Male Football Comedy. A Reappraisal of Traditional, Declassed, Toxic Masculinity. *Ted Lasso* as an Improved Continuation of British Television Sports Series[1]

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Abstract: This research focuses on British television sports sitcoms (2002-2023), which in this study we term 'male football comedy', and their depiction of declassed male characters in what has been termed the 'crisis of masculinity'. It investigates the causes of the comic portrayal of men experiencing professional and personal failure in a reactionary zeitgeist, leading to toxic masculinity, in contrast to the clichéd figure of the 'bossy woman'. The various productions portray class differences and in particular, the abyss between elite soccer and the working class. We conclude that the subgenre and its inherent toxic masculinity have been maintained, criticized and at the same time legitimized, and that American television series *Ted Lasso*, belonging to the same subgenre, is a conciliatory approach towards a better relationship between genders.
Keywords: British sports fiction; football; toxic masculinity; social class.

ᴱˢ Comedia futbolística masculina. Reivindicación de la masculinidad tradicional, desclasada y tóxica. *Ted Lasso* como continuación mejorada de las series de televisión deportivas británicas

Resumen: Esta investigación se centra en las *sit-coms* deportivas británicas (2002-2023), que denominamos "comedia futbolística masculina", y en su representación de personajes masculinos desclasados de la denominada crisis de masculinidad. Se investigan las causas de la representación cómica de los hombres y su fracaso profesional y personal, en un *zeitgeist* reaccionario, que conduce a la masculinidad tóxica, en contraste con el cliché de la "mujer mandona". Las series retratan la diferencia de clases y, más concretamente, el abismo entre el fútbol de élite y la clase trabajadora. Se concluye que el subgénero y su inherente masculinidad tóxica se han mantenido, criticado y al mismo tiempo legitimado, y que la serie estadounidense *Ted Lasso*, del mismo subgénero, es una propuesta conciliadora de una mejor relación entre géneros.
Palabras clave: Ficción deportiva británica; fútbol; masculinidad tóxica; clase social

1. Introduction

This research focuses on the subgenre of the football-based[2] 'male-friendly soap opera' (Glynn, 2018: 231) broadcast in the United Kingdom between 2002 and 2023 (*Mike Bassett: Manager* (ITV, 2005), *The Cup* (BBC Two, 2008), *Rovers* (Sky, 2016), *The First Team* (BBC One, 2020), in addition to *Ted Lasso* (Apple, 2020-2023) due to its similarities, since the latter is set in Britain, and depicts the clash between American and English mentalities. It is a subgenre devoted to describing the football environment, and as such although they do not watch football, potential viewers can watch these series covering game's contextual aspects (the players' lives, the fans, the relationship with journalists, the pub). The original and aptly named Glynn subgenre can be studied in these sports-centred television productions, in addition to the characteristics of beta-male comedy and bromance. We will focus specifically on comedy; the British sports television productions that describe and laugh at what has been termed the 'crisis of masculinity'. We call this subgenre 'male football comedy'.

As in Europe and the United States, men's football and its live and televised broadcasting have undergone several changes in the United Kingdom since the 1990s (Glynn, 2018; Whannel, 2002), as it has increasingly become an elitist form of entertainment, with many clubs all over the world turning into companies with vast wealth and globalized business models (see, e.g. Detchenique and Cezar, 2023), which no longer present sporting values linked to amateurism, and with fans complaining about these business-driven changes, and calling for football to be returned to the 'people'. Working-class men seem to have socially lost the 'sphere' that formerly belonged to them, in which supporters might have had meaningful input, partly as a result of sport becoming a business in neoliberal and globalized societies (Kozma and Teker, 2022). During the decades immediately following the deindustrialization of northern England, football was a working-class people's sport, while rugby was a middle-class sport, and cricket the real entertainment for the upper classes (Porter, 2015), in a development in which the media played a decisive role (Griggs and Gibbons, 2014). However, this is no longer the case, and it has never been in the Global South or in Mediterranean Europe (Bayle, 2024), or in the United States of America (Markovits and Weil, 1990), or even in some other English-speaking countries (Jones, 2023). Football has succumbed to a crisis as an exclusive space for masculinity (in a historical development explained by King, 1997, and twenty years later by Roberts, Anderson, Magrath, 2017), and camaraderie, in which free rein can be given to emotionality, in addition to the issue of culture wars, which lies beyond the scope of this paper (Allsop, 2008) and requires further development. We make a distinction between 'appropriate emotions for men' in cultural terms - emotions that males can exhibit without being socially punished or perceived as weak. In the contained context of losing or winning a football match, anger and joy fall into this 'acceptable' range, and may also be associated with varying degrees of violence, aggression and homosociality.

In a broader context, these productions can be placed in the context of a United Kingdom in which there have been Conservative governments in the last seventeen years, with the emergence of Brexit (2016-2020), and premierships marked by upheaval, such as that of the controversial Boris Johnson (2019-2022), and the cuts to the welfare state since the coalition government of David Cameron (2010-2015), after the financial crisis of 2008.

As observed by Negra and Tasker (2014), there is a considerable difference in television consumption in the United Kingdom between the products and the audience's lived experience. In addition to their empowerment in media products, such as the royal weddings in the United Kingdom and the television series *Downton Abbey* (ITV, 2010-15), and a lack of empowerment for citizens, in the last seventeen years consumption of television has increasingly involved bifurcated media, with television shows portraying "comedies of manners"[3] as the most watched, in contrast to other distant, spectacular and luxurious settings, highlighting an abyss between the proximity of everyday life and distant luxury.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. A man's business?

