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'Racist behaviour is interfering with the game': exploring football fans' online responses to accusations of racism in football

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an incident of alleged fan racism involving Chelsea defender, Antonio Rüdiger. During a match against Tottenham Hotspur, in December 2019, Rüdiger claimed he heard racial abuse from Spurs fans. This incident sparked a broader national conversation regarding racism in sport, and wider society. This paper will draw on a comprehensive content analysis of Twitter comments to provide insights into fan reactions at the time of the incident. Was Rüdiger alleged to have played the 'race card'? Was Rüdiger believed to have used his 'race' to attempt to punish the Spurs' fans? Using thematic analysis, it will highlight patterns in fan responses to this case and attempt to illustrate football fans' attitudes towards 'race' and racism within English football. The paper will close by offering some final thoughts on how racism, and other forms of discrimination, can be both challenged inside the stadium and on social media.

Introduction

On 22 December 2019 the two London based English Premier League (EPL) clubs Chelsea and Tottenham Hotspur (from here on out Spurs) played each other at Spurs' home ground the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium. The match kicked-off at 4.30pm with Chelsea going into a 2–0 lead at half time. On the 60th minute Chelsea's Antonio Rüdiger tackles Spurs' Son Heung-Min. Son Heung-Min then kicks out at Rüdiger and after a consultation with the video assistant referee (VAR) is red carded and sent off. Following the short delay while the decision was being made on around the 65th minute Rüdiger makes a gesture to the referee suggesting that he heard racist monkey chanting emanating from the crowd. This led to an announcement over the ground's public address system saying 'racist behaviour is interfering with the game' and calling for the chants to stop. What followed in the aftermath was a continuation of the debates about racism and football in the sporting press and across social media. Spurs, along with the police, investigated the allegations reviewing CCTV images and footage, and using professional lip readers found no evidence of racist abuse. They did however state that:

> We fully support Antonio Rudiger with the action that he took - however there is no evidence to corroborate or contradict the allegation and as such neither ourselves nor the police are in a position to take any further action.[1]

The underlying merits of the allegations are not what is being investigated by this research. This paper is concerned with the reaction of fans on the social media platform Twitter to the allegations of racist abuse as a way of exploring the kinds of online conversations which happen around such incidents. These reactive messages provide valuable insights into the levels of engagement with the underlying issues and what fans feel should be done about it.

We will therefore begin by contextualizing overt racism in football, both online and offline. Considering that we will be analysing tweets, it is important that we critically discuss how the nature of online communication encourages feelings of disinhibition as this exacerbates online abuse. This will help us understand and frame the Twitter comments. Our methodology section outlines how the data was gathered and analysed. We thematically analysed a total of 8845 tweets across a nine day period relating to Rüdiger, identifying 27 codes. Our three overarching themes that we will discuss include the game itself and the immediate reactions to the incident, fan solidarity against racist abuse, and the trivialization and denial of racism.

Online/offline racism in football

English football possesses a history tarnished by hooliganism, violence and racism.[2] During the 1950s and 1960s, far-right groups such as the National Front would campaign and distribute leaflets outside football stadiums[3] as racist and fascist political parties attempted to mobilize, and reify, young working-class men's' racial fears, encouraging them to 'engage in racist behaviour in order to protect the "imagined community"'.[4] As more black and minoritised players prospered in the game, overt racism echoed the political ideologies of the far-right. Football stadiums throughout the 1970s and 1980s remained hostile spaces as overt racism was commonplace. Robinson[5] suggests that football became a societal mirror throughout the 1980s as some fans viewed black players with frustration and discontent as the UK grew ethnically diverse and economically unstable.

The implementation of the 1991 Football Offences Act, whereby indecent or racialist chanting was made illegal, constituted a turning point in the professional game.[6] Moreover, the EPL became safer due to stadium changes as well more family orientated through the commercialization of the game.[7] Football, and wider society, is perceived to be much more civilized in contemporary times as open prejudice in public spaces, such as sports stadiums, are believed to have decreased with the advancement of social and cultural norms as well as the implementation of sanctions.[8]

