



Ranting as Rhetorically Responsive Social Actions on Sports-Talk Radio: A Critical Discursive Approach

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Abstract

This study uses a critical discourse analytic approach to examine the use of rants by callers on a prominent sports-talk radio show. Rather than being simply invective or contentious forms of social interaction, the findings show that rants are typically carefully constructed social actions that often use disclaimers to manage strong epistemic stances regarding knowledge of both the sporting events and sports culture. Rants are often created in opposition to other caller's comments, making them rhetorically responsive. Rants also generally solicited intersubjective affiliation from the talk show host and displayed carefully crafted, accountable identities that reflect stylistic forms of communication and cultural norms. The up-close, discursive orientation reveals the multifunctionality of ranting in sports-talk radio interactions.

Keywords: ranting, rants, critical discourse analysis, sports-talk radio, identity, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

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Introduction

Research exploring antagonistic or conflictual online interactions such as venting, trolling, flaming, hating, or ranting, is rich and varied. Historically, these discursive forms of online expression have been interpreted as inappropriate, toxic, anti-social (Lange, 2014; Vrooman, 2002), and generally disruptive to civil public discourse (Buckingham, 2009; Hess, 2009). However, more recently, some scholars (Angouri & Tseliga, 2010; Lange 2014; Shum & Lee, 2013) have argued that these types of interaction can function to promote meaningful discussion, solidarity, enhance social awareness, and increase empathic identification. This multifunctionality has to do with varying normative communicative factors at play between different contexts, communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), or genres of participation (Ito, 2009). Ostensibly antagonistic forms of online communication may have different feeling tones as the cultural contexts in which they are embedded change; a discursive practice such as ranting may come off as argumentative, polemical, or puerile in one online environment while in another context, function as humorous, satirical, or may promote coalition building. In short, seemingly antagonistic, or aggressive forms of communication may not always be taken up as impolite or unhealthy (Culpepper, 2012; Hardaker, 2013; Lange, 2014) but may be a means of pursuing affiliation (Korobov, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c).

The present study specifically examines the online discursive practice of ranting by guest callers on a prominent sports-talk radio show in the USA. To borrow from Lange's (2014, p. 54) research, online ranting is defined here as "emotional messages, often exhibiting anger or frustration, that identify a problem or criticize things such as interactants' behavior or the performance of technical features or systems." Rants form a genre that includes features (e.g., stating a problem with feeling tones such as anger or frustration) that overlap with other, similar discursive genres like venting or complaining.

Unlike Vrooman (2002) or Dery (1993), who characterize rants as emotional monologs or extended flames that are usually anti-social and designed for personal or competitive attack, the present inquiry borrows from scholars such as Lange (2014) and Manning (2008) who note that ranting talk can be multifunctional, especially across an ever-burgeoning array of online social contexts. Rants can thus serve a salubrious social function as they allow participants to engage in

empathic sharing and affiliation by airing out emotional grievances and addressing inequities and frustrations in a collectively organized way.

Lange (2014) showed how rants posted on YouTube often helped create a shared emotional space that generated discussion and problem-solving by users who may have felt powerless against broader corporate entities. Manning (2008) showed how venting-type rants produced by coffee shop baristas created a shared empathic space where employees could address the challenges of difficult customers. And O'Connell (2002) demonstrated that disagreement, sometimes in the form of rants, between callers and hosts on sports-talk shows did not necessarily devolve into adversarial confrontation. Instead, hosts were skilled at flexibly pursuing rapport and solidarity. The present study borrows this broader conceptualization and treats online ranting as a discursive genre that may serve not only invective but also, and perhaps more counterintuitively, socially constructive, or affiliative functions.

It is important to note that the ranting being examined in this study occurred in a mediated, online environment of a call-in talk show. Unlike face-to-face interactions, online interactive spaces are unique participation genres (Ito, 2009; Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Lange, 2014) that are mediated through technology, which creates a distance between callers and hosts. This distance potentially mitigates some of the risks that come with face-to-face interaction, particularly when those forms of interaction have an adversarial edge, as they may with ranting. Online formats are often also, to varying degrees, idiosyncratic as they carry with them distinct participatory norms, common goals, recognizable patterns and modes of engagement, stylistic forms of communication (e.g., humor, sarcasm, inside jokes), and expectations for proper engagement (Garces-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Ito, 2009). In short, online platforms are often ripe spaces for engaging in riskier forms of communication and confrontation, each carrying with them distinct norms of engagement that may affect the extent to which a social action like ranting is oriented to as aggressive versus affiliative.

Sports-Talk Radio Shows

This is particularly true for the participatory genre of call-in radio sports talk shows (Kerr, 2018; O'Connell, 2002; Zagacki & Grano, 2005). Interactive radio sports talk shows have grown immensely in popularity over the last few decades, especially in the USA (Zagacki & Grano, 2005). Online sports talk shows are often dramatic discursive spaces where the raw, spontaneous, and uncensored feelings and reactions

of hosts and callers related to both the performance and dramaturgy surrounding sports teams and sports culture are aired out publicly. They are sites where the feelings and reactions of ordinary people seem to matter, where emotion-infused interpretations and overreactions of sports outcomes are common, where regional pride, work ethic, race, and masculinity are on full display. They are sites where losses create a shared crisis and where victories provide fuel for solidarity building, pride, and hope. Call-in radio sports talk shows are thus enormously valuable discursive sites for communication researchers. As Zagacki and Grano (2005) note, “they function to reaffirm identity through mediated interactions in which heroes, villains, and role of the fans are recalled and renewed in common appreciation” (p. 46). Online sports talk shows are a subculture unto themselves.

