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Investigating Online Football Forums: A Critical Examination of Participants' Responses to Football Related Racism and Islamophobia.

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Abstract

This article investigates a series of football forums that discuss racism and Islamophobia. While racist abuse inside the stadiums has generally decreased annually within English professional football over the last two decades, racism on social media, including forums, has risen. This research used a critical sampling approach to identify relevant forums to explore fan reactions, responses and sentiments around the problem of racism and Islamophobia in football. A thematic analysis of 1,064 forum posts identified 19 themes which led to the construction of five overarching themes which are: i) racism has decreased; ii) denying and downplaying racism and Islamophobia; iii) racism has increased; iv) victims and perpetrators; and, v) the action that should be taken. Our analysis illustrates that many football fans subscribe to a narrow understanding of racism in that it is perceived as overt and visible. Very few forum participants offered a nuanced understanding of racism, meaning that institutional racism and how it can be challenged was overlooked. Other relevant findings include the common conflation between racism and Islamophobia, the denial of racism, and the belief that racism is only practised by social outsiders, allowing some fans to distance themselves from the issue. While overt racism and Islamophobia was infrequently observed across the forums, fans' tendency to downplay racism, and distance themselves from it, was noteworthy as this acts as a barrier to anti-racism in football.

Key words: racism, Islamophobia, football, forums, online, social media.

Introduction

When racism and Islamophobia on social media are the focus of illiberal behaviours from politicians, we should not be surprised to see them finding their way into the domain of football.¹ Tory candidate David Pulman's endorsement of blogposts complaining about the "destruction of the white race" claiming "non-white 'migrants' from Africa and the Middle East" were "flooding" Europe "disguised as so-called 'refugees'" is a relatively predictable indicator of social discourses likely to find their way into football.² The ongoing presence of racism and Islamophobia in football remains a problem for many related to the sport. For instance, Manchester United striker, Marcus Rashford, argues that social media make it too easy to abuse people racially. After he missed a penalty against Crystal Palace, Rashford announced that he received a wave of racist abuse.³ More recently, players including Romaine Sawyers, Anthony Martial, Axel Tuanzebe, Reece James and Yan Dhanda have all complained that they too have received a deluge of similarly distasteful posts. The growing volume of malicious content online has brought high-profile exposure to some cases where fans have been prosecuted for racist and/or Islamophobic tweets.

It is often argued that the Internet is the last race-neutral space though this sentiment has been consistently problematised in recent years.⁴ Matamoros-Fernandez's⁵ notion of platformed racism remains critical of how significant social media platforms contribute to sustaining the supremacy of Whiteness, by hosting communications from highly controversial sources. Doidge adds that active fan engagement on social media replicates their biases offline, thus debunking an imagined Swiss neutrality in cyberspace.⁶ In fact, participants incorporate the emotion of the stadium and rearticulate their interactions virtually. By extending their facilities and services to those who share racist, anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim viewpoints, social media

afford a platform to racism and thereby continue to be as much part of the problem as they are a significant part of the solution.

Hylton⁷ expresses that many online users feel less accountable to social norms and mores than when they are offline. Put simply, pseudonyms, avatars, and anonymity on social media platforms mask users' identity and authenticity. Suler suggests that anonymity affords users the “opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity”, which results in feeling “less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out”, while invisibility exacerbates racism as aggressors are physically removed from their victims.⁸ As Farrington et al. note, “if one cannot see others’ physical expressions, one is less immediately aware of their dislike or distaste of our actions”.⁹ Kilvington summarises that cyberspace “has provided a platform where it is easier, quicker, and cheaper to spread hate, leading to group polarisation and mobilisation”.¹⁰

This work focuses on seven online forums in which football fans responded and reacted to racial incidents in the game. It acknowledges that participant behaviour within forums differs from that observed on micro-blogging platforms, such as Twitter. Participants are less likely to post rapid responses within forums and are more likely to offer considered judgements. Therefore, forum posts tend to be longer and more nuanced than those found on certain social media sites. Forum 1 examined fan responses to a Kick It Out report, suggesting that homophobia and racism were increasing in English football. Forum 2 explored fan interpretations of racialised comments made by a football pundit. Forum 3, which grouped four closely related fora due to their smaller sample sizes, focused on participant reactions to Islamophobia in football. The final forum concerned fan responses to the overt racism England's black players encountered while playing Bulgaria in 2019. Overall, 1,064 posts

across the forums were analysed. Using qualitative thematic analysis, we offer a detailed snapshot of contemporary football fans' views and perceptions of racism and Islamophobia. This goes some way towards understanding how fans perceive race-related issues in the modern game and wider society.

Racism and Islamophobia in English Football

Twitchy dynamics frame the context to racism and Islamophobia online around English professional football. International shifts herald these dynamics to the right in the US, France, Germany, Brazil, Italy and the UK. The UK, particularly, has become embroiled in a protracted and turbulent exit from the European Union that has led to a generally more caustic and xenophobic delineating of identities and politics. This is supplemented by what Ciftci also documents the international anti-Muslim rhetoric and Islamophobia rife in the renowned footballing nations of the UK, Germany, Spain, Italy and France.¹¹ This rhetoric is exacerbated by high profile racial incidents in the UK of 40 politicians being found guilty of racist and Islamophobic posts in 2019.¹²

