That match was "a bit like losing your virginity".
Failed humour, face and identity construction in TV interviews with professional athletes and coaches

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Abstract

This paper explores the under-researched topic of *failed* humour in the context of *public-facing* media interactions. While most previous pragmatics research has focused on the support strategies employed by conversational partners when classifying humour attempts as successful or failed, this paper acknowledges that in public facing media interactions, the participation framework is more complex, raising interesting questions about how and to what extent humour can be seen to succeed or fail.

Employing a socio-pragmatic approach, we aim to highlight the complexity of humour in public-facing interactions, by drawing on media interviews with professional athletes and coaches. Our analysis illustrates how humour attempts can simultaneously succeed and fail with different members of the broader participation framework. Our particular focus is the implications of failed humour in this context on identity construction. Considering that an attempt at humour is also an attempt to make certain identity claims, any humour that fails has potentially detrimental effects on identity construction. This is perhaps more problematic in public-facing media interactions, where failed humour is particularly face-threatening and may challenge the public image of those who attempted the humour.

Introduction

Research on humour is currently enjoying a surge with an increasing number of scholars exploring the multiple uses and functions of this common yet highly complex discursive strategy. This research has been carried out in a wide range of different contexts, including professional and medical workplaces (e.g. Plester & Sayers 2007; Schnurr 2009a; Demjen 2016; Chimbwete-Phiri & Schnurr 2017), friendship groups (e.g. Hay 2001) and families (e.g.

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Habib 2008), the media (e.g. Dynel 2016; Chovanec 2012), school settings (e.g. Kersten 2009; Schnurr et al. 2016), and sports teams (e.g. Wolfers et al. 2017; Hester 2010).

However, in spite of this recent focus on the pragmatics of humour, relatively little research has looked at failed humour (e.g. Bell 2009a, b; 2015; Laineste 2013), and so this unintended outcome of humour remains largely unexplored. Moreover, most humour research has concentrated on private-facing interactions, such as among family and friends, and close-knit circles of professional acquaintances which often form communities of practice (Wenger 1998). In these relatively private settings, interlocutors usually draw on considerable shared knowledge and negotiated practices which govern members' use and interpretation of humour.

In contrast to these studies, in this paper we explore failed humour in public-facing interactions where speakers are dealing with and orienting to different audiences and perhaps more complex and diverse interactional norms. We pay particular attention to failed humour and questions of identity and face in the context of media interviews with professional athletes and coaches. The close relationship between humour and identity construction is well-established in the literature, and several studies have described how humour may be used as a tool to construct different identities, including professional identities (e.g. Schnurr 2009a; Richards 2006; Holmes 2007), social identities (Hay 2001; Ferguson & Ford 2008; Terrion & Ashforth 2002; Archakis & Tsakona 2005), gender identities (e.g. Westwood & Johnston 2011; Holmes & Schnurr 2014; Schnurr & Holmes 2009), as well as cultural and ethnic identities (e.g. Holmes et al. 2003; Labrador 2004). These identities are, however, not necessarily distinct from each other. On the contrary, it has been noted that professional and social identities "overlap and feed into" each other (van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2018: 44), and that for some professionals, such as the sex workers researched by Sanders (2004: 275), their professional roles and personal lives merged, making humour "visible as an important tool for defining different aspects of their identities". However, considering that an attempt at humour is also an attempt to make certain identity claims, any humour that fails has potentially detrimental effects on identity construction. As we show in our analyses below, a failure to construct a particular social identity may also negatively impact attempts to claim specific professional identities. In other situations where self-promotion is important, (c.f. van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2018 on job interviews). This interconnectedness between different identities is very relevant for public figures (like professional athletes and coaches), whose constructions of social identities may have direct implications and consequences for their professional identities and popularity – especially in public-facing media interactions.

This paper explores these issues by drawing on several instances of failed humour in post-match media interviews and press conferences with professional athletes or coaches. Our particular focus is those instances of humour that can be classified as both successful and failed. They are often *successful* given the reporter's reaction in the immediate context in which the interview with the athlete or coach took place, but they can be seen to have *failed* (at least in part) when looking at the reactions of the media and sections of the wider audience to which the interviews or press conferences were broadcast. In fact, some of the

comments were perceived as not humorous at all and as rather offensive, highly inappropriate and even rude among members of the wider audience, who often reacted quite strongly, expressing their disapproval and criticising the athlete's or coach's behaviour.

In our analyses, we look at the reactions to these instances of humour by both audiences: the audible and visual immediate reaction by the interviewers, as well as the mainly written (and hence delayed) reactions by journalists and opinion writers in follow up media articles, and fans and the wider public in social media posts on Twitter. In what follows we first provide a brief review of the relevant literature on failed humour – especially with regards to identity construction and media interviews – before outlining our methodology and discussing several instances of failed humour that occurred in post-match sports media interviews and press conferences.

Failed humour: a complex phenomenon

What exactly is failed humour? Scholars have provided different definitions of what they consider to be failed humour and have looked at different aspects of this complex phenomenon. For example, Bell (2009a: 1827) defines failed humour as "an utterance that was recognized as an attempt at humor, and understood, but was not appreciated", while Priego-Valverde (2009: 165) distinguishes between unperceived humour and rejected humour. She defines the former as "a joke being understood as a verbal attack" and the latter as being "perceived but purposely ignored by one [or] several of the listeners". " As we illustrate in our analyses below, these definitions capture some of the failed humour in our data, but this distinction is overall too rigid to explain the phenomena we explore here. Yet another definition is suggested by Bodgan (2014: 35), who understands failed humour as those instances where "what seems funny to the speaker may appear very rude to the hearer." While this definition is also useful, again, for our purposes it is too narrow. In addition to these and other studies (e.g. Laineste 2013) which explicitly examine humorous attempts that fail, there are also some studies which explore similar phenomena without explicitly framing them as failed humour (e.g. Kramer 2011).

