

Tackling Social Media Abuse? Critically Assessing English Football's Response to Online Racism

Communication & Sport
2019, Vol. 7(1) 64-79
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DOI: 10.1177/2167479517745300
journals.sagepub.com/home/com



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Abstract

Although English football has, to some extent, managed the problem of racism in and around football matches, recent years have seen an increase in football-related racist content published on social media. Footballers are frequently the target or subject of such abuse and occasionally the source of it. In this context, this article explores and critically assesses the response of English football's institutions, organisations, and clubs to the problem of racism on social media. Its findings are based on interviews with key officials from the Professional Footballers' Association and Kick It Out and with safeguarding and media officers from football clubs across the English Premier League and English Football League. It concludes there are a number of systematic failings undermining or hindering football's attempts to address this issue including poor coordination, a lack of clear guidelines, ad hoc educational provision, a shortage of resources, and a culture of secrecy at many clubs. This article concludes with some recommendations about how these weaknesses may start to be improved.

Keywords

football, social media, Twitter, racism, whiteness

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A recent study revealed that almost 135,000 discriminatory social media posts relating to the English Premier League (EPL) were made during the 2014/2015 season (Bennett & Jönsson, 2017). The research, commissioned and published by Kick It Out and English football's main antiracism and discrimination organisation, identified 95,000 discriminatory posts directed at EPL teams, with approximately 39,000 such posts aimed at EPL players. Chelsea was the most abused club (approximately 20,000 posts) closely followed by Liverpool (19,000) and Arsenal (12,000). Former Liverpool striker Mario Balotelli was the most targeted individual, receiving more than 8,000 discriminatory posts. The statistics revealed the huge extent and seriousness of the problem now facing English football, and other sports, in terms of how to protect and police its players in their use of social media. This article critically assesses how key institutions and organisations are performing this task.

This article presents new empirical research analysing how English football is responding to the problem of racism on social media. It aims to

- critically assess how key institutions and organisations in English football are responding to racism on social media,
- identify the current barriers that may be weakening or inhibiting this response, and
- suggest recommendations for how this response can be strengthened.

While this article focuses on English football, it has significance beyond this context for a number of reasons. First, while national in focus, the problem of sports-related racism on social media is a worldwide one with social media organisations transcending national legal boundaries. The issues discussed in this article therefore have wider resonance, even if viewed through a particular lens. Second, the social media audience for English football is a global one with, for example, an international television deal now worth more than £1 billion a year. While the article critiques the responses of the institutions of a national sport, these are responses to a problem which is played out on an international stage with a cast of millions.

This article begins with a literature review discussing theories of racism and whiteness in the contexts of football and social media. It then provides a Method section outlining the nature and limitations of its empirical work, which consists largely of interviews with key stakeholders. The Findings section critically discusses the results of these interviews in relation to relevant theory, before a conclusion containing recommendations for future research and methods of better tackling the issue of football-related racism on social media.

Literature Review: “Race,” Whiteness, and Cyberspace

The *New Yorker* infamously proclaimed in a 1993 cartoon that “On the internet nobody knows that you are a dog” (Farrington et al., 2014, p. 42). In other words, while our ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and appearance, among other identifiers,

may influence and shape our off-line experiences, the Internet allows a space where our identities can be so deeply hidden that it creates a neutral or equal space for users. Unfortunately, this utopian model of cyberspace does not exist. As Nakamura (2008) suggests, the Internet is an “outstanding example of a racist medium” (p. 75). The Internet is not a race neutral or colour-blind space, as it arguably mirrors the physical world. For example, Boyd (2011) explored “White flight” and highlighted that White Americans migrated to Facebook after African Americans began to populate and “ghettoise” Myspace. Research illustrates that race structures the online world—it influences our behaviour and determines what spaces we visit and avoid (Boyd, 2011; West & Thakore, 2013).

Cleland (2014) notes that social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter have allowed “racist thoughts to flourish online, in particular by rejecting multiculturalism . . . through the presentation of whiteness and national belonging and an outright hostility and resistance toward the Other” (p. 415). The Internet has allowed users a new platform to spread hate. Hate groups no longer have to communicate in isolation, hunt for new recruits, or distribute leaflets on foot. The Internet provides them instant access to new and existing followers, and it makes considerably easier to mobilise and spread hateful messages (Brown, 2009). Social media, then, in particular, has “allowed old racial schemata to be broadcast in new social settings anonymously via smart phones and computers” (Cleland, 2014, p. 417).