Like Hussain and Bagguley¹³ we recognise the distinction between racism and Islamophobia. However, although both concepts are distinct, they recognise their common conflation and inter-relationship and we shall examine this conflated distinction later in relation to one of the forums examined. Islamophobia is a shorthand for a confluence of narratives, acts and entities that express and propagate anxiety, fear, hostility and rejection towards Muslims. Tell MAMA describe anti-Muslim or Islamophobic incidents as: “Any malicious act aimed at Muslim groups or individuals, private property, or Islamic organisations, where the act has biased motivation or content, or that the victim was targeted due to their being (or perceived as) Muslim”.¹⁴

Coram and Hallinan argue in their critique of racist Australian AFL crowd behaviour that racism is ubiquitous, ordinary, making it hard to see; it is not a single entity and has multiple forms.¹⁵ Simply put, they argue that racism is behaviour that discriminates based on 'race' and that racism treats people differently. There are numerous examples of studies that illustrate the multifaceted dimensions of racism in football across Europe.¹⁶ Llopis-Goig¹⁷ likens the peer pressure on fans in the stadium to one that causes the atrophying of inhibitory mechanisms on moral control that acts as a platform for racism and xenophobia. He applies the concepts of impulsive and instrumental racism and xenophobia that he found in Spanish football. Impulsive, or casual, racism tends to emerge from a sense of frustration, insecurity, lack of knowledge or ignorance. Instrumental racism or xenophobia is aimed at intimidating opposing players and fans¹⁸ and is commonly observed online.¹⁹

Rzepnikowska²⁰ makes an important observation that racism targets go beyond biology and physiognomy to culture and ethnicity to what might be seen as more contemporary forms of racism such as 'new racism' or 'cultural racism'. Such newer forms build upon traditional biology-based racism. Hylton describes this dynamic as the 'racialisation of ethnicity' as ethnic and cultural identities become reduced to constructions of biology, intellect and physiognomy.²¹ Elsewhere, racism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia in sport have parallel and particular characteristics across geographical, historical and cultural contexts; for instance, the UK,²² Germany,²³ the Netherlands,²⁴ Italy,²⁵ and more broadly across Europe.²⁶

We should not be surprised to see racism and Islamophobia in football, especially if they are prevalent in a society's infrastructure.²⁷ The advent of a plethora of online platforms has meant that it has never been so effortless to communicate an opinion about a game, player, club or 'other' with so little effort. The conversations that football fans have every day, not just

matchdays, can be shared (and captured) on social media sites. Farrington *et al*²⁸ describe the Internet and its social media platforms as a mixed blessing, while Cleland²⁹ and Doidge³⁰ laud the Internet as the catalyst for more ‘active’ fans (those who engage in information exchanges with a range of others). However, Farrington *et al*³¹ and Cleland³² agree that social media are providing an “outlet for the mass publication and sharing of racist [and Islamophobic] views”³³ and that “limited attention has been paid to how race, racism and Islamophobia have been represented online”.³⁴ A survey of 2,500 football fans conducted by Cleland and Cashmore³⁵ found that over 80% stated they felt racism was ingrained in football. Referring to the work of Burdsey they emphasise that football is merely the window through which we view society at play. They use Burdsey's³⁶ term of *context* or *referent*. Football is the arena in which people's racial dispositions with interest in sport are revealed. Cleland and Cashmore³⁷ and Cleland³⁸ were able to evidence the internalised dispositions, perceptions and expressions toward racism. Hylton³⁹ did likewise with online posts about Tiger Woods as well as Farrington *et al*⁴⁰ who explored fan propensities toward online abuse.

Online and offline fans will opportunistically engage in racist or Islamophobic acts. Salha⁴¹ observed how Middlesbrough FC fans defended their own player – Ahmed Hossam ‘Mido’ – when he received Islamophobic abuse from Newcastle United fans but then ripped sections of the Holy Qur’an during a game in Birmingham. Similar contradictory behaviours routinely find their way online. For instance, Millward⁴² reports that fans feel comfortable sharing xenophobic discourses on message boards. At Liverpool and Oldham, he found that ‘non-national European’ players were more likely to be criticised while local players were the least likely to be criticised. Oldham fans were also more likely to criticise non-British European players with all British players (Black and White) least likely to be criticised. Hence prejudice may not relate solely to traditionally racialised biological traits but also include culturally

defined ethnic groups. Millward described this xenophobia as an inevitable strand of cultural racism, given the continued sense of perceived threat of loss or struggle that fans have, coupled with the need to scapegoat those external to the club, or if necessary, inside it. Echoing Holland's⁴³ earlier work, Doidge⁴⁴ carefully considers how such racialised ideologies can be situated in a hierarchy of abuse. Before analysing and discussing our empirical data which investigates racialised ideas in football across forums, we will first outline our research design, sample and associated ethical considerations.

Methodology

Critical case sampling was used as we selected forums discussing 'critical' incidents of contemporary football-related racism and Islamophobia (Table 1).

Table 1: Football Forums Examined

Forum	Forum Title	Number of posts analysed
1	<i>Is racism and homophobia increasing in football?</i>	355
2	<i>BBC Radio Derby: The Sports Scene show</i>	360
3a	<i>Salah abused by Hammers fan</i>	22
3b	<i>Mo Salah abuse</i>	30
3c	<i>Salah and Islamophobia</i>	18
3d	<i>West Ham fan's racist abuse of Salah</i>	137
4	<i>Bulgaria v England</i>	142

