanced interpretation of him and how he manages his role and personal life. Mikel's family inadvertently engaged in a form of hermeneutics as they attempt to interpret what he says and does. For instance, Lorena interprets Mikel's behaviour at home by comparing it to when on holiday to signify his incessant obsession in differing contexts. Whereas the accounts of Mikel's children provide insight into how his physical and psychological absence at home, not only thwarts his well-being but his family's. For example, the burden of work and family obligations can cause coaches to experience physical and mental fatigue, to the extent they deprioritise

wider aspects of their life such as family (Lundkvist et al., 2012). However, Mikel seems unaware that his well-being and presence at home are being thwarted due to work, reinforced by a clip of him trying to play football in the garden with his children whilst on the phone. Mikel's behaviour could thus be interpreted as a lived obliviousness caused by a strong immersion in work which consequently down-prioritises family impeding their well-being (Lundkvist et al., 2012; Seamon, 2018). Comparably, the LMM docuseries entered Diego's homelife, where his family provided nuanced insights into his well-being and consumption of the role:

Giovanni (Son): He thinks too much about stuff, about how he could have done this, or that. My old man is 100% soccer ... (Episode. 1). He doesn't have anything else. I've told him many times that he needs to focus on something else. At present, his two daughters are the way he has of switching off. (Episode. 3). I said he had to learn ... soccer is soccer, but there's also another side that's life. For someone whose life involves soccer 24/7, it's hard to get him out of that soccer atmosphere, [as] he breathes soccer all the time. (Episode. 5).

The account provided by Giovanni highlights the toll football can take on Diego's well-being as he becomes consumed. Giovanni's assertion of "he breathes soccer" signifies how engrained Diego is within the football context, implying football appears to be the air (i.e., purpose) that gives him life. Considering football is the air Diego breathes, removing him from football without alternative purpose could thwart his overall well-being. Giovanni tried to widen Diego's horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 2013) by encouraging him to focus his breath (i.e., purpose) on something other than football, such as family. Consequently, well-being could be an antecedent of mitigating immersion in a role via a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2013) with others (e.g., family). Giovanni's account emphasises the importance of family surrounding the coach and how they may help with dissociation from football and management of well-being.

## 2.3. *"You need the right people around you"*

It was apparent from the docuseries that personal relationships played an important role in managing a coach's well-being. For instance, after a poor run of results Mikel was more cognizant about the importance of being surrounded by the right people when pressure is on:

We are bottom of the league. Zero goals ... we are getting hammered by everybody ... In difficult moments, you question yourself, you have fears, difficult things happen in your mind ... You need the right people around you to support you and sometimes to help you lift when you're under difficulty.

Interpreting Mikel's account, comprising of isolated self-doubts, and the claim "difficult things happen in your mind", suggests that his mental well-being can become thwarted due to constant rumination (Rush & Grouzet, 2012). His want for having people around him could represent the loneliness of the profession and how having others present may mitigate the detrimental impact isolation can have on well-being. Contrastingly, Diego claims:

Regardless of the people around me, I make the decisions. When there's happiness, criticism, sadness and when there's elation, you are by yourself.

Diego's statement of "regardless of the people around me" came in the final episode, concluding that even with others continuously present in his environment, he still felt a sense of isolation. However, Diego's account could be illuminated by Mikel's choice of language such as "right people", implying that simply having people present is not enough to alleviate isolation and obsession, but perhaps people need to understand him to rightfully support him. This is exemplified by Mikel's wife Lorena:

I take the good and the bad, the critics and the opinions, everything

really as part of his job. But normally I don't allow all that to get in the house. I normally try to be outside of that bubble. Sometimes I need to drag him out from there and make him see, 'Hey, it's just that bubble.' I mean, life is going on outside the bubble. With me, he's quite vulnerable, completely open, and we talk a lot.