The Paul Finebaum Show

The present study examines the discursive practice of ranting on one of the most widely popular and prominent sports talk-radio shows in the USA, *The Paul Finebaum Show*. According to Kerr (2018), *The Paul Finebaum Show (TPFS)* is one of the most followed and diverse sports-talk radio shows, in terms of tone, content, and caller participation, with a massive regional audience in the Southeast, USA. *TPFS* is synonymous with Southeastern Conference football. Paul Finebaum is an American sports author, former columnist, and now television-radio personality. Although *TPFS* offers a range of content, substantial portions of it are dedicated to callers who regularly chime in with colorful emotion, content, and sometimes fiercely contested emotional confrontations with Finebaum himself (Kerr, 2018). Because long-winded rants are common and expected on *TPFS*, the show was chosen as a promising entry site to begin exploring the function of online rants in sports-talk radio.

A Critical Discursive Psychological Approach to Ranting

The present inquiry approaches ranting from a critical discursive psychological (DP) orientation. In DP, emotion-talk is not taken to be an outward expression of a person’s inner psychological dispositional world, but instead is analyzed performatively, as an interactional resource used to manage relational business presently relevant for the speakers. Talking about emotions and feelings is not simply a window into the psyche but is a social/cultural performative method for managing accountability or blame (Edwards, 1999). Discursive

psychology has provided a very subtle and analytically descriptive account of human subjectivity (Edwards, 1997; Edwards & Potter, 2017; Potter, 1996). DP's approach to subjectivity focuses on how speakers performatively formulate emotions, feelings, dispositions, and beliefs as *social actions*. Rants are thus discursive methods for interactively *doing* things, not simply reflecting inner states of mind.

Potter (1996) notes that there is an *offensive* and *defensive* rhetorical nature to the ways assessments and descriptions are built in conversational interaction. A critical discursive approach considers how ranting works *offensively* in so far as it undermines alternative positions and *defensively* as it deflects potential challenges to the arguments themselves. Since talk that involves ranting is interactively risky, it will likely encompass a variety of rhetorical functions to make claims that are finely-tuned and not easily assailable. Rants are thus used to manage *accountability*—that is, the attributional work of implicitly assigning/deflecting blame. The kind of interactional work brought off during moments of ranting in argumentative contexts between sports fans is clearly a matter of accountability, e.g., delivering and deflecting blame, constructing veracity, owning epistemic rights, as well as handling the sensitive issues surrounding being seen as a well-informed, loyal, or passionate fan by those listening. The present discursive analysis will focus on how callers pursue affiliation while managing accountability amidst a riskiness of ranting.

Participants and Method

The present study was initiated because of an informal ethnographic interest by the authors in sports-talk radio interactions. One of the common features of these radio shows were the portions where callers would phone in, typically after the weekend's games, and rant about various teams' performances from the weekend. The vivid and colorful nature of these rants and the responses to them by the hosts became analytically interesting. As a result, we began to cull a range of these segments from *TPFS* and began to consider them in detail for analytic purposes. As noted, *TPFS* was chosen because of its national popularity and prominence as well as its reputation for featuring guests who call in to rant.

For this present study, the data were 27 randomly chosen interactions containing episodes of ranting between callers and Paul Finebaum occurring on *TPFS* between August and November of 2023.

For coding purposes, an episode of ranting was deemed to be any stretch of conversation involving an impassioned or excited tirade or diatribe that could involve complaining, moaning, whining, criticizing, scolding, or condemning, often in an exaggerated way for dramatic effect. Both authors had to agree that an excerpt fit this criterion to an appreciable degree to count as a rant. Because the data corpus was modest in size, restricted to just the Paul Finebaum show, and circumscribed to a 3-month period, this should be considered an initial research foray into this topic. To align with space constraints, the analysis below examines six of these ranting interactions. These six examples were chosen because they were deemed to be the fullest exemplars of the types of interactional work we found most common and conspicuous in the rants in this data set, which allows for the fullest possible analysis in the space provided. Analytic attention is given to the discursive positioning strategies used by the callers (and host) to rhetorically display identities and manage accountability while proffering affiliation (as opposed to antagonism).

Analysis

In the first excerpt, the caller (Jim) is ranting about the Alabama Crimson Tide's recent struggles. Paul gently pushes back in several places and positions Jim as overreacting. This excerpt displays a variety of the most common discursive features of rants found in this corpus.

Excerpt 1.