Taking these definitions of failed humour as a starting point and acknowledging Hay's (2001) observation that some instances of humour may only be partially supported, in this paper we explore instances of humour in post-match media interviews that received mixed reactions indicating that they were successful for some parts of the audience and unsuccessful for other parts. They were often successful as judged by the responses of the immediate audience (i.e. the interviewer) and some of the online comments posted by a wider audience of fans and supporters, while the same instances were also perceived as inappropriate and rude by another part of the wider audience (as is reflected in their critical and sometimes face-threatening online comments). Like in the online discussions around rape jokes researched by Kramer (2011), this latter part of the (immediate and online) audiences rejected the comments and often explicitly stated their lack of appreciation and criticism on moral and ideological grounds.

Adding to this complex picture is the number of potential reasons why humour may fail, how it may fail, and what effects this may have on interlocutors' identity. Hay (2001) outlines several reasons that may cause humour to fail, among them "misjudging the relation between speaker and audience", and "portraying oneself inappropriately for one's status or gender". In an attempt to categorise the different types of failed humour, Bell and Attardo (2010: 423) propose a taxonomy. Among the "seven levels at which a speaker may fail to successfully engage in a humorous exchange" is "failure to appreciate the joke", which refers to those instances where the listeners recognise the speaker's intention to be humorous but, for various reasons, decide not to acknowledge the humour, and thus reject the speaker's attempt to frame an utterance as "non-serious". This is also the case in the examples that we analyse below, where (part of) the audience fails, or perhaps refuses, to appreciate the player's attempt at humour. Such negative reactions to the attempted humour, in turn, have potentially detrimental implications for the speaker's identities because by not acknowledging or by responding in a dispreferred way to the humour, the audience at the same time rejects the speaker's identity claims as expressed through the humour.

Failed humour, identity and face

As mentioned above, identity is a useful resource for understanding instances of humour and failed humour in interaction, therefore some attention to this complex concept is relevant here. In our work, we take a social constructivist stance and understand identity not as a static attribute and characteristic that speakers (and listeners) possess, but rather as a dynamic, emergent, and changing activity (or performance) that interlocutors engage in (e.g. Schnurr & van de Mieroop 2017a). According to this view, identities are multiple, fragmented and co-constructed, and constantly negotiated among interlocutors throughout an interaction (Hall 1996; Bucholtz & Hall 2005).

A closely related notion is that of face, which – although it is hard to pin down its exact meaning (e.g. Haugh & Hinze 2003)– is often understood as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself [sic] by the line others assume he [sic] has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1967: 5). As recent research has established, a close relationship exists between the notions of face and identity, and it has been argued that by doing facework, and orienting to each other's face needs, interlocutors at the same time construct their own and each other's identities in relation to each other (e.g. Geyer 2008; Schnurr & Chan 2011; van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2017b).

Where humour becomes relevant is in its potential to heighten face threats. As Bell (2009b: 161) succinctly put it, "there is much at stake in terms of face and identity for both conversational participants", and as a consequence, the failure of humour may result in the loss of the speaker's and/or the addressees' face (e.g. Schnurr 2010; Bell 2009b; Zajdman 1995). The speaker's face may be threatened, for example, due to their misjudgement of interlocutors' relationship and their (unsupported) identity claims, while the addressees' face may be threatened if they have to admit that they did not get the joke (Bell 2009b).

Additionally, any attempt at humour is also an attempt at constructing or orienting to an assumed in-group in which the speaker claims membership (e.g. Holmes et al. 2003; Schnurr 2009b). Numerous studies have identified and described the idiosyncratic ways of using and responding to humour that characterise particular teams (which often form communities of practice (Wenger 1998)) (e.g. Schnurr 2009a; Holmes at al. 2007; Daly et al. 2004; Plester & Sayers 2007). In adhering to the group's norms of "doing" humour, members not only reinforce these norms, but they also signal their group membership. In other words, if the humour is responded to appropriately (i.e. if it is successful), interlocutors' membership claim is legitimised, and group-ties are strengthened. However, if an attempt at humour fails (even if only partly), these membership claims are challenged, and the assumed or aspired relationship between interlocutors is questioned. As a consequence, social distance between interlocutors – rather than solidarity – is created, and asymmetrical power relations may be emphasised (Bodgan 2014; Schnurr 2009b).

Given these group-specific norms and practices of appropriately using (and responding to) humour, it is thus perhaps not surprising that humour seems to occur more frequently in relatively private interactions among interlocutors who know each other fairly well, such as friends, family members, colleagues, or members of the same sports team (e.g. Hall & Sereno 2010; Bell 2015; Wolfers et al. 2017). Doing humour among acquaintances and intimates is thus less risky than using humour towards strangers (see also Bell 2009a). However, due to the set-up of many post-match interviews and press conferences, or indeed any interaction broadcast through the media, and the often diverse and heterogeneous audiences they can reach, the boundaries between acquaintances and strangers, as well as between in-group and out-group, may not always be straightforward.

Constructing identities for a media audience: media interviews by professional athletes and coaches

Humour attempts in media interactions have received only relatively limited attention, particularly from a pragmatic perspective (Dynel 2012; Chovanec 2016), and this study aims to contribute to this research. As outlined above, in this paper we explore the complex relationship between failed humour and identity in public facing post-match media interviews and press conferences with professional athletes or coaches. For sporting professionals, speaking to the media has become an obligatory component of their professional role, and this has made the management of their public-facing identities a salient concern. Some research has explored the ways athletes and coaches attempt to construct and negotiate their various identities in this context (e.g. Caldwell, 2009; File, 2012, 2015, 2017a; File & Wilson, 2017). For example, File's (2015) study presented evidence of a media identity that athletes appear to strategically construct when speaking in interviews after sports matches in an attempt to portray themselves in line with perceived values of a professional athlete. This media identity is characterised by stances of graciousness in victory and defeat, the portrayal of oneself as a team player (as opposed to an individual superstar), and as respectful of the opposition and referees. Data from ethnographic interviews carried out with professional athletes revealed that constructing

oneself in the media in these ways was sometimes a challenge, especially after controversial match results or when the athletes/coaches were emotional and disappointed after a loss. But, in spite of these difficulties it was nevertheless necessary to construct these identities in order to appeal to audiences and not attract unwanted negative attention.