Lorena's use of metaphorically dragging Mikel out of the football bubble when at home connotes how he can become deeply consumed due to work-life conflicts (Didymus et al., 2018) in his ecological niche, but also how Mikel is reactively receiving (as opposed to proactively seeking) social support to manage his work-life balance and subsequent well-being. Furthermore, Lorena disclosed that Mikel is "completely open" with her, indicating family fit into the category of "right people" for emotional expression, perhaps due to unwavering trust. Similarly for Diego, the supportive relationship with his wife Carla played an important role as he states, "Carla was very important for me because she knows me, she knows what I need". Here Diego concurs that having an established relationship is of utmost importance to understand and effectively meet his individual needs for regulating well-being. Coinciding with Lorena's account, Carla discloses that talking and listening to Diego is a form of social support they enact:

Sometimes he gets home at 4am and wakes me up to talk. If it went well, I fall asleep because I know he'll be able to sleep. But if it didn't go well, I wake up. But yeah we have conversations at the strange hours.

Both Mikel and Diego appear to utilise their romantic relationships with their wives as forms of well-being support, possibly due to strong trust, ease of access, and dissociation from their club. Therefore, because of having strong spousal relationships they feel safe and are more inclined to be honest with how they feel, as demonstrated by Diego seeking support from his wife at 4am. Within football, men typically struggle to be open and display vulnerabilities due to its uncaring nature and socially legitimised masculine norms (Manley et al., 2016). This then may be why Mikel and Diego confide and seek solace in the women of their lives, as they provide the care they do not receive at work. Consequently, the absence of perceived psychological safety and care at work may be why male coaches perform to gender norms when in the football context (Newman et al., 2021; Parker, 2001). For instance, professional football clubs can be viewed as institutions which exude hegemonic masculinity, which is characterised by power, authority, competitive aggression, emotional restraint, and heterosexuality (Parker, 2001, 2006). Such institutions expect a 'professional attitude' which is often viewed as how well one conforms to the traditional working practices of the club, hence coaches conform to and display hegemonic masculinity (Parker, 2001). Therefore, it is no surprise football coaches attempt to seek support and display glimpses of vulnerability outside of their respective football clubs as they do not have to conform to the systemic hypermasculine culture. For instance, Diego discusses the difficulties of building relationships and being honest in the professional football context:

I'm a bit unusual ... I find it hard to start relationships. I wish I had been different in that respect. I wish I had been more open, but I haven't been able to. It's probably something that can still be improved. In my opinion, family keeps you grounded. And it makes you understand that beyond the passion we feel for the sport, I have a very nice life and a beautiful family.

Diego states "I haven't been able to" in response to being open and building relationships. This could be interpreted as the football context (i.e., job role and environment) he is in does not allow for it, perhaps because of all the backstabbing and infighting that occurs for self-preservation (Higham et al., 2021). He also claims at the start "I'm a bit unusual", possibly due to struggling to build relationships in football, despite having strong ones elsewhere. A former player of Diego's, Sebastian interprets why Diego may see himself as unusual:

I was lucky enough to get to know him as a person and as a coach. Diego, a nice cheerful guy, a jokester. He's honest. He's emotional. [Alternatively] I met Cholo, who is demanding, tough, cruel, heartless, a winner.

Sebastian implies that Diego has a dual identity in Diego and Cholo, which enabled him to act differently when in and out of football. For instance, Diego is sociable, emotional, and honest, but when he enters the football context, he becomes Cholo, who appears to conform to professional football's masculine norms (Manley et al., 2016). According to Goffman (1963) individuals engage in impression management, where they shape their identities to align themselves with certain dominant or subordinate cultural discourses in their context. Therefore, Sebastian's insight provides added depth and clarity to Diego's earlier statement of "I haven't been able to" build relationships as he seems to be aligning with football's dominant ideologies (macrosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Consequently, some coaches may adopt different identities when in and outside of football, but this could cause fragmentation of self and thwart well-being due to being an inauthentic self (Sarvimäki, 2006). For instance, when work-life balance becomes conflicted, a clash of polarised identities may occur within their microsystem (e.g., work and home; Bronfenbrenner, 1995), which could be why well-being becomes compromised.