The fundamental premise prior to an increased inclusion of women in sports, seeking equality, and other significant social changes (e.g. the increased visibility of LGBTQIA+ communities) at the beginning of the twenty-first century was clearly binary: masculinity was explained in terms of a rejection and opposition to femininity and its supposed major characteristics (i.e. greater vulnerability and emotionality). Gay subculture and queer theory (Butler, 1998) contributed to the evolution of masculinity studies, which had developed as a field of theoretical thought since the 1980s (with queer theory and feminist theory). There have also been changes in the representation of masculinity, which is exemplified through male sexualization and men's bodies being more objectified (Whannel, 2002).

Masculine stereotypes take shape in the areas of domination and power (having an active and autonomous role in society, above women and unlike them), which allows them to dominate the public sphere through work and their reputation, their patriarchal role as a breadwinner, and being removed from the private sphere. In order to achieve these goals, they are supposed to be unemotional, competitive, intelligent, expert, and successful (Feasey, 2008). According to Godfrey (2018); Kimmel (2008); Messner (1992) and Whannel (2002), masculinities as a concept traditionally encompass physical strength, dominance, self-sufficiency, and power in the workplace and the public sphere. There is also an association between men and violence as a primary source for the exercise of domination.

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[2]　These are British television series, but like Glynn (2018), we have chosen the term 'football' instead of 'soccer'.
[3]　A literary genre of local customs and manners that can be applied to television genres.

The concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) is an essential starting point for understanding what the crisis of masculinity is, and why it may lead to toxic masculinity. It refers to an ideological construct that serves and maintains the interests of dominant male groups, and rejects femininity, emotivity and vulnerability.

From the perspective of the ideology of traditional masculinity and hegemonic masculinity, emotionality is practically synonymous with vulnerability and therefore something to be avoided, or it is linked to restrictiveness (Messner, 1992). Vulnerability continues to be a carefully deployed element in the 'new masculinities'. Emotionality (understood as the expression of supposedly 'strong' emotions that are socially acceptable for men, and 'weak', unacceptable emotions) is also an essential attribute for analysing the new masculinity (Guarinos, 2012), as the expression of emotions is linked to new masculinities and the presumed feminization of men. In psychology, the term alexithymia has been coined to refer to the pathological difficulty or impossibility of expressing emotions. These 'new masculinities' today seem to be confronted with a resurgence of a stauncher and more reactionary heteropatriarchal masculinity.

Rutherford (1997: 26) explains that the British males forged in imperial manliness (as a sign of national idiosyncrasies) were men who were 'emotionally repressed, sexually confused, mother-fixated'. Toxic masculinity has been defined as "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence" (Kupers, 2005: 714).

Masculinity is supposedly so closely linked to the workplace that a social, economic, or labour crisis may lead to a crisis of masculinity, and some scholars have argued that this is the case in the United Kingdom (de Boise, 2014; Kimmel, 2012; Roberts, 2014; Tirado Gilligan, 2011; Whitehead, 2002), although others suggest that masculinity is always in crisis against the Other – females, gays, racial differences (cfr. Oates, 2017). Although this crisis did not pose a real 'threat' to men *vis-à-vis* women in the workplace, in the past (Rutherford, 1997; Whannel, 2002), it has promoted the narrative 'that confronts empowered, independent women with disempowered and dependent men' (Godfrey, 2018: 52), oscillating between laddism and 'mancession'. With the financial crisis of 2008, a cultural trend took shape which framed the economic crisis as white and masculine (Carroll, 2011; 2014; Hamad, 2014; Negra and Tasker, 2014), although in reality the successive economic crises have really affected working-class women, ethnic minorities and the poor to a greater extent (Palmer, 2011).

Research on the representation of masculinity in television fiction addresses hegemonic masculinity in American television series (Cuklanz and Erol, 2021). Lotz (2014) and Zimdars (2017) observe an ambivalence in the fictional television representation of masculinity, on the one hand incorporating 'feminine' traits (new masculinity, 'sensitivity', increased ease with expressing feelings) on American television since the 1980s (Zimdars, 2017), and on the other hand, preserving the traditional hegemonic representation of sexist, toxic masculinity, retrograde and misogynistic hypermasculinity and sexuality (Johnson, 2007; Tragos, 2009). Some authors refer to this binomial as the alpha or manly male *versus* the beta male, or new man (Albrecht, 2015; Zimdars, 2017). This evolution of male characters has taken place in the third golden age of television, in which (complex) characters are characterized in greater depth, as studied by Mittell (2014).

Kim et al. (2007) established an equivalence in television fiction between masculinity and (hetero)sexuality, including an active and aggressive role for male characters involving the pursuit of sex, while female characters were not only objectified, but also objectified themselves and were judged by their sexual conduct; and 'delayed adolescence' among men: a sense of male superiority; a reduced capacity for empathy; a sense of entitlement; increased homosocial behaviour (in the sense of 'male bonding', Clare, 2001); increased displays of sexism; and the desire for the freedom to be 'grossly offensive' and politically incorrect (Kimmel, 2008).