A total of 1,064 posts were examined. The analysis of a forum ceased when the thread closed, there was a natural break in the conversation, or saturation had been reached as codes were becoming repetitive. The topics covered across the forums are wide ranging, allowing us to gain a broader understanding of football followers' reactions to racism and Islamophobia in domestic and international contexts. Forum 1, for example, analysed a two week period in which several high-profile cases of spectator racism in English football occurred. The other forums, however, each centred on a particular event. Forum 2 investigated participants' reactions to racially charged comments made by football pundit Craig Ramage on BBC Radio Derby.⁴⁵ Forums 3a, 3b and 3c, all Liverpool FC fan forums, and Forum 3d, a Sunderland AFC forum, focused on the Islamophobic abuse of Mohamed Salah. Multiple forums on this topic were selected to increase the sample size. Forum 4 explored fans' unfolding responses to racist abuse by Bulgarian spectators of England's black players in October 2019.⁴⁶

The research used a qualitative content analysis approach which “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication” and pays particular “attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text”.⁴⁷ This approach incorporates four stages, as outlined by Bengtsson,⁴⁸ which began with *decontextualisation*. This first stage enables the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data as early codes and themes are inductive. Second, *recontextualisation* allows the researcher to check whether the codes correlate with the study’s overarching aims and objectives. The penultimate stage involves *categorisation*, and all categories are scrutinised and compared across all forums. The final stage, *compilation*, is reached when themes and categories have been finalised. A total of 19 categories were established across all forums, each containing multiple sub-categories. The compilation phase saw the construction of five overarching themes that spanned the forums, which will be discussed later.

It is important to point out that several ethical factors must be considered and mitigated because this research captures potentially sensitive online data. Thus, we aim to protect online users’ identities in the following ways: we have revised the post titles across the forums (see Table 1); we have provided blanket anonymity for online participants⁴⁹ to ensure that usernames remain hidden; and direct quotations from online participants have been paraphrased in such a way to maintain user meaning but hide user identity.

Analysis

The conversation topics covered in Forum 1 were the most varied because a two week period was analysed, longer than any of the other forums. Participants reacted to a series of high profile instances of racism in English professional football, whereas the other forums focused on a singular event. Forum 2 analysed a Derby County forum and focused on participant responses to Craig Ramage’s dismissal in February 2020. Ramage, a former professional footballer, who was a regular guest on BBC Radio Derby’s Sports Scene podcast, suggested on-air that Derby County’s black players needed to work harder and had an attitude problem. The Islamophobic abuse of Liverpool winger Mohamed Salah, when playing against West Ham in February 2019 was the third forum's focus. To increase the sample size, we analysed three different Liverpool forums and one Sunderland AFC forum. Forum 4 focused on the Bulgaria v England match in October 2019, whereby a group of Bulgarian fans continued to abuse England's black footballers throughout the match racially. This forum is different from the others as it contains 'liveness' as participants responded as the events unfolded. The nature

in which contemporary football fans consume live-matches is highlighted by McGillivray and McLaughlin⁵⁰ who note that “The media landscape has changed and websites, online content, and social media are acting as ‘second screens’ to the primary broadcast via television and are being used simultaneously by fans”. Therefore, this forum is useful in accessing football fans’ immediate responses to Bulgarian spectator racism.

The following analysis will explore five overarching themes which were consistent across all forums: i) racism has decreased; ii) denying and downplaying racism and Islamophobia; iii) racism has increased; iv) victims and perpetrators; and, v) the action that should be taken.

Racism has decreased

The phenomenon of racism in English football emerged as a subject of widespread concern during the 1970s as far-right groups “were regularly seen selling their newspapers and magazines outside football grounds ... [and] with the emergence of black players at all levels of football, phenomena such as racist chanting and abuse directed at them became common”.⁵¹ During this time, the predominantly working-class spectators used football to express their dissatisfaction at rising immigration and thus, black players were targeted on match days. The racist abuse aimed at black players throughout the 1970s and 1980s echoed the far-right political behaviours and ideologies. Unsurprisingly, football became synonymous with racism, juvenile crime and youth violence,⁵² though it was not until the 1993/4 season that the campaign ‘Let’s Kick Racism Out of Football’ was established by the Commission for Racial Equality and the Professional Footballers Association. Notably, in Forums 1 and 4, participants argued that racism in football belonged to a bygone era.

I believe racism has gone down massively, not only in football, but in general (Forum 1)

My goodness, I thought we left racism behind in the 1970s and 1980s (Forum 4)

These responses indicate that some fans believe that overt racism has significantly receded since the 1970s and 1980s. Bulgarian spectator racism towards England’s black contingent encouraged some fans to draw parallels between racism in Bulgarian football now and racism in English football during the 1980s.

Yesterday's horrific show of racism in Bulgaria reminded me of several of our football grounds from the 1980s. It was a small yet loud minority who completely soured the occasion and turned the entire match into a circus (Forum 4)

Comparing the two countries implies some level of moral high ground as English football is purported to be decades ahead of other nations in its anti-racism approach. For Robinson,⁵³ football's 'modernisation', and the increase in ticket prices since the inception of the English Premier League, has helped reduce racism on match days. Football fandom has changed as anti-racist legislation, such as the 1991 Football Offences Act, which made indecent or racist chanting illegal, have made incidents relatively uncommon rather than the norm. Kilvington argues that "the introduction of the English Premier League (EPL) in 1992" is significant as it "revolutionised the culture of football and football fandom".⁵⁴ Williams⁵⁵ adds that the EPL, compared to other nations' leagues, has become safer due to stadium changes and a greater security presence; it is now less tribal and has become more family orientated through the commercialisation of the game. Forum members added to these sentiments:

The demographic of fans going to live matches has drastically changed ... It's a much more welcoming, friendlier, kind environment now (Forum 1)