1 P: whoa whoa (.) well Jim (.) I mean (.) I hear you but um:
2 J: Paul there's not many levels see IT's WRONG it's ba:d on
3 TOO MANY levels (.) I'm sorry he still ain't the same as
4 he was when fired'when he was fired by um Saban in 2007
5 or 2008 when he was there for a year (.) it's NO AGGRESSION
6 on defense or offensive plays calling (.) >UP THE MIDDLE
7 UP THE MIDDLE< it's the same old crap (.) it's HORRIBLE Paul
8 (.) am I not passionate enough to tell you that? cuz I'm
9 telling you IT's AWFUL (.) it's awful (.) and I like Jalen
10 Milroe um ok I'm not getting on him (.) but he's NOT the
11 answer!
12 P: but but how many times have you heard people say Nick Saban
13 will fix=
14 J: =IT DON'T MATTER PAUL! I heard it and didn't believe it then
15 (.) n'I believe it now Paul (.) I believe it now (.) an I'm
16 not a dummy (.) I saw so many things wrong it's unbelievable
17 Paul (.) I don't see how Saban has a straight face (.) he
18 ought to be embarrassed to stay the coach and he' I don't
19 know what he can do (.) he better look for shelter is all
20 I can say because THIS IS BAD.
21 P: I mean Jim uh=

22 J: =I'm not [being=
23 P: [don't you think that's a slight overreaction?
24 J: NO (.) it's not quite as much (.) it might NOT be enough (.)
25 it might not be enough.
26 P: I mean we are talking about Nick Saban here.
27 J: I know (.) an' everybody gets a pass (.) you know (.) a pass
28 or time (.) I know how it works n'I believe he is (.) I'm
29 jus' hey I'M SICK (.) you know what Paul (.) a friend of mine
30 came over to the house one time and said 'man that pride is
31 gone out of the Sunday morning paper (.) isn't it refreshing?"
32 WELL pride WASN'T here on Sunday morning like it usually is (.)
33 there was NO pride going through there on Sunday morning and
34 it won't be for many Sunday mornings this year in my opinion.

(Finebaum, 2024a)

One of the conspicuous trends in nearly all the rants analyzed is that they do far more than simply display frustration or anger. Rants are parts of broader social and cultural activities that reveal some of the deeper functions of sports-talk interactions. For example, note the way Jim's initial ranting turn (lines 3-11) not only displays frustration and moral condemnation for Alabama's performance, but also displays historical knowledge dating back to 2007 about the offensive play calling and how it has become predictable and unimproved. This stance epistemically credentials Jim's emotional rant. His anger is anchored in knowledge and not simply emotion.

In lines 8 and 9-10 he then creates two important disclaimers that are defensively rhetorical in that they inoculate his rant from appearing to be motivated by ill will. This is where the management of accountability becomes evident. In line 8, he rhetorically asks "Am I not passionate enough to tell you that", which positions his rant as motivated by passion, not antipathy. The fact that he designs it as an interrogative addressed to Paul displays the intersubjective nature of his rant. It is a recipient-designed disclaimer. Jim is soliciting solidarity from Paul. And second, before he claims that their quarterback, Jalen Milroe, is not the answer, he uses the disclaimer "I'm not getting on him" to manage accountability. The disclaimer shows that his dissatisfaction with Jalen Milroe is again not motivated by dislike of Milroe, but rather logical appraisal anchored in historical knowledge. In short, Jim's rant allows him to perform the identity of a truly passionate and informed fan.

Paul's note of the support typically extended to Saban in lines 12-13 works as a setup. It allows Jim to counter Paul and extend his rant, which is part of the performance Paul is eliciting here. It allows Jim to display historical awareness of the cover typically offered to Saban,

which credentials his disbelief that Saban is above reproach. He adds that “I’m not a dummy”, which further rhetorically inoculates his critical appraisal of coach Saban. Jim again claims the dual identity of being passionate, well-informed, and thoughtful. Even as Paul gently wonders if Jim is slightly overreacting (line 23), Jim displays that his reaction may not be enough, suggesting that he may be holding back, and thus measured, which prevents his rant from appearing irrational or spiteful.

In Jim’s final turn, he further displays his epistemic authority as a knowing fan by showing that he understands that all coaches are afforded either a pass or some amount of time to show they can win. Jim takes this into account when he creates his rant. He suggests Saban has been given both, which defensively guards his critique from reproach. He also indexes the sports trope of pride across his final turn, noting that the pride that he has historically enjoyed as an Alabama fan is now gone both for himself and as part of the collective (it is absent in the Sunday morning paper) and that he feels sick about it. Jim is doing far more than just ranting. He is positioning himself as a heartfelt Alabama fan who understands the game, how coaching works, and when it’s time to make changes. He also shows his genuine pain, but that the pain he is feeling is not clouding his judgment, which is key. Finally, not only does he seek intersubjective alignment with Paul, but it’s clear that Paul’s minimal interjections and weak protestations indirectly allow Jim to extend, refute, and elaborate on his rant. The rant is a carefully orchestrated performance between the two of them.

This following example is another illustration of the use of epistemic authority, historical knowledge, and personal experience to rant against the perception that the Alabama head coach intentionally directed his players to engage in flagrant fouls. Note the way the caller creates a particular identity as a sports fan.

Excerpt 2.