Like other media interactions, what is particularly interesting about these interviews is that they are designed for potentially very different audiences. On the one hand, the immediate audience is the reporter who is conducting the interview – often immediately after the match on the sports field. In some cases, the interviewer will themselves be an ex-professional athlete who may have a pre-existing relationship with the player being interviewed from their own playing days (see File, 2012, 2013 for a discussion of this). On the other hand, these interviews are conducted with the aim of being broadcast to a wider audience of TV viewers in dispersed locations (e.g. at home, in the pub). This wider audience can be very heterogeneous – both in age (including children and adults), educational and economic background, gender, as well as level of interest in sports. This double articulation characteristic of broadcast interactions has been noted as a key feature in understanding discursive action by speakers (and possibly reactions by different participants and audiences) in media contexts (Chovanec, 2016).

For our interests in this paper, this complexity of the audience, as we illustrate in our analyses below, is a crucial factor that accounts for potentially very different reactions to the same instance of humour, and it may explain why some humour may work for one audience and fail for another. Moreover, the presence of a more complex participation framework in these interviews – one that can include both fellow interlocutors involved in the broadcast interaction and a spatiotemporally distant, heterogeneous television audience that may not share knowledge and values of the speaker – raises important questions about the nature and even the possibility of being able to dichotomously classify humour as either successful or failed.

The relevance of different audiences in broadcast media publications or presentations is also discussed in more detail in Dynel (2012) with respect to impoliteness. Examining the occurrence of impoliteness (most of which is humorous) in the TV series *House*, Dynel (2012: 161) shows how "the film discourse operates on two communicative levels", namely on the level of the fictional movie-world and the level of the audience at home. She argues that the characters' utterances carry a range of different pragmatic effects for these different audiences, and that, for instance, an utterance that may be perceived as inappropriate and impolite by another character on the level of the fictional movie world, may be perceived as humorous and entertaining by the audience watching the episode on TV. One of the reasons for these differences in perception and interpretation is that the scripted interactions between the fictional characters are written for the entertainment of the audience at home watching the interaction, and that, as a consequence, it can be assumed that this audience "will normally recognize the fictional speaker's intention […] to cause face-damage" and will interpret it as entertaining rather than upsetting (Dynel 2012: 175).

However, the situation in the post-match interviews that we look at in this paper is very different as both audiences – the immediate (i.e. the interviewer) and the wider (i.e. those watching the interview on TV) – are trying to make sense of unscripted, naturally occurring utterances and are typically not expecting impoliteness to occur in this context (see File, 2017b for a discussion of marked and unmarked media performances in post-match interviews). While most research on failed humour relies on scripted instances drawn from TV series or a movie (e.g. Bogdan 2014) or has elicited responses to a 'lame canned joke' (e.g. Bell 2009a, b; Bell & Attardo 2010), only very few studies analyse naturally occurring instances of failed humour (Priego-Valverde 2009; Schnurr 2009b; Bell 2015). Such a focus on authentic, rather than scripted or specifically elicited instances of humour has several advantages and provides valuable insights into the pragmatic complexities of humour – both, failed and successful. Moreover, unlike in the fictional world of *House* or any other TV series or movie, the failure of the humour and the resulting face loss of the professional athletes in the high-stakes post-match interviews, have potentially far-reaching consequences – especially as those incidents may threaten the athletes' public image and thus pose serious challenges to their identities.

Data and methodology

In this paper, we combine two different data sets to analyse the way humour works in broadcast interactions. Our primary data consist of naturally occurring instances of failed humour in post-match interviews, which is supplemented by secondary data in the form of audience reactions on social media.

Primary data set: naturally occurring instances of failed humour in the broadcast media

This data set is made up of video-recordings of authentic post-match interviews and press conference interviews with professional athletes or coaches that were carried out between 2011 and 2016. We have chosen three relatively recent incidents of failed humour from three different sports (Baseball in the United States, Formula 1 racing and Australian Rugby League). Two instances come from post-match media interviews with athletes after a match, and one from a post-match press conference with a coach.

Difficulties around identifying humour are well-documented in the literature, and researchers generally agree that exclusively focusing on laughter as a response strategy is too limiting and does not capture all instances of humour (e.g. Chapman 1983; Hay 2001; Schnurr & Chan 2011). Our observations below confirm these claims and illustrate a variety of different response strategies to the humour attempts. When selecting instances of failed humour for this study, we largely followed Bell (2015). More specifically, however, we chose instances which have been explicitly referred to in the media as controversial, problematic or "failed humour" and which generated a relatively large response from the professional media (e.g. sports reporters and opinion writers). These media stories and news items were usually critical of the athlete or coach's humour attempt and predominantly classified them

as examples of failed humour. These reports gave us a warrant to explore these cases further to investigate how and/or to what extent the humour attempt can be seen to succeed or fail.

The relevant interview sequences were transcribed using simplified transcription conventions (see conventions below at the end of the article). In our analysis of this primary data set in particular we draw on interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz 2003). Interactional Sociolinguistics is particularly useful for an analysis of humour (see e.g. Schnurr 2009b; Schnurr & Mohd Omar fc) as it provides the discursive tools to identify and describe how humour works in an interaction, while at the same time allowing us to link these micro-level observations to the macro-level concepts of identity and face. In particular, the concepts of conversational inferencing and contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 2003) are useful when trying to capture not only the interpretive procedures by which interlocutors assess what is communicatively intended at any point in an exchange – i.e. what triggers the humour and how is it followed up – but they also help identifying the linguistic forms that contribute to signalling contextual presuppositions, such as a range of verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g. laughter, tone of voice) on which interlocutors rely to frame and interpret an utterance as humorous or not.