The relationship between watching television sports and personal adherence to masculine ideology is a common one (Giaccardi et al., 2016; Johnson and Schiappa, 2010), and sports media exposure has even been linked to potential sexual aggression (Hust et al., 2013). It should be noted that the presence of football on television is multifaceted, and responds to different degrees of fictionalization. Some scholars have focused on sexuality (Kim et al., 2007), youth or adolescence (Kimmel, 2008), and the crisis of masculinity (de Boise, 2014; Clare, 2001; Kimmel, 2012; Roberts, 2014; Tirado Gilligan, 2011; Whannel, 2002; Whitehead, 2002).

The representation of men in sports has been studied extensively, e.g. McKay et al (2000); Messner (1992; 2004); Musto et al. (2017) and Whannel (2002). Both the enjoyment and the practice of football are associated with a certain degree of gestuality which is usually associated with masculine traits based on physical prowess, pain, rage and celebration, among others.

There has been an evolution of sporting values and the image of men in the United Kingdom. As portrayed in *The English Game* (Netflix, 2020), sport and the origins of football in the Britain were linked to elite public schools (Rutherford, 1997). Sporting values were related to following the rules established by the ruling class, and forging characters related to leadership (Messner, 1992), traditionally considered as characteristics of masculinity. The main values were 'promptitude, resource, honor, cooperation, and unselfishness' (Horrocks, 1995: 149); 'readiness, courage, self-reliance, character and lastly religion', Rutherford, 1997: 15). There was a shift related to social classes in the twentieth century, with 'men of different backgrounds competing with each other' (Messner, 1992: 19). As mentioned above, football is once again becoming an elitist sport in the United Kingdom, due to changes in the media industry and globalization, thereby pushing the middle-class man away.

In his analysis of English masculinity in Britain's history of Empire from Victorian times to the 1990s, Rutherford (1997) deduces the reasons for the 'perpetual adolescence' of British men, and he defers to Connolly (1938), who links it to the 'great public schools' (Eton and others) and the practice of sport. Rutherford emphasizes the lack of importance given to individuality in favour of team games, with negative results for Englishmen as individuals.

2.2. Sporting values displayed by day and night

Positive male homosociality may be considered in terms of a 'sense of loyalty and camaraderie' (Seidler, 1992: 22), or 'male bonding' (Clare, 2001: 87). As men have not been expected to be vulnerable, intimacy has never been an important issue within the description of hegemonic masculinity. Male homosociality is based upon camaraderie, jokes and games (sports) (McKay et al, 2000). In societies where men are not expected to display their emotions publicly, watching or participating in sports becomes a culturally sanctioned space for the expression of feelings. Male homosociality can be 'negative' when it leads to excess, alcohol, drugs, and problematic relationships with women (Clare, 2001), usually in the form of abuse, completely inverting the supposed sporting values displayed 'by day' (Horrocks, 1995; Messner, 1992), which are meant to be the traditional foundations of this practice. This negative homosociality is related to toxic masculinity, and to 'hostile masculinity' (Malamuth et al., 1991).

The controversial figure of the 'lad' has been defined as a 'form of heteronormative masculinity' repudiating 'the supposedly "feminized" new man' (Godfrey, 2018: 95). The rise of the new lad in the 1990s was a provocative form of masculinity, which was a reaction to feminism and post-feminism. As Rutherford (1997) explains, the increased presence of women in the workplace and a reaction to the post-feminism of the 1990s led to a deterioration in relationships between men and women, even for those men who used to be progressive: "Middle class men began to experience a relative loss in their social prestige and economic status" (Rutherford, 1997, 142).

There is a link between violence, masculinity, laddish behavior, and playing or watching football (Horvath et al., 2012). 'Laddish' forms of masculinity represent a *defensive* assertion of masculinity, men's rights, and male power, but combine these 'nostalgic' definitions of masculinity with aspects of the nice, new man associated with benign masculinity (Albrecht, 2015; Godfrey, 2018; Rutherford, 1997, 141; Zimdars, 2017); an aggressive reaction towards alterity, as pointed out by Rutherford (1997); which can be related to Carroll's 'affirmative reaction' (2011). Poor education and a lack of role models are also characteristics of lad culture (Whannel, 2002).

2.3. Sports and television

As an area of study, sport has traditionally been masculine, like its performance and representation, and has been linked to male hegemony, and even to manliness (Oates, 2017; Ingrassia, 2014). Feminist studies have increased in recent years, and the prevailing approach was formerly focused on hegemonic masculinity, linked to the quasi-warrior figure (Johnson, 2021) – a mainly white, male, middle-class heterosexual identity (Oates, 2017).

The representation of sport on television usually aims to enhance it. The spectacle that television has always sought as a medium uses the plasticity, dynamism, rhetoric, and epic nature of the game for television's benefit. Both its televised, documentary format, and its representation as news (Vogan, 2014) tend to reward sacrifice, effort, and courage on behalf of the society they represent, as contemporary heroes, especially in the United States. An example is *Invictus* (2009, directed by Clint Eastwood), and all sporting narratives related to mythical and heroic quests and the quasi-warrior narrative (Johnson, 2021).

3. Objectives, methods and sample

1. To observe how cultural and social changes have reinforced the narrative of men in crisis in the television series analyzed.
2. To analyse the causes of the persistence of this subgenre and its characteristics.
3. To analyse the differences in the depictions of professional men and women.