1 P: Gunney is up next in Georgia (.) hello Gunney.
2 G: How ya doin’ Paul.
3 P: We are doin’=
4 G: =I just wanted to uh make a few comments (.) I was gonna
5 call you before Veterans Day um: give my <opinion> about
6 a few things (.) I coached football for about thirty years
7 n’I played football in the Southeastern Conference (.) but
8 you know uh I didn’t play at Alabama (.) cause Alabama uh
9 I root for all the schools in the Southeastern Conference
10 when they’re not playing Auburn (.) but uh (.) you know that
11 hit on the quarterback (.) there’s NO WAY that Saban uh (.)
12 condoned that or asked that to be happened (.) cause the kid
13 DIDN’T do it (.) LOOK (.) football is not ballet (.) if it

14 was he'd be out there in a little tutu (.) dancing around on
15 their toes (.) it's a game of VIOLENCE (.) n'that you know
16 he came (.) you know (.) I heard them announcers say a hundred
17 times he came across on the blitz and with bad intentions
18 hhuhmp (.) n'that's what he did and it's just a thing (.)
19 that happens in the game of football (.) it wasn't on purpose
20 NO WAY (.) NO legitimate coach (.) and certainly not Saban
21 would uh condone asking somebody to out somebody out the
22 ball game (.) that's just one of the things that happens (.)
23 you know (.) everybody on every team is bruised up a little
24 bit and all that kinda stuff (.) n' for people to use this
25 as an excuse to jump on somebody or go after a coach about
26 something (.) ya know (.) IT'S RUDE (.) in my opinion (.)
27 it's RIDICULOUS (.) how do ya feel about it Mr. Finebaum?
28 P: I agree with you.

(Finebaum, 2024b)

The opening lines (4-10) of Gunny's call function as a prefatory disclaimer, which reveals the delicate nature of how rants operate. Gunny begins by noting his intent. He says he's "gonna make a few comments" and then says, "give my <opinion>," but slows down and stresses the word 'opinion' as if to signal to Paul to take that term loosely, since he will soon show that his opinion is a strong one backed by knowledge and experience. He is signaling that he is about to do more than simply offer a casual opinion. These moves mitigate against the appearance of intentional ranting. Ranting is not the point, per se. These callers typically demonstrate agendas that transcend simply getting upset for the sake of it. Managing accountability is central.

Gunny notes that he has coached football for about 30 years and once played in the SEC conference. He also notes that although he generally roots for SEC teams, Auburn is his favorite. Since he is about to defend Alabama, noting his allegiance to Auburn mitigates against bias in defending Alabama. Gunny therefore appears not only experienced and credentialed as a coach, player, and SEC fan, but also as someone not inherently invested in Alabama. This sets his rant up to appear rational, rather than motivated by homerism (i.e., when sports fans advocate for their teams to an irrational degree). The crux of Gunner's rant is that the hit on the opposing team's quarterback by Alabama's defense player in the most recent game is *not* the type of hit that coach Saban condones or encourages his defensive players to carry out. Gunner is reacting to other pundits and fans who have argued that these types of hits are intentional and tacitly encouraged by the coaches.

Gunner emphatically argues that there's "NO WAY" Saban ordered that, that the defensive player "DIDN'T" do it, and that it's "RUDE" and

“RIDICULOUS” to suggest this. But his rant is not simply a protest. It is a rant circumscribed in a strong and certain epistemic stance backed by personal experience and knowledge of the game. His argument for why the hit on the quarterback was not illegal is rhetorically offensive. He offers a sexist comparison of football to ballet, noting that football is not ballet and that these players are not out there wearing the female ballet tutu outfit. Football players are tough men, not tutu-wearing women engaged in a “game of violence”. He rhetorically (offensively) constructs a version of football that has violence, not delicacy, as it’s defining characteristic. He scoffs (“hhumhp”) at the announcers saying the defensive player came with “bad intentions”, suggesting that they indeed come with aggression, but that this is “just a thing” common in the “game of football”. Gunny knows from his own experience and knowledge of the game that violence and injuries are part of the game, and that coaches do not direct players to cause injuries. Any other argument, he says, is a “rude” and “ridiculous” “excuse”. After his long rant, he asks how Paul feels about this, which is a common solidarity proffering move at the terminus of rants, showing that rants are about building an identity, in the collective, as a sports fan. Paul concludes by affirming Gunny’s identity-proffering bid with straight-away agreement which creates alignment.

A similar orchestration of epistemic stance prefaced by disclaimers and ended with solidarity seeking alignment can be seen in this rant by Mark.

Excerpt 3.

