How do Football Fans Experience Online Abuse? Impacts, Responses and Implications

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How do football fans experience online abuse? Impacts, responses and implications

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ABSTRACT

Online abuse, especially in the context of sport and leisure, is a growing and required area of study. Athletes, journalists and officials have been notably subject to various forms of abuse on major social media platforms, and this, in turn, has prompted responses from scholars, media organisations and sports authorities. One stakeholder who's experience of online abuse has gone largely unexamined, however, is fans. In existing research, fans have generally been conceived of as perpetrators of abuse. The potential for them to be victims of abuse or, indeed, active participants in the struggle against it, has been overlooked, leaving the risk that fans may be regarded by authorities as a problem to be managed. To address this dearth, we have conducted a survey of over 2000 football (soccer) fans, gathering insights on their opinions and experience of online abuse in the sport they follow. Our findings reveal not only the impact, specifically on well-being, and regularity of online abuse suffered by fans, but also point towards what triggers abuse against them and how some of them end up perpetrating abuse. In doing so, this paper asserts the significance of leisure as a social milieu for understanding online abuse.

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Introduction

UEFA Euro 2020 climaxed with Italy defeating England in a penalty shoot-out. Though the tournament represented the England men's team's best performance in decades, which saw them celebrated throughout the country, the three black players who missed the crucial penalties were subject to a barrage of racist abuse across social media (Black et al., 2023). This prompted much discussion across popular media (see Liew, 2021) as well as promises of action from both football administration and the U.K. government

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(Gov.uk, 2021; Lee, 2021). Indeed, it can be seen as something of a watershed moment in awakening authorities to the gravity of the issue of online abuse in football (Smith, 2023) – notably leading to football authorities being asked to provide input into the UK government's Online Safety Bill and to the FA instituting sanctions for repeat offenders of online abuse. It also spurred an upsurge of research into the topic (Sinclair, Lynn, et al., 2024). In the years since, action from authorities – both within and beyond the sport – has largely focused on large-scale events, such as the Euro 2020 case (i.e. instances in which high-profile players were subject to online abuse [Sinclair, Kearns, et al., 2024]).

However, there has been little attention concerning the position of the fans in the context of online abuse