Goffman’s (1959/1990) seminal work around frontstage and backstage performances is noteworthy. This dramaturgical metaphor posits that individuals present antithetical versions of themselves through guiding and controlling impressions in public (frontstage) and private (backstage) spaces. Put simply, a divergent racial performance is presented within frontstage (multiracial) and backstage (White) spaces. Although overt racism has declined in frontstage spaces due to the contemporary “politically correct” culture popularised by dominant liberal political and cultural agendas, overt expressions of White male racism remain and have moved behind closed doors (Feagin & Picca, 2007; Hughey, 2011; Hylton & Lawrence, 2016). Nakayama (2017) argues that people often feel free to post abusive messages online rather than espouse hate in public spaces. We argue that social media has provided a platform whereby backstage racism is being projected frontstage.

Suler (2004) expands, suggesting that online users “loosen up, feel less restrained, and express themselves more openly” (p. 321). Suler’s seminal work on the online disinhibition effect critically investigates online behaviours. He presents a number of tenets which aid disinhibition, the first of which is *anonymity*. This allows people to separate their online and off-line identities, allowing them to be freed from the moral and psychological constraints which usually guides their behaviour. Crosby et al. (1980, p. 557, in Crandall & Eshleman, 2003, p. 421) found that “discrimination was more marked in relatively anonymous situations than in . . . face-to-face encounters.” Another tenet is *invisibility*. If a social media user abuses another, they fail to see their victims’ physical expressions meaning the aggressor is unaware of the harm being caused. Crandall and Eshleman (2003) note that

“discrimination is less likely in face-to-face situations . . . than in conditions in which the target is remote” (p. 421). Hylton (2013, online) adds, “Through the seeming privacy of the Internet, its individualistic communications process and the relative anonymity of the interactants, cyberspace becomes a ‘safe space’ for normally borderline and more abhorrent views.” In other words, social media mimics some of the characteristics of being backstage as users may feel hidden, protected, safe, empowered, and invisible. Arguably, the smart phone and tablet is an extension of the self and coupled with pass codes and thumb prints, these devices appear personal and deeply connected to us (Lynch, 2016). With the option of anonymity and an added sense of privacy and invisibility, users can post their innermost borderline or abhorrent thoughts in a perceived “safe space” behind *their* screen. While overt displays of racism were once saved for backstage spaces, the characteristics of social media enhances levels of disinhibition which has breathed life back into frontstage racist performances.

Like Daniels (2012) and Nakayama (2017), we too understand that whiteness influences online behaviour as it is the mechanism used to gain and maintain the dominant position. “Whiteness is not an ahistorical category, but a socially constructed one that accounts for the hegemonic practices that hold powerful currency to determine how people are treated, understood, and think about each other” (Brown, 2009, p. 204). Whiteness therefore structures and influences online discussion, opinion, access, and behaviour. The White racial frame, which is seared into Whites’ collective memories and histories, refers to the process in which Whites consciously and subconsciously make sense of everyday situations pertaining to racial matters (Feagin, 2013; Regan & Feagin, 2017). This whiteness is performed in online spaces and is employed to reject “outsiders” and abuse nontraditional fan identities (Farrington et al., 2014).

Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) discussion of the “White habitus” is useful to consider here. Cashmore and Cleland (2016) state that its existence “regulates the practice and condition of whiteness with regards to taste, perception, feelings and views on matters of race and racial inequality” (p. 29). In consequence, and in relation to football fandom, this encourages solidarity and connectedness amongst Whites and reinforces their behaviour, practices, and performances in digital environments (Ruddock, 2005). Discourses of whiteness then, online, contain “linguistic forms such as socially based metaphors, derogatory language, and territorial concepts that depersonalize and degrade Blacks among other groups” (Brown, 2009, p. 204). Feagin (2006) suggests that oppressors in a racist society have an inability to understand, empathize, or relate to the recurring pain encountered by the oppressed.

