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The Emergent Practices of English Football Agents

Abstract

Tasked with managing financial affairs, agents are commonly in the media spotlight during high-profile transfers and contract negotiations. The industry has evolved into one of the most misunderstood parts of the game. This research originates at a time of deregulation and lower entry barriers making it timely to explore the developing world of agent practices. The data collection in 2018, involved interviews with 20 agents who had responsibilities for 114 professional players. Participants had a minimum of two years' experience and represented players within English football. The analysis identified 'Image Development', 'Financial Planning', 'Relationship Building' and 'Constructive Counselling' as the emergent themes that illustrated agent's practices. The findings present evidence that the agent industry has experienced a significant period of evolution with those involved becoming increasingly specialised in their practices to facilitate transactions, as clients continue to expect the highest level of individual service, often unrelated to 'on-field' performances.

Keywords: Football Agent; Agent-Player Relationships; FIFA Agent Regulation

1. Introduction

According to Staudohar (2006), the origins and social acceptance of the ‘agent’ profession dates back to 1930s, which observed the first occurrences of athlete representation. However, formal recognition of football agents only began in the 1960s and 1970s when union reforms against the ‘retain and transfer’ system, allowed contract negotiations on behalf of clients (Lipscomb & Titlebaum, 2001; Mason & Slack; 2001). Academic investigations into the financial management of football (Haynes, 2007; Neinman, 2007; Bower, 2003; Morrow, 2003) suggests the hyper-commodification was driven by the introduction of subscription-based television and steered clubs to develop a destructive economic agenda by paying inflated player salaries and agent remuneration in order to capture the leading talent in the game.

Tasked with managing the financial affairs of their clients, agents are commonly in the media spotlight during high-profile transfers and contract negotiations (Shropshire, Davis & Duru, 2016). To managers and executives, they operate as obdurate negotiators intent on extracting exorbitant deals for their clients and the commissions that accompany them (Poli 2016). Among fans, they appear as manipulative and cynical, loyal only to themselves, and capable of convincing players to abandon clubs against their best interests (Poli, 2010a). Conversely, alternative perspectives highlight that agents function with pastoral concern for young footballers, many of whom have come from difficult backgrounds or quit the education system early, leaving them short of the necessary skills required to deal with the level of wealth within the sport (Rothstein, 2009; Holt, Michie & Oughton, 2006).

As the number of agents has increased, the football market has observed a growing influx of unlicensed or so-called ‘dodgy agents’ (Weir, 2007). Unethical practices have negatively influenced public opinion and many have now questioned their credibility (Kelly &

Chatziefstathiou, 2018). The industry has evolved into one of the most misunderstood, albeit entirely necessary parts of the game. Football operates in a global context in which personal relations and local expertise could ensure a significantly better deal (Roderick, 2006). The reality for clubs is that now, some agents are so influential, enjoying a constructive dialogue with significant 'others' is paramount for continued success (Bower, 2003).

In 2009, FIFA embarked on an in-depth reform of the existing agent's system to address the inefficient licensing of agents, insufficient transparency and confusion between club representatives and players' agents (FIFA, 2015). The purpose of the review was to propose a transparent system that would be easier to administer, resulting in improved enforcement at national level. Following amendments to FIFA Statutes, a new 'deregulated' industry emerged on the 1st April 2015, as those looking to represent players no longer had to pass the FIFA agent exam, take out indemnity insurance, or possess understanding of contract law (Dean, 2016).

The significant changes imposed by FIFA following the reform creates a new and important context as the number of registered agents in England increased from approximately 600 to 1700 from 2015 to 2018 saturating the nature of the industry. Subsequently, the purpose of this paper is to explore the 'emerging' practices of a representative group of English football agents by empirically examining the core working requirements and specialist skills needed within the industry three years on from the changes. Furthermore, the aim is to illuminate the player-agent dynamic and important dimensions of agent practices based on the demands to provide effective services within the commercially orientated and intensely competitive landscape of English football agents. From this general framing, the paper investigates and addresses both an under-researched and important knowledge gap as industry deregulation, the absence of proper person

checks and weak guidelines around a code of conduct further threaten an industry already plagued by underhand and unlicensed transactions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Evolution of Football Agents

The working activity of an agent has been present within the football leagues since the late 19th century. Rothstein (2009) highlighted that in the days of amateurism, the role of an agent was confined to that of a club representative tasked with discovering new talent. Rossi, Semens and Brocard (2016) suggested that this first generation of agents were ‘small-time’ entrepreneurs who managed to exploit the lack of professionalism within the recruitment and scouting networks of clubs. Historically and using a sociological lens, agents built their ‘jurisdiction’ in the ecology of football by responding to a problem encountered by its main actors (clubs and players) (Magee, 2002). The job of matching was made complex by legal and financial evolutions and in England, the maximum wage encouraged foreign agents to collaborate with their local counterparts in order to transfer British player’s abroad (Rossi et al., 2016). Consequently, the image of agents became a source of debate, many clubs did not trust them, players became treated as commodities and the idea that players could negotiate with official representation was the major threat to club management.

The Professional Football Associations successful campaign to abolish the maximum wage in 1961 facilitated an expansion of the transfer market, increased player rights and legitimised the utilisation of personal representatives (Bower, 2003). The 1970s brought a new wave of commercialisation into English football and the range of services offered by agents diversified (Magee, 2002). Product endorsements, legal consultancy and financial advice became a necessity

that encouraged the arrival of business professionals from different industry sectors. As contract values increased and financial power in football began to appear, the first generation of ‘professional’ agents had arrived becoming an influential stakeholder and participant in the social construction of professional football markets (Chadwick, 2010). Sociological interest in agent activity became stressed by growing financial evaluations that define economics, and weakening transfer limitations facilitated an environment for agents to strengthen their position by building overseas networks and establishing new trade channels.