Despite these apparent improvements, however, we have arguably reached the summit and are now on a downward trajectory as overt racism, and other forms of discrimination in football, and wider society, is increasing.[9] The Home Office[10] recently reported a 47 percent increase in football related hate-crimes in England and Wales during the 2018–19 season. Of the 193 reports relating to hate-speech, 79 percent were racist, which is a 51 percent increase on the previous season. Moreover, reports of hate-speech have risen consecutively over the last seven seasons. During the 2019–20 season, players including Raheem Sterling, Pierre Emerick Aubamayang, Mohamed Salah and Son Heung-Min have encountered racist abuse by spectators within the stadium. But, players are now also targeted, and racially abused, on social media.[11] Kick It Out[12] reported that during the 2014–15 season, 134,400 discriminatory posts across social media platforms were directed at EPL players and clubs; which averages 16,800 discriminatory posts every month. During the 2019–20 season, Tammy Abraham, Paul Pogba and Marcus Rashford were all racially abused on Twitter after missing penalty kicks. But, with fans expelled from the stadiums and watching remotely for most of the 2020–21 campaign due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online racist abuse towards footballers has exploded. In January and February 2021 alone, Romaine Sawyers, Marcus Rashford, Axel Tuanzebe, Anthony Martial, Yan Dhanda, Eddie Nketiah, and Willian, to name but a few, all revealed that they had been sent racist messages on social media. It is perhaps unsurprising to learn that 43% of Premier League players involved in a PFA[13] study had

'experienced targeted and explicitly racist abuse on public Twitter'. Moreover, it is worth high-lighting the PFA study also illustrated that players who publicly call out racism, such as Rüdiger, are likely to see an influx in abuse following their challenge.

This speaks to a longer history around athlete activism whereby players who publicly challenge racism and inequality are often met with hostility. Farrington et al.[14] analysed the sport media's response to F1 Racing driver Lewis Hamilton's claim that he had been unfairly stopped by stewards at the Monaco F1 Grand Prix in 2011 because he was black. Despite this being a somewhat throw away comment made in frustration, Hamilton faced a backlash as his apparent privilege and affluent lifestyle was foregrounded to negate claims of racism. Hamilton was therefore accused of playing the 'race card' as his class was judged to override his blackness. Similarly, Back, Crabbe and Solomos[15] discuss the case of former Wales international footballer, Nathan Blake, who reported former Wales manager Bobby Gould, for making a racist slur. For speaking out, Blake found himself ostracized, he was considered too sensitive, a trouble maker, and never played for his country again. Eniola Aluko similarly never played for the England Women's team again after making allegations of racism and bullying against her former manager in 2016. Also in 2016, Colin Kaepernick opted to 'take the knee' in protest against institutionalized racism and criminal injustice within the US. This anti-racist symbol has become iconic and has reverberated throughout different sports across the globe. Kaepernick, akin to Raheem Sterling in English football, have used their platforms to highlight and challenge oppression. Unlike Sterling though, Kaepernick's sporting career ended when he took the knee as he has remained unsigned ever since. All the athletes in question, along with many others, have put their careers in jeopardy to protest racialized injustice.

This article therefore provides a case study approach of one athlete who publicly challenged racist chants inside the stadium and focuses on the alleged racist chants directed at Chelsea defender, Antonio Rüdiger. Drawing on Twitter to assess and analyse fan responses to Rüdiger's claims, we will investigate whether Rüdiger's allegations were met with support, sympathy and empathy, or further abuse. To further critically understand and contextualize the analysis though, we must first theoretically consider how communication, practice and behaviour differs between online and offline spaces.

Online/offline fan performances and disinhibition

The work of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman[16] allows us to critically make sense of fan behaviours inside the stadium and online. Goffman employed a dramaturgical metaphor to under-stand human communication and interaction. Put simply, we deliver different performances upon different stages. The frontstage is open, public and visible while the backstage is hidden, private and concealed. Our behaviour is then governed by rules, norms and customs as performances are situated in context. Appropriate or legitimate performances become expected as performers assume their accepted roles. When exiting the stage, whether it is a university lecture hall, a job interview or a football match, the performance is terminated as one transitions to the next stage. For Goffman, we assume different characters and possess multiple selves as we don't merely live, 'but act'.[17]

Guschwan[18] postulates that 'people become fans through performances – through the learned and behaviour actions that make one feel like a fan, and, crucially, allow others to recognise that fandom'. In regards to football fandom, abusing the opposition is perceived to be part of the game as this hostility attempts to provide your team with an advantage.[19] Kilvington[20] discusses the hyper-masculinity and aggression that exists within these spaces as the 'traditional' fan's performance is motivated by a sense of belonging and tribalism which heightens one's emotional response. But, although abusing players and rival fans is deemed acceptable by some, this behaviour would be considered wholly inappropriate in almost any setting outside of sport. Football's leading anti-discriminatory organization, Kick It Out released an advertisement in 2010 which attempted to challenge homophobic abuse; this advertisement is relevant here as it features a football fan on his commute to work and in the office environment. Throughout the short video, he verbally abuses

almost everyone he encounters and even starts a homophobic chant in an elevator. This shocking behaviour features the caption: 'this behaviour is unacceptable here', referring to the office environment. In the closing scene of the advert, the fan is featured in the stadium shouting homophobic abuse at players as another caption fades in, reading: 'so why should it be acceptable here?' This example perfectly illustrates the diseased nature of past and present fan cultures in sport. No one should face such hostility and abuse while simply doing their job but this is what footballers have to contend with in the stadium and online.

