



Understanding BUCS Football Athletes: Motivations and Profiles

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We explored the motivational profiles of players who participate in the Men's tiers 5-7 and Women's tiers 3-5 of BUCS football, in relation to their well-being, ill-being, and drop-out intentions. We employed a two-stage, mixed-methods approach, utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods. At Stage 1, 260 BUCS footballers completed an online quantitative survey about their motivations, well-being, ill-being, and drop-out intentions. We used this data to determine motivational profiles. We then examined differences in well-being, ill-being, and drop-out intentions between the motivational profiles. Then we selected 2-4 players from each motivational profile to take part in qualitative focus groups at Stage 2, to gain an in-depth insight into their experiences.

Results of our quantitative and qualitative analyses support a person-centred approach to studying motivation. That is, individuals have multiple reasons for playing lower tier BUCS football. Stage 1 results indicated five distinct motivational profiles within lower tier BUCS football:

1. A High-controlled, Amotivated Profile
2. A Very-low Motivation Profile
3. An Average Motivation Profile
4. A High-autonomous, High-controlled Motivation Profile
5. A High-autonomous, Low-controlled Motivation Profile

These profiles were distinct based on their different mix of reasons (type and strength of motivation) for taking part in BUCS football. Profiles differed in well-being, ill-being, and drop-out intentions. The 'High-autonomous, Low-controlled Motivation Profile was the most adaptive (i.e., where we would expect the highest quality experience), with the highest well-being and lowest ill-being and drop-out intentions. Conversely, the 'High-controlled, Amotivated Profile was the most maladaptive (i.e., where we would expect the poorest quality experience), with the lowest well-being and highest ill-being drop-out intentions. The 'Very-low Motivation Profile was the next most maladaptive profile. They also had the lowest well-being scores, and compared to the 'High-autonomous, Low-controlled Motivation Profile, they had higher ill-being and drop-out intentions. The 'High-autonomous, High-controlled Motivation Profile was the second most adaptive profile. They also had the highest well-being scores (similar to the 'High-autonomous, Low-controlled Motivation Profile). For drop-out intentions, they did not differ from the 'High-autonomous, Low-controlled Motivation Profile, however, for ill-being, they did score lower on the exhaustion and devaluation subscales.

Our quantitative results show having high(er) levels of autonomous motivation to participate in BUCS football is associated with higher well-being, and lower ill-being and drop-out intentions. Having high(er) levels of controlled motivation to participate in BUCS football may have negative consequences for one's experience. Yet, when individuals have high(er) levels of both controlling and autonomous reasons for playing BUCS football, autonomous motivation appears to protect against negative consequences, particularly in relation to one's well-being and drop-out intentions.

At Stage 2, our qualitative analysis of the focus groups resulted in four main themes:

1. Passion for football
2. Navigating the environment of BUCS football
3. Feeling (un)valued
4. The complex, individualised, dynamic, and interactive nature of motivation.

Stage 2 supported and extended our understanding of the motivational profiles. That is, our qualitative analysis also suggested that players had multiple reasons for taking part in BUCS football. Yet, while the quantitative analysis suggested that certain profiles had low(er) levels of autonomous motivation, the qualitative analysis suggested that a 'passion for football' (love for football and football being part of who they are) was a central driver for all players. The (multiple) other reasons that players had for playing BUCS football were important but peripheral, seen as added bonuses, as opposed to a central reason for participation.

The passion for football buffered against negative (often environmental) features, facilitated other positive drivers, and helped individuals persist within football and university. However, although all players discussed a passion for football, in-line with our quantitative analysis, those from less adaptive motivational profiles reported that additional (environmental) aspects of BUCS football ‘chipped away’ at their passion for football. Specifically, those from maladaptive profiles viewed additional aspects as burdens, whereas those from more adaptive profiles viewed them as opportunities. Again, this supports and extends our quantitative analysis, in understanding how different motivational profiles have variable experiences of lower tiers BUCS football.

Our qualitative analysis also allowed us to explore how individuals interacted with their environment. Within the theme of ‘Navigating the Environment of BUCS Football’, our first subtheme, ‘Group Structures’ showed that BUCS football environments were uniquely structured, entailing hierarchies, roles, and norms related to the team, club, and year students were in. Navigation of these complex group structures influenced players’ experiences of BUCS football. Our second subtheme, ‘Social Experiences’ demonstrated that the social side of BUCS football was an integral aspect of participation across all profiles. Our third subtheme, ‘Motivational Climate’ indicated that the perceived quality of the motivational climate was superior in more- versus less-adaptive profiles. Common to all profiles, the fourth subtheme, ‘Tangible Resources and Provisions’ suggested that funding, facilities, and provisions were potential issues within lower tier BUCS football. This environment, and players’ navigation of it, influenced the extent to which players felt valued.

The main theme of ‘Feeling (un)valued’ related to the extent to which players felt valued within their environment. This theme referred to how connected players felt with others, how capable they felt, how much they felt cared for and appreciated, the extent to which they were treated fairly, and the extent to which they had autonomy. While all players expressed that they felt undervalued to some extent, those from less adaptive motivational profiles felt more strongly that they were not valued at various levels. The extent to which players felt (un)valued influenced their passion for football, whereby feeling unvalued, dampened their love for the game. Another interesting feature of this theme, was that feelings of value related to various levels, ranging from those closest to players’ experience (i.e., team-level) to furthest away from players’ experience (i.e., BUCS-level). This suggests that a player’s experience of lower tier BUCS football is complex and influenced at multiple levels.

While we did not conduct research longitudinally, focus groups suggested that motivation was dynamic. The final main theme referred to the ‘Complex, Individualised, Dynamic and Interactive Nature of Motivation’. In-line with the quantitative analysis, this theme suggested that players had multiple reasons for taking part, but also that these motives changed across weeks/terms/years, based on a person’s interactions with the environment.

In sum, certain motivational profiles (e.g., High-autonomous, low-controlled), related to players’ thriving and having a very positive experience of lower tiers BUCS football, whereas other profiles (e.g., High-controlled, amotivated) related to players ‘at-risk’ of having a more negative experience. Overall, our analyses suggest that protecting players’ passion for football and making them feel more valued within the BUCS football environment may support them in moving towards a more adaptive motivational profile. Seven recommendations to achieve these two goals are provided at multiple levels (club-, university-, and BUCS-levels) of the BUCS football environment:

1. Develop clear communication (at the Club-, University, and BUCS-levels)
2. Consider delaying the start of the season (at the Club-, University, and BUCS-levels)
3. Develop alignment between values and actions (at the University-level)
4. Develop further equality in resources and provisions (at the University-level)
5. Develop transparency and trust with lower tier teams (at the University-level)
6. Develop an appropriate motivational climate (at the Club-level)
7. Develop a unique team identity (at the Club-level)