Discrimination isn't what it was previously, that's for sure. But, I wonder if it'd be more widespread if tickets were cheaper and easier to access to make it part of young lads' culture (Forum 1)

In sum, Cashmore and Cleland state, "British football does not witness the level of racism that affected the sport in the 1970s and 1980s".⁵⁶ Racism in British football is now considered an anomaly, practised by a small minority:

The morons that are responsible for these offences need to be sanctioned ... but I absolutely do object to one idiot doing some stupid thing, and then all football fans become tarred with the same brush (Forum 1)

The hate at football matches by some lone individuals is just bewildering ... there's some absolute scum around. In my view it's usually just one or two idiots but this results in everyone being tarnished as racist (Forum 3d)

Besides only 'one or two idiots' responsible for tarnishing English football's reputation as racism-free, there are a handful of clubs perceived as having racist supporters. Notably, London based football clubs are deemed problematic:

It's awful down South (Forum 3d)

It always seems to be the London clubs. That's Chelsea, West Ham and Tottenham supporters now who have been caught (Forum 3b)

West Ham seems to have this racist sub-culture of fans that act like pricks (Forum 3d)

I'm not saying all Chelsea supporters are racist, that's crazy, but there's a significantly higher number of racists at the club when compared with other clubs (Forum 1)

There is a consensus that individuals belong to a small number of clubs who are guilty of 'doing' racism in English football. For many football fans, this narrow and simplistic understanding of racism illustrates that it is perceived as an individualised act perpetrated by others. It fails to comprehend racism's deep-rooted, concealed and hidden nature as it manifests within the fabric of sporting institutions. The following section will therefore explore football fans' narrow conceptualisations of racism and how it is denied.

Denying and downplaying racism and Islamophobia

For some participants, abuse, regardless of the type, at football grounds is just part of the matchday experience:⁵⁷

There's always going to be bigots that exist within large groups of people. But, when it comes to football, these bigots will act on it because they want to abuse opposing players as best they can to put them off their game. It might be bald b*****d, short-arse, Cockney w*****r, or whatever. This example of racism has been completely blown out of proportion (Forum 1)

Abuse is abuse, racist or not! It's all the same. There's no level to it (Forum 1)

By homogenising all forms of abuse, treating them as the same, it downplays the indecencies of racism and exonerates those accused of engaging in such acts. For some, abuse, quite simply, is ingrained within football culture.⁵⁸ Jones⁵⁹ suggests that players, coaches and referees are all mocked within the stands due to aspects of their appearance, which the crowd may find unusual or distinctive. Long et al add that the "rationalisation of racial abuse [is] legitimised because other players are abused because they are short, fat, bald or old: 'That's how people express themselves when they get emotional'".⁶⁰ This way of thinking suggests that 'race', arguably the most powerful social construction ever invented; a myth that orders world populations and justifies genocide, hatred, and oppression has become no more significant than other identifiers such as hair type, weight or height. When we critically examine these social

demarcations and contextualise them historically and culturally, we cannot accept that being ginger-haired, bald, or a Cockney influences and determines one's life chances in the same way person's 'race' or ethnicity. Nonetheless, in response to Mohamed Salah being called a 'Muslim c**t' by a West Ham United fan, one forum user responded with:

I remember when we played Wimbledon at Selhurst Park back in the mid 90s ... they had this player who was a bit heavy. One of our fans got at him ... and completely nailed him every chance he got. 'Skin the fat lad' [and] 'miss the ball lardy' were a couple of the loud shouts I remember. The player acknowledged the fan and gave him the thumbs up; he laughed and applauded the fan at half time. It was given and taken in good humour (Forum 3d)

This participant implies that Islamophobia is on par with abusing a player for being a 'bit heavy' while other participants commented that the Salah incident is not racially motivated.

Muslim means that this incident is not racism. It should be condemned though and in truth, the fan shouting the abuse probably does actually have racist views, however labelling someone a 'f*****g religion' isn't racist (Forum 3d)

By rejecting this incident as non-racist, it denies it and fails to comprehend the complexity of racism and Islamophobia.⁶¹ Van Dijk⁶² suggests that symbolic racism encompasses hostility towards outgroups based on their ethnic, religious or racial symbols. Stephen, Ybarra and Morrison add that groups who are considered vastly different or "socially deviant" may elicit greater "symbolic threats".⁶³ In that construction we take Islamophobia to be an example of symbolic racism. Ratcliffe⁶⁴ states that following 9/11, "anyone who wore a turban, or simply 'looked Asian' was at risk of physical assault or verbal abuse" within Britain as community tensions heightened. For Johnson, Britain has become "a society increasingly divided by race and religion"⁶⁵ and in turn, Muslims within Britain are not only isolated, but seen as the 'enemy within'.⁶⁶

Although many black Muslim players have competed in the English Premier League, such as Paul Pogba, Yaya Toure, and Papis Cisse, none of them were reported to have faced Islamophobia. Salah's Egyptian compatriot, Mido, arguably encountered the most Islamophobic abuse in English football history.⁶⁷ Like Mido, Salah is from North Africa, has a lighter skin tone, and has a more 'conventional' Muslim appearance based on UK news media reports and Islam and Muslims' images across the last two decades.⁶⁸ The West Ham supporter employed the term 'Muslim' in a derogatory and symbolically racist way to position Salah as

belonging to an 'outgroup', a group consistently admonished and demonised by the Western press and politicians.⁶⁹ Suppose a hostile term precedes or follows the descriptor 'Muslim'. In that case, the victim is abused based on cultural racism, even though Islamophobia (Anti-Islam or Anti-Muslim) would be a more accurate categorisation of the hostility.