The methodology consists of a textual analysis of the representation of male characters, and the discourse tracking of Altheide (2000), who offers an exhaustive monitoring of media content through textual, interpretative, and thematic analysis, combined with a formalist analysis of the characters, focused above all on dialogue (Bordwell, 1985: 15). The categories used to determine the representation of masculinity in the sample are constructed in relation to the crisis of masculinity, and male homosociality. The first two, middle and last two episodes of each season of the five television series belonging to the 'male football comedy' subgenre were analyzed, since the first two episodes establish the basis of the story, and the rest are indicative of the development of the plots, as these productions do not have complex narrative (Mittell, 2015) characteristics, except for some episodes of *Ted Lasso* (S2, E9, 'Beard after hours'). Mittell (2015: 3) argues that one of the foundations of narrative complexity is "an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling, often oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes", which would precisely describe the Beard episode in *Ted Lasso* mentioned above.

The research determines the sample by studying British sports television series broadcast between 2002 and 2023. 2002 marked a turning point in British television, as it saw the beginning of digitization in the media ecosystem (Cooke, 2015). The study included four British comedies from this period, with the first one starting in 2005. *Mike Bassett: Manager* (ITV, 2005) is a television sequel to the successful film *Mike Bassett: England Manager* (28 September 2001), with both iterations adopting a comic tone and centered on the figure of the eponymous coach. *The Cup* (BBC Two, 2008) is the British version of *The Tournament* (CBC, 2005-2006), a Canadian series about the parents of a club of under-11 players and their highly questionable attitudes. Directed by Matt Lipsey, it is partially mockumentary in style. *Rovers* (Sky, 2016) depicts the daily life of some Redbridge Rovers' fans, mainly at the pub, as they look forward to seeing their non-league football club promoted. The television series has actors from and echoes of *The Royle Family*. *The First Team* (BBC One, 2020) tells the story of a football club's players on and off the pitch, starring Matt Sullivan (a player from the United

States) and his teammates Benji Achebe and Jack Turner. Created by the team behind *The Inbetweener*s (E4, 2008-10), it was not well received. *Ted Lasso* (Apple, 2020-2023) is one of the company's most successful television shows. Created by and starring Jason Sudeikis and Brendan Hunt, it won eleven Emmy Awards and received 61 nominations. Centred on the figure of an inadequate football coach, it evolves from comedy due to his inadequacy and a British/American culture clash, to a feelgood television series. As we shall see, there is a 'spectrum continuum' between the series, ranging between the most problematic (*The First Team*) and the most conciliatory (*Ted Lasso*).

4. Results

4.1. General features

The series analyzed are comedies, and through their comic tone, they present the 'crisis of masculinity', crossing the boundaries of political correctness. The presentation of sports is minimal in comparison with personal storylines in all the productions analyzed.

A completely antithetical portrayal of the mythical, 'quasi-warrior narrative' takes place in the British series studied. There is no exaltation of traditional sporting values as promoted since the origins of football in England in any of the British series (Horrocks, 1995; Rutherford, 1997). These characters are instead primarily defined by their professional incompetence, laddish behaviour and a general absence of values.

The origin of the production is doubly important here, since television products have their own characteristics related to that origin (American and British productions), and at the same time these television series portray a type of nationalism linked to football and its location. The depiction of sport in these series emphasizes its global status, as well as its national, regional and emotional character (Johnson, 2021), in addition to its politically conservative and traditional traits, which easily lead to nostalgia and abjection in a context of crisis as mentioned above.

4.2. Genres

As initially discussed, this research builds on Glynn's term 'football male-friendly soap opera' (2018). From a historical and televisual point of view, the soap opera has always been considered an eminently feminine genre (Geraghty, 1991), linked to the creation of the image of the housewife in the United States and the United Kingdom (Wood and Kay, 2021), seriality and emotionality (Ang, 1985). However, the characteristics of soap operas, such as seriality, emotionality, homemaking (men may stay at home due to economic recessions), and commitment to the football team and engagement with the television series) have also recently been applied to productions mainly aimed at male viewers, in the field of sport and also in cases of bromance and beta-male comedies, which are related to the crisis of masculinity, 'alternating between endorsing and ridiculing the misogynist and homophobic representations' (Alberti, 2013: 5). Greven defines beta-male comedies as a "fairly cohesive portrait of an American masculinity comfortably inhabiting its privileges, privileges that include the right to be misogynistic, racist, and homophobic." (Greven, 2013, not paginated).

Bromance is characterized as a 'code of friendship, a social behavioral pattern' (DeAngelis, 2014: 14), by male bonding ('emotionally intense bond between straight men' (DeAngelis, 2014), and is closely related to the buddy movie (Weinman, 2014, 31). Accepted as a genre (Albertis, 2013), it originates in the eponymus corresponding sociological phenomenon (probably toxic homosocial camaraderie). Bromance can also be defined as inability to 'man up' (Greven, 2013: 418), perpetual adolescence and trash talking (Weinman, 2014, Albrecht, 2015). The characters move away from family and marriage as inherent parts of the plot (De Angelis, 2014), which in the series analyzed are transferred to football as a space of homosociality. These narratives are based on the supposed need of these male main characters for a 'safe', potentially misogynistic space, away from women.