1 P: Mark is in Mississippi (.) and uh hey Mark (.) good afternoon.
2 M: No hotty toddies for YOU today Paul (.) but it’s all good (.)
3 we lost to a great team (.) a better team (.) I mean you know
4 which we just face up to it and move on (.) I mean although I
5 would like to say if Jaxson Dart had not got hurt (.) missed
6 most of the second half (.) n’we don’t have an injured offensive
7 line (.) there’s NO:: WAY they’d beat us fifty two to seventeen
8 I think we could make that into a respectful game (.) but credit
9 Georgia (.) man (.) they got a chance to make history and I hope
10 they do (.) they could be the first time in college football
11 history to win three in a row (.) n’t that would be a Southeastern
12 Conference team to do that (.) n’I hope they do it (.) I’d say go
13 Dawgs (.) I think they (.) I think they could do it (.) I hope
14 they do (.) n’as far as Ole Miss (.) hell we got a chance at a
15 really good season (.) we can go ten and two n’uh we’re favored
16 to (.) we can go undefeated at home (.) six and two n’ the
17 Southeastern Conference (.) our only losses would be at Athens
18 and at Tuscaloosa (.) and I can LIVE WITH THAT (.) I think by
19 the end of the year (.) that these last two games there’s a

20 decent chance we can get right back in the top ten again (.) I
21 think we'll be right outside the top ten tonight (.) even the
22 twelfth spot so I think we're pretty much a lock (.) we'd better
23 win these last two games in the New Year's sixth Bowl (.) and
24 one last thing before I let you go Paul (.) I support (.) I
25 appreciate all the support and love for the vets this weekend
26 (.) I'm a navy vet myself (.) I served in the Persian Gulf (.)
27 my dad's an air force vet from way back in the day n'I just wanna
28 say (.) uh (.) I jus'I appreciate it (.) and until next time (.)
29 Paul uh: (.) I hope (.) good show and uh see ya (.) 'till next
30 time (.) I love your show and uh (.) talk to you again (.) bye.
31 P: thank you Mark (.) and uh (.) thank you for you and your dad's
32 service.

(Finebaum, 2024c)

Mark frustratingly notes that there will be no celebratory drinks (“NO hotty toddies”) for Paul today (and by extension, himself), as his team just took a beating. Note the way he immediately seeks solidarity with Paul. In what follows, Mark takes the higher ground and concedes that his team got beaten by a better team and that he and his fellow fans should accept the defeat. The rhetorical move involves making concessions (Antaki & Wetherell, 1999; Korobov & Barnes, 2004). Sometimes, when evaluations are being built, concessions are formulated to soften or even counter previously stated strong claims (Korobov & Barnes, 2004). Mark uses concessions to soften his statement that Georgia is a better team and does so by creating a two-part potential excuse for the loss, underscoring that if Jaxson Dart had not gotten injured and the offensive line was in better health, the outcome may have been different. But he then quickly returns to the original assertion by crediting Georgia (lines 8-14), a move that softens the potential for his excuse-making to sound like he's rationalizing, which may undermine his epistemic position, making him appear out of touch with reality.

In so doing, Mark displays a strong epistemic stance that shows he understands both the nature of the specific loss and the broader picture for Mississippi football. By showing support for Georgia, he tacitly suggests that the SEC conference is strong, which suggests that his team, Mississippi, is among strong talent. He thus turns the loss into a noble loss. He then reviews the current state of Mississippi's record and forecasts a strong finish, which provides a rhetorically offensive account that further supports the notion that Mississippi is still among the elite. And again, it is key to note how he solicits solidarity from Paul. Rather than asking Paul to weigh in directly, his tactic is to switch

topics altogether (in line 24) and thank Paul for supporting the US military veterans on his show. He shows his identity as a US military veteran, soliciting Paul's expression of gratitude (line 31). In so doing, he creates alignment with Paul, a common feature in rants, especially at the terminus of the rant.

These next three examples focus specifically on the use of epistemic displays of authority regarding historical sporting events, but in these cases, they are used to justify a rant directed at the comments of a previous caller, something that was common in this corpus. Rants were often invigorated by and built around something a previous caller said. Here, Don takes issue with a previous caller's premature negativity towards Alabama's recent struggles.

Excerpt 4.

1 P: Don is up next (.) hello Don.
2 D: hey Paul (.) how are you doin' (.) listen Paul (.) uh
3 I wanna just put Legend in his place (.) I'm an Alabama
4 fan to the core n' I can tell him that Alabama lost two
5 years straight to Louisiana Tech (.) I've seen them lose
6 to Northern Illinois (.) I've seen them uh (.) lose to
7 Southern Mississippi (.) I've seen them uh get tied by
8 Tulane n'I could mention two or three other incidents of uh
9 (.) weak schedules (.) they played Chattanooga (.) they
10 played Richmond (.) n'they played teams that are just as
11 WEAK AS WATER when it comes to football (.) so why doesn't
12 he compliment those schools (.) Richmond turns out terrific
13 (.) um scholastic abilities n'Auburn does the same thing!
14 they graduated uh astronauts over there at Auburn (.) I live
15 25 miles from 'em n'I've got several friends that I respect
16 totally (.) NOW (.) he needs to know a little history (.) back
17 in 1968 (.) Alabama went on a losing streak with Bear Bryant
18 as their head coach (.) they started with the loss of the
19 Cotton Bowl n'then in '69 they were six and five (.) n'then
20 in '70 they were seven and four (.) n' people were almost
21 talking Bear Bryant into quitting (.) they HARASSED THE CRAP
22 outta the poor guy (.) n'in '71 (.) he instituted the wishbone
23 at Alabama (.) n'they went out on the west coast and beat
24 Southern Cal seventeen to ten (.) and they won three national
25 championships in the seventies (.) NOW (.) now they're talking
26 about Saban bein' weak (.) there's so much room on the bus
27 today uh Nick'I mean uh'Paul (.) you better get on quick
28 because it's gonna fill up quick again (.) they all abandoned
29 uh coach Saban and Alabama.