2.2 The Regulation of Agents

In 2001, the number of qualified agents in Europe had increased by around 300% (Poli, 2010b). Regrettably, throughout this period, an increasing presence of agents existing without official recognition by governing bodies assisted the adoption of inappropriate transfer activity. The lack of market accountability was attributed to the development of a ‘bung’ culture, and the associated corruption and political ineptitude that accompanies a market-driven, free enterprise approach (Bower, 2003). Pressures surrounding governance within the game intensified following exposure of leading figures involved with illicit payments confirming the need for reform (Thomas, 2003). In 1994, FIFA formally created the first licensing system officially transforming the activity of football agents into a regulated profession (FIFA, 2015).

However, Yilmaz (2018) notes that the conformity of the license requirement with EU law was questioned and it was argued that the system constituted a restriction to operate as a players’ agent and eliminated competition in the internal market (Branco Martins 2007; Rossi et al., 2016). Further concern arose following analysis of the parliamentary working paper, ‘Professional Sport in the Internal Market’ (Yilmaz, 2018). Congruent perceptions about causal relationships between the malpractices of players’ agents led to recommendations for FIFA and UEFA to work together

to amend the licensing system and reinforce the control of players' agents in European football by giving greater care for regulatory enforcement (Yilmaz, 2018). Concurrently, FIFA revealed that only 25% to 30% of international transfers were conducted by licensed agents and the existing licensing system was practically ineffective to deal with unlicensed agents (Geeraert, 2016). They decided to conduct an in-depth reform of its licensing system as a part of the global package of football governance measures that were agreed in conjunction with the FIFPro, 'to defend the game's universality and the integrity' (FIFA 2015).

Yilmaz (2018) observed that despite a general consensus on the necessity to improve the regulatory framework of players' agents, divergent views existed about the appropriate regulation methods regarding localised regulatory capabilities. Thankfully differences were overcome and the new FIFA Regulations on Working with Intermediaries (FIFA 2015) came into force on 1 April 2015 which included a 'European licensing and registration system', a code of conduct and a sanctioning mechanism. Unfortunately, problems still persist as the licensing regulatory framework has been reformed and replaced by a system where anybody can become an agent providing they are without a criminal record, have no conflicted interests, and in England pay £500 to register with the FA (Dean, 2016). According to Yilmaz (2018) instead of regulating agents, the new system regulates the transaction, and thus the liability lies with the players and clubs leaving transfers open to abuse and manipulation.

2.3 The Practices of Football Agents

The 'agent – player' relationship is still poorly understood topic leaving Mason and Slack (2001) to explain the similarities with that of a 'principle – agent' relationship. The player is a 'principle', who entrusts an agent to provide services on his behalf (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Loyalty and trust are related and relational concepts. 'Related', because loyalty is the complement

of trust and ‘Relational’, because they exist between two (or more) people, i.e., you trust *someone* and are loyal *to* someone. A skills assessment suggests an agent should be loyal towards his principle and avoid conflicts of interest (Rosner, 2004). Lipscomb and Titlebaum (2001) identify personal trust as a crucial factor to sustaining successful relationships involving companionship and assistance beyond traditional etiquette. However, Jensen (2000) offers, if the aim of both parties is to maximise their economic position, there is good reason to believe that the agent will not always act in the best interests of the principle.

DuBois and Neville (1997) explain that frequency of contact and closeness between both parties are foundational skills for a ‘mentor’ relationship (Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). The need for such may arise due to national/international migration (Frick, 2009) and taking care of emotional well-being can strengthen the bond whilst improving a player’s self-confidence (Roderick, 2006). The study of labour markets in football shows that player opportunities to move are not just dependent on economic factors but also the social and cultural actors involved in the transfer. Consequently, impartial guidance and assistance provided by an agent can be an important factor in determining the success of a young football player (Frick, 2009; Lipscomb & Titlebaum, 2001). Labour market liberalisation has emerged as a subject, particularly in the EU, where the principles of the single market are influential. However, some countries are still reluctant to relinquish control and in most EU member states, sports agents essentially provide services as intermediaries between individuals and clubs (Rossi et al., 2016). Furthermore, the existence of ‘multi-year’ contracts also highlights that agents must propose gradual mobility responses to tax changes as it is less costly to move at the end of a contract than in the middle of a contract. Rossi et al. (2016) highlight how higher rates may induce workers to migrate to countries where the tax

burden is lower, hence limiting the ability of governments to redistribute income using progressive taxation.

Poli et al. (2012) reveal that over 50% of an agent skill assessment exist in the form of financial, legal, estate and public relations support (Rosner, 2004; Lipscomb & Titlebaum, 2001) whilst Rosner (2004, p194) expressed that today, agents also need to be ‘psychologists, social planners and counsellors for clients’. Pinna (2006) develops this idea further suggesting that in recent years, an agent’s professional development is shifting toward representation that is more complete and infuses a player’s private life. Innovative ways of paying player salaries has become a fundamental practice of football accountancy and accordingly the evolution of image rights is now a key concept within the practice of agents. Boyle (2003) highlights how this allows players to exploit their name and image through merchandise and negotiate a share in the profit from any personal endorsements attained from sponsorship, underlining the centrality of exploiting licensing contracts beyond success on the field. In this regard agents now need skills as marketing practitioners, using celebrity endorsement as a promotional strategy in launching new products, repositioning brands or reinforcing brand images (Erdogan, Baker & Tagg 2001).