For some participants, such alleged incidents of racism were overblown as 'political correctness' has worked to restrict formerly *legitimate* and *acceptable* words and views:

It's just crazy that this incident has been talked about on the news when there are so many more serious issues in the world. Some cretin calling someone a name, that's not worth talking about (Forum 1)

Whatever next? "Stand up if you love xxx" will be considered offensive by disabled supporters (Forum 1)

Lots of reporting, like this, is pointless and a waste of time. (Forum 1)

Another participant commented that the UK is too sensitive which thus prevents freedom of speech:

I thought this was a country where free speech was still a thing ... I used to be on the left and canvassed for Labour during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Since then, I've more to the right, as I find it offensive that speaking the truth has now become offensive! (Forum 3d)

In sum, the contestation and resistance towards anti-racism stem from what are taken to be 'more serious' issues in the world. This, essentially, undermines those who challenge displays of racism while at the same time shedding light on those (White people) with the privilege not to care about their effects. Moreover, the analysis illustrates that participants' conceptualisation of racism is limited as racism is perceived as an individual act propagated against a person almost exclusively based on skin colour. Narrow and simplistic understandings of racism were therefore evident across all forums as only two participants in total noted that racism operates at a systemic level. Racism is, therefore, understood as a visible act that can be easily observed and condemned.

Racism has increased

Unlike those just discussed, some forum users speculated over the apparent increase of racism in football and its causal factors. Indeed, these participants are correct as reported cases of

racism have risen sharply in recent years. The Home Office⁷⁰ reported that hate crimes have more than doubled in England and Wales since 2013, with the majority being racially motivated, accounting for 76% of all offences. Kick It Out⁷¹ also reported that racism remains the most common form of discrimination in professional and grassroots football, constituting 65 percent of all reports. They also reported a 75 percent increase in faith-based discrimination, which includes Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The following forum users argue that Brexit is to blame:

Because of Brexit, and a general increase in the right wing, I believe that people are becoming more honest and open with their views again. They're scum! (Forum 1)

People absolutely keep a lid on it but when they're in the company of someone who supports their views it's like they're relieved they can finally let go and speak their mind. I definitely think that Brexit has emboldened people. (Forum 1)

Kilvington argues that when nations journey through periods of social and political unrest, "racism and xenophobia are rarely far behind. Brexit and the changing political landscape in the US and Europe have seen debates around race, ethnicity and national belonging" re-emerge.⁷² As the latter participant alludes, politically incorrect and culturally insensitive views are not only reappearing but are becoming part of *accepted* speech as Brexit, arguably a vehicle for xenophobia and anti-immigration rhetoric, has provided a vehicle for endorsement of outdated discourses. Brexit, to some extent, is emboldening some football spectators, giving them the confidence to espouse racial hatred. The process of emboldening, for some, is facilitated through the news media:

Newspapers and the wider media definitely fuel xenophobia. The amount of hysteria built up around Brexit ... was ludicrous and feral. (Forum 1)

Other forum users discussed the sport media's framing of black players and paid particular attention to Raheem Sterling:

I have to agree when it comes to Sterling's treatment from the newspapers - if that's not racism then I don't know what is (Forum 1)

Newspaper coverage of Brexit and Raheem Sterling were considered inflammatory and believed to have fuelled xenophobia and racism among some forum users. Moreover, the news media were branded 'hypocrites' alleged to exacerbate racism while simultaneously attempting to condemn it.

Although Kick It Out⁷³ recorded a rise in reports of racism in football, some forum users argue that this does not indicate that racism has risen. Some stated that:

Clearly, there is much, much more reporting now, but that doesn't mean there's more actual abuse, it just means that back in the day people didn't care about reporting it. (Forum 1)

More people are reporting things as opposed to there being a genuine rise in incidents. (Forum 1)

First, this attempts to downplay the problem of racism within English football. Second, it implies that spectators are reporting incidents more. Both surveillance (CCTV cameras) and *sousveillance* (fans recording fellow fans through smartphones) were highlighted among forum participants:

The footage they showed at half-time, which included close ups of their fans being racist, was conclusive. They can't deny it. Disgusting. (Forum 4)

They were captured on camera doing Nazi salutes. There is no chance they'll get away with it. (Forum 4)

In my opinion, the fact people have camera phones is helping us spot racist incidents. Social media also helps too. (Forum 3d)

Surveillance, inside and outside football, has become a dominant mode in operations of power and leads to a type of control whereby the society in question plays an active role in their self-governance and aids in identifying and challenging racism. Foucault states that "Panopticism is a form of power ... Organised around the norm, in terms of what [is] normal or not, correct or not, in terms of what one must do or not do".⁷⁴ In other words, through 'discipline-enforcing norms', we learn how to behave, how to live, and what is right and wrong. Therefore, CCTV cameras and matchday stewards observe football spectators, like the Panopticon, ensuring civil obedience. However, as the final participant points out, while 'sur'-veillance means to watch 'from above', 'sous'-veillance means to watch 'from below'.⁷⁵ Hence, *sousveillance* means that cameras are brought down to the human level. As a result, contemporary football fans with smartphones can capture and report incidents of racism quickly and safely from behind their technological devices. A total of 73 percent of reports were submitted to Kick It Out were via their app and website during the 2018-19 season, illustrating that technologically aided ways of reporting are perhaps helping to expose incidents rather than there being an actual increase

in incidents. That said, we argue that it is not one or the other, it is more a combination as racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic views appear to have risen, and are more likely to be publicly articulated online or in the offline world than in previous years.