Nakayama (2017) argues that Whites are empowered in this digital environment because of the imbalance of language. He states that there is not a word for Whites that carries the same power of racist terms for other racial groups, particularly for African Americans. Whiteness can be used to protect the interests of fellow Whites while simultaneously marginalizing and excluding non-White groups. If overt

racism is a common theme on social media platforms, as well as YouTube and newspaper forums, then it symbolizes these spaces as “White-only.” This perceived online exclusivity encourages disinhibition which influences feelings of privacy, anonymity, and invisibility which has allowed expressions of backstage racism to be catapulted frontstage. Racism online, notably on Twitter, toward football players, teams, and supporters is on the rise (Bennett & Jönsson, 2017).

In contrast, recent statistics gathered by the Home Office (2014) do little more than confirm that football is successfully combating racism at live matches as only 0.01% of fans, which equates to one fan in every 16,800, was arrested for racial chanting during the 2013/2014 season. With this evidence, some may claim that football has entered a new “postracial” era in which racism is no longer considered the norm or embedded within fan cultures. It is this thinking that led FIFA to disband its antiracism taskforce in September 2016, claiming that the mission has been “completely fulfilled” (Bland, 2016).

Although progress has been made within the stadia, we suggest that overt racism in football has not yet been eradicated. While racist incidents at live matches are decreasing, racism toward players, clubs, and fellow fans on social media is increasing (Bennett & Jönsson, 2017). Perpetrators operating in the backstage, behind screens, are now able to abuse others in digital environments. This abuse is observed in the frontstage.

Method

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify the organisations and individuals most relevant to exploring how English football is responding to racism on social media. This approach “allows the researcher to home in on people or events which there are good grounds for believing will be critical for the research” (Denscombe, 2003, p. 16). The following institutions and organisations were identified as being key to understanding this subject:

- The Football Association (FA): The governing body of football in England, responsible for the governance of the sport, including providing guidelines and rules on social media.
- The Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA): An organisation with an aim of protecting the rights of professional players and which is regularly involved in providing training sessions and workshops for players.
- Kick It Out: English football’s main antidiscrimination charity and organisation with roles including the monitoring and reporting of social media abuse and providing social media education and training for clubs and players.
- Football Clubs: The organisations that directly employ and have a duty of care for professional footballers.

Semistructured interviews were conducted with four officials from Kick It Out. These people were selected as having direct involvement either with monitoring and responding to discrimination on social media or in providing player training in using social media. One interview was conducted with an official from the PFA—someone with responsibility for the training and education of footballers, including their use of social media. Within football clubs, safeguarding officers and media or communications managers were identified as the staff responsible for dealing with issues of player use of social media. One interview was conducted with the head of safeguarding for an EPL team—numerous other requests for interviews were either ignored or declined. An online survey was sent to all media officials at all EPL and English Football League clubs. We received seven responses, but these did include a team from each of the four divisions of the English professional football game. The FA failed to provide anyone to be interviewed despite numerous requests for them to do so. All interviewees were provided with guarantees of anonymity in an attempt to encourage people to talk freely and honestly about their experience and views of the subject.

It is acknowledged that the research discussed below is limited by problems in gaining access to interview subjects. The absence of a voice from the FA is a regrettable gap in the data, as is the relatively small number of interviewees from within the clubs themselves. However, the findings still have value and significance for a number of reasons. First, while there are gaps in the empirical work, the voices we hear from are significant people in positions of relevance to this topic (as discussed above). In fact, this study provides one of the first empirically based accounts of this important subject area and includes the testimony of people from within the game. While it does not pretend to tell the full story, it does begin to tell some important aspects of the story. Second, this is a case study of the response of English football to racism on social media and case studies are by nature limited in scope. However, the detail and focused nature of case studies can provide a valuable and necessary part of the wider picture. As Flyvberg (2006) has argued, “The advantage of large samples is breadth, whereas the problem is one of depth. For the case study, the situation is the reverse. Both approaches are necessary for a sound development of social science” (p. 241). This article should therefore be viewed as a building block toward a fuller understanding of the issues discussed. Third, the problems in gaining access to interviewees are, we argue, an important finding in itself as it points to a culture of denial and resistance to effectively tackling the problem. This is discussed in more detail in the Findings section.