Secondary data set: audience reactions on social media

In addition to the reactions to humour attempts evident in the interactional data and in news reports, a secondary data set of social media posts was also collected and analysed to develop an understanding of the wider audience reactions to the humour attempts being analysed here. Social media data were collected from the social media platform Twitter. A data set of Tweets was collected for each humour attempt by using Twitter's advanced search option to search for the coach's or player's names on the date of the humour attempt and for a period of one week after the humour attempt. The full results were then downloaded and analysed using NVivo analysis software.

These searches generated a large number of tweets for each case and these were examined for general recurring patterns (see Kramer, 2011 for similar approach). For the purposes of the article here, a number of Tweets were excluded on the basis that they did not offer any reaction to the humour attempt (e.g. Tweets that sought to link people to news stories explaining the humour attempt or any potential fallout). Tweets that mentioned the athlete or coach's name but that had no connection to the humour attempt were also ignored. However, Tweets that offered a reaction to the humour attempts focused on in this article, were analysed and a number of broader patterns across tweets.

While there is much that could be done with this social media data, for the purposes of this study, we primarily share examples below that show the supportive and unsupportive reactions to the humour attempt as a way of both helping to support our interpretations of these instances as humorous and to show variation in the way these humour attempts were reacted to. We also use these examples to illustrate the arguments of this paper: that the extent to which we can claim a humour attempt as having failed is complex, and that

questions of identity emerge in the process of evaluating humour attempts as failed or not. The spelling and grammar in the tweets shared below have been left as in the original, but we have removed the user's Twitter handle to protect their identities.

Findings of the primary data set: naturally occurring instances of failed humour in the broadcast media

We chose the three examples presented below to illustrate how the humour works and how it was perceived on three different levels and in relation to different audiences afforded by a media broadcast interaction: i) in the immediate context of the interview with the reporter (who was often an ex-professional athlete), ii) in the media reports (written by professional sports reporters or opinion writers), and iii) in the online posts and twitter comments. Our examples show that while the same instance may be successful in one context and for one audience, it may fail for another. Moreover, in all our examples questions of identity emerge and the different audiences often orient, more or less explicitly, to the athletes' social and professional identities, which are sometimes set in opposition to each other and at other times are described as overlapping and closely related with each other. Each of the three extracts are discussed further below.

Extract 1

Interview context
Interview date: around 05/06/16
Sport: Australian Rugby League
Interview with winning captain, after a close win.
Interviewee: Sam Thaiday, player and captain of the Queensland team
Interviewer: Brad Fittler (an ex-professional Australian Rugby League player)
Match details: State of Origin match between New South Wales and Queensland

Interviewer (Brad Fittler)
1.　　how was that Sam

Sam Thaiday
2.　　yeah it was a bit like ah losing your virginity

Interviewer (Brad Fittler)
3.　　{smiles and laughs}==

Sam Thaiday
4.　　==ah it wasn't very nice but we got the job done {smiles at the interviewer}

Interviewer (Brad Fittler)
5.　　{continues smiling and laughing}
6.　　oh I'm not sure if I've got a second question

Sam Thaiday

7. that's alright but yeah + tough {laughs} <u>TOUGH</u> win
8. but ah it's always good to get off ah good start and ah it's always tough playing the first game anywhere
9. but ah to play down here made it even tougher
10. but tough grinding win and now we've got to go home and defend our own little little patch of grass up there in ah Brisbane

[…post-match interview continues…]

In this example, from an Australian Rugby League context, Sam Thaiday (a professional rugby league player) and Brad Fittler (the interviewer and an ex-rugby league player himself) reflect on a recently completed match. The humorous comment (underlined above) takes the form of a witty one-liner, in which Sam Thaiday uses a colloquial (and rather sexual) simile to describe his impression of a tough match in response to the first question of the interview (in line 1). In post-match interviews, like this, players and coaches are typically asked to evaluate the match, and an unmarked response is to evaluate the match as tough or difficult (File, 2013). However, in this instance, the interviewee's response is marked as it differs from the typical formulaic answers.

In applying a fine-grained analysis to this interaction, Sam Thaiday first indicates his understanding, and perhaps indeed expectation of this question, as his utterance-initial 'yeah' (line 2) shows. He then produces the (sexual) simile, which is immediately followed by a more explicit explanation of what he means in line 4: 'it wasn't very nice but we got the job done'. The first part of the response (i.e. the attempt at humour) could thus be seen as an attempt to create an in-group with the reporter (and possibly the wider audience) by using a generally known expression, while the second part of his response resembles more closely the kind of expected and unmarked answers in this context.

Interestingly, the reporter initially responds with a reserved and partly suppressed laugh (line 3), but one which can be interpreted as signalling understanding and agreement (Glenn 2003). This laughter continues after the interviewee's explanation in line 4, before he follows up with what could be interpreted as a distancing comment in line 6, 'oh I'm not sure if I've got a second question', which is uttered in an amused tone of voice. With this second part of the response the reporter seems to take a different stance – shifting from his initial reaction (i.e. the laughter) which signals in-group membership (along the lines of 'I know what you mean') – towards a more distanced stance by not giving his interviewee the chance (or space) to further elaborate his initial comment thereby somewhat minimising his alignment with him.

So, while the initial laughter could perhaps be interpreted as some sort of amusement (if not agreement) by the interviewer, with his subsequent remark he somewhat distances himself from Sam Thaiday's response. This is followed up by the player who in his subsequent utterance converts back to the norms of post-match interviews (lines 7-10). In line with standard practice, he continues his evaluation of the match by reverting back to

giving generic responses typical of post-match interviews – construing the win as tough, evaluating it positively in relation to the series and match context and making reference to the next match and challenge facing the player's team (File, 2013).