Experience and networks are also key foundations for agent success (Poli et al., 2012), as Poli (2010b) argues that market knowledge is the key strategic resource for agents with the recruitment of players based on networks. These ‘network effects’ (Porter, 2008), arise in industries where a willingness to pay for services increase along with endorsement. However, higher levels of intense rivalry has threatened profitability within the agent industry, and in such situations it is difficult to avoid ‘poaching’ (King & Tucci, 2002), especially where the service levels of rivals are identical and there are few switching costs. Consequently, growing pressures and competition has forced development in the form of collaboration and establishment of

‘agencies’ in order to meet player expectations (Rosner, 2004; Poli, 2010a). Morrow (2003) identified this as a ‘positioning’ strategy, established in alignment with transfer market complexities and new regulatory contexts that require specialist skills within negotiations.

Geeraert & Drieskens (2105) explain that problems within principal – agent relationships appear when choice exists under uncertainty and consequently in 2003 the Professional Footballers Association had to renew its standard agreement contracts due to the exploitation of tax loopholes through image rights. Overseas investment trusts were created allowing players the ability to offset income tax and national insurance payments from commercial income leaving the need to pay capital gains tax (at a much lower rate). Further transparency is now required through full disclosure of earnings as the economic rhetoric is that cultural creativity linked to the use of intellectual property will continue to evolve as agents secure trademarks associated with the development of personal brand identity (Boyle, 2003).

2.4 Negative Perceptions of Football Agents

Viewed through a frequently critical lens, the growth and diversity of agents has resulted in negative implications as individuals motivated by financial gain have engaged in unethical activities aimed at deceiving and exploiting players (Pinna, 2006; Neinman, 2007). Consequently, Rothstein (2009), Neinman (2007) and Lipscomb and Titlebaum (2001) stress the importance of choosing an agent who can be a ‘trusted’ advisor and explain that whilst talented agents can negotiate higher salaries, young players should be more concerned with ‘opportunities to play’.

Haynes (2007) articulates that the cavalier nature within club management and surrendering to the demands of agents is driven by those ‘looking to dine at European Football’s top-table’. The materialistic approach proffers epithets such as ‘self – serving leeches’ and ‘fly-

by-nights' (Weir, 2007) whilst Poli (2016) highlights how perceptions of agents have changed due to their role in creating extortionate salary expectations and 'dirty' negotiation practices affecting the integrity of the sport. Rothstein (2009) offers that the sports agent environment naturally forces unethical conduct as the industry promotes an 'arms race for labour', whilst Magee (2002) admits that agents are a '*necessary evil*' who could be very useful when clubs need to buy or sell players. Behind this assertion is the belief that clubs are setting an economic agenda by paying inflated salaries in order to capture the leading talent promoting the destructive influence of 'player power' (Haynes, 2007).

The White Paper on Sport (2005-2007) recognised the issue of players' agents as a specific policy problem and consequently the issue entered into the EU political agenda (Yilmaz, 2018). The findings repeatedly expressed concerns about the problems of the activities of players' agents. In particular, dubious practices such as the widespread dealings of unlicensed agents, the exploitation of young players, dual representation of players and clubs under the same transfer, non-disclosure of the level of commission, the concealment of important information, and the abandonment of players after the receipt of commission were all underlined (Geeraert, 2016). In summary, Kelly and Chatziefstathiou (2018) note that due to the proliferation of agents in professional football, there is a widely held view that agents are damaging the game. The widespread hostility is emphasised by Napoli owner, Aurelio de Laurentiis, who described them as the 'cancer of our world', stating that football 'does not need them'.

The existing body of knowledge identified above presents critical value in promoting the agent industry as an evolution from narrow 'entrepreneurial' activity to full time professionals who exist with divisive reputations within the football landscape. There is a clear suggestion that amendments to the licensing system have facilitated an environment with limited market

accountability and a general consensus that improvements are needed within the regulatory framework. The principle-agent context presents a theoretical foundation to explore the development of successful relationships with access to networks identified as a key strategic resource.

At present there is limited work dedicated to the nature of specific roles played by agents and furthermore, few academic studies have conducted semi-structured interviews with agents in examining their roles and responsibilities in the world of professional football. Subsequently, this paper seeks explore a noticeable gap in our knowledge about the specialist skills and relational nature of player-agent encounters in English football, during a period of intense market rivalry and competition. It addresses both an under-researched and important knowledge gap captured by the research question, ‘What are the emerging practices of English Football Agents in a post-regulation 2015 context?’

3. Methods

A social constructionist orientation has been chosen for this paper. In doing this, the paper is therefore devoid of the modernist notions pertaining to ‘truth’, objectivity and value neutrality because this weakens our ability to look at, and think about, things from a multiplicity of perspectives and personally constructed realities. Also, the qualitative, multi-perspective, polyvocal and constructionist research design of this paper, provides a way of attempting to avoid ‘easy’ ideas about interpretations of the agent’s voice. Questions of authenticity, of the telling of other people’s practices and voice are challenges at the heart of any claims to (re)present the views of the agents interviewed in this research.