Although arrests for racist chanting inside the stadiums had generally decreased annually since the turn of the century,[21] these figures have spiked in recent years[22] while online racism directed at players, clubs and fans has drastically increased.[23] It is therefore imperative that we understand why online racism in football has risen, what motivates these expressions, and what communicative differences exist between online/offline spaces which influence abusive behaviour. Kilvington,[24] who draws on the work of Brown[25] and Suler,[26] outlines four key factors which encourages disinhibition and leads to online hate-speech. First, anonymity, or perceived anonymity, allows users to feel freed from the moral and psychological constraints that govern decorum in the offline world. Anonymity also equips those guilty of posting online racism and abuse with a feeling of security as they are more likely to escape punishment. Second, invisibility enables users to keep their eyes averted. Being physically, spatially and geographically removed from victims prevents aggressors from truly understanding the impact of their expressions of hate. As a result, aggressors are perhaps less likely to feel empathy which becomes a causal factor of espousing hate.[27] Third, some platforms such as Twitter encourage rapid responses. If one has less time to consider the post and its audience, then one is more likely to post something they may later regret. Fourth, some online users perceive the internet to be a 'make-believe' dimension or a game. In other words, their actions and expressions are legitimated because once their laptop closes or smart phone clicks to the 'black mirror' then one returns to the 'real world' whereby agreed customs, rules and norms resume.

The internet has undoubtedly changed our world in regards to human communication, interaction and behaviour and it has thus become an important site for academic research. Despite Goffman's[28] work being empirically informed in a pre-internet era, it is still relevant now and can, to some extent, be applied to online spaces to help us understand fan performances. Kilvington[29] has attempted to update Goffman's theoretical framework to critically understand social media practices, arguing that we now have virtual frontstages (public communication) and virtual backstages (private communication). Kilvington[30] suggests that 'all virtual communication, whether it is posted in a virtual frontstage or a virtual backstage, is created or composed within a space that simulates backstage feelings of privacy, safety and security'. For Merunkova and Slerka,[31] 'The line between private and public is blurred in the context of social media' because virtual frontstages often feel private and personalized despite being public. Arguably, as the communicative content is being composed, the output of the message, and its intended audience, is not being fully acknowledged. It is this 'backstage mimicry',[32] encouraged by the above factors of anonymity, invisibility, rapidity, and dissociative imagination which has exacerbated online racism and abuse in football. Online disinhibition thus enhances fans' feelings of courage and freedom[33] and blurs virtual frontstages and backstages. Racist, Islamophobic and xenophobic beliefs have not disappeared despite offline public expressions generally declining over the last few decades. Social media has offered us a window into the private thoughts and beliefs which were once reserved for backstage spaces.[34] Through online disinhibition, and 'backstage mimicry', these views have been catapulted centre stage for all to observe on virtual frontstages. The communicative differences between offline/online spaces have emboldened people to publicly air their views, which is symptomatic of the socio-political climate of the contemporary era.[35]

This section has therefore attempted to critically outline a useful theoretical framework to help contextualize the following analysis. Due to online disinhibition,[36] it could be argued that a critical examination of football fans' online responses to allegations of racism enables us to capture reactive,

honest or private beliefs regarding racism and anti-racism in the game, and wider society. Before our analysis, though, we will first discuss the methodological approaches that were adopted within this research.

Methodology

The data from Twitter was gathered using Twint, a Python library designed for open-source intelligence investigations. This method, adapted from one used Chorley and Mottershead,[37] allows researchers to use webscraping to query Twitter's web pages and gather information from the open web and not have to worry about historic limitations set by Twitter's API. A pilot investigation revealed fans were using a number of different naming conventions when talking about the player in question, as a result the search terms run through this method were: @ToniReudiger, Antonio Rudiger, Reudiger, Rüdiger, and Reüdiger. The tweets were gathered from the 17 December 2019 up to and including 26 December 2019. This includes the run up to, the day of the game itself, and the days following to fully capture the discussions taking place.