Other productions can also be labelled 'mancession', including post-recessionary sitcoms such as *How to be a Gentleman* (CBS, 2011-2012), *Man Up!* (ABC, 2011), and *Work it* (ABC, 2021-2013), which adopted the narrative of the negative consequences of the financial crisis for men and their reaction to female empowerment, and *Last Man Standing*, which ran for ten seasons (ABC, 2011-2017, Fox, 2018-2021). As Negra and Tasker (2013: 345) point out, 'the usurped male breadwinner serves as a handy visual reference point'. As in the 1980s, drama became the most successful TV genre for depicting the recession, privileging 'male subjectivities' (Hamad, 2014: 231)-46 and made it possible to look at the construction of subjectivities in greater depth. We argue that the subgenre analyzed here channels a contemporary masculine discomfort. The main characteristics that male football sitcoms share with bromance and beta male comedies are the existence of a 'safe space' without women, where men can have freedom and are able to use offensive language (trash talking), characters depicted by their immaturity, a refusal to 'man up' and coarse jokes. In the British male football comedies, football is meant to be that space, on occasions in open competition with the wives and families. According to Greven (2013, not paginated), in beta male comedies, males are 'fundamentally estranged from the world of women'. While drama has made it easier to focus on the complexity of character construction (indeed, Longworth, 2000, coined the term 'drama's era' to refer to quality television), comedy offers a comfortable ambivalence between satire and 'reprimand': "Bromantic comedy elevates the pleasures of homosocial relationships such that the genre seems unable to redeem or correct male immaturity solely through promises of heterosexual romance and patriarchal responsibility" (DeAngelis, 2014, 17). In *Ted Lasso*, it is precisely the 'drama' aspect of dramedy that conveys most of the characters' characterization and emotional interiority, leaving the comic aspect to the aforementioned ambivalence, albeit gradually converted into a feelgood production.

4.3. Football and classism

Having analyzed the similarities and differences between these series in relation to the genre(s), it is apparent that there is a structural, core 'similarity': the protagonists of the British television series are a sort of transcript of the working or lower middle class English men who have been declassed (Tyler, 2013) from the football elite.

'Male football comedy' situates the production and their characters within a certain social class, and aimed at a certain audience. The commodification of the audience, i.e. designing the television product to ensure a specific target that is economically viable, and especially vice versa ("the mass media under monopoly capitalism produce audiences to market commodities" (...) "audience power is produced, sold, purchased, and consumed", Smythe, 1981, 232-233), takes place by creating different portraits of the football environment, alluding to the football 'pyramid'. They may be at an elite level, and situated close to the Premier League (*Ted Lasso, Footballer's Wives, Dream Team*), in football teams closer to the working or middle class (*Mike Bassett, The Cup*) or lower class, non-league football clubs (*Rovers*). It is the classism inherent in this differentiation that has alienated football from working and middle-class audiences, especially since the inception of the satellite television sports broadcasting business. The 'class markers' in the series are many repeated themes and motifs (fundraising galas or parties, travels, relationships with journalists, pubs or clubs), which in each television series are depicted according to a particular social class. In these productions (as in reality), the Premier League is synonymous with luxury, and exemplary of the abyss that separates the richest from the middle, working and lower classes in neoliberal societies.

The television shows ostensibly mark a major difference between those who are outside the elite, who contribute to the maintenance of the system to which they (do not) belong, or from which they have been expelled (Tyler, 2013). The main characters in the British television series from the sample see themselves as *football's 'national abjects'*, the underclass, the undeserving (Tyler, 2013), in the neo-liberal stratification and contrast of social classes, the scum of the underclass versus the players of the elite depicted in *Ted Lasso*, *The First Team* and earlier British television series (*Dream Team, Footballer's Wives*). The differentiated depiction of the characters is based on their economic level relative to the Premier League and the elite, but practically all the characters are flawed in some way. The reasons behind the sustainment of 'male football comedy' are linked to the 'nostalgic construction' of these declassed men. Having been alienated from their 'usual' consumption of football, due to economic changes and shifting gender relations in sport and beyond it, some men adopt these television programmes as a refuge that evokes a past time - a sense of belonging that is even national and misogynistic. These comedies use mockery to expose these characters' abjection, in its comical or ironical form, as well as their efforts and abilities to endure as representations of toxic masculinity, despite its political incorrectness.

4.4. Commonalities

The comic productions analyzed seek to entertain the audience through the comedy of the adventures and misadventures of the main characters, whether they are coaches (*Mike Bassett, Ted Lasso*), players (*The First Team*), fans (*Rovers*) or the players' parents (*The Cup*). For various reasons, these protagonists are inadequate in their roles (professional incompetence, ignorance of the game, overzealousness, and excessive ambition). This male professional incompetence (cfr. Lotz, 2014), present in all the comedies analyzed is primarily a narrative engine and a source of comedy. The characters become antithetical to the foundational characteristics of the values of sport, and particularly British sport (Horrocks, 1995; Rutherford, 1997), close to hegemonic masculinity. This comic portrayal of the male protagonists highlights a problem with work that is a generic recurrence involving 'the usurped male breadwinner' (Negra and Tasker, 2013: 345), insofar as it presents the conflicts they experience as a provider or paterfamilias, potentially becoming a failure (Hamad, 2014: 239). Depending on their position on the spectrum continuum between conciliation and toxicity, some of the characters acquire a role that runs counter to the ideology of hegemonic and traditional masculinity, and tend to acquire the stereotype of the 'lad' (defined above) and display toxic masculinity and negative homosociality.