In terms of identity construction, this short example, illustrates how interlocutors take different positions and construct different and somewhat socially distant identities throughout an interview. By asking a standard question, inviting the athlete to evaluate the match, the interviewer assigns two distinct, albeit related, professional identities to himself and Sam Thaiday, namely as reporter and athlete. However, this dichotomy is temporarily challenged when the interviewee provides his marked response in the form of a humorous simile. Such an action emphasises the shared ground between the interviewer and himself (Holmes et al, 2003), and may make claims for co-membership in the same group of professional rugby league players (van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2018). This assignment of another identity is initially accepted by the interviewer (as reflected in his initially supportive response to the humour), before he backgrounds it and converts back to his ('new' or other) professional identity (by distancing himself from the player's response). This is then picked up by Sam Thaiday, whose subsequent response constitutes a more unmarked answer (lines 7-10) and can be seen to index the identity of a professional athlete who has experience with these kinds of interviews.

So, while the humorous comment is initially successful – as reflected in the first part of the reporter's reaction – it soon becomes set up as problematic (by the reporter's subsequent reaction) and could be seen to fail. This failure is even more obvious when we look at the ways in which the remark was taken up by the wider audience to which the interview was broadcast. For example, several media reports written in response to this interview indicated that the humorous remark split opinion (Hunt, 2016; Marshallsea, 2016; Sharwood, 2016; "State of Origin 2016," 2016), and some of the people quoted in these stories also indicated the reaction to the humour attempt was mixed. For example, a Member of Parliament in Australia denounced the comments as 'unacceptable'; and some people called on the player to apologise (which he initially refused to do). A political party in Australia, Family First, also expressed their shock at the comments, on the basis that the player who uttered them was a 'family man' who should not be talking about sex in reference to a game of rugby league. The explicit use of the identity category 'family man' by the party in their comment is particularly noteworthy in this context as it shows that Sam Thaiday is not only judged here as a rugby player but also in a more social, perhaps role-model role as a 'family man'. This reference to this identity category is used here to justify the interpretation of this humour as failed based on the athlete portraying himself in ways that are perceived as inappropriate given his status as a public figure (Hay 2001). This overlap between social and professional identities may be particularly relevant for celebrities who seem to be particularly prone to public scrutiny and whose social identities (and the qualities that they project) may be seen as directly related to their professional identity and public image.

Extract 2

[…post-match press conference in progress…]

Interviewer
1.　　is it difficult though + to maintain that even keel with what you're going through right now
2.　　especially your first time around

Brad Ausmus
3.　　ah ++ yeah I mean it's not fun
4.　　but ++ like I said it- it- it- once I get to the field I'm always in a good mood
5.　　especially if I'm driving in and its sunny out
6.　　so ++ I mean once I'm here I'm- I'm ready to go
7.　　I'm I'm + I I I feel like I'm the exact same person that you would've seen on day one of spring training

Interviewer
8.　　how are you when you go home

Brad Ausmus
9.　　<u>I beat my wife</u>
10.　　*{journalists in the press conference react, some with laughter and others with sharp intakes of breath or by saying 'jeez'}*
11.　　just kidding no
12.　　ah ++ no luckily my wife are
　　　　{journalists in the press conference continue to laugh}
13.　　are um fantastic because I do I do get a little mopey at home
14.　　um but my wife and kids are good
15.　　they've seen me +++ ah +++ they've seen me um be in a bad mood after a loss
16.　　and ah so they've been they've been great

Interviewer
17.　　Brad what do you like about JD in that number five spot
18.　　and he's getting some playing time obviously at

[…post-match press conference continues…]

In this example, Brad Ausmus, the head coach of a professional baseball team in the United States, jokingly remarks that he beats his wife when asked how he handles the pressure of his team's losing streak (line 9). This response comes after one of the reporters asked him to

reflect on his mood after another loss, specifically asking whether it is difficult to remain calm and balanced when the team continues to lose. In responding, Brad acknowledges that losing is not fun (line 3) but adds that despite this he is always in a good mood when he is at work. This response is in line with what could be expected in this context, with Brad constructing his professional identity as being calm and in control despite the repeatedly disappointing results. By referring to these positive character traits, which index the identity of a professional sports coach or manager, Brad Ausmus may also be attempting to diffuse any criticism from the reporters and portray himself as in control of the situation.

However, when in a follow-up question the focus of attention shifts from the professional to a more personal domain (at home) (line 8), his potentially humorous remark 'I beat my wife' (line 9) generates mixed responses among the immediate audience of journalists and reporters. As we can see in line 10, some of the reporters respond with laughter – thus acknowledging and (at least partly) supporting the humorous intention of the utterance – while others express their disbelief, shock and disapproval of the comment, as reflected, for example, in their audible sharp intakes of breath and their verbal reaction ('jeez'). While the supportive respondents may have interpreted Brad's utterance as humorous– probably based on the assumption that Brad's confession is clearly exaggerated, highly unlikely, and probably untrue, perhaps as an example of absurd humour (Dynel, 2017) – the other respondents reject it and mark it as non-humorous and inappropriate – either having read it as a true account or as an inappropriate comment in this context (Bell 2015).

Perhaps in response to the mixed reaction he receives, Brad Ausmus then quickly retakes the floor and explicitly marks this controversial utterance as humorous and non-serious by exclaiming that he was 'just kidding' (line 11). This attempt at damage control is further supported by his subsequent explanations and positive evaluations of his home life and the supportive role his family play despite his occasionally bad moods due to his team's frequent losses (lines 12-16). These explanations contribute to reinstating his own face (which has suffered due to his controversial comment); they also to some extent reconstruct his professional identity as a good manager, as well as his social identity as a good husband and father. According to Membership Categorisation Analysis (henceforth MCA; Sacks 1992), by making explicit reference to his family, Ausmus skilfully (although not necessarily consciously) draws on the positive attributes of the identity of a family man and projects them onto himself, thereby portraying himself in a positive light (e.g. Benwell & Stokoe 2006). This seems to be largely successful in the context of the press conference as the journalists move on and ask a new question about a different topic related to the specifics of the sports (lines 17 and 18), thereby supporting his attempts to shift back to the sports domain and focus on his professional identity. Later during the press conference, the coach also apologised explicitly to anyone who may have been offended by the comments, stating that he did not mean to make light of battered women.

