



# ONLINE ABUSE IN SPORT

**MAY 2025**

# INTRODUCTION

The following is a summary of academic research carried out under two ongoing research projects, 1. Tackling Online Hate in Football (TOHIF) and 2. FIA United Against Online Abuse (UAOA).

Following a description of the methodology, findings, outputs and impact of this work, we outline recommendations specific to stakeholders including athletes, fans, sporting and civil society organisations, media, journalists and researchers on this topic.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT



**TOHIF FOCUSES ON FOOTBALL...BECAUSE IT IS THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR SPORT, AND WHILE HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATION HAVE ALWAYS BEEN PROBLEMS IN FOOTBALL OFFLINE, THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA HAS SEEN THEM EXACERBATED AND COMPLICATED FURTHER.**

**Tackling Online Hate in Football (TOHIF) is a research project (2021-2025) funded by UK Research and Innovation-Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Irish Research Council under the 'UK-Ireland Collaboration in the Digital Humanities Research Grants Call'.**

The project is a collaboration between researchers from Dublin City University, University of Galway, Ulster University, Loughborough University, Sheffield Hallam University and Leeds-Beckett University. It focuses specifically on the framing, tracing and combating of online hate in football, an issue that has increased significantly in recent years, and has subsequently received growing media attention and pressure on sporting organisations to address (Kearns et al., 2023).

We focus on football in this project because it is the world's most popular sport, and while hate speech and discrimination have always been problems in football offline, the growth of social media has seen them exacerbated and complicated further. Consequently, policy makers, football governing bodies and grassroots anti-hate organisations are largely left playing catch-up with the rapidly shifting realm of online hate.

The second research project is funded by the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA) in their role as a leading sporting organisation in the United Against Online Abuse coalition. This project focuses on a wider number of sports and broadens the focus from online 'hate' to online 'abuse'.

# DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT

Both projects address the shortfall in academic knowledge and highlights the shortfall in practical and differentiated policy responses concerning the issue of online hate and abuse in two ways:

## SOCIAL MEDIA DATA ANALYSIS AND MACHINE LEARNING

- Review of research on machine learning models to support the classification of offensive communications and online hate in sport
- Development of large-scale longitudinal empirical datasets:
  - Analysis of all tweets concerning the European Football Championships (both men and women) from 2008-2021, The African Cup of Nations 2021, Copa America, 2021 and 2022 Qatar World Cup.
  - Major international tournaments are particularly significant as sites where national, ethnic and gender identities are highlighted, debated and re-shaped across print, broadcast, and digital media.
  - The European Championships alone contain almost 50 million tweets that comprise billions of data points. Each tweet contains up to 58 data points (e.g. number of likes/retweets, timestamps, profile details).
- Development of tools and techniques to identify and classify online abuse:
  - Large Language models trained on the intricacies of football language to avoid false positives.
  - Identified 'abusive' tweets were subject to exploratory data analysis and a combination of descriptive, user, content, and network analytics to identify events or phenomena of interest or address specific research questions raised by other parts of desk and primary research.
  - Custom vocabularies, annotated datasets, preprocessing recommendations, and models for each class will be made available as open data, to the extent permitted under existing licenses, and through publications in due course.

163

professional footballers based in England interviewed

2,000

football fans across Ireland and the UK surveyed

37

sports journalists, coaches, agents and more interviewed

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

- 163 professional footballers based in England interviewed one-on-one or as part of focus groups representing clubs from the Premier League, Championship, League One, League Two, Women's Super League (WSL) and Women's Championship. Given the relative inaccessibility of professional athletes – footballers particularly – this sample is unprecedented:
- 21 interviews with sports journalists.
- 7 interviews with professional managers/coaches
- 6 interviews with player care and safeguarding professionals
- 3 interviews with football agents
- Over 2,000 football fans across the United Kingdom and Ireland and surveyed about their experience of online abuse.
- Netnographic analysis of Premier League football club fan forums.
- Large number of civil and sporting organisations actively involved in supporting the research (e.g. Kick it Out, Show Racism the Red Card, Football Association Wales, Football Supporters Association, Sporting Equals).
- A Delphi Study was conducted with 35 academic, industry and legal experts from around the world to design an online safety audit framework for sports organisations.
- Workshops
  - 3 workshops with 65 members of Sky Sports staff
  - 2 workshops (in collaboration with Kick it Out) with 45 English Football League Equality, Diversity and Inclusion/safeguarding leads
  - Online Harms in football workshop for students at University Campus of Football Business in collaboration with Football Against Racism in Europe (FARE).
  - Workshop with a leading WSL club (18 professional players) aimed at challenging professional club cultures of normalising and ignoring online hate/abuse.