Victims and perpetrators

The third of the key themes identified in the analysis highlighted discussion around victims and aggressors in forum users' reactions to racist and Islamophobic incidents. Across the forums, racial and faith-based abuse was largely condemned, and victims were met with sympathy. This sympathy was most visible in Forum 4 as participants judged the racist Bulgarian spectators as the enemy, guilty of attacking 'our' boys. Victims and perpetrators were clearly defined. However, while condemning the racist abuse, some participants were diminishing their own argument by reflecting xenophobic views:

It's laughable that the Bulgarians are doing chants like this. It's like they think they're superior to other nations - they are Bulgarians ffs! (Forum 4)

This contradiction, however, was challenged while other participants pointed out that racism is still embedded within English football. In contrast, Forum 1 which focused on domestic racism discussed, at length, the racist abuse that Raheem Sterling and Pierre Emerick-Aubamayang encountered during the 2018-19 season. Again, participants were quick to condemn the perpetrators and display sympathy for the victims. Yet, despite the perpetrator throwing a banana at Arsenal's Aubamayang, several participants defended the aggressor, noting that it may have been thrown out of frustration, in the heat of the moment, or without any awareness of the racist symbolism associated with the banana. This discussion tended to be associated with the idea of 'innocent until proven guilty' as some participants argued that suspected offenders should not be publicly shamed unless there is concrete evidence.

This theme resonates with the Craig Ramage affair after some participants suggested that further evidence should have been collected before BBC Radio Derby dismissed him. Although Ramage's sacking was welcomed by many, there was also some sympathy for him:

I don't believe Ramage is racist, but he did make a racist remark on public radio and that's a sackable offense. I am sorry that he lost his job. (Forum 2)

I don't think Craig Ramage is a racist. He didn't express himself the way he wanted to ... he began generalising because both young full backs had been dropped because they both made errors. Those full backs aren't being sacked for their mistakes, are they? I

don't think anyone on the radio should have been sacked ... A simple apology would have been fine. (Forum 2)

For some, Ramage's sacking was harsh, and an apology would have been enough. The latter comment is deeply problematic, as this participant suggests that Derby County's two defenders, who made costly errors in a previous match, were dropped rather than sacked for their mistakes, unlike Ramage. However, a footballing mistake and a racist remark are not equivalents, and this response reduces and downplays the severity of Ramage's behaviour.

Despite most participants suggesting that BBC Radio Derby was right to punish Ramage, they unanimously leapt to the defence of his co-presenter, Chris Coles. One participant commented:

I hope Coles doesn't face any sanctions for Ramage's comments. He's a top presenter and doesn't deserve any criticism. (Forum 2)

Another participant offered a series of excuses on behalf of Coles and even attempted to deflect the blame:

Leave Coles alone and stop jumping on his back for not challenging Ramage. Remember, journalists have time constraints and he might not have even heard the comment at the time. But, whoever edits the show should've spotted it. I reckon that the person who edits the audio and posted it online will be in trouble. (Forum 2)

Although Coles was interviewing Ramage, therefore privy to the comment and the broadcast, Coles is seemingly exonerated due to his popularity among Derby County spectators.

To some extent, then, Coles is implicitly framed as a potential victim of the story as his career may suffer because of Ramage's comments – guilty by association. Likewise, the emerging young Black player, Max Lowe, one of the players Ramage was referring to in his outburst, is also framed as a victim. For others, though, Lowe, who publicly criticised Ramage's comments on Instagram, was perceived as the aggressor:

Lowe has destroyed an up and coming sports journalists career because he didn't challenge the comment. Coles did nothing wrong and he probably didn't hear Ramage's silly quote anyway ... I feel so sorry for the young presenter. Max Lowe probably earns more in a week than Coles does in a year (Forum 2)

Here, Lowe, framed as a high-flying and wealthy professional footballer, becomes the aggressor and is guilty of potentially sabotaging a young journalists' career. These accusations were challenged, however:

Do not lay any blame at the door of Max Lowe. (Forum 2)

Why blame Max Lowe? Surely we should be saying: “Craig Ramage has trashed a young sports journalists career”. We must remember who the offenders and victims are in all of this? (Forum 2)

Like Lowe, Salah, also a victim of racial abuse, similarly became a target of forum abuse. Forum 3d, which comprised Sunderland AFC fans, contained a sinister and deeply worrying undercurrent. Some participants used this space to share their Islamophobic tendencies, labelling Islam as an 'evil' religion that is antithetical to 'western values'. And, in reply to: ‘Poor Mo Mo, he doesn’t deserve such abuse’, two participants commented:

Salah a better diver than Tom Daley. (Forum 3d)

He is a diving little s**t, that’s safe to say (Forum 3d)

Salah is therefore accused of ‘diving’ and ‘cheating’ which deflects from the incident in question and marks him as undeserving of sympathy or respect. Interestingly, in Forum 3a, the Liverpool fan, a Muslim himself, who filmed the abuse and uploaded the video to Twitter, was attacked for not challenging the West Ham fan at the time. For some, filming the video secretly and uploading it online was an act of cowardice as it was the fan’s duty and responsibility to protect Salah, a hero of Merseyside. Hence, the individual responsible for publicly highlighting the incident is abused for not doing more.

The analysis illustrates that victims are met with sympathy as well as further abuse; reporters of racist incidents are both applauded and criticised; and aggressors are condemned but also forgiven. The final theme reflects forum users’ views on how racism in football should be challenged.