However, while this apology may have ended this topic in the press conference, Brad Ausmus' comment was subsequently picked up by the media and generated further debate – with mixed reactions to the humour. Media reports were universally condemning of the remark – despite its possibly humorous intention – with one labelling it as 'unfortunate',

'off-colour' and 'controversial' (Axisma, 2014). Some questioned the appropriacy of this behaviour for a professional baseball coach (Oz, 2014), which again makes relevant the interviewee's professional identity; and others regarded such behaviour as inappropriate for a role model, thereby emphasising a more social and perhaps educational aspect of the coach's identity. Like in Sam Thaiday's case in the previous example, it could also be argued here that the social identities of good husband and role model are an intricate part of the coach's professional identity, and so the failed humour challenges his social identity and by implication also his professional identity. We discuss one more example here before moving on to the reactions of the wider audience on social media.

Extract 3

| **Interview context** |
| Interview date: around 29/05/2011 |
| Sport: Formula 1 |
| Interviewee: Lewis Hamilton, Driver for McLaren (now driving for Mercedes) |
| Interviewer: Lee Mckenzie, Channel 4 |
| Match details: post-race mix zone media interview after the driver has had a controversial race in which he has been penalised by the stewards for continued rule infringements during the race. |

[…post-race mix zone media interview in progress…]

Interviewer
1.   why do you think you're so magnetic to the stewards
2.   why do you think that it's- you obviously feel that you're being targeted

Lewis Hamilton
3.   {laughs} maybe it's because I'm black {laughs}
4.   that's what Ali G says
5.   ++ I don't know

Interviewer
6.   just ++ explain how much this is hurting your championship
7.   is it hurting your confidence as a driver

[…post-race mix zone media interview continues…]

This example comes from a Formula One racing context where a driver jokingly makes relevant his skin colour as black in response to a question about why the officials continue to punish him for transgressions on the race course. Prior to the extract transcribed above, the interviewee, Lewis Hamilton, is asked to reflect on a race that has been difficult for him, in particular how he feels about the decisions of the race stewards (similar to referees) to penalise him for what were deemed rule infringements during the race.

After providing an emotional account and rebuttal to these decisions, Lewis Hamilton is asked to reflect on why he thinks he might be on the receiving end of these officiating decisions (lines 1 to 2). In responding, he humorously suggests that his skin colour is to blame for what he perceives to be unfair treatment: 'maybe it's because I'm black' (line 3). The utterance-initial and utterance-final laughter in which this remark is embedded set this up as non-serious and humorous. Moreover, the hedge 'maybe' and the intertextual link to a satirical character, Ali G (played by Sacha Baron Cohen) (line 4), who uses the phrase '*is it because I'm black*' as part of his comedy routine, downgrade the seriousness of the utterance and mark it as humorous. By voicing Ali G's racial humour example in this interview, Lewis Hamilton can be seen to deflect away from any serious interpretation of the content of his remark, as he indicates explicitly that he is merely quoting a comedy figure as he explains his recent experience with the race stewards. However, when the comment does not receive an audible reaction by the interviewee (see the relatively long silence, for this genre in particular, in line 5), Lewis Hamilton follows it by pleading ignorance ('I don't know' in line 5), indicating that he has no explanation for the stewards' behaviour.

Regarding the interviewer's response, unlike in the two previous examples, there is no audible supportive feedback for the interviewee's humour attempt. The interviewer is not visible and so we are unable to gauge her facial responses. However, based on her subsequent behaviour (i.e. the utterance-initial 'just' followed by a noticeable pause before continuing with the interview), we can deduce that she is somewhat stumped by the athlete's comment. This does not necessarily imply a non-appreciation of the humour but could indicate a concern about how she should react given that this interview will be broadcast to a wider audience. It could be that by remaining calm and continuing with the interview without making any explicit judgements, she is attempting to enact and uphold her professional identity as a sports reporter, one that presumably involves maintaining some social distance from the interviewee. Alternatively, the interviewee's answer could have left the interviewer feeling uncomfortable and wanting to avoid being part of an in-group drawn along racial lines. The silence may then reflect a conflict for the interviewer whereby a decision needs to be made as to whether to support the interviewee's face and acknowledge the humour attempt or look for a way to avoid it so as not to be associated with it.

Interestingly, in contrast to the rather reserved interviewer, the follow up media reports appeared to interpret Lewis Hamilton's remarks as condemning of the race stewards and not as humorous. Several reports described his behaviour as an indirect rebuke or attack of the steward's treatment of him ("BBC Sport - Lewis Hamilton launches attack on Monaco stewards," n.d.; Cary, 2011), while others did refer to the humour attempt but drew attention to its failure (Weaver, 2011). Several news outlets also covered Hamilton's apology after this episode in which he himself draws attention to this failed attempt to be funny (Cary, 2011; "Hamilton clears the air with stewards," n.d., "Hamilton explains 'unfunny' joke," 2011, "Lewis Hamilton sorry over Ali G 'joke' | F1 News - ITV Sport," n.d.). In these instances, the media use what they largely perceive to be a failed attempt at humour to criticise Hamilton for being an emotional driver who is trying to find ways to

attack the stewards over their decision to punish him by using his skin colour as an unjustified reason. One article in particular accuses him of 'playing the race card' in order to gain an advantage, perhaps in the form of a more lenient or dropped punishment from the stewards (Rosenburg, 2011).

Social media data analysis: Secondary data set: audience reactions on social media

In analysing the social media data for reactions, the extent to which the humour attempt can be seen to fail is again complex. The analysis of the social media data revealed four broad patterns: (1) tweets by people that showed support for the humour attempt, (2) tweets by people that rejected the humour attempt, (3) tweets by people offering their own humour attempt in order to keep the joke going, and (4) tweets by people who focused on the negative reaction to the humour attempt and used it to criticise society for being too sensitive and too politically correct. While the latter of these strategies could be seen as a strategy subcategory of support for the joke, this was not always the case, so these examples were coded separately. Examples of these categories are provided below in Table 1.