#### 2.4. "It's difficult to describe the manager without describing the person"

Within all the docuseries coaches revealed aspects of their identities that conflate and differ in relation to their well-being. Mikel, after being asked how he thinks others would describe him, reveals that there is more to him than being a head coach:

I think it's difficult to describe the manager without describing the person, so I think ... I'm honest, direct, and probably very demanding as well ... Sometimes, they [media and fans] see a manager in a way that is not realistic. I suffer. I have feelings, I have kids. I make mistakes. I cry. I laugh. Inside that person, there is somebody else that is dealing with something as well, you know, that is not immune to what is happening.

Mikel provides a nuanced account opposing the masculine football norms as he believes his identity as a coach cannot be described as separate to him as a person (e.g., a husband and father). He reveals as a head coach that his authentic self (Sarvimäki, 2006) is someone who can suffer and is not immune to the hardships of football. Mikel saying, "inside that person there is somebody else", could imply how his true identity can be suppressed and overlooked by those (e.g., media and fans) on the periphery of his ecological niche (e.g., exosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Drawing on the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 2000), a probable reason why this may be is because the media and fans (i.e., exosystem) have stronger proximal interactions with football's culturally masculine attitudes and ideologies (i.e., macrosystem) than with Mikel (e.g., the individual). Consequently, the media and fans' unrealistic perceptions and expectations of head coaches' are possibly why Mikel's identity and subsequent well-being feel fragmented. Contrastingly, Mikel felt as though he could display his true identity and be open with his players:

I made a decision when I decided to be a manager that I was going to open up with the players and to do that then you have to accept that ... you're going to get hurt.

Mikel's endeavour to display characteristics which align more so with his perceived identity (authentic self) is possibly due to the proximal closeness and frequent interactions he has with his players (microsystem) within his ecological niche, as opposed to fewer interactions with wider exo- and macrosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Thus, Mikel appears to engage in impression management (Goffman, 1963), whereby proximal closeness to others determines his authenticity



and subsequent well-being. Moreover, although Mikel acknowledges that honesty can leave him vulnerable, he is honest with his players to try and establish trusting relationships, a condition which helps foster well-being in professional football (Baldock et al., 2021). Similarly, José openly discloses with his team the personal trauma of his dog dying:

I think the majority of you know and some of you maybe think ... I am an idiot. But the reality is that I'm dead because my dog died. My dog died, and I'm fucked. Deeply fucked. And I want you to know that because I don't want you to think I am upset with you, or less confident or less happy.

Throughout the docuseries, José promoted the segregation of sporting and non-sporting lives, but due to personal trauma thwarting his well-being, José's ecological niche became conflicted. For instance, an individual incident (i.e., dog passing) external to his coaching role, thwarted his well-being and subsequent performance, demonstrating how interactions within and between his wider ecological niche (mesosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2000), can shape well-being experiences. Thus, José's experience implies a coach's well-being cannot be discussed separately from the wider interactions within and between their ecological niche over time.

## 2.5. "People are trying to stab you"

For most of the head coaches, interactions with the media and fans (exosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2000) played a pertinent role in cultivating pressure and criticism, which appeared to influence well-being. For example, footage was shown of Arsenal fans verbally abusing Mikel whilst he was leaving a match. However, criticism did not only transpire from fans as several head coaches displayed clear frustration and anger when the sports media targeted them and their team:

[José working while listening to the TV] Pundit: I'm telling you Mourinho is passed his best. Look what happened in United—

José:  
[turns off TV] Fuck off.

[Pep attends a press conference] Reporter: What do you make of John Stones' performance today? He's been criticised a lot this season. But he seemed to play—

Pep: [visibly frustrated] John Stones has more personality than all of us here together in this room. More balls ... than everyone here.