3.1 Participants

The paper draws on data collected from 20 football agents in 2018, through a convenience sampling technique (Patton, 2002). The sample provided a mixture of seven independent agents and 13 agency employed agents who had representation responsibilities for 114 professional players. The eligibility criterion was that they had to be a registered football agent, licensed to practice in the UK, have a minimum of two years' experience working as an agent and represent players from either or both of the Barclays Premier League or the Sky Bet Football League Championship. The lead researcher was a licenced football agent and utilised existing professional networks and contacts through membership of the association of football agents (The AFA) to target an elite and experienced population. The nature of the sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected between June and August 2018 with the broad intention to discover agent's emerging practices. Embedding the research within a general interpretivist paradigm (Patton, 2002) allowed the qualitative examination of the emerging practices of agents operating within the contemporary UK football landscape. As alluded to earlier, the aim was to provide a 'practical understanding' of how expectations and activities have been evolving in an industry experiencing deregulation and increased player mobility. To pursue an enquiry of this kind, lightly focused interviews with a selection of current agents representing UK based professional football players, within the top two divisions of English football was conceived. The decision to interview implies a value on personal language as data, and interviewing in person provided an appropriate approach given the research focused on gaining insight and 'in-depth' understanding of football agent activities (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

Each interview centred on an exploration of the central research question namely, ‘what do currently licensed football agents do in a context of significant change? The interviews allowed for a balanced and honest exchange with participants expressing views and expanding on information related to agent practices. Examples of supplementary questions asked within the flow of the interview included for example, do you have any loyalty strategies? What topics have caused disagreements? How have contract clauses changed? The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and due to confidentiality restrictions, the identity of the participants remain anonymous. Consequently, agent names have been removed from the final transcripts replaced with labels ranging from Agent 1 (A1) to Agent 20 (A20).

3.3 Data Analysis

The interviews were manually coded and transcribed verbatim using digital voice recorders. Subsequently, transcripts were analysed in line with the grounded theory coding techniques (Holton, 2007) because it provides clear, sequential guidelines for conducting qualitative research and offers precise strategies for managing the analysis phases of inquiry. This approach supports the ordering of data offering trace ability between the data and categories. Corbin and Strauss (2008) highlight a further strength of grounded theory is the ability to create unique insights through the open and axial phases. However, they also highlight a weakness in grounded theory is coping with a large amount of data. There is no explicit support for helping researchers with where to start the analysis, which can include several pages of interview transcripts. Corbin and Strauss (2008) note the obvious risks are the potential development of an unfocused analysis, data taken for granted or a frustration about disorder in the data.

Themes were not predefined, but rather emerged during a rigorous data analysis, informed by insights drawn from the literature and confirmed through a recursive inter-coder reliability

validation process (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009) with the co-author, who was not involved in the interview process. This validation process used had the explicit purpose of reaching intercoder agreement between the two authors (Scheff, 1973). The process used for this paper worked like this. (1) The first author (and interviewer) had the first read of the interviews and derived the first set of themes from his analysis of them. This was done remotely. In this research, the analysis started with an ‘open’ coding approach, the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualising, and categorising data followed by the allocation of tentative labels. The next stage included ‘axial’ coding, refining the initial open codes so specific labels could be allocated based on connections in the data. Finally, ‘selective’ coding identified the core categories through systematically validating the relationships via various matrix configurations and tables (Neuman, 2003). (2) The second author read 50% of the interview transcripts, derived themes and again this was done remotely. (3) The two authors then compared themes deduced independently, justified, modified or discarded themes until consensus was reached. All discrepancies were discussed in line with the work of (Smaling, 1992). This was done face-to-face as it preceded COVID-19 and lockdown. (4) Then armed with the agreed set of themes, two interview transcripts were re-analysed using these themes to ascertain the extent to which there was a satisfactory level of agreement between the two authors. Although there are multiple variations as to how the intercoder agreement process is specifically conducted (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012), this was the process that was successfully implemented for this paper. Both authors brought something social to the process. The first author brought his intimate knowledge of each agent, gained from the interview process. He was therefore very familiar with the data. The second author brought fresh eyes and a more distanced perspective. Four emerging agent practices were revealed in the analysis exemplified in the following section.

4. Findings and Discussion

The analysis identified emerging practices related to ‘Image Development’, ‘Financial Planning’, ‘Relationship Building’ and ‘Constructive Counselling’. These key ‘dimensions of practice’ illuminate developing aspects of an agent’s role within the landscape of English football.

4.1 Dimension 1: Image Development (Table 2 to be read left to right)

Table 2

The first emerging theme identified through an analysis of the interviews was the need for agents to engage with the practice of ‘Image Development’ with their clients. What follows are some illustrations of this. Branding has become ubiquitous throughout a wide range of sport categories with many clubs, leagues, events and players having become successful brands (Burton & Chadwick, 2008). A prominent theme discussed by all the agents was the emerging demand placed on ‘image development’. Central to this discussion is the growing influence and profound effect that *technology* and *social media* now has in sport. “The most significant change is how the *speed of information* has increased exponentially, things happen now at a frightening pace within a consolidated time. The previous daily management of my client’s image has evolved into moment-to-moment career management” (A1).

The Industry has evolved from fax machines to iPhones and we must be able to instantly commodify information. The online approach works well because it is time effective, players can ‘tweet’ anywhere and all marketing contracts now include a social component especially given the range of platforms that exist now (A3).