Findings

Relationships and Communication

While gathering empirical data for this research, it became apparent that there was some confusion among organisations regarding the work key stakeholders are doing

to challenge social media racism in football. The PFA, Kick It Out, and professional clubs provide social media training for academy and first-team players, while the FA also delivers educational sessions. Kick It Out and the PFA are perhaps the most active with regard to social media training among players but the latter takes more of a legal approach, while Kick It Out focuses more on the dangers of social media and how to identify and report abuse. The PFA session is facilitated by a former journalist who, with consent of players, befriends them, investigates their social media accounts, and shows their findings to the players. A PFA official said, “It is quite a hard-hitting programme. Some of the things they have found have been quite frightening” (June 20, 2017). Working closely with League Football Education and Premier League Learning, the PFA delivers social media training sessions for the apprentices, aged 16–18 years old. Training is also offered to the under-23 squad and the first team. In the 2016/2017 season, the PFA delivered 18 social media training courses at Football League clubs. Conversely, Kick It Out sessions offer

tips on how to use social media. There’s also information on how it may be used against you. There’s tips around when you’re having conversation with someone and it starts to turn, try your best not to respond to it. There’s tips on like if you’re angry, count to ten before you actually do anything. (Kick It Out official, May 8, 2017)

Surprisingly, there is no unitary or compulsory educational session delivered to first-team players on social media as key stakeholders each deliver their own bespoke training sessions. Clubs, for example, more so in the EPL, tend to offer their own internal social media training. This inconsistency and lack of communication were apparent in the feedback from clubs, as they all offered different responses regarding the social media support and training their players receive. Club 1 said the FA has hosted talks; Club 2 commented that Kick It Out, the PFA, and the FA have delivered workshop sessions; Club 3 noted that their safeguarding and inclusion officer and head of education have supported players, while League Football Education and the PFA have delivered workshops; and Club 4 stated that their first team has received “no support or training” whatsoever (March 9, 2017). The clubs appeared ambivalent toward the FA and PFA, as some were unsure of their roles and responsibilities. On the other hand, some clubs suggested that Kick It Out needs to engage more with first-team squads, rather than academies. There was also some inconsistency over what players should do in the event of facing online abuse. Club 7 said that players must inform their player liaison officer or head of media, Club 6 stated that they should seek advice from their media staff, the PFA suggests that they should inform the head of equality and diversity or the head of player welfare at the PFA, and Kick It Out encourages players to contact them directly.

The FA and PFA deliver educational rehabilitation sessions for players and managers who have been found guilty of social media hate speech, while Kick It Out offers sessions for both fans and players. Kick It Out liaises closely with clubs’ communications department and provides advice on whether offenders should

receive education sessions or face sanctions. A Kick It Out official, who delivers rehabilitation sessions, said,

I've worked with a few players around this. One player said something and was sanctioned by the authorities, then I went to see him and he was distraught. He was a really nice lad and it really did affect him. He felt terrible because he didn't want to be associated with anything like that. He thought he wasn't using the word in the way that people thought he was. We talk to them about how they can become defined by what they put on social media. (May 8, 2017)

Bennett and Jönsson (2017) add that fans who attend rehabilitation courses tend to respond well and in one case, an offender went on to help organise a Kick It Out day at his local football club. Farrington et al. (2014) emphasise the importance of education for offenders rather than immediate punishments, for example, stadium bans, fines, or imprisonment. Because action is being taken against offenders, in some cases, it challenges the *asynchronous* nature of online spaces as perpetrators might not be able to escape the crime (Suler, 2004).

Despite limited resources, Kick It Out has perhaps made the biggest impact in challenging football-related social media abuse. The formation of the Social Media Expert Group in 2015 is a positive step forward, as it attempts to build relationships between key stakeholders inside and outside football (Bennett & Jönsson, 2017). For example, the expert group includes members of the police and representatives from Twitter and Facebook. The following comment illustrates how developing social media relationships has made a difference:

I have had some success as complaints have been made against some twitter users but their accounts haven't been suspended. Then, when I am informed, I am able to speak to my direct contact and he has then suspended the account. (Kick It Out official, May 5, 2017)

Despite only being a lobbying group, Kick It Out now has direct channels of communication to powerful organisations that can enact positive change.