These productions feature displays of affective and sentimental ineptitude by the male characters, and are characterized by presenting the 'crisis of masculinity. The male protagonists are not only professionally incompetent (i.e. as breadwinners), but they also tend to be infantilized and irresponsible, with their basic and primal instincts highlighted. As such, they are antithetical to hegemonic masculinity, and some of them (especially Petey, in *The First Team*) verge on toxicity. Most of them perfectly match Kimmel's (2008) definition of delayed adolescence (Rutherford, 1997; Connolly, 1938) and display a sense of men's superiority over women, overt displays of sexism and a limited capacity for empathy, in addition to their professional incompetence. Ted Lasso is a case apart, given his positive management of the team's emotions (The Diamond Dogs) and the fact that he is probably one of the most emotionally competent heterosexual characters in American television fiction.

In these comedies, there is usually a problem with authority, a lack of role models and the need for *external* help as a characteristic of the crisis of masculinity, whether in the form of psychologists or irrational help (superstitions, religious help, rituals, magic). The crisis of patriarchal affiliation (Carroll, 2014) is patent in all of these characters, as well as the lack of male role models, the conflict with them and with their 'offspring' - or lack thereof.

Sports and its presentation in television series as a space for male homosociality is taken for granted. However, while positive male homosociality tends to be an exception, negative homosociality abounds. Foul language constitutes the first level of negative homosociality, and is often accompanied by jokes and sexual references, which are usually denigrating towards women or gays. Jokes constitute a hinge between the acceptable (jokes between men that foster their emotionality and group cohesion) and the pejorative - when they

become attacks on women. Verbal violence is often the prelude to physical violence, in reality and fiction. This kind of negative male homosociality originates in the 'real' practice of sport (Clare, 2001; McKay et al., 2000). Violence, aggressiveness, and anger are also widespread in these productions, either characterizing a particular character or driving specific plots. These male-friendly soap operas constitute this redoubt of exacerbated toxic masculinity, although it is not the only one present in television productions. There is also a desire for the freedom to be 'grossly offensive' and politically incorrect (Kimmel, 2008). Corruption, obscenity, bad taste and pornography are apparent in all the television series analyzed; political incorrectness is taken for granted.

This research focuses predominantly on masculinity because the invisibility and reification of female characters in the depiction of sports (Messner, 2002) are accomplished to their full extent in the sample. The representation of women in male football comedy is highly stereotyped, cosified, and sexualized. However, the representation of uninhibited, passionate women who are accepted in amorous and sexual terms numerically constitutes the majority (as in *Ted Lasso, Rovers,* and *The First Team*). When their representation is related to caring for others and is more heteropatriarchal in nature, it is aimed at a middle-aged family audience (*Mike Bassett*, *The Cup*). The male in crisis is portrayed comically (with that benevolent ambivalence between reprimand and the humour of 'locker room talk' or 'banter'), in an interesting contrast to the efficient, and sometimes even 'bossy' (Negra, 2009; 2013) professional women. Women are portrayed mainly as aloof, with common sense, know-how and professionalism, in a family or professional environment.

It is also interesting to note how for most characters home is not a safe place, but instead a space of anxiety, or conflict, in which the wife can even become the enemy. This reactionary characteristic, observed by Carroll (2014) as typical of the post-recession narrative, is evident in most of the series analzsed, in contrast with the football environment as a safe space for the male characters. The characters' relationships with their wives tend to be distant and superior (Mike Bassett, Terry in *The Cup*) and conflictive (Chris in *The First Team*). The vilification of the female characters (which is logical in a misogynist approach) makes them the threat/culprit, rather than promoting a reflection on changing gender roles and dynamics or the systematization of uncertainty in contemporary society.

4.5. Specificities

4.5.1. 'Mike Bassett' and 'The Cup'

Although these are different kind of productions - one is about League Two football and the other about Under-11 football - their shared characteristic is that the comedy arises from highlighting the 'tribulations' of the coach (*Mike Bassett*) or those of the players' parents (*The Cup*). In both series, produced before the 2008 crisis, the sporting values extolled are competitiveness and winning at all costs. In *The Cup* (E6), the coach, Blackley, ends up having a stroke because of the aggressiveness of the main character, Terry (Steve Edge) and his desire to win everything. Both main characters are excessively ambitious on the playing field and contemptuous towards their wives. In *The Cup* ('Pilot'), Janice complains about having to do the laundry for the whole team because Terry has said she would do it. Meanwhile, she has to claim her space in relation to Terry's 'safe space':

Terry to Janice: 'Can I decide between you and football after the final?'

Janice to Terry: 'I've got my answer'.

In *Mike Bassett*, Karine complains that she always must follow her husband's lead.

Karine Bassett: 'I feel like a spare part'.

Mike Bassett: 'You are an essential part of the Bassett machinery … I couldn't run without you'. (*Mike Bassett,* 'Pilot').

Later, Karine makes a football-related suggestion, and her husband and the team laugh at her (*Mike Bassett,* E2).