Once the tweets were scraped the data was cleaned to remove any duplicates. A small sample of 50 tweets from across the corpus was looked at in order to build up categories for coding. This coding was then applied to a further, different, 50 tweets to ensure that the categories did not overlap or to ensure that themes were not missed out. In total, there were 27 categories and tweets could be coded as more than one theme, a minimum of one up to a maximum of three. During the coding process any other tweets which were not relevant to the study were deleted and 8845 tweets were eventually coded.

Results and analysis

In the run up to the game, between 17 and 21 December, much of the Twitter chatter was around player and team form/praise/criticism. Tweets like the following exploring the Chelsea manager to play a particular team:

> Please lampard play @ToniRuediger n @fikayotomori_ at d heart of our defense. @reecejames_24 RB and @emersonpalmieri, @jorghino and @nglkante double 4 @Mateo_Kova23 10. @cpulisic_10 11 @willian-borges88 7 and @tammyabraham 9.dats my team tot vs Chelsea.[38]

The volume of tweets during this time period barely represents 1% of the total amount of tweets gathered. This all changed on the day of the game, 22nd (2760 or 31% of total tweets), and the 23rd the day after (4352 or 49% of total tweets). These two days represent the highest volume of tweets in the sample thus further illustrating the reactionary nature of Twitter. Onto the day of the match itself, Saturday 22 December, kick off commenced at 4:30 pm GMT. In the hour prior to the match mentions of Rüdiger mostly come from sport related accounts tweeting about the Chelsea team's line-up, and some from fans expressing support towards the team or towards individual players. The following represents a few of examples:

> Chelsea Lineup: Kepa Rüdiger Tomori Zouma Azpilicueta Alonso Kanté Kovacic Mount Willian Abraham. #TOTCHE[39]

> Make us @ChelseaFC proud Tonny♡[40]

> I strongly believe you guys can do it if there's believe and team work. #I stand with Chelsea FC#[41]

These types of tweets are fairly benign, lacking in too much opinion apart from team support, and are descriptive in nature. Again, it must be noted that Twitter, a micro-blogging platform, relies on immediacy and reactions. Therefore, pre-match, fans are exercising more considered and descriptive comments. More analysis and emotionality does not truly arrive until the live action begins.

The game itself

Once the match kicks off there is a running commentary of fans describing what is happening in the game and either praising or criticizing the teams or players:

> Must say I love Antonio Rudiger. 👏👏👏😍🙌[42]

> Alli being a dirty cunt, staying true to his nature. Pushing Ruediger into Kepa, trying to start a fight with Kova. Proper small club mentality (CescOffender, 2019)

This becomes much more amplified in the 60th minute with the aforementioned coming together between Spurs' Son Heung-Min and Chelsea's Antonio Rüdiger. Rüdiger is seen to foul Son to which Son retaliates by kicking out and is sent off via a VAR decision. There is criticism of both players, Son for the act, and Rüdiger for play acting, as well as praise for Rüdiger for 'getting' Son sent off:

> Son is a dirty player, broke André Gomes's leg and kicked Rüdiger in the belly.[43]

> Antonio Rudiger you fucking prick[44]

> Son sent off 😂😂😜 beautiful play acting by Rüdiger[45]

The analysis illustrates that both Rüdiger and Son are framed as victims and aggressors within this incident, which is perhaps unsurprising as many of the tweeters will be either Chelsea (pro Rüdiger) or Spurs (pro Son) supporters. This demonstrates the tribal nature of football fandom as fans simply 'rally behind' their team and often lack objectivity. It must be highlighted that there is one tweet in the sample that responds to this incident using a racial stereotype, but it is directed towards the Republic of Korea international Son:

> Lovely shithousery from Ruediger. Let's not forget that he gives off the person of a nice chap but Son eats a pre-match meal of Doggies and mash[46]

In Long's[47] work on racism denial in sport, he argues fans accept that abuse is part of the game and is exercised by the 'traditional' or 'true' fan. However, he adds that many fans struggle to understand the differences between general abuse, such as the criticism of a players' hair style, performance, or height, and acts of hate-speech, such as using racist or homophobic language. The above tweet provides a back handed compliment to Rüdiger for his 'lovely shithousery', referring to his apparent play acting, but then offers a culturally insensitive and racist remark based on the stereotype of South Koreans, like Son, eating dogs. St Louis[48] postulates that comments such as this can be understood through the lens of cultural racism as 'popular discourses on "race" ... are continually conducted through the frame of *ethnicity and culture* where difference is presented primarily in cultural and social terms'. Put simply, 'culture' has become a euphemism for 'race', and racism hides behind the veil of culture making it easier for aggressors to deny and escape punishment online and offline. The feeling of online disinhibition[49] facilitated through 'backstage mimicry'[50] goes some way in helping us understand how and why such comments are posted online.