Supportive of the humour attempt	• 'Was a bit like losing your virginity, wasn't very nice but got the job done'- take a bow Sam Thaiday • Well i thought that was a dull #Origin ... until Sam Thaiday's interview
	• Am I the only one that found Ausmus' comment funny as hell? • Ausmus' joke may have missed with many. But I thought it was funny. #twistedhumor
	• @LewisHamilton I wouldn't worry about your comments last weekend, most fans found the Ali G thing pretty funny! Solid stuff. • @LewisHamilton well I thought the ali g joke was funny but I guess he aint for everyone, keep da faith! Westside ;)
Rejection of the humour attempt	• Sam Thaiday's bizarre post match interview was silly and offensive. • I'm all for jokes but Thaiday that was really inappropriate for TV. • Sam Thaiday "it's like losing your virginity, rough but you get the job done"! Nice for all the kids watching! #PoorForm #Origin
	• Hey Brad Ausmus..Wife beating smack is never funny..just sayin. #truth • Awww Brad Ausmus, no. Not funny. Not even in your mind.

	• @LewisHamilton so disappointed you played the race card, joking or not. Thousands of kids look up to you and you act like a child. • 'And @Lewis Hamilton wants to grow up and stop acting like a child. No need for the stupid racism reference, wasn't even funny!'
Continuation of the humour attempt	• I, for one, am not shocked by Thaiday's comments. I think most #NRL players lose their virginity with 16 of their teammates present. • I was more impressed that Thaiday seemed to be implying he lasted 80mins when he first stepped on to the hallowed turf.
	• If you don't think spousal abuse can be funny, you haven't envisioned Brad going home and getting his ass kicked by Mrs. Ausmus tonight. • Brad Ausmus should be punished appropriately. By having to sit through 12 hours of open mic comedy. Without alchohol.
	• I see Lewis Hamilton has apologised. Is that for the driving, the 'joke' accusation of racism, or tax avoidance by living in Switzerland? • @LewisHamilton Lewis don't try to crack jokes your driving was enough of one. Get real & grow up!
Criticism of the negative reaction to humour attempt	• I thought Sam Thaiday's joke was quite witty. Vastly better than the usual NRL blather. Some people need to get a life, or at least rent one • Although it was probably said in bad taste, I think has a massive overreaction in regards to the post-match comments made by Sam Thaiday.
	• They need to leave Ausmus alone. Let the joke go--he meant nothing harmful by it. People need to stop becoming so easily offended. #letitrip • This whole Ausmus "abuse" thing is such a non-issue. How people can get so offended over poor choice of words is asinine. #moveon
	• Genuinely thought what Lewis Hamilton said was funny! People need to wise up, it was obv said in jest! • @LewisHamilton well I thought the ali g joke was funny but I guess he aint for everyone, keep da faith! Westside ;)

Table 1: Broad level patterns in the social media reactions

Across all three examples, the broader patterns indicate variation in the way the humour attempt was perceived with some orienting to it as humorous while others criticising and negatively evaluating it. With respect to Example 1 (Sam Thaiday), those social media users who signalled an appreciation of the player's humorous comment focused on celebrating the entertaining nature of the remark in a genre infamous for its generic and largely expected answers, and questioned the perceived outrage shown by people in response to

the comment. Sam Thaiday himself also justified his behaviour along those lines, arguing that rather than giving the same old bland responses, he deliberately chose to try to be more entertaining ("State of Origin 2016," 2016), although this may also have been an attempt to excuse his behaviour after the fallout. Thus, those defending the player's behaviour arguing that it was indeed humorous, largely orient to his professional identity and portray himas an entertainer and someone who likes to do things outside of what is typically expected during post-match interviews (e.g. '*take a bow Sam Thaiday*', '*Well i thought that was a dull #Origin ... until Sam Thaiday's interview*'). While those who considered the humour to be inappropriate and hence as failed, foregrounded his responsibilities as role model and family man (e.g. '*Sam Thaiday… Nice for all the kids watching! #PoorForm #Origin*', '*I'm all for jokes but Thaiday that was really inappropriate for TV*'), thus orienting to his social identities in evaluating the humour attempt and condemning its implications on his professional identity.

With reference to Example 2 (Brad Ausmus), some fans indicated that they believed Brad Ausmus's comment was intended to be 'light-hearted' and humorous (e.g. '*it was a joke get over it*', '*the "beat my wife" joke by ausmus was funny*'), but many also expressed their strong disagreement and considered his behaviour inappropriate (e.g. '*Yes, he was joking. does not matter*', '*get over it? How is that an appropriate time to kid about domestic violence*'). However, those who found the humour attempt problematic mobilised and oriented to different identity categories – mainly the professional identity of a sports coach and the social identity of a good husband and father.

In relation to Example 3 (Lewis Hamilton), the reactions of the wider public were again mixed, and the social media posts once more oriented to characteristics that index different identities. Just like in the media reports, some fans condemned Lewis Hamilton's attempt at humour by attributing the label of child (e.g. '*And @Lewis Hamilton wants to grow up and stop acting like a child. No need for the stupid racism reference, wasn't even funny!*'). Explicitly mentioning the identity category 'child' and – following MCA – projecting the perceived attributes of a child onto Lewis Hamilton, such posts strip the sports star of his professional identity and instead portray him as irresponsible and immature. Comments like this show that the humour is failing for this (part of the) audience because they perceive Lewis Hamilton to portray himself inappropriately for this status and age (Hay 2001). But there are also several tweets defending the race car driver – often by pointing to the humorous and hence non-serious intent of the remark (e.g. '*Lewis Hamilton was never serious about his black comment … it was said in jest people!*', '*nothing to apologise about*'). Some people even shifted the blame onto the media (e.g. '*love how media can jump onto things…*') or other social out-groups (e.g. '*sheltered white, middle-classes*'), thereby also supporting a humorous, non-offensive, reading of the remark and sometimes portraying Lewis Hamilton as the victim (of the media or humourless people) rather than the offender.