Traditionally working with global brands created a mechanism for endorsement *exposure* (Jones & Schumann, 2000), however co-branding (Cristiano Ronaldo – CR7) and the ability to trademark

personal brands (Rio Ferdinand – FIVE) now allow players to connect their sporting profiles with other industry sectors such as music, fashion and the media (Kwon, Kim & Mondello, 2008). In addition, Burton and Chadwick (2008) highlight how a player’s personal brand is very important and young footballers should work with agents who can match brands with their individual values. A4 emphasised how Trademarks and Intellectual property (IP) rights ensure integrity whilst protecting players against unauthorised use of their name. A9 noted that players are increasingly sophisticated, caring more about their brand and image than previous generations and A7 underlined the challenge today is how instantaneous trends and commercial opportunities emerge. “You can no longer wait, the ‘branding’ services we provide need to constantly evolve otherwise our clients get left behind” (A7). “Our clients have a significant interest in the ‘business’ of sport, wanting daily involvement to discuss and influence digital platforms, media interviews, appearances, charity projects and sponsorship opportunities” (A11).

4.2 Dimension 2: Financial Planning (Table 3 to be read left to right)

Table 3

The second emerging theme, identified through an analysis of the interviews, was the need for agents to have specialist skills and knowledge of ‘Financial Planning’ practices for their clients. The last twenty years has witnessed a financial evolution in professional football that has significantly influenced the agent industry. With commercial drivers continuing to push football into the entertainment and brand space, a growing ‘transnational capitalist class’ has evolved comprising of players, agents and coaches (Giulianotti & Robertson, 2004). Agents are looking for a variety of ways to ‘*monetise*’ assets and the increasing commodification of player’s ensure they are now traded based on tangible and intangible factors, whilst also prone to fluctuations in the potency of their symbolic and capital worth (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). Such processes have

produced a growing economic and cultural distance between players and fans symbolised by the enormous wages throughout the football pyramid (Edensor & Millington 2008).

All of the agents identified that *contractual negotiations* are central to their duty and within the terms of each deal, basic contracts can include details of annual salary, appearance bonuses, car options, and housing agreements. As indispensable mediators, agents are expected to maximize their 'principle's' utility (Geeraert & Drieskens, 2015) creating future financial stability. A6 highlighted the biggest change is having an appreciation of his client's value, especially when building a career through multiple contracts especially when a contract is up at the end of the season. It's not an easy task to get a player who hasn't played for six months fixed up with a new club, especially given the raft of free agents available every summer. Frick (2009) agrees suggesting a player's market value evolves based on length of current contract, footballing talent, age, club strategy and economic status of the transfer market.

A19 emphasised how the multiplication of sophisticated clauses within contracts now include *complex* bonus payments, exit options, future work and image rights where the concept of 'passing off' is under extreme scrutiny. "The major issue over the last 20 years is where clubs made payments to players with no image". Haynes (2007) highlights that a player's image can include his name, nicknames, autograph, initials, endorsements and personal characteristics whilst Geey (2015) notes that 15-20% of a contract is deemed acceptable to 'pass off' into a pre-existing company of which the player is a director.

"In the UK, *image rights* contracts mean big savings on national insurance and income tax contributions, for both the individual and the club. Wages will be taxed at 45% however image rights are taxed at corporation rates, currently 20%" (A10). According to Geey (2015), the HMRC suspect systemic abuse by those who do not have the requisite profile. "I know the increased

scrutiny into image rights collected millions in additional tax payments and some Premier League clubs will no longer sign image rights contracts due to the negative media publicity” (A8). A5 expressed his concern in a period of austerity as the economic imperatives of football develop from the sports core value and the HMRC has been challenging what it perceives as contrived structures in the pursuit of *tax avoidance*.

Modern football presents images of wealth and luxury but *financial mismanagement* is also prevalent within the professional game. Gordon Taylor, chief executive of the Professional Footballers' Association claims 20% of players could face bankruptcy within five years of retiring over lavish spending and poor decision making (Gupta, 2013). “I know a player who appeared in court over outstanding debts because nobody had ever shown him how to set up direct debits and another young player who on holiday had a £50,000 bar bill” (A8). A18 advocates that players like to demonstrate achievement through lifestyle and possessions, “so we work with them on *decision making* and planning long-term investments”. Agents have a responsibility to plan for the future, especially as players have increased exposure to investment opportunities. “Within the last year my clients have been offered film schemes, property ventures, restaurant projects and the more traditional wealth management funds” (A20).

Many players believe they will start receiving their football pension when they are 35, but that hasn't been the case since 2006. Pension savings cannot be accessed until they are 55 and beyond so a priority is to make sure our clients have liquid assets (shares, bonds) or private equity projects that can produce income or capital from the moment they stop playing (A9).

This shift in financial flexibility demonstrates agents have a need to become entrenched in their clients' business lives performing specific functions as financial managers, PR specialists, investment / tax experts, and legal counsellors.

4.3 Dimension 3: Relationship Building (Table 4 to be read left to right)

Table 4

The third emerging theme identified in the data, was the need for agents to engage with the key practice of 'Relationship Building' with their clients. *Competition* among sports agents has created a new pressure to successfully identify and build relationships with players from an early age. "Unless you have a close friendship or are a relative of players, the only way to build a client base is to sign young, emerging talent" (A13). The outcome of competition can depend on 'know-how', identifying club requirements, information access, and relationships with decision makers. A12 observed that in the world of football, "my business grows on the strength of my reputation".

The relationship building dimension in this study has two distinct categories, '*friendship*' and 'professional'. The interpersonal dimension and commercial calculations are inextricably linked. A player can be a friend and a profitable commodity especially as agent careers rely on competence, relationships and *personal traits* as negotiators. A15 highlighted that relationships need to have clear parameters. "I am not looking engage in social activities with my clients but I do promise to take care of their finances and be available 24 hours a day if they have a problem". Accordingly, the 'professional' category suggests detachment or merely fulfilling the requirement of an employment contract whereas the 'friendship' approach creates associations with intimate self-disclosure (Grayson, 2007). Consequently Wood (1982) isolated four essential dimensions of successful *interpersonal relationships, investment, commitment, trust, and a comfort*.