On 65 minutes there was a break in play and Rüdiger gestured to the referee that he heard monkey chants coming from the home fans following the sending off. It is at this point in the timeline where the discussions on social media change. There is the reporting on the incident itself, in other words stating what had happened, which occurred in 645 tweets or 23% of all tweets on the 22nd. For example:

> Rüdiger complaining about racist chants there it looked like as well?[51]

Moreover, there was a slightly bigger reaction to come in terms of calls for more to be done to tackle racism (24%). The reactions range from a fairly straightforward condemnation to more complex suggestions on how to eradicate racism in football. These solutions cover everything from calls for the English FA and EPL to act, banning fans for life, and deducting clubs points:

I'm ashamed to be a @SpursOfficial fan today We should learn to losewith class the #Racist abuse towards @ToniRuediger us disgusting and completely unacceptable under any circumstances #WinWithClass #LoseWithClass #GetSomeClass[52]

Racist behavior today was just reported to have occurred towards Rüdiger.Let me put it simply . . . If you're guilty of this, or ever have been, you have my permission to leave earth permanently. We don't need you. We don't want you.[53]

An announcement from the Tottenham PA: "Racist behaviour among spectators is interfering with the game."That would seem to confirm what Antonio Rudiger was complaining about earlier.Utterly appalling from those responsible. Time The FA started docking points for these offences.[54]

This almost unified condemnation was satisfying to observe as fans chastised racist chanting in football, noting that it is not welcome in the game. The zero tolerance response offered by fans was often followed up with ideas and solutions about how to reprimand those guilty of the abuse. Some solutions, however, were somewhat extreme and arguably flippant.

Even if they are caught they will probably be ban for watching football for life, but I think henceforth anybody caught still being a racist in this age should be given a death penalty. No mercy no more.[55]

If I ever meet the person who made racist chants at my Rüdiger, I'm going to beat them to death with an inflatable banana. In fact, if I meet anyone who makes any racist chants, they will also get the same treatment. Despicable cunts.[56]

Here as well some users coalesced around certain hashtags such as #racism, #racist, #kickitout, #notoracism, and #noroomforracism to name but a few:

#SayNoToRacism[57]

Imagine cheering on rose, sissoko, ndombele but abusing Rüdiger. So pathetic. So disgusting. #kickitout #racism #Notoracism[58]

The unity and collective response against racist abuse in football was heartening, illustrating that the vast majority of fans participating within the Twitter sample are opposed to overt racism. This rejection of racism was further intensified and echoed following Rüdiger's post-match statement.

Rüdiger speaks out and fan solidarity

Later that evening Rüdiger took to Twitter to send the following thread highlighting issues around racism in football:

It is really sad to see racism again at a football match, but I think it's very important to talk about it in public. If not, it will be forgotten again in a couple of days (as always). (1/4)

I don't want to involve Tottenham as an entire club into this situation as I know that just a couple of idiots were the offenders. I got a lot of supportive messages on social media from Spurs fans as well in the last hours - thank you a lot for this. (2/4)

I really hope that the offenders will be found and punished soon, and in such a modern football ground like the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium with dozens of TV and security cameras, it must be possible to find and subsequently punish them. (3/4)

If not, then there must have been witnesses in the stadium who saw and heard the incident. It's just such a shame that racism still exists in 2019. When will this nonsense stop? (4/4)[59]

Around the time this was posted (11:07 pm GMT) there was a spike in the hour that followed which expressed support for Rüdiger from other Twitter users (198 tweets or 7% of that day's total). Such as:

I stand with you @ToniRuediger 👏👏👏👏👏👏👏👏👏 #SayNoToRacism.[60]

We are with you Antonio 🤍🤍🤍[61]

The strong support Rüdiger received on Twitter contradicts recent findings from The PFA[62] who reported that players who publicly challenge racism online and offline are met with an increased volume in racist abuse. The study highlighted that Wilfred Zaha and Raheem Sterling in particular encountered a backlash online for challenging racism. Yet, following Rüdiger's statement, the analysis demonstrates that the response was largely positive and supportive.