The action that should be taken

Participants put forward a range of remedies to challenge racism and Islamophobia in football. It was suggested that a zero-tolerance approach should be enacted if club and national teams are found guilty of racism. One participant argued that offending teams “should be completely banished for two years” (Forum 4) while another noted that racist fans should be “banned from the game for life” (Forum 1). Others, while similarly condemnatory proposed a more constructive tack:

The most effective strategy to deal with these idiots is to provide them with an education, or let them speak directly to the type of people they abuse. (Forum 1)

So while some argued that banning orders should be enacted for racist spectators and the clubs which they support, others suggested educational rehabilitation. Across the forums, it was noted that key stakeholders such as UEFA and the FA should be playing a key role in challenging football-related racism and must start “enhancing their game” (Forum 1). In addition, the sport media were also alleged to be fuelling racism and xenophobia and participants urged that changes be made regarding the reporting of black footballers such as Raheem Sterling.

Within Forum 4, direct black resistance was viewed as the most effective way to combat racist abuse:

Best reply to racism is ... Sterling scoring a goal. (Forum 4)

That’s the best way to stop the Monkey chants. Two black players are on the scoresheet. Brilliant from Rashford and Sterling! (Forum 4)

However, these views arguably trivialise and minimise the impact of racism on players and simplify how to deal with such an endemic and complex problem.

Finally, some forum users offered a more laissez-faire approach to challenging racism:

Lessons to be learned, that’s for sure ... Time to come together at the club and move on. (Forum 2)

Here’s to the end of that small distraction then. Upwards and onwards from now. (Forum 2)

Does anybody really give a f**k about this so-called incident? Ramage makes a mildly non-PC comment and predictable fallout follows. All that needs to happen is Radio Derby making one brief statement and then we all move on. (Forum 2)

The browns and Muslims need to learn about the British stiff upper lip. They should just get on with the game. (Forum 3d)

For these participants, racism is considered a distraction from footballing matters and something that can be fixed with a ‘brief statement’. Or, as the last comment postulates, Islamophobia can be brushed off by activating the ‘British stiff upper lip’. These suggestions

of 'move on' trivialise the complexity of racism and demonstrate a lack of empathy and understanding around 'race', racialised experiences and micro-aggressions.

Concluding Comments

Our research has shown how many contemporary football fans operate with a limited understanding of racism as it is perceived as something visible, obvious and clear. Within these networks, there was a consensus that racism is the practice of a few 'lone wolves' and 'hooligans' rather than being an endemic part of football culture and wider society. However, forum participants were divided on whether racism and Islamophobia had decreased or increased in recent times. There appeared to be a general acknowledgement that racism, which was taken to be overt racism, was considerably worse in previous decades and is a much greater problem across Eastern Europe. In turn, this logic, therefore, symbiotically downplays the domestic racialised issues of the present. A minority of forum users expanded on this somewhat congratulatory logic by articulating the view that contemporary society has become too sensitive regarding 'race' and racism. As a result, some racist and Islamophobic abuse victims, such as Max Lowe and Mohamed Salah, were alleged to be fuelling racialised divisions by playing the 'race card'. Finally, the forums showed that there was a simplistic understanding of anti-racist action. While a small minority of participants raised sanctions and education, others believed that black and minoritised players' 'feet should do the talking'. In other words, Raheem Sterling and other black footballers should just continue scoring goals in order to silence and eradicate racism. If only it were that simple.

Our analysis illustrated that most forum participants refrained from engaging in racist and Islamophobic rhetoric as most users condemned racist incidents and behaviour. These results are pleasing to see when compared with other datasets exploring football-related racism and Islamophobia on social media.⁷⁶ It could be suggested that because forum participants are less likely to post in a reactionary manner in comparison with micro-blogging behaviours, the likelihood of hate-speech is reduced.⁷⁷ Moreover, those who do post abuse and breach the terms of service are likely to be banned as all the forums had appointed moderators. Of course, we understand that moderating forums with several thousand users is considerably easier than moderating Facebook with several billion users. It was encouraging to observe football fans, across multiple forums, engaging honestly and openly in an online discussion in response to racism and Islamophobia. Education can help increase empathy and understanding, while

wider football-related campaigns must be founded on recognising that racism and Islamophobia are deeper rooted than just overt expressions of abuse.

Since our analysis, the world has changed; the game of football has changed too, but to what extent? Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, professional footballers in the UK have been ‘taking the knee’ in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement aiming to challenge systemic racism and injustice. Our findings illustrated that fans were generally sympathetic to those experiencing racialised injustice in the game but had a narrow conceptualisation of racism. As the Black Lives Matter movement continues to grow and is endorsed by players in the English Premier League, it is to be hoped that this image, and its wider message, is embraced by contemporary football fans in acknowledgement that racism is a deeper problem than the acts of ‘a few lone wolves’.

Notes

¹ Murphy, 'Tory candidates suspended over racist and inflammatory posts'.

² Ibid.

³ Sky Sports, 'Manchester United striker Marcus Rashford suffers racist abuse on Twitter after Crystal Palace defeat'.

⁴ Farrington *et al.*, *Sport, Racism and Social Media*; Matamoros-Fernandez, 'Platformed racism: the mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube'; Hylton, *Contesting 'Race' and Sport: Shaming the colour line*.

⁵ Matamoros-Fernandez, 'Platformed racism: the mediation and circulation of an Australian race-based controversy on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube'.

⁶ Doidge, '"If you jump up and down, Balotelli dies"' : Racism and player abuse in Italian football'.

⁷ Hylton, *Contesting 'Race' and Sport: Shaming the colour line*.