Early *investment* is ‘critical’, the time, energy, efforts and resources given to build the relationship go unnoticed. People do not see the long days and nights driving, watching youth team games, meeting players and parents. The overall management of a player’s career has become more complex, they care more about individual value and experience (A1).

“Players want you to be an expert and provide a premium level service. We invest in, and embrace innovation to create a competitive edge when trying to sign new clients” (A2). Roderick (2006) suggests this ‘investment strategy’ will fluctuate depending on performances and economic benefit to the agent.

The *commitment* to continuing a relationship requires an element of personal responsibility. A legal mandate guarantees agent remunerations, however A10 said “in a practical sense contract fragility creates the need for a reinforced interpersonal relationship”. Consequently, Yilmaz et al (2018) note that agents extend the range of services they offer players to encourage loyalty and diversify revenue streams. Additionally, A4 believes successful relationships involve facing relational difficulties together. “Recently I had a player with six months left on his contract, earning a decent wage at his club. Despite being a top player, he found himself out of a favour and hadn't made a match day squad for a month”. A12 added that a classic way to save wages is to “drop your top earners, hoping that they will want to play games and move on. As an agent, it's my job to work with the player's current club, speak to potential suitors and work out an agreement for all concerned”. Roderick (2006) attends that such personal attention to challenges will ultimately infuse attachment, particularly if the agent has appreciation for client expectations.

“*Trust* is an essential component as clients need to feel they can rely on me so I try to build close relationships with families who are the best judges of character” (A7). However, Poli et al.

(2012) suggest that players whose careers are transcending upwards will actively change agents, ‘selectively matching’ with those who operate in a higher segment. ‘Super-agents’ who dominate the market have cumulated advantages through associations with the wealthiest clubs, information and opportunities in view of salary enhancement.

“Players need to feel *comfort* that you are working in accordance with their best interests especially given the numerous factors that can affect the relationship” (A13). Agents always try to negotiate the best deal but there is a need to manage expectations, especially as players don’t always understand how negotiations and markets can shift. According to Greve and Salaff, (2003) agents epitomise entrepreneurial traits building *networks* that systematically vary based on experience and taking advantage of ‘structural holes’ to develop valuable levels of social capital. “It’s a myth that all agents are ruthless in the boardroom, many have disagreements but they’re never personal, there is no desire to upset anyone because that could affect future negotiations” (A16). Ron Shapiro conceptualised ‘the power of nice’ (Evans 2010) and if teamwork is the foundation for sporting success it makes sense that agents develop relationships based on *competence* through knowledge, understanding and effective communication.

4.4 Dimension 4: Constructive Counselling (Table 5 to be read left to right)

Table 5

The final emergent theme identified was the need for agents to exist as constructive counsellors for their clients. Within the counselling profession, personal qualities, such as empathy and congruence play a significant role in developing an effective relationship with a client. The findings of this study support the concept of constructive counselling as “*emotional intelligence* and genuineness represent the key attitudes and personality traits of an effective agent” (A3). These

examples are a manifestation of Corey's (2009) explanation that personal qualities develop on a continuum through personal experience and increased self-awareness.

Football is a fluid industry where the *dynamics* at boardroom level can affect club ambitions and coaching changes impact playing philosophies and preferred tactics. "Match time, new signings, current form and injury can all have a psychological impact on players and consequently the emotional support players require will fluctuate throughout a season" (A10). Additionally, sporting regulations now denote that player transfers can only take place in two defined periods (inter & mid-season) whilst departures require agreement from three parties (buying club, selling club and player). A5 remarked that "as soon as one window shuts I start to put together plans for the next". Poli et al. (2012) highlight how transfers can be rejected due to team rivalries, 'unattractive' clubs or leagues and even failed medicals. Accordingly, A6 notes that "individual frustrations can arise especially when players are on the cusp of 'dream moves' or significant salary improvement".

The complexity of the player – agent relationship is enhanced by the increased utilisation of *statistical packages* in dissecting player performance. Opta data offers multiple analysis factors with a significant interpretive element. "I try to create a performance *connection* with clients by having knowledge of their key stats that can be useful in contract negotiations" (A14). "Remunerations and market value are extremely disparate and we increasingly see brands invoking data to determine a player's endorsement value" (A17).

Strupp (1978) contends that counselling places a clear emphasis on the importance of professionals to be *integrated*, mature, genuine, authentic, and congruent in their relationship with a client. Recognition of these specialist traits exist in this study, creating an *empowering* and engaging environment that recruits players to a personal cause. "We encourage players to come

up with their own ideas, ensuring that community projects are *genuine*” (A15). There are increased opportunities to explore social and commercial opportunities within countries linked to a player’s ancestry. “My clients work with government agencies and non-profit organisations to improve the lives of people affected by poverty, homelessness and abuse” (A2).

“An unacknowledged factor is the doubts and insecurities of player’s so we meet up to talk, learn, ask questions and look out for each other” (A19). However, A17 suggests there are times when losing a player or two from the agency isn't such a bad thing, whilst a change of agent may help them too. “A new approach, with new ideas and contacts could well be the way to go for all parties”. A11 agreed stating, “I used to hate change, I liked comfort but sometimes you have to embrace a new direction and evolve to keep things moving”.