However, somewhat astonishingly, although Kick It Out reports directly to the FA concerning incidents in the face-to-face world, such as racist chanting in a stadium, they "don't liaise with the FA with regards to social media" (Kick It Out official, May 5, 2017). Therefore, the FA, the governing body of football in England and thus the most powerful, appears unaware of the day-to-day problem of football-related social media abuse, and this may have added to their hesitancy and refusal in agreeing an interview for this research. Kick It Out states that social media abuse was the highest reported incident during the 2014/2015 season. That said, the fact that Kick It Out does not liaise with the FA with regard to social media indicates that the FA is ignorant of the problem, they do not take this issue as seriously as face-to-face incidents or they are not committed to challenging this growing problem. This

channel of communication needs opening as the FA must play a bigger role in challenging football-related online abuse. Yet, the FA's silence, lack of communication and collaboration in response to this growing issue, is far from surprising in the context of their mismanagement of recent high-profile cases involving discrimination. The treatment of Chelsea Ladies striker Eni Aluko, who was allegedly subjected to multiple racist remarks while representing the England national team, is a case in point. The way in which the FA investigated Aluko's claims has drawn widespread criticism.

It is essential that key stakeholders open their channels of communication and agree on a unified and collaborative approach to challenging football-related social media abuse. The FA, PFA, Kick It Out, and professional clubs all deliver training sessions for players. Surely, resources could be pooled, and a standard course created so that players are provided the same information and educational experience. In doing so, all players will receive the same training and, for example, be clear on their point of contact if they encounter online abuse or other issues.

Resources

Kick It Out is on the frontline of tackling discrimination in football, with an increasing focus on social media. It does this as a small charity with an annual income of £811,000 (Kick It Out Annual Report 2015/16). Just over £601,000 of this annual income come from contributions by the FA, Premier League, and PFA. To put this in perspective, the FA invested £125 million across football in 2016, while Premier League clubs generated revenues of more than £3.6 billion.

What this means in practice is that Kick It Out can afford to employ one reporting officer to monitor all social media posts, deal with reports of discrimination (of which there were 402 in 2015/2016), and liaise with police, social network sites, and clubs in following up these reports. A Kick It Out official said, "A Monday morning tends to be busy because we tend to get most complaints over the weekend fixtures. Could we do with more resources in terms of reporting? Of course, we could" (May 5, 2017).

If resources reflect the importance attached to an issue, this must lead to fundamental doubts about how seriously football's governing bodies really take the issue of protecting players from racism on social media. It should be noted that some individual clubs invest finances in dealing with social media and many Premier League clubs, for example, now employ experts in monitoring their players' social media feeds. However, this ad hoc approach cannot provide a strategic or comprehensive approach to the problem and only serves to increase inequalities in protection and safeguarding across the game. Such inconsistencies further expose the lack of resources with which an organisation such as Kick It Out must cope, as Bennett and Jönsson (2017) have acknowledged, "The lack of guidelines and consistency primarily makes dealing with online discrimination in football complex. This is especially challenging for Kick It Out who have limited resources to tackle this issue alone" (p. 212).

Access

One of the main problems facing those seeking to better understand and challenge football-related racism on social media is acquiring access at various levels of the game. The authors have experienced this firsthand. For example, in 2016, the authors approached the FA asking it to endorse a bid for The Union of European Football Associations research funding for a project exploring how players felt about social media training and how it could be made more effective. The FA declined to support the project because it was not “closely aligned” enough with its strategy going forward. At a club level, the authors have also been frustrated by clubs’ unwillingness to engage on this issue. An interesting finding from this research is that others, from within the game, find similar problems in gaining access to clubs and players. When Kick It Out attempted to conduct its own survey with footballers about their experiences of discrimination, it attempted to contact 4,000 players via their clubs—and received only 200 responses. One Kick It Out official said,

A lot of the clubs we sent it to, it never reached them. At football clubs there are gatekeepers and they decide what’s best for the players. So, a huge percentage of the players never got it. Many of the players that did get it didn’t read it, engage with it, and return it. (May 8, 2017)

Kick It Out is a small charity that has been met with some resistance and mistrust by some players within the game, and so perhaps this lack of response can be seen in this context. However, even the PFA—the body which represents the interests of footballers—are experiencing increasing problems in gaining access to their members on this issue. A PFA official said,

You have to go through representatives at each club. You’ve also got to get through the agents. So that’s two layers to get to the players. Even us at the PFA, we have to go through the player liaison officer, or the manager or the PFA delegate to say “look, can we have a meeting with the players”? You can’t just go to a player and say “can we come and talk to you”? There’s certain channels you’ve got to go through whereas in the past I could go down to Chelsea or Tottenham and go in and no problems at all, it’s totally changed. The players aren’t as accessible as they used to be. (June 20, 2017)