José's and Pep's responses indicate how their emotional management can be tested by interactions with the media. Research on coaches' stress supports that the media are commonly cited as a performance stressor which thwarts well-being because they incite pressure (Didymus et al., 2018). But what was most apparent for some head coaches was their perceived obligation to defend their team in the public eye, leaving them to take all the criticism:

Of course I'm going to defend you till the end of our lives in the press conference. (Pep)

Don't worry, I will face the people. But today it's hard to defend you. Hard. I will take all the shit again. No worries. (Mikel)

The use of "the end of our lives" by Pep could be interpreted as his unwavering support for his team, but it could also be understood as how interacting with the media (exosystem) can terminate footballing lives due to its cutthroat nature, thus thwarting job security (microsystem) and well-being (Bentzen et al., 2020). Ultimately, highlighting how distal exosystem interactions influence microsystem relations and shape well-being experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Furthermore, Mikel frustratingly highlighted it is his sole obligation to face the "shit" from the media as he is the head coach, which placed his well-being at risk. For example, Mikel makes sense of the persistent criticism by comparing it to a deliberate act of physical harm:

We have to go through different moments, some very difficult, some when people are trying to stab you. Criticism is coming ... We're under a lot of pressure and criticism.

The use of "people are trying to stab you" implies that the deliberate, targeted pursuit of the media and fans can cause actual harm, which would subsequently impede well-being. Moreover, Mikel's wife Lorena discloses the severity of the criticism and abuse Mikel faces:

Producer: One minute people are praising him, and the next minute they want him to be sacked.

Lorena: Or to die! ... They hate you. People really feel extremely passionate about what's happening in football. People put their joy, anger, sadness, or their deepest emotions [in it]. You need to not ride on that train and focus on what you're doing and what you can control and what is in your hands. Otherwise ... [Lorena swirls her finger] you go crazy.

Lorena's evident awareness that people have called for her husband's death signifies the abhorrent abuse that head coaches are exposed to and how it will not only influence their well-being but that of their family. The professional football environment has been characterised by abuse and intimidation within clubs (Newman et al., 2021), yet Lorena's account reflects how external abuse and intimidation towards a coach within their exosystem can bleed into personal life (microsystem; Bronfenbrenner, 2000). Lorena's reference to going crazy appears to be in relation to how the criticism from media and fans could consume a coach, perhaps through fuelling persistent ruminations, something which happened to Mikel as he questions what his children may think when they see media content: "The kids read news and ... Will he go somewhere else? What is happening? You're gonna get fired, Daddy, if we lose another match?" Further inspection of Mikel's account would suggest an ecological nature to his well-being (Kiefer, 2008). For example, interactions within and between his ecological niche which are mostly out of his immediate control, such as micro-level team performances and exo-level media expectations are influencing one's well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Insofar, in a squad debriefing session midway through the season, José urged his team to provide him with protection via positive results:

I think it's a very important week, probably the most important week of the season until now. So I need your protection. And your protection is give me results.

José's account is indicative of how volatile a head coach position can be as he displays job insecurity through stating he "needs" his team to provide him "protection" by winning. Feeling pressured to win has been associated with less optimal well-being in coaches, which is concerning since optimal well-being can enhance their long-term wellness, and performance- and athlete-related outcomes, such as relationships and mental states (Yukhymenko-Lescroart & Sharma, 2022). Moreover, feelings of job insecurity and external pressure in football are known to expedite experiences of burnout which can subsequently thwart one's well-being and performance (Bentzen et al., 2020). Therefore, coaches should be cautious of obtaining protection and subsequent well-being solely from unstable elements which lack individual control (e.g., player performances), as well-being would best be facilitated by stable factors within a coach's immediate control (e.g., family support and behavioural habits).

## 2.6. Applied implications

To aid the comprehension and management of coaches' well-being within professional football we propose a selection of applied implications. Coaches would benefit from regular education and reflective practice on their management of well-being which could increase their self-awareness on issues that compromise it and subsequent performances. However, given well-being support has previously been



questioned by UK professional football coaches (Whyatt, 2021), an exploration of well-being support services for coaches within the UK and other countries is warranted because differing international football associations will offer varying support and guidance. More so, considering the idiosyncrasies of well-being and coaching, bespoke well-being education and support would be greatly welcomed in addition to generic guidance. Thus, coaches' well-being strategies should be explored and delivered on more of an individualised level throughout the season. This could be explored in novel longitudinal ways, such as using diaries or photos to capture and enrich coaches' experiences and sensemaking of well-being support.