Taken together, these reactions from the social media data set to all three examples illustrate some of the complexities of classifying remarks in media interviews as 'humorous' or as 'failed humour'. Whereas the media reports seemed to take a predominantly negative view to these controversial humour attempts, the social media data revealed greater

variation in judgement. In making these judgments, audiences invoke a complex array of different identities for the athlete or coach and portray him very differently depending on their understanding of the humorous comment.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has illustrated the interactional and pragmatic complexities of failed humour, and thus contributes to an area of inquiry that is starting to receive more attention from scholars. We have shown that the concept of failed humour is highly contested and that the question of what counts as failed humour is anything but straightforward as the same remark is often responded to very differently by different audiences, especially in public-facing interactions. Moreover, in interpreting a specific utterance and accounting for it as humorous or non-humorous, different audiences and members of the audience orient to and employ different identity categories, which they use to justify their stance towards the humour as failed and inappropriate or as successful and acceptable. These responses capture a complex picture of the extent to which we can claim that humour attempts fail, and also highlight the role of identity in arguing whether an attempt fails or not.

While failed humour is always potentially threatening to the speaker's (and sometimes also the addressee's) face and identity claims (Schnurr 2010; Bell 2009b; Zajdman 1995), our examples have shown that different kinds of identities are challenged by audience reactions. More specifically, in the public-facing media interviews that we looked at in this paper, the athletes and coaches were not only criticised for their perceived inappropriate behaviour in relation to their professional identity, but the criticism also expanded to other identities, which are, strictly speaking, non-professional but which, in the case of these public celebrities, may be closely related to their professional identities (see also van de Mieroop & Schnurr 2018), such as the identity of a role model (Examples 1 and 2), as well as their social identities, such as family man, father and husband (Examples 1 and 2), or mature adult (Example 3). These criticisms and reactions to the humour point to an iconisation of humour (c.f. Kramer 2011 for an iconization of responses to rape jokes), whereby making specific kinds of humorous comments on potentially taboo topics (such as sex, domestic violence, race etc.) seems to be interpreted by the audience as reflecting, in cases of failed humour, problematic "intrinsic personal qualities" of the person attempting the humour (Kramer 2011: 160).

The paper also raises important questions about the role of the audience, and critically discusses the multiple readings of failed humour with regards to identity construction and negotiation in the public domain. The importance of audience reactions when understanding humour is long established (e.g. Jones 2005; Derks et al. 1995; DeCamp 2015), but only recently have researchers started to pay more attention to the complex nature of this audience (e.g. Dynel 2012). We contribute to this evolving research by distinguishing between the reactions of the immediate and the wider audience; and we show the importance of considering both when attempting to do humour – especially in

public speech events such as media interviews where the larger part of the audience does not occupy the same spatiotemporal space as the person attempting the humour.

With respect to these different audiences, while in this study the media report and opinion writers appeared to universally condemn the controversial humour attempts discussed in this study, there was evidence in the transcripts and social media data that showed variation in the degree to which interlocutors and audience members supported these humour attempts. Some of this may also be explained when we consider the partisan nature of sport. In the domain of professional sports, the public is made up of fans and those who are not fans of an athlete, coach or team (perhaps they are fans of other competitors). In such a context, there is likely to be the potential for multiple readings of a controversial humour attempt, perhaps dressed up as defensive or attacking actions of the person they support or dislike. Moreover, given the diverse and heterogeneous nature of sports audiences – with regards to social, educational, cultural and other backgrounds – and the fact that they will be drawing on vastly different states of background knowledge and contextual presuppositions when interpreting a humorous attempt, it is perhaps not surprising that the examples discussed in this paper received controversial reactions and were interpreted rather differently by different audiences.

However, this poses a considerable challenge for professional athletes and coaches who, as an important part of their job, regularly interact with these different audiences. For these professionals, who are under constant public scrutiny even in potentially emotional moments (such as immediately after a match), misjudging their audiences can have potentially detrimental effects as it can damage their face and identity, and thus have serious consequences for their future careers. This difficulty is also acknowledged by Bell (2015: 156) who maintains that "some speakers, such as politicians, teachers, and religious leaders, may be held to a higher standard than other individuals", and that thus their (public) attempts at humour attract more scrutiny and tend to be judged harsher than those of ordinary people in everyday conversations.

This complexity of the audience and the speakers' (public) roles are crucial for conceptualisations of failed humour and should also be reflected in attempts to define this complex phenomenon. Based on our observations, we thus propose a slightly revised definition of failed humour as an utterance that was intended to be humorous by the speaker but that was perceived as inappropriate and non-humorous by (at least some part but not necessarily all of) the audience. As we have shown, the notion of failed humour is rather vague and its boundaries are very fuzzy, leaving considerable room for different interpretations of the same utterance. Given this fuzziness and complexity it is surprising that failed humour remains largely under-researched, especially in public domains where it may have potentially detrimental effects on the speakers' identity and face claims, as demonstrated in this paper.

While the research presented in this paper was necessarily limited in that it looked at only three cases of failed humour and only a small selection of audience responses, it is clear that more attention needs to be paid to failed humour – especially in currently largely neglected authentic interactions in public contexts. Although failed humour may occur less frequently

than successful humour (e.g. Schnurr 2009b), it is nevertheless an important pragmatic phenomenon that deserves more attention. As we have shown, there is often a lot at stake when humour fails, especially in media interviews and with regards to interlocutors' face and identity. And, while in this paper our specific interest was the construction and negotiation of the identities of a professional athlete or coach, future research could perhaps look in more detail at the face and identity claims made by (different) audiences, and at how the face and identities of the different parties are constructed and negotiated on different media platforms.

Transcription conventions

+ a short pause (less than half a second)
++ a longer pause (more than half a second but less than a second)
+++ a longer pause of around 1 second
== latching
{laughs} paralinguistic features noted in parentheses

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