5. General Discussion

The findings within this research present evidence that the football agent industry has experienced a significant period of evolution and transition. It is clear that agents ensure they are increasingly specialised in practices to facilitate transactions as their clients expect the highest level of individual service, often unrelated to ‘on-field’ performances. As graduates and current professionals explore the ‘representation’ industry for potential employment opportunities, this research provides clear suggestions of the skills and attributes required to be a successful agent in the dynamic landscape of professional football. Table 6 is a summary of the key emerging practices identified from the four dimensions discovered in this research.

Table 6

The theoretical foundations and contribution of this paper in response to the research question exploring the emerging practices of English Football Agents is defined by four key dimensions

(image development, financial planning, relationship building and constructive counselling). Technological evolutions now allow agents to provide a full suite of branding services (endorsements, marketing partnerships, personal branding, community outreach and public relations) that can establish their client's *image* and prepare them for 'post-career' activities. In addition, *relationship building* originates from an agent's ability and dedication to build personal and professional networks, understand market trends, evaluate player qualities and act accordingly. Furthermore, providing *constructive counselling* and feedback through elevated levels of emotional intelligence has evolved as a fundamental practice as players increasingly seek guidance and reassurance in this new data driven and media scrutinised world of professional football. Finally, *financial planning* remains focused towards economic security and maximising career earnings in an increasingly complex negotiation environment.

These emerging practices of football agents ensure their clients have the space to remain focused on playing football and not worrying about multiple uncertainties created within endorsement deals or the mechanics of a club contract. The research also offers a new perspective as amplified player expectations and commercial expansion have created transcendence beyond the 'traditional' principle-agent representation meaning emotional agility and expectation management emerge as key requirements alongside building networks. However, as agents view clients as assets, a focus on advancement crafts a paradox as selective matching can weaken attachment and loyalty when players search for career and financial progression. The ambivalence cultivated within such a competitive market mean a 'strategic' finding of the paper is that agents need to avoid 'friendship' and develop relationships solely based on 'professional' commercial work and the continual recruitment of new players.

Although complex entry barriers remain through informal relations, emerging practices can be dictated by market strength and player opportunities. Unfortunately, the recent regulatory changes by FIFA aimed at absolving the game of issues related to corruption, exploitation and mismanagement has actually created an increase in the number of registered agents in England (Dean, 2016). The amount of money paid to agents is increasing and exposes the financial resources available to clubs whilst also validating the growing influence of a profession. There is no doubt that many more will look to showcase these emergent practices in a bid to join the ‘agent family’.

The methodological limitations of the study include the potential for author bias with the opportunity for existing views and experience to influence the subsequent data analysis. Furthermore, the interviews covered only 20 licensed football agents meaning the results are not ‘generalisable’ to the wider population of currently practicing agents of which there are 2,253 registered with the English Football Association (as of 25/08/2020). Finally the English-centric nature of this study mean contextual assessments and ramifications from agents operating in overseas markets do not occur in this paper. The global nature of the industry facilitates a clear opportunity for further contributions to this topic area, particularly in regards to recent political changes (e.g. Brexit) and the subsequent specialist skills needed when trading within the EU. It is also important to note that other studies (Kelly & Chatzietstathiou, 2018) have focused on the ‘unethical’ and ‘illegal’ practices of the agent industry which has resulted in significant levels of hostility and disparaging labeling. There will always be agent-player relationships motivated by exaggerated financial incentives. Although these issues fall outside the scope of this paper, it is clear that the term ‘agent practices’ can also involve work deemed morally ‘questionable’. Do agents have a moral and ethical compass, is therefore a significant question for future research.

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Table 1: Summary of Participant’s Education and Previous Work Experience

Independent Agents	Years of Experience	Highest Educational Qualification Note: O & A levels refer to public exams usually taken between the ages of 16-19yrs)	Previous Industry Experience
A1	10	O Levels	Professional Sportsman
A2	5	A Levels	Sports Administrator
A3	12	O Levels	Sales & Marketing Exec.
A4	25	No Specified Qualification	Entertainment Manager
A5	17	O Levels	Business Owner
A6	13	O Levels	Marketing Agency
A7	6	BA (Law)	Player Representation
Agency Employed Agents	Years of Experience	Highest Educational Qualification	Previous Industry Experience
A8	2	BSc (Sports Science)	Sports Agency
A9	8	ACCA / CIMA	Chartered Accountant
A10	7	MBA (Business)	Sports Marketing
A11	10	BSc (Physical Education)	Teacher
A12	8	A Levels	Sports Retail
A13	15	UEFA A Licensed Coach	Sports Coaching
A14	9	A Levels	Recruitment
A15	2	BA (Marketing)	Customer Relations
A16	2	BA (Sports Management)	Sports Agency
A17	3	BA (Business Management)	Sports Agency
A18	12	No Specified Qualification	Professional Sportsman
A19	18	BA (Law)	Sports Law
A20	5	Diploma (Business & Administration)	Sales

Note: (O Levels were subject based academic qualification for 16-year-old students used in the UK. They were abolished in 1987 and replaced with General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSE’s). A Levels are advanced subject based qualifications for 18-year-old students in the UK.