(Finebaum, 2024d)

This rant is essentially a long-winded diatribe that draws on historical knowledge of Alabama's ascent into success. The caller, Don, is indirectly challenging a previous caller's (Legend) belief that Alabama

is currently a bad team because they are losing to bad teams, and that this assessment by Legend and his potential loss of faith in Alabama may be premature and uninformed. Don begins by emphatically noting that he'd like to "put Legend in his place", signaling that this rant will be an emotional reproach. Like in the first excerpt, Don carefully begins with a disclaimer ("I'm an Alabama fan to the core") to rhetorically insulate his forthcoming description of Alabama's historical struggles from appearing to be motivated by negativity, disloyalty, or ignorance.

He goes on to educate Legend about the history of how Alabama once struggled, but emerged successfully from that struggle under Bear Bryant, and how the opponents they have recently lost to are good and not "as WEAK AS WATER", as Legend purportedly claimed in his earlier call. He also describes the harassment and criticism that fair-weathered fans had for Alabama at that time. Don is careful to contrast himself from such fans, suggesting that there are bandwagon fans and that he, perhaps unlike Legend, is not one of them. He uses extreme case formulations ("they all abandoned"), which are common in rants, to describe the mass exodus of fandom that occurs when teams struggle and that he knows better than to be like this. Like in previous excerpts, Don's rant allows him to display epistemic authority as a fan, thus positioning him as not only knowing and competent as a sports fan in general, but also as a wise and rational devotee of the Alabama football team. Don displays an epistemic stance that credentials his emotional rant. His frustration with Legend is anchored in knowledge and not simply emotion.

In this next excerpt, David calls in to first establish rapport and solidarity with Paul, which works rhetorically as a preface to launch a co-constructed rant against a previous caller.

Excerpt 5.

- 1 P: David is up next in South Carolina (.) hello David.
2 D: PAUL (.) my main man FINEBAUM (.) you finally got to meet me
3 in Knoxville (.) three weeks ago (.) I've been trying to get
4 through since then n'I wanted to make sure you enjoyed your time
5 with me.
6 P: David (.) uh (.) I'll try not to uh border on hyperbolic here
7 (.) but it was probably the most important (.) significant
8 interaction I've had this year.
9 D: oh: I sure do appreciate that (.) because you know I am a number
10 one fan (.) I've been telling you that since I called n::'I
11 told ya when I met ya I wasn't gonna say anything about the Barber
12 anymore n'I'm not (.) we definitely talked about it=
13 P: =hha'now (.) I-I definitely remember.
14 D: he's a BOOB!

15 P: ((laughs, 2.0))
 15 D: ((laughing)) yeahhhhaa (.) we talked about AJ (.) He's a boob
 16 n'he calls this show with NONSENSE!
 17 P: well (.) David (.) don't(hhha) please=
 18 D: =he probably doesn't know who the Auburn head coach is.
 19 P: please don't let him know I called him a boob privately (.) okay?
 20 D: no:: ((laughing)) YOU didn't call him a boob (.) I did! you just
 21 agreed with me (.) that's all(hhhahhaa).
 22 P: okay (.) actually (.) I had a stronger name than a boob.
 23 D: hhhahahha he probably don't even know who the Auburn head coach
 24 he calls with a bunch of nonsense (.) he doesn't talk football (.)
 25 I mean he sits here and belittles other callers (.) I mean talk
 26 about your football team (.) talk about what your coach and your
 27 quarterback and your running back are doing on the field (.) don't
 28 call and talk about other people (.) if you don't know what sports
 29 are about (.) then DON'T CALL THE SHOW (.) SIMPLE.
 30 P: well said David (.) thank you for the call.

(Finebaum, 2024e)

There are two key segments to this excerpt. The first part (lines 1-10) is a preface to the rant that creates intersubjectivity. David opens this section with an emphatic display of affection for Paul (line 2) and a reminder of the time they met up in person in Knoxville. Paul remembers the time quite well and is overly enthusiastic in his recollection of it. Paul's overly exaggerated appraisal of it (lines 6-8) hints at some obvious inside joking going on, which enhances their rapport and affiliation. David goes on to praise the show, reminding Paul that he is his number one fan. The two appear to be in sync. And all of this occurs before David has clarified why he is calling, which is not atypical in rant prefaces. Establishing this connection, as we have seen in the previous excerpts, is an ingredient in establishing a rant. Since rants are risky and potentially disaffiliating if overdone, it creates the apropos environment for launching a rant.