⁸ Suler, 'The Online Disinhibition Effect', 322.

⁹ Farrington *et al.*, *Sport, Racism and Social Media*, 44.

¹⁰ Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate: Using Goffman's work to conceptualise the motivations for online hate', 264.

¹¹ Cifti, 'Islamophobia and Threat Perceptions: Explaining Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the West'.

¹² Murphy, 'Tory candidates suspended over racist and inflammatory posts'.

¹³ Hussain and Bagguley, 'Securitized citizens: Islamophobia, racism and the 7/7 London bombings'.

¹⁴ Tell MAMA, *Tell MAMA Annual report 2018: Normalising Hatred*, 7.

¹⁵ Coram and Hallinan, 'Critical race theory and the orthodoxy of race neutrality: examining the denigration of Adam Goodes'.

¹⁶ Bradbury *et al.*, *Representation and structural discrimination in football in Europe: The case of minorities and women - Summary report of key findings*; Ryan, 'The European Union and Fan Racism in European Soccer Stadiums: The time has come for action'; FRA, 'Racism, ethnic discrimination and exclusion of migrants and minorities in sport: A comparative overview of the situation in the European Union'; FIFA, *Diversity and Antidiscrimination in Football*.

¹⁷ Llopis-Goig, 'Racism and Xenophobia in Spanish Football: facts, reactions and policies'.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Farrington *et al.*, *Sport, Racism and Social Media* ; Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate: Using Goffman's work to conceptualise the motivations for online hate'; Kilvington and Price, 'Tackling Social Media Abuse? Critically Assessing English Football's Response to Online Racism'.

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- ²⁰ Rzepnikowska, 'Racism and xenophobia experienced by Polish migrants in the UK before and after the Brexit vote'.
- ²¹ Hylton, *'Race' and Sport: Critical Race Theory*, 11.
- ²² Bradbury and Kay, 'Racism, resistance and identity in local football in Leicestershire'; van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and Leeuw, 'Race, ethnicity, and content analysis of the sports media: a critical reflection'; Burdsey, 'Applying a CRT lens to sport in the UK: the case of professional football'; Bridgewater, 'How are football coaches appointed?'; Ratna, "'Who are ya?'" The national identities and belongings of British Asian football fans'; Lusted, 'Understanding the varied responses to calls for a "Rooney rule" in English football'.
- ²³ Kassimeris, 'Deutschland über Alles: discrimination in German football'.
- ²⁴ Muller, Van Zoonen and De Roode, 'Accidental Racists: Experiences and Contradictions of Racism in local Amsterdam Soccer Fan Culture'; van Sterkenburg, Knoppers and Leeuw, 'Race, ethnicity, and content analysis of the sports media: a critical reflection'.
- ²⁵ Kassimeris, 'Fascism, separatism and the ultras: discrimination in Italian football'; Doidge, "'If you jump up and down, Balotelli dies'": Racism and player abuse in Italian football'.
- ²⁶ Ryan, 'The European Union and Fan Racism in European Soccer Stadiums: The time has come for action'; FRA, *'Racism, ethnic discrimination and exclusion of migrants and minorities in sport: A comparative overview of the situation in the European Union'*; Bradbury, van Sterkenburg and Mignon, 'The glass ceiling in European football: Levels of representation of visible ethnic minorities and women in leadership positions, and the experiences of elite level ethnic minority coaches'.
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- ³⁴ Cleland, 'Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards: How Social Media Has Added a New Dimension to Racist Discourse in English Football', 417.
- ³⁵ Cleland and Cashmore, 'Football fans' views of racism in British football'.
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- ⁴⁵ Hyde, 'Ramage's "young black lads" mindset reflects football's inaction on racism'.
- ⁴⁶ Aarons, 'Boris Johnson calls on UEFA to take strong action against Bulgaria'.
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- ⁴⁸ Bengtsson, M. 'How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis'.
- ⁴⁹ See Dawson, 'Our anonymous online research participants are not always anonymous: Is this a problem?'
- ⁵⁰ McGillivray and McLaughlin, 'Transnational digital fandom: club media, place, and (networked) space', 33.
- ⁵¹ Back, Crabbe and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*, 21.
- ⁵² Frosdick and Marsh, *Football Hooliganism*.
- ⁵³ Robinson, 'Tackling the anxieties of the English: searching for the nation through football'.
- ⁵⁴ Kilvington, 'British Asians and Football: Exploring the Rise and Popularity of Punjabi and Bangla Fan Groups', 77.
- ⁵⁵ Williams. 'Protect me from what I want: Football fandom, celebrity cultures and new football in England'.
- ⁵⁶ Cleland and Cashmore, 'Football fans' views of racism in British football', 40.
- ⁵⁷ See Long, 'No racism here? A preliminary examination of sporting innocence'; Long and McNamee, 'On the Moral Economy of Racism and Racist Rationalisations in Sport'.

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- ⁶¹ Barker, *The New Racism*; Kilvington, *British Asians, Exclusion and the Football Industry*.
- ⁶² Van Dijk, *Elite Discourse and Racism*.
- ⁶³ Stephan, Ybarra and Morrison, 'Intergroup Threat Theory', 47.
- ⁶⁴ Ratcliffe, *Race, Ethnicity and Difference: Imagining the Inclusive Society*.
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- ⁶⁶ Allen, 'Islamophobia and its Consequences'.
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- ⁷⁶ Bennet and Jonsson, 'Kick it Out: Tackling online discrimination in football'; Kilvington and Price, 'Tackling Social Media Abuse? Critically Assessing English Football's Response to Online Racism'.
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