Table 2: Data Analysis constituting Image Development

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Core Category
The move from Fax Machines to iPhone's, Tablets and Laptops Digital Marketing (e.g. Social Media, Blogging, Video/Content Marketing, App Creation Live Distribution Platforms (e.g. Facebook Live, Periscope, Snapchat, YouTube) Enhanced User Experience	Multiple Devices and Platforms	Technological Environment Evaluation of developments and availability of technology	IMAGE DEVELOPMENT
'Moment to Moment' Career Management Real Time Commodification Time Effective Circumvent Traditional Media Instantaneous Trends	Speed of Information		
Fan Communication User Engagement Digital Assets for Target Markets Reduction of Geographical Boundaries Idolatrous Territories	Location		
Behind the Scenes Content Unique Content Transparency Influencer Marketing Celebrity Athlete Endorsement	Exclusivity	Personal Branding Strategic trademarks and co-branding initiatives	
Co-Branding Partnerships / Collaboration Brand Ambassadors Integration and Connection of the Sporting Profile Brand Relevance and Evolution Brand Identity	Exposure		
Digital Rights Protection Integrity Individual Ownership of Trademarks Legal Enclosure	Intellectual Property		

Table 3: Data Analysis constituting Financial Planning

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Core Category
Transnational Capitalist Class Tangible & Intangible Commodification TV Rights and Subscription TV Economic Distance between Players and Fans driven by Wealth Economic Status of the Transfer Market Financial Flexibility	Financial Evolution	Complex Negotiation Evaluation of the Financial Environment and Developments in Player Contracts	FINANCIAL PLANNING
Sophisticated Clauses 'Passing Off' a salary percentage into a pre-existing company Reduced Tax and National Insurance Contributions Negative Media Publicity Offshore Accounts	Image Rights		
Maximisation of the Players 'Assets' Financial Stability Appreciation of Market Value Building a Career through Multiple Contracts	Monetisation		
Systemic Abuse of Image Rights Contrived Structure in Pursuit of Tax Avoidance HMRC Scrutiny and Investigation Pension Accessibility	Legal Environment	Legal & Financial Management Analysis of Financial Planning and Occupational Challenges	
Lavish Spending on Lifestyle and Physical Possessions Outstanding Debts Bankruptcy Long Term Investment Opportunities Retirement Planning Liquidity and Private Equity Projects	Decision Making		
XPRO Financial Assistance Legal Representation Adjustments and Challenges of Life After Football Strategic Partners	Charity Support		

Table 4: Data Analysis constituting Relationship Building

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Core Category
Market Intensity Globalisation Relaxed Regulation Increasing the Number of Agents Increased Pressure Underhand Tactics Gamble on Emerging Potential 'Super' Agents	Competition	Player Investment Evaluation of the factors affecting client recruitment	RELATIONSHIP BUILDING
Player Identification Club Associations and Relationships Access to Information Industry Reputation & Social Capital Relationships with Decision Makers Selective Matching	Network		
Availability (24 ours / 7 days) Time Dedicated to Players Energy for Travel and Meetings Enthusiasm/Enjoyment for Undertaking Games at Different Levels	Commitment		
Sharing of Personal Issues Self-Disclosure Social Interaction Communal and Intrinsic Orientations Embrace Relational Challenges Together	Friendship	Interpersonal Skills Defined personal characteristics within the agent – client relationship	
Negotiation Skills Problem Solving Employment Experience & Expertise Providing Individual Value and Experience Market / Industry Knowledge Judgement of Economic Benefit Contract Fragility Service Range	Professional Competence		
Trust and Loyalty with Players Embracing Innovation Providing Personal Attention to Understand Client Needs Establishing a Sense of Comfort Managing Expectations An Entrepreneurial Mindset Effective Communication	Personality Traits		

Table 5: Data Analysis constituting Constructive Counselling

Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding	Core Category
Empathy, Congruence and Sensitivity Self-Awareness Self-Regulation Social Skills Genuineness and Authenticity Maturity	Emotional Intelligence	Integrated Player Connections Evaluation of the support mechanisms and supportive systems	CONSTRUCTIVE COUNSELLING
Increased Data and Multiple Analysis Factors Media Interpretation and Scrutiny of Player Performance Models Game Understanding Performance Appreciation	Statistical Information		
Exploration of Individual Beliefs and Interests Control and Ownership of Projects Community Engagement Enabling Inclusivity and Social Change Responsiveness to Local Needs	Empowerment		
Strategic Direction External Investment Sporting Regulations (e.g. Transfer Windows) Team Rivalries	The Club Environment	Industry Dynamics Key stakeholder changes which impact player status	
Boardroom Executives / Football Directors Scouting Structures / Networks Coaching Changes which Impact Playing Philosophy and Tactics New Signings Player Sales	Personnel Changes		
Injuries Improved or Loss of Form Playing Time Increased or Decreased Contract Status Market Value Interest from Other Clubs Inadequacy, Doubt and Insecurity Wellbeing	Personal Circumstances		

Table 6: Summary of Emerging Agent Practices

Emergent Theme	What Agents Do
<i>Image Development</i>	Engage in moment-to-moment career management due to increased speed of communication
	Identify market trends and have the ability to commodify information
	Discover co-branding opportunities and establish players as personal brands
	Have knowledge of intellectual property rights and trademark legislation
<i>Financial Planning</i>	Have the ability to understand and identify client values within a dynamic marketplace
	Develop knowledge of sophisticated clauses such as personal image rights
	Establish expertise in a range of investment options and enable pension planning
	Understand the dangers of financial mismanagement and HMRC scrutiny
<i>Relationship Building</i>	Employ early identification of talent due to increased competition
	Showcase the ability to establish club relationships with key decision makers
	Manage player expectations at various stages of a client's career
	Provide premium level service through personalised value and experience
<i>Constructive Counselling</i>	Deploy an established level of emotional intelligence and agility
	Appreciate player performance packages and the value of statistical data
	Empower clients to engage in bespoke projects based on personal meaning
	Cultivate strong communication skills given the multi-cultural nature of the football industry