On the 23 December there is a similar pattern whether it is tweets talking about the incident (1344), praise for the player (1347), or calls for more to be done to tackle racism (1779). The Rüdiger incident provided an opportunity for users to discuss the wider societal context and impact of racism in the UK. Grime artist Stormzy's comments on 20 December about the UK being 'definitely' racist with Prime Minister Boris Johnson making it 'worse' was mentioned by many Twitter users in association with the Rüdiger case.[63] Stormzy's name came up in 54 tweets across the 22nd and 23rd (or in 1% of tweets on those days). He was mentioned as follows:

> Antonio essentially talking about what @stormzy is being blasted in the media for. Racism in the UK exists. It hurts and it's disgusting. Not every briton is about that though.[64]

> @stormzy was right . . . . 100% . . . Racist incident aimed at Antonio Rüdiger overshadows Tottenham vs. Chelsea.[65]

It must be noted, however, that Stormzy's comments were considered contentious and misguided by many social media users because he has forged a successful career in the music industry thus demonstrating the perceived meritocratic and colour-blind nature of contemporary 'post-racial' Britain. The polarized and divided nature of social media was apparent as #StormzyIsABellend and #IStandWithStormzy trended on Twitter. Although football fans navigating online platforms have often been labelled racist in recent times, it is noteworthy that the Twitter users within our sample alluded to Stormzy to further reinforce their belief that racism exists in football and wider society, rather than a way to reject, dismiss and deny Rüdiger's claims of racism. This links with Lopez-Gonzalez and Guerrero-Sole's[66] work who note that online users responding to sport related incidents and news stories on social media have a tendency to contextualize and locate such matters within broader socio-political debates.

By comparison, Stormzy's remarks around racism were further echoed during the games' coverage by ex-England and Manchester United player turned *Sky Sports* pundit Gary Neville who commented in the post-match discussion:

> We've just had a general election in this country where both main parties, and the leaders of both main parties, are accused, constantly over the last month, of fuelling racism and accepting racism within their parties. If it's accepted in the highest office in the country, we're not talking about it at a micro level, we are talking about it at . . . the highest office in the country.[67]

Gary Neville appeared in 237 tweets across the 22nd and 23rd (or 3% of tweets on those days). For example:

> Supporting Gary to be our next Prime Minister @GNev2. On a serious note well said Gary! [. . .][68]

> Gary Neville quite rightly applauded for speaking out on racism after Antonio Rüdiger incident. Empower the players to act if society keeps allowing this. The power of one and others will follow. All bystanders can choose to do something. [. . .][69]

The evoking of what Stormzy and Neville said with reference to the problems of racism in the UK demonstrate a higher level of discussion beyond this being 'football's problem'. It must be pointed out though that while Neville garnered widespread support for publicly challenging racism, Stormzy faced a backlash leading to a wave of online racism and further abuse.[70] In addition, and going against what is often perceived in football rivalries, there is a number of supporters from a variety of clubs, including Spurs, who expressed support for Rüdiger's statement, remorse and/or apologizing for what had happened to him (328 tweets or 5% of tweets on those days). For instance:

> Another Spurs supporter here. my family and I are mortified that this behavior came from our club. Those who took part in it have no business claiming to support Tottenham. In the States we'd give anything to watch in person and these idiots go & act like this. So sorry, Rudi.[71]

> Spurs fan here, I am apologising for what happened to you. There should be #noroomforracism.[72]

The fact that Spurs fans are using Twitter to publicly call out and condemn racist abuse is poignant and links with Munger's[73] research which found that perpetrators of online abuse are more likely to reconsider their beliefs and practices around online behaviour if they are criticized and sanctioned from a member of the in-group, particularly if the member is perceived to be influential (significant number of followers, or a verified or blue tick Twitter account). Therefore, a Spurs fan criticizing a fellow Spurs fan, meaning an in-group member condemning an in-group member, has the potential to activate positive change; this behaviour should be encouraged as racism should be collectively challenged – it is not the responsibility of the victim, it is the responsibility of all.

Downplaying racism and uses of racial language

There is however a small counter narrative which sought to downplay any potential racism. What this spawned was narratives around Rüdiger 'deserving it', downplaying the racism by saying it was boos or a misheard chant, criticizing Rüdiger for diving or play acting, and Rüdiger playing the 'race card'. This is captured in the following tweets:

> Until I see a video of someone being racist/making racist gestures @ToniRuedigercan shut the hell up. Nothing at all was racist in the corner at the time. He was absolutely spinning the booing … Wanker to play the racism card.[74]

> How can you trust @ToniRuediger? Azpilicueta said he didn't hear anything and he play acted with Son. Better not be lying.[75]