4.5.2. 'Rovers'

Rovers portrays a completely declassed protagonist, Pete (Craig Cash, *The Royle Family*) who does not give up hope as a fan of a club that has no chance of promotion to the league. His inadequacy is constant, involving ridiculous and embarrassing situations that create comedy. In this exercise in nostalgia, the club in which these declassed 'losers' meet is an environment of relative fraternity and sorority, in which even the anti-heroes (Bruce, Lee) are comical and inoffensive, and everyone is united in contributing to the team's success. Interestingly, two types of mothers are presented: Francis (blind, castrating, critical, pernicious) and Doreen (a bartender, symbolic mother, providing constant support for the club and its fans), played by Sue Johnston (*Coronation Street, The Royle Family*). Significantly, in terms of relationships, just one happy couple (Tel and Mel) is presented, which is the homosexual one (Rutherford, 1997 anticipated the heteropessimism, Seresin, 2019). The characters of Willy (Francis' son, Pearce Quigley) and Mandy Trevor (Diane Morgan) are a perfect depiction of some of the issues of heterosexuality that Rutherford (1997) analyzed. Willy, who has to care for his blind and widowed mother, is completely repressed, and he is still a virgin at the age of 40. Mandy, a textbook *chav* (like Vicky Pollard, the *Little Britain* character, Tyler, 2013) embodies a sort of trashy, shabby *femme fatale* who wants to seduce him. The moments of obscenity and pornography, and lack of taste, are not limited to this couple, but also affect the 'tycoon' of the club (in his final harangue to all the fans (E6)).

4.5.3. 'The First Team'

The First Team's main characters are the most infantilized in the sample. Jack's character is one of the worst cases in terms of emotions and relationships with women (alexithymia).

> Jack on Tinder: It's harder than I thought. … They [girls] expect you to ask questions and be interested in the answers (*The First Team,* E2).

Its more negative side is exacerbated, resulting in scatology, pornography, obscenity, mockery of homosexuality, inadequate nudity, non-normative sexual practices, aggressiveness, rudeness, and bad taste, as well as physical and verbal violence, and anger. This television series has major similarities with *The League* (FX, 2009-2012; FXX, 2012-2015), mainly in its description of a male body, its sexual, scatological functions and sexist banter from 'educated men' (Albrecht, 2015: 29-45).

The toxic masculinity is primarily focused on the character of Petey, who is verbally and physically aggressive towards the whole team, and particularly so when they do not offer him the position of coach (E5). He constantly uses contemptuous and obscene language ('Pilot', E2, E5, E6), and is offensive towards women and gays - but misleadingly so, as in his case homosociality would be studied as Sedgwick (1985) studies it, i.e. related to male desire, because the only homosociality that Petey understands is homosexual and scatological. Matt is a *rara avis* in the series, who provides a counterpoint and receives no support from his peers or superiors, as happens in a crisis of patriarchal affiliation (Carroll, 2014).

> Petey: 'Can all you fat twats at the back squeeze in'; 'Take the piss behind his back'; 'Play shit or you are dead' (E5);

> Petey: 'Does that mean you've stopped eating anuses?'; 'The only thing I've forgotten is the names of most of the birds I've shagged'; 'We used to kiss each other's arses for bants' (E6).

This fascination with the male body, which has been related to queer visibility (Oates, 2007; Greven, 2013) is in the realm of reification, the commodification of bodies as objects of desire, but it is also to be understood in terms of a genre that submits the body to the extreme (horror, comedy and pornography, Greven 2013) as well as 'another stereotype of white trash: the uncontrolled and libidinous body' (Carroll, 2011: 107) and abjection (Tyler, 2013), creating a completely differentiated space. Tyler (2013) reframes the concept of abjection, which is interesting in order to understand how the incorporation of characters and scenes verging on scatology, pornography and obscenity leads to the definition of a boundary ('abjection is spatializing', ibid. 28). The function of these elements in the television series analyzed is not only to give free rein to toxic masculinity, but also to provoke rejection from the audience. As Albrecht (2015: 42) points out with regard to the characters in *The League*, 'in order to cling precariously to any version of dominant masculinity, they must evoke brazenly crude and crass hypermasculine personae').

4.5.4. 'Ted Lasso'

As an American sports production, *Ted Lasso* does not have a precedent in the United States, except for beta-male comedies, bromance and in particular, *The League*. The few football (soccer) cases are related to women's sports, such as *The Kicks* (Amazon, 2015-2016) and the Canadian series *21 Thunder* (Netflix/CBC, 2017), and usually run for fewer seasons and enjoy lower ratings. There is a clear preeminence of American football as the hegemonic male sport in American fiction, with longer-running productions, with the most successful and paradigmatic case being *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-2011).

Ted Lasso continues with the British subgenre but runs counter to it, perpetuates it, and innovates it. Focused on male characters, it offers a 'better' approach in terms of gender relationships, but one that is (still) far from presenting an equal relationship between women and men. Through the feelgood (Brown, 2015) television series, it shows solidarity between genders, but it also presents other problems, such as politically incorrect jokes and sometimes denigrates women, particularly in its first season. *Ted Lasso* is a case in point because although there are male stereotypes (i.e. the characterization of Rupert and Jamie) and female stereotypes (the reification and sexualization of Kelly), as well as the 'bossy woman' (Rebecca at the beginning of *Ted Lasso's* first season), there is sorority, camaraderie and help among peers. As the main female character, Rebecca acquires the club after a painful divorce and hires Ted, an American football coach to ruin the club, although her characterization evolves positively, especially in the subsequent seasons. In most of the series analyzed, the professional, efficient woman is contrasted with the incompetent man. The 'bossy woman' stereotype is used as a scapegoat to place men in a false position of victimization, to exorcize male anxieties about ineptitude in fulfilling heteropatriarchal 'mandates', and to continue to promote a male discourse of projection of guilt onto the Other, in which mostly cis hetero and white men consider themselves personally victimized by other subjects' access to rights and power. It is a figure that lies behind the gender relations in these series, and which in the case of Ted Lasso and Rebecca quickly undergoes a marked improvement.