65

members of Sky Sports staff  
attended our workshop

7

workshops held for media, EDI  
and safeguarding leads, students  
and a leading WSL club

35

experts took part in Delphi study to  
design online safety audit framework



**ATHLETES WHO CHALLENGE DISCRIMINATION AND USE THEIR VOICE AND PLATFORMS TO INFLUENCE POSITIVE CHANGE ARE MORE LIKELY TO RECEIVE ONLINE HATE AND ABUSE.**

# KEY FINDINGS

Data analysis across all work streams is still ongoing but we can present the following:



**UP TO 3.5%**

Desk and primary research conducted by DCU, as part of the UAOA research commissioned by the FIA, suggests that online abuse and offensive language typically account for approximately 0.5% to 1% of social media posts related to major sports events. However, this percentage varies depending on the sport, platform, and event, with results as low as 0.01% and as high as 3.5%.



## ATHLETES

Athletes who challenge discrimination and use their voice and platforms to influence positive change are more likely to receive online hate and abuse in return.

Athletes have internalised the abuse they receive as inevitable and part of their job. They only take it seriously when it spreads to family and their wider social network.

Athletes do not feel comfortable or empowered to report abuse or discuss how it has impacted them with managers and wider leadership in sporting organisations. This is explained by a lack of faith that anything can be done and not wanting to look weak, potentially impacting their standing in what are hyper competitive and masculine environments.

Although athletes receive training on safe use of social media, there is minimal evidence of support for athletes coping with abuse.

Athletes are facing various other 'harms', ranging from online harassment, bribery, death threats (aimed at both them and their loved ones), and instances of mis/disinformation and fake news which may have professional and personal implications.



## BUT NOT JUST ATHLETES

It is not only athletes that are subject to abuse. There is significant evidence that coaches, commentators, referees, journalists and fans receive consistent abuse.



## JOURNALISTS

Female journalists receive abuse disproportionately to their male colleagues.

Journalists alter their writing style and reporting techniques in anticipation of abuse. They sometimes refrain from reporting on certain topics and self-censor for fear of abuse. This has a significant impact on the profession.

The abuse has a notable impact on the mental health of journalists and friends and family of journalists.

There is little in the way of dedicated training or support structures.



**FEMALE  
JOURNALISTS  
RECEIVE  
ABUSE DIS-  
PROPORTIONATELY  
TO THEIR MALE  
COLLEAGUES...  
THE ABUSE HAS A  
NOTABLE IMPACT  
ON MENTAL  
HEALTH.**



## FANS

73% of fans have received online abuse from other football fans.

83% of fans who have received abuse felt it impacted negatively on their mental wellbeing.

Almost half of fans that received abuse did not report it.

16% of fans admitted that watching football has led to engaging in online abuse against others.

72% of members of supporters' groups said their group had acted on the issue, but 77% of all fans said they had not been engaged by the football authorities in efforts to address online abuse in football.

Increasing tribalism due to several factors (e.g. social media algorithms) have fostered a toxic environment for fans. Such toxicity can be leveraged by sporting actors to delegitimise sporting organisations, officials, media and other stakeholders that are viewed as opposition.

Sport, in particular football, is used as a context in which to coordinate the spread of far-right conspiracy theories.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## ADVANCED

Research needs to be advanced on different classes of hate speech and online platforms (e.g. TikTok). Researchers require access for both small and very large online platforms.

---

## TARGETED INTERVENTION

Policymakers, sporting organisations and advocacy groups need to focus on targeted interventions and more efficient counter-messaging and awareness campaigns.