Overall, there were 362 tweets downplaying racism (4% of total) several of which were first-hand claims from people who said they were at the match. These tweets all came from the 22nd, the day of the game onwards, with high peaks during the match, and in response to Rüdiger's tweet thread in the evening. Again, other events had an impact on some of the comments. There are accusations made towards Rüdiger that he lied, or that there is a burden of proof before there is acceptance of a racist event happening. This was occasionally wrapped up in histrionics around Rüdiger's previous experiences of racial abuse once while playing for AS Roma against SS Lazio,[76] and for Chelsea in a Champions League game against his former club AS Roma.[77] The second of these incidents is particularly pertinent in that it involved an investigation into monkey chants, a case instigated by UEFA, but later dropped for a lack of evidence (ibid). These incidents were conflated and used to insinuate that Rüdiger had lied or 'cried wolf' previously about racism even though the Chelsea vs Roma investigation was instigated by UEFA not Rüdiger (ibid). Such as:

> No. You were booed for cheating. And mistook booing for monkey chants. Just like you did vs Roma. No-one was racist. And you know it.[78]

> Lied about monkey chants in 2017 v Roma and he's lied again. The chants was "cheat cheat cheat" and booed for diving.[79]

The amount of tweets which contained either racist language or connotations caught in our sample were rare. There were only 56 out of 8845 tweets in this category. These tweets, however, were not always being overtly racist, simply using racial epithets in an illustration or utilisedthe word 'Yid', which Spurs fans often use to describe themselves to symbolize in-group solidarity.[80] Overt racism came in the form of antisemitic abuse towards Spurs fans, or through the use of racial stereotypes, like the aforementioned Son example, racist memes, or the monkey head emoji.

🙈🙉🙊[81]

> But Tony you really deservd it … why did you act as if Son had put a bullet in your chest? You are a true monkey indeed[82]

Tottenham fans 🇮🇱🐵[83]

Based on Kick It Out's[84] findings from the 2014–15 season whereby 134,400 discriminatory posts were made on social media platforms within the context of the EPL, one would have expected the volume of racist tweets directed at Rüdiger to be considerably higher especially as this incident represented a 'trigger' for 'knee jerk' reactions. But, less than 5% of the sample downplayed racism and only 56 tweets in total used racist language and emojis. This arguably provides some solace and hope that overt racism is espoused by relatively few online users as Rüdiger was largely supported. Yet, it must be noted that Rüdiger is already framed, by some, as the victim as he alleges racist abuse in the stadium. However, if he was sent off for a dangerous tackle, missed a penalty kick, or scored an own goal, the reaction towards him online may have been very different. Moreover, it must be pointed out that our tweet sample was scraped retrospectively and it is possible that a number of racist and discriminatory tweets may have already been removed. Twitter[85] stated that since the beginning of the 2020–21 football season, over 11 million tweets were posted from people in the UK concerning the game. They add that during this time, 5000 tweets had been removed for breaching Twitter rules and almost 90% were removed proactively. This suggests that our sample may have originally contained an increased number of racist tweets. Conversely, in 2021, the PFA reported that 31 out of 56 racist and discriminatory tweets remained live on Twitter despite being reported to them the previous year while Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE) found that 66% of discriminatory tweets and 71% of the accounts involved in the discriminatory abuse of 157 footballers competing in the Champions League and Europa League remained on Twitter six months later.[86] Although small steps appear to be taking place in the fight against online hate, one could argue that Twitter and other social media platforms are not doing enough to challenge and remove online hate-speech. It is essential that overt racist abuse on Twitter, such as black players being called 'monkeys' or being sent racist emojis, has to stop. Twitter and social media giants must invest, commit resources to this issue, and be more proactive in this fight. However, the football community can also rally together and unite, showcasing that social media platforms like Twitter are inclusive rather than exclusive spaces.

Conclusion

Overall, what we found was that users were using Twitter as a broadcast medium for news, thoughts, and opinions on Spurs vs Chelsea. It is a prime example of how tweeting has become part of football culture regardless of how someone is consuming the match. This relates to the work of McGillivray and McLaughlin[87] who explore the ways in which contemporary football fans consume live-matches, stating 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'. In the past fans had to rely on radio phone-ins, but the difference is that this is live, more reactionary, and does not benefit from the presence of an editor. Football Twitter here is acting as an electronic stadium or pub where there is the performance of fandom – fans are now communicating on the virtual frontstage thanks to Twitter. In these spaces, football tribalism, toxicity and abuse is being performed. Fans are coming together in their publicly virtual displays of player criticisms. That said, these tribalism's are set aside when something is seen as serious enough to transcend sporting rivalries. In this case the outpouring of solidarity towards Rüdiger and calls for harsher punishments for those found to be perpetrators of racist abuse. When events like this happen, football is a true reflection of society and how politics is expressed through sport. Similar, outpourings were seen around Black Lives Matter and in response to the proposed Super League in April 2021. Furthermore, just like in a stadium there is a minority who still feel uninhibited enough to direct abuse at, or about certain players, teams or fellow fans. However, the

fact that the blatantly racist tweets still exist on Twitter further demonstrates that they, as a company, are still not doing enough to tackle online abuse. These acts of digital violence are rarer than anti-discriminatory sentiments, but it is this abuse which causes the most damage to those it is directed at.