But perhaps the most striking finding of all is that even people from within clubs are being frustrated in attempts to support players about their use of social media because the clubs will not grant them the necessary access. The head of safeguarding at one Premier League club said,

Currently first-team players are almost considered untouchable and no support is in place for all kinds of difficulties they may face. I could deliver online training, but the main barrier is access to the players as this is seen as a detraction from their football activities. (July 3, 2017)

Reluctance to Report

While social media represents a beneficial communicative tool for athletes, it also presents challenges, given the ease with which fans attack them (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Farrington et al., 2014; Sanderson, 2011). In addition, people in the public eye are common targets for online abuse, and this is arguably the price one pays for engaging in media platforms for personal and commercial reasons. If players perceive social media abuse as inevitable, they are likely to refrain from reporting incidents. Other reasons include

It's too much hassle. They haven't got time. It's not a big deal. Players are a different breed because they've lived in the criticism business since they were eight or nine so they've developed a way of dealing with things which is a no fuss way. They don't want the spotlight on them, they don't want to make a big deal of things, so they just think "I wanna get on with the game and just put it to one side." (Kick It Out official, May 8, 2017)

Failing to report abuse stems from players being well versed in facing criticism, viewing it as a detraction from their primary aim of playing football, and as too much effort (especially if players are uneducated and unaware of reporting procedures), and there is a tendency among players to avoid playing the "race card." Because popular discourses of inclusion, belonging, equality, meritocracy, and "fairness" are so deeply embedded within sport, few challenge them. Players therefore adopt racial coping mechanisms which Kilvington (2016) summarises as resistance, denial, and acceptance. Players who are reluctant to speak out embrace the denial or downplaying position and thus "tolerate racism" (Ratna, 2013). In other words, because institutions are "so deeply racialized" (Feagin, 2006, p. 267), some victims ignore racism and "play the system" (Kilvington, 2016, p. 74).

Scott Sinclair has recently spoken out against the racial abuse he has faced on Twitter. He said, "In football we want to kick it out because there's no need for it. If any player goes through it *you have to keep your head down and keep going on* but you want it kicked out" (in Mullen, 2017, emphasis added). This testimony constitutes the acceptance position as Sinclair acknowledges that racism exists, yet must simply *keep going on*. Burdsey and Randhawa (2012) add that "professional football clubs continue to be viewed by many—symbolically—as 'white' (male) institutions" (p. 108). This alludes to Cohen's (1996) discussion of racial "no-go" areas whereby race becomes a marker of territory. The "true" locals, a synonym for whiteness, symbolically own the game, the ground, the match day experience, and online spaces (Kilvington, 2017). Outsiders, in turn, do not belong. Therefore, players such as Sinclair feel powerless and have few options but to downplay or accept racist incidents. This feeling is not uncommon as Browning and Sanderson (2012) critically examine student-athlete responses to online abuse, noting that players often ignore or delete critical comments. They highlight the story of a

U.S. college football player, Ja'Quay Williams, whose "abuse was so awful that he turned over his Twitter account to a friend, who subsequently censored fans" (Browning & Sanderson, 2012, p. 506). Similarly, former Manchester City defender Micah Richards quit Twitter after prolonged racist abuse (Townsend, 2012).

Browning and Sanderson (2012) do add that some athletes decide to overtly respond to online abuse. For example, former footballer turned television pundit, Stan Collymore, regularly "makes a habit of screen-shotting, re-tweeting and reporting racially offensive comments" and has become a role model by continually exposing users guilty of racism (Farrington et al., 2014, p. 131). In addition, Sanderson (2013) highlights the story of Boston Red Sox pitcher, Curt Schilling, who was criticised by members of the media in 2007 after posting material on his blog which attacked the news and journalism industry. During a game, a commentator, Gary Thorne, suggested that Schilling had faked an injury during the 2004 American League Championship Series. Fans overwhelmingly supported Schilling's use of his blog to chastise journalists and commentators. Fans sent him messages of support online reaffirming his identity as a heroic figure at the club. Fans agreed with his actions and argued that he had behaved in a respectful and dignified way.