Ted Lasso is characterized throughout the entire television series as a feelgood character, and he is depicted as conciliatory, as we argue the television series is. Camaraderie is fostered not only among the players but also between him and Rebecca, uniting the whole team and promoting solidarity between genders (S1, E4), which also happens between two female characters, Kelly and Rebecca (S1, E4). According to Lipsey (2021), to a certain extent, there is an 'absence of stereotypes' in the series. *Ted Lasso* has a 'positive' approach as it provides an outlet for masculine emotions - this is probably one of its greatest achievements, beyond traditional values and the new lad, to foster a type of emotive masculinity. It presents a

range of possible emotions (Roy's anger, Ted's companionship, Nate's ambition, Rojas' sadness) and does not sanction them but instead shows different ways of conveying them (superstitions; psychologist; talking to classmates, Diamond Dogs, Ted's 'therapy' group, Beard, Nate, and Higgins: S1, E8). Some instances of physical violence are sanctioned negatively by the series, such as Jamie's father in the team's locker room, finishing with an emotional hug between the toughest players, Jamie and Roy (S2, E8). Both characters are depicted in the first season as 'rabid', tough characters, and they improve as the series progresses, in line with the ethos of the series.

The third and final season covers therapy in sport, homosexuality, and the main character's fatherhood - Ted Lasso returns the United States for his son. And last but not least, Kelly suggests creating a female team to Rebecca, in keeping with the times. The television series offers a recalibration of gender balance, probably on the basis (after successive economic crises) that traditional gender roles are pernicious for men and women (Carroll, 2014). Ted Lasso is the most emotional, ambivalent, sensitive male character (Lotz, 2014; Zimdars, 2017) in the sample. Ted is an anomalous character, not only because of his management of his emotions, but also because of his open lack of toxicity, with positive attributes that are those of an American in a British environment. We observe his solidarity, understanding and emotional maturity as the opposite of toxic masculinity, whether in the conservative United Kingdom or in Trump's America. What makes him particularly different from the characters in the other male football comedies is that he goes beyond the beta male and breaks down the 'safe space' between men and women. *Ted Lasso*'s conciliatory approach may be due to several factors. It is the only feelgood television in those analyzed, it is the most recent and it is an American production, albeit focused on British football. It transcends the most unpleasant version of the beta male comedy, and turns the 'safe space' of football into an area to be shared with women, albeit within the neoliberal elite, as Beare and Boucaut (2024) argue, probably because of the influence of Apple, the company producing the series.

5. Conclusions

The productions in this subgenre are broadcast between successive economic crises and portray the classism and the neoliberal abyss inherent in a real economic situation in the football world. The result is a depiction of males who are declassed (through social classes and nostalgia) and the abject (through pornography and extreme toxic masculinity). The reactionary nostalgia arises from recovering a safe space that has been lost due to those changes, in addition to the (recent) incorporation of women in football. The *raison d'etre* of these 'male football comedies' is that they offer the spectator this 'safe space' from women, which legitimizes the mockery of otherness (mainly women) and which at the same time represents a claim for heteropatriarchal masculinity. These television series seem to be a coping mechanism for displaced males, as they place 'themselves' in abjection, nostalgia, and retreat. This 'abyss' between the elite and the 'underclass' also occurs in recent British audiovisual consumption, and misogyny and toxic masculinity are constantly resurfacing.

These television series fall within a variety of genres and subgenres (bromance, beta male comedy, male-friendly soap opera, football comedy), in which the most important elements are superficially male bonding, a misogynistic safe space (turned into football), perpetual adolescence, and trash talking. In addition, the contrast between the man in crisis and the 'bossy' woman emphasizes the male characters' professional incompetence.

From the most abject representation (*The First Team*) to the most nostalgic one (*Rovers*), by way of the other 'beta male' depictions, *Mike Bassett* and *The Cup*, 'male football comedy' may be seen as staking a claim for traditional masculinity. *Ted Lasso* complicates this approach by breaking away from the exclusively masculine safe space, to share it with women, and promoting a positive male homosociality with its conciliatory approach, far from the toxicity of the spectrum continuum (*The First Team*), and from the other series analyzed (*Mike Bassett, Rovers, The Cup*) as comic portraits of hegemonic masculinity.

In his analysis of sports fiction in films, Archer (2022) makes a distinction between the successful American protagonist and the more 'cautious' British one, generating different styles. Further studies might consider whether the differences in class and taste that have traditionally defined the two countries persist in the productions analyzed, or whether they have been dissolved in the magma of contemporary global adaptations and productions. Another important issue would be the chasm between the kind of programmes that are watched in the British domestic market and not exported abroad (the television series analyzed here) and those which are exported globally, e.g. *The Crown* (Netflix, 2016), *The English Game*, and *Downton Abbey*. This would lead us to focus on bifurcated media, bifurcated productions, bifurcated characters and in short, the social and economic abyss between the abjected, declassed (which could be any one of us) and the distant elite (some of the programmes viewed), which is undoubtedly related to the disappearance of the middle class. However, that would certainly require further research.

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