Beginning in line 11, David establishes the reason he is now calling. He reminds Paul of his previous promise not to troll "the Barber" (whose actual name is revealed in line 15 to be "AJ"). The 'not to talk about' reminder is, of course, offensively rhetorical. He said he wouldn't, but he just can't help it, and he's going to anyway. It also works intersubjectively as a reminder that he and Paul have jointly had a previous go at "the Barber" and invites Paul to join him for another round of it. In what follows (lines 13-29), there is a long and extended co-constructed rant where they both laughingly recount calling him names and trolling him for his lack of football knowledge. Paul feigns resistance and temperance (lines 17 and 19), perhaps as part of the unspoken norms of

civility expected of a host, but otherwise does not hold back, and even ups the ante in one spot (line 22). David's main rant against AJ has to do with his general lack of football knowledge, both with the game and in knowing how to conduct oneself as a caller. Because rants are, as we have seen, typically about displaying a certain knowing epistemic stance about football and football culture, the content of his rant comes as no surprise. The rant is centrally about establishing David's identity as a knowing football fan, and in soliciting Paul's cooperation. In short, rants are identity-constitutive social actions.

In this last excerpt, Lou builds a rant that is directed at a previous caller's comments. Like in the last excerpt, Lou seeks alignment with Paul in constructing the rant.

Excerpt 6.

1 P: Lou is up next in Tennessee (.) Lou?
2 L: hey Paul (.) how ya doing this afternoon?
3 P: fantastic (.) thank you.
4 L: okay (.) so (.) Will out of Atlanta (.) Georgia doesn't have
5 a power spot team and he wants to start=
6 P: =wel-well first of all (.) he's a liar (.) uh nobody believes
7 that he doesn't have a team (.) he:'s=
8 L: =well yeah (.) but you know what (.) what a brilliant ending to
9 that phone call when you said, 'well, the only intellectual part
10 of this call is the guy on this end' (.) CLICK (.) that was great
11 (.) that kind of happens to me sometimes, but I wanna talk to you
12 about the SEC schedule too (.) and the strength of schedule (.) n'
13 everyone wants to talk about Georgia and trust me (.) I'm not a
14 Georgia r' Bama fan (.) I bleed green Sunday through Friday (.) n'
15 my blood turns orange on Saturday.
16 P: I like that.
17 L: but everybody in the east plays everybody (.) n'the east is really
18 not'I don't see where people think there's a huge schedule change
19 or advantage either way (.) I mean we play everybody Georgia plays
20 with the exception of the two out of the west (.) I mean (.) they
21 always get like Auburn and this year (.) Ole Miss (.) so uh
22 Tennessee (.) we always get Alabama and we get A&M next this
23 weekend but I mean (.) to me (.) it's balanced and everybody plays
24 the high school football teams in the SEC (.) but the SEC is a
25 strong conference out there (.) and how-how (.) this cat thinks
26 Michigan could be number one (.) he's out-he's OFF HIS TREE (.)
27 he's off his tree and he lives in his land in Georgia (.) he needs
28 to go wherever Michigan plays (.) I-I-I don't know (.) that guys a
29 NUTCASE!
30 P: thank you(hha) very very much (.) it's really good to hear from
31 you(haahha).

(Finebaum, 2024f).

Like in the previous excerpt, Lou seeks to establish a kind of solidarity and rapport with Paul as he eases into his rant against a previous caller's

(Will) comments. After exchanging the typical prefatory pleasantries (lines 1-3), Lou broaches the reason for his call, which is to revisit Will's claim that he is not a fan of a "power spot" team. However, before Lou can complete his turn and his criticism of Will, Paul latches on and escalates the criticism by calling Will a "liar", claiming that nobody believes he doesn't have a team. Paul's comments index the previous call by Will to the show, which Lou heard. Lou latches back on to that, calls that exchange between Paul and Will "brilliant" and then uses reported speech to replay Paul's put-down of Will, followed by a hard hang-up. Lou loved seeing Paul do this to Will, and the two then built intersubjective alignment and affiliation around this recollection. Once this is established, as is the case in the other excerpts, Lou is free to shift into the next phase of his rant, which is to talk about the strength of the SEC schedule. Again, rants are often rhetorically built around making (successful) bids to share antipathy towards mutual enemies (here, other callers).

Lou's comments about the SEC schedule at first appear to shift the rant back into calmer waters, but in line 25 we see that these remarks work as a preface yet again to launch back into a vitriolic rant against Will's opinion that Michigan should be ranked number one, given their weak schedule as compared to SEC teams. Like in other excerpts, the rant allows Lou to demonstrate a strong epistemic stance. Lou positions himself as understanding the ways that strength of schedule matters in rankings disputes. His rant displays his knowledge of football and football culture. He formulates a rant to perform that knowledge, using Will as a foil. And like in the previous excerpts, it solicits intersubjective alignment with Paul, who shows approval by laughingly appreciating and thanking Paul for his rant.

Discussion

This study used a critical discourse analytic approach to offer a foray into a corpus of rants by sports fans on a prominent sports-talk radio show. Broadly, the goal was to examine the social, interactive, and rhetorical function of ranting talk, and to discover if the rants were simply invective, heated, and contentious forms of interaction (as has been suggested in previous research on rants), or whether there was more going on. One of the key findings was that these rants are multifunctional. They rarely devolved into adversarial confrontations. The rants deployed in this study of sport-talk interactions were often

carefully created social actions used to display a strong epistemic stance that solicited intersubjective affiliation and displayed carefully crafted, accountable identities that reflected stylistic forms of communication and cultural norms.