Although Kick It Out has reported that EPL players, clubs, and fans encounter considerable online abuse, it is remarkable that six of the seven clubs we contacted stated that their players are "rarely" involved in any social media-related incidents. And, only two of the seven clubs stated that they had faced online abuse as a club with one club adding that they "try to ignore" it and only "involve the police if an individual is targeted" (March 3, 2017). It leads us to question whether players are speaking out about social media incidents to their club as one Kick It Out official said that "the biggest issue they [players] have is with social media abuse" (May 8, 2017). Clubs, it appears, seem unaware of the severity and regularity of this problem, while the FA, as noted previously, does not liaise with Kick It Out regarding social media abuse. In order to encourage players to challenge racism online, they must be empowered, supported, and fully understand reporting procedures:

We want a group of proactive not reactionary players. We want players with courage who can actually stand up for what they believe is right. We want players to talk out about it. Too many players these days are too frightened to talk publicly about what is going on for them. (Kick It Out official, May 8, 2017)

Encouragingly, Kick It Out suggests that self-policing among fans is on the rise. This refers to fans who read/view abuse and report it. This self-policing attempts to challenge the exclusivity, and whiteness, of football fans in cyberspace. Farrington et al. (2014) highlight the power of self-policing in frontstage spaces arguing that it demonstrates a "united front against racism" and "promotes the idea of inclusivity in cyberspace If racism is tackled collectively, hate speech should decrease and trolls will reconsider posting material that is deemed exclusionary" (p. 131) and abusive. This is summarised as follows:

We are seeing a lot more self-policing among fans. I get reports from fans saying “I was so shocked and appalled to see this that I just had to report it even though, you know, I may not be black, I may not be gay, or Jewish. But I can’t stand by and watch this.” We have got to encourage this among the fans. (Kick It Out official, May 5, 2017)

Conclusion

This article has highlighted a range of influencing factors that has exacerbated football-related social media racism. Social media provides a platform whereby football followers, as well as players, can publicly voice their true thoughts and opinions in a perceived safe, protected, and private space. Conversations, remarks, and expressions once held for backstage spaces are now transposed with frontstage spaces. In turn, this disinhibition influences and encourages users to post abuse online. This article has also presented and discussed evidence of systematic failings in football’s response to racism on social media. The structures, policies, and cultures of some of football’s key organisations and clubs have, at times, undermined attempts to tackle this racism and, at others, actively prevented it. These failings include

- poor coordination and clarity about the responsibilities of institutions, organisations, and clubs;
- a lack of effective collaboration between institutions, organisations, and clubs;
- a shortage of resources;
- a lack of clear guidelines, policies, and resources for clubs to follow and use;
- a culture of secrecy in the FA and clubs;
- a reluctance to provide access to first-team players and engage with those seeking to address this problem; and
- a reluctance among some clubs and players to properly acknowledge the severity of the problem.

Based on the above evidence, we suggest the FA needs to take a much more proactive and clear role in providing governance, guidance, and leadership on this issue. There should be a minimum mandatory level of social media training and education that all players receive, with clubs forced to provide access to first-team players on at least an annual basis. The advice on how players and clubs should respond to racist online abuse also needs to be clarified to ensure a more coordinated and effective response. The work of Kick It Out and others also needs to be properly resourced to meet the large and increasing volume of racist content directed at footballers and clubs. These resources need to be provided at a national level to ensure all clubs have access to useful support and resources, rather than just the wealthy few. Cultures can be slow and resistant to change, but properly resourced policies and processes are a useful starting point.

This article has provided a case study of English football's response to racism on social media and has aimed at providing the quality, depth, and focus that case studies can bring. Its results should be of interest to an international audience, given the global nature and fan base of English football. More importantly, its findings are of significance on a wider stage, given the nature of the problem under discussion. Social media organisations transcend national, legal boundaries and their users come from across the world. This article therefore should not be viewed as a national case study but as a case study of an international issue as it plays out in a particular context.

While limited to some extent by problems of gaining access to interviewees, this article has heard the voices of insiders from key institutions and football clubs across all levels of the English professional game. It therefore provides a useful foundation on which future research on this subject can be built. Researchers need to keep knocking on the doors of powerful institutions and organisations and asking important questions. Sometimes, the failure to answer such questions provides a telling response in itself. Furthermore, although often let down by football's institutions and misguidedly overprotected by their clubs, players should be at the heart of this future research. It would be worthwhile to hear their voices and thoughts about their experiences of racism on social media, how they perceive the support they receive, and how they would like this to be improved.


Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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