Notes

1. Tottenham Hotspur, 'Club Statement'.
2. Kilvington, 'British Asians and Football'.
3. Fawbert, 'Wot no Asians?'
4. Cleland and Cashmore, 'Football fans' views of racism in British football'.
5. Robinson, 'Tackling the anxieties of the English'.
6. Back, Crabbe and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*.
7. Frosdick and Newton, 'The Nature and Extent of Football Hooliganism in England and Wales', and Williams,'Protect me from what I want'.
8. Bodenhausen, Todd and Richeson, 'Controlling prejudice and stereotyping'.
9. Kilvington, 'In Our Divided Brexit Britain' and 'Racist abuse at football games is increasing'.
10. Home Office, 'Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2018–19'.
11. Farrington et al., *Sport, Racism and Social Media*; Kilvington and Price, 'From backstage to frontstage' and 'Tackling Social Media Abuse?'; and PFA, 'Recruitment and Representation within Football'.
12. Kick It Out, 'Kick It Out unveils findings of research into football-related hate crime on social media'.
13. PFA, 'Recruitment and Representation within Football'.
14. Farrington et al, *Race, racism and sports journalism*.
15. Back, Crabbe and Solomos, *The Changing Face of Football*.
16. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
17. Ibid., 64.
18. Guschwan, 'New media: online fandom'
19. Long, 'No racism here?'
20. Kilvington, 'British Asians and Football'.
21. Home Office, 'Football-related arrests and football banning order statistics'.
22. Home Office, 'Hate Crime, England and Wales, 2018–19'.
23. Bennet and Jonsson, 'Klick it Out' and PFA, 'Recruitment and Representation within Football'.
24. Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate'.
25. Brown, 'What is so special about online (as compared to offline) hate-speech?'
26. Suler, 'The online disinhibition effect'.
27. Farrington et al., *Sport, Racism and Social Media*.
28. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.
29. Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate'.
30. Ibid., 266.
31. Merunkova and Slerka, 'Goffman's theory as a framework for analysis of self presentation on online social networks'.
32. Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate'.
33. Brown, 'What is so special about online (as compared to offline) hate-speech?'; Farrington et al., *Sport, Racism and Social Media*; Keum and Miller, 'Racism on the Internet'; Kilvington and Price, 'From backstage to frontstage' and 'Tackling Social Media Abuse?'; Suler, 'The online disinhibition effect'
34. Feagin and Picca, *Two-Faced Racism*; Hylton and Lawrence, 'For your ears only!'
35. Kilvington, '"Racist abuse at football games is increasing", Home Office says'.
36. See Kilvington and Price, 'From backstage to frontstage' and 'Tackling Social Media Abuse?'; Kilvington, 'The virtual stages of hate'; Suler, 'The online disinhibition effect'.
37. Chorley and Mottershead, 'Are You Talking to Me?'
38. clarkkent1987, tweet.
39. ozzyfire06_, 'Chelsea Lineup' [. . .]. Twitter, December 22, 2019, 3:35 pm., https://twitter.com/ozzyfire06_/status/1208773085597487104.
40. Itstugenfinest, 'Make us @ChelseaFC proud Tonny♡ ♡ ♡'. Twitter, December 17, 2019, 8:14 am., https://twitter.com/itstugenfinest/status/1206850028372942850.
41. CsoRalph, 'I strongly believe' [. . .]. Twitter, December 17, 2019, 4:49 pm., https://twitter.com/CsoRalph/status/1206979802751746048.
42. SolomziGwayi, 'Must say I love Antonio Rudiger' [. . .]. Twitter, December 22, 2019, 4:50 pm., https://twitter.com/SolomziGwayi/status/1208791933935652864.

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48. St. Louis, 'Sport and common-sense racial science'.

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52. DanAbacus1, 'I'm ashamed to be a @SpursOfficial fan' [...]. Twitter, December 22, 2019, 6:03 pm., https://twitter.com/DanAbacus1/status/1208810283344506880.

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