---

## TACKLING AMBIGUITY OF LANGUAGE

Challenges persist regarding the ambiguity of language, platform-specific norms, and the need to differentiate between offensive speech and legally defined hate speech. To tackle these issues:

- Develop sports-specific lexicons and enhance datasets to incorporate multilingual, multimodal, and domain-sensitive content.
  - Prioritise research aimed at improving ensemble methods, ensuring consistent API behaviour, and promoting collaboration with sports organisations, platforms, and service providers to secure access to anonymised flagged and moderated data for academic study. This is available under the Vetted Researcher Programme in the Digital Services Act.
- 

## SAFEGUARDING POLICIES

Clear safeguarding policies required.

Sporting federations and governing bodies need to provide standardised and open-access educational resources to support clubs and organisations at all levels, including amateur level, to challenge the normalisation of abuse and hate. Such template policies and educational resources must consider impact on all relevant stakeholders, not just athletes.

---

## THE FANS

While many organised, independent supporters' groups have acted against online abuse in football, the potential of fans to help fight this problem remains notably untapped by the game's official authorities. We believe fans lay at the heart of the cultural problem of online abuse/hate and should be utilised in fighting against it in a more strategic fashion.

## STEP-UP

The research team developed specific policies and practices for media organisations to fight against online harms/abuse. The STEP-UP model is summarised below:



**Support:** Provide support to targets/recipients, from emotional support to dedicated counselling and legal advice where needed.

**Training:** Training should also involve and address how to recognise and report abuse.

**Education:** Education, and regular training across the workforce, should focus on online harms/abuse – on its forms, impacts, and why it is unacceptable (it should not be normalised).

**Policy:** Develop and communicate clear policies against online harms/abuse. These should define what constitutes online abuse and harmful activity, the consequences for perpetrators, and the support available for targets/recipients.

**Unite:** Collaborate with partners who can help support efforts to challenge online harms/abuse. Partner with social media platforms and online forums to address harms/abuse. This can help in quickly removing abusive content and tracking perpetrators. Partner with dedicated and committed experts who can provide external counselling services to protect staff members' mental health and wellbeing. Partner with academic researchers who can provide the most contemporary findings and offer data-informed solutions to key challenges

**Positive Culture:** Work towards creating a positive, respectful online culture within the sport media industry. Encourage positive communication and discourage any form of online harms - this means zero-tolerance. This extends to releasing statements which openly counter incidents or movements which have exacerbated online harms/abuse towards the workforce.



# OUTPUTS AND IMPACTS

## PUBLICATIONS

6 peer-reviewed journal publications across sociology, media and communications and sports journals.

2 book chapters

2 conference paper publications in computer science

3 commissioned reports (1 x Sky Sports, 2 x FIA)

12 online articles/blogs (e.g. The Conversation, LSE, RTE).

## MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Guest on several prominent podcasts/radio shows (e.g. BBC World Service, Second Captains)

Featured in national and international newspapers

Produced 8-episode podcast series on Tackling Online Hate in Football

## PEER-REVIEW

32 peer-reviewed conference presentations

## WEBINARS

8 webinars delivered by academic and industry practitioners on subject of online abuse in sport

## NEW COURSE

Public oriented FutureLearn Course on Online Abuse in Sport developed

# TACKLING ONLINE HATE IN FOOTBALL

## ONLINE ABUSE IN SPORT

GARY SINCLAIR (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY), JACK BLACK (SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY), MARK DOIDGE (LOUGHBOROUGH UNIVERSITY), THOMAS FLETCHER (LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY), COLM KEARNS (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY), DANIEL KILVINGTON (LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY), KATIE LISTON (ULSTER UNIVERSITY), THEO LYNN (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY), PIERANGELO ROSATI (NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF GALWAY), GUTO L. SANTOS (DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY)

MAY 2025

 TOHIFNOW

## *Online Abuse in Sport*

SINCLAIR, Gary, BLACK, Jack <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-5083>>, DOIDGE, Mark, FLETCHER, Thomas, KEARNS, Colm, KILVINGTON, Daniel, LISTON, Katie, LYNN, Theo, ROSATI, Pierangelo and SANTOS, Guto

Available from the Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/35753/>

## **Copyright and re-use policy**

Please visit <https://shura.shu.ac.uk/35753/> and <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html> for further details about copyright and re-use permissions.