An up-close, discursive orientation was necessary to see the multifunctionality of ranting in sports-talk radio interactions. The analyses reveal how callers rhetorically crafted strongly felt emotions as part of more nuanced projects that had to do with showing what they know as a sports fan, how they can embody or resist the norms of sports culture(s), how they can formulate an identity as a sports fan, and how they can create alignment and affiliation in so doing. These are local, interactive projects, made visible only through a careful discursive orientation to the data and its turn by turn unfolding.

On an aesthetic level, it was plainly clear that the rants were often quite colorful, humorous, graphic, and tongue-in-cheek displays of frustration and anger. The rants were laden with hyperbole, innuendo, and play-fighting, often designed to incite, jab, and elicit argument or banter. They drew on colorful idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, at times indexing what appeared to be a true, corporeal felt sense of sadness, anger, or resignation. In other words, these rants felt real to an extent and were not simply performative. Previous research, as noted in the introduction, attested to this aesthetic dimension to the rants, so seeing was expected.

That said, the in-depth discursive analyses reveal that these rants are often far more than aesthetically provocative displays of frustration or anger. They are real in other ways as well. As the analysis show, ranting does not seem to be the singular aim, per se. Far more was going on. Managing accountability in the pursuit of identities, both singular and intersubjective, was clear and obvious. For example, the analyses show that *displaying a strong epistemic stance* regarding the game of football (e.g., play calling, coaching) and football culture (e.g., how to assess the quality of a team's performance, what wins and losses mean, the competitiveness of the broader field of teams, the history of the sport, and so on). Rants are thus a form of epistemic credentialing. The felt sense of the caller's anger and frustration was bracketed by knowledge, not simply emotion. This epistemic credentialing is typically built by indexing historical precedents and events or else through the demonstration of personal experience with having played the game of football at a high level.

Rants were often managed through the careful use of *disclaimers*. In this corpus, disclaimers were often used to manage accountability and to inoculate the speaker's positions from appearing to be motivated by homerism, or from being knee-jerk reactions that are not backed by knowledge, or from appearing to be overly passionate. In general, disclaimers were useful for revealing the careful management of accountability. Because rants are, by definition, typically strong stances that involve making accusations or assessments that involve faulting and blaming various entities for the success or failure of something, they may require softening if the person delivering the rant is concerned to be heard (or not heard) in certain ways. Because the rants in this corpus were often formulated with disclaimers, it shows that the callers are not simply freewheeling their emotions but are concerned to be heard in certain ways and not others. Disclaimers thus tend to the delicate nature of rants, and of their recipient-design.

This idea of recipient-design segues with another key finding, namely that the rants were typically constructed in ways that clearly sought out *intersubjective affiliation and alignment*. Callers often solicited Paul's cooperation, affiliation, and support as they constructed their rants. This shows again how rants are delicate social business, where recruiting the support of Paul is ingredient. Rants are solidarity-seeking rhetorical actions that are built not only to persuade and align with Paul Finebaum, but to also counter actual or imagined challenges from listeners representing potentially divergent viewpoints. They are thus rhetorically defensive. This was made evident through another key finding, which was the fact many of the rants were *derivative of other callers' comments*. Rants were often invigorated by and directed at the comments of a previous caller. They are rhetorically formulated social actions that are designed to address the subculture of fellow listeners. This again underscores the communal nature of ranting.

It suggests that rants are delicate ways of participating in a sports subculture. Rants must be rhetorically finely tuned so that the callers fit in as knowing members of sports-talk culture, where there are obvious rules and norms that guide what it means to take positions and have opinions, especially when those positions and opinions are heated and set in juxtaposition to the actual positions and opinions of others.

And finally, the findings show that rants are *identity-constitutive* vehicles for showing that (and how) callers are emotionally and intellectually invested fans, or connoisseurs of not just the game of

football, but the culture of football, which involves displays of masculinity and regional pride. The data were littered with idiomatic expressions to signal cultural membership in a shared way of talking. In the data analyzed, there was arguably a Southern (USA) masculine ethos being circulated. In other sports markets in different geographical locales, we would expect to see a similar sort of parochialism. Further research on ranting in sports talk settings outside of the Southeastern USA is needed to understand the ways that cultural differences shape the form and social/rhetorical function(s) of ranting. This is true not only with respect to the nature of how ranting is publicly displayed in general, if at all (e.g., how cultural norms related to expressions of frustration/anger, politeness norms, humor, etc shape the way ranting might emerge and be used), as well as how rants might appear specifically in publicly accessible talk about sports. Although we would anticipate considerable variation across cultures, we would expect rants to nevertheless still involve identity-work and to be intersubjectively attuned and rhetorically responsive to the actual and imagined expectations of others. The ways these differences appear would be helpful windows into the cultures from which the ranting is derived.

Undoubtedly, further research on ranting in sports-talk is needed on larger sports-talk data sets of various types from a wider range of geographic and cultural locales with wider demographics of sports-fans to more fully understand how rants work and why they are deployed. Still, the findings from this study stand as a strong foray into the topic, demonstrate an important (discursive) method for interrogating ranting at the interactional level, and illustrate interesting findings that can catalyze further analyses.

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