It was apparent from the sample of coaches that they reactively relied on ad-hoc, informal forms of social support in their environment, such as strong marital relationships, which was possibly due to its ease of access and established trust. Consequently, we encourage coaches to establish strong relational bonds away from the football context as those external to the sport context can widen horizons of understanding (Gadamer, 2013). However, we acknowledge that coaches relying on receiving informal social support highlights how professional football organisations need to take a proactive role in cultivating psychologically safe and supportive environments for coaches. Clubs often have a player care member of staff in position who strives to support player well-being, therefore we argue this role could be extended to support coaches' well-being. As a result, coaches would have access to a dedicated member of staff or team, who supports club employee well-being. Lastly, coaches implied that their well-being thrived when their identity was not conflicted, and their perceived purpose was not solely on their job. We acknowledge that changing football's ideologies and cultural norms is not feasible for one coach, but if more coaches shared their voices and well-being experiential accounts, then it may initiate change for the better and lessen the perceived stigma around the concept. Thus, it is important for football organisations to develop an awareness that head coaches can become consumed by their job roles, and that this can have deleterious effects on their well-being and performance. Organisations should therefore promote opportunities for coaches to develop a more well-rounded sense of self so that their identities do not solely revolve around being a football coach. This could be facilitated by club owners/executives encouraging coaches to engage in external hobbies, in turn enabling them the time to disassociate from their coaching role.

## 2.7. Reflections and future research directions

The study makes an original and novel contribution to the topic area, by illuminating and exploring male professional football head coaches' well-being experiences throughout a season using coaching docuseries. This study highlights how a seldom-heard group (Smith et al., 2023) can be accessed without researcher involvement via documentary data, which allowed for flexibility whilst maintaining contextual sensitivity (Farr & Nizza, 2019). Despite those strengths, we acknowledge the lack of participant-researcher interaction limits the ability to probe for additional depth and detail in provided accounts (Farr & Nizza, 2019). Future research could therefore benefit from combining documentary data with traditional participant-researcher interviews, as incorporating both types of data would enrich the sensemaking process and illuminate nuanced convergences or divergences in coaches' accounts. Moreover, although this is one of the first pieces of work which uses docuseries data as a platform to explore coaches' well-being experiences, a limitation is that the docuseries were edited and constructed by someone other than the research team and were not produced to specifically capture well-being experiences. Consequently, to progress this study's adapted IPA findings, future work could conduct a deeper film analysis on how such edited and stylised stories portray coaching experiences. Lastly, it would be beneficial for future research to explore how obsessive tendencies and the culture of professional football influences coaches' well-being experiences and sensemaking. This could be achieved by ethnographical research which would add further additional layers to

how coaches experience well-being in their context.

## 3. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to use docuseries to illuminate and explore male professional football head coaches' well-being experiences. Findings have demonstrated that coaches' well-being can become thwarted due to obsessive-like tendencies, which lead to persistent ruminations, such as worries and self-doubt. Obsession also led many coaches to become consumed by their role which created a lived obliviousness as to how they were behaving and acting outside of the football context. Coaches' immersion-in-role fragmented both their well-being and that of their families, as work and related ruminations spilt over into their homelife, thus conflicting their ecological niche. A nuanced finding was that coaches' well-being can be thwarted due to conflicts within their ecological niche, such as when their perceived identity could not be asserted due to conforming to football's institutionalised norms. Overall, the findings of this study provide insight into the well-being experiences of a seldom-heard group and acts as a platform for future work to do the same so that more voices can be represented and shared. Researchers should continue to illuminate coaches' well-being experiences and idiosyncrasies so that organisations can become better equipped to provide bespoke support.

## Disclosure statement

There are no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## Declaration of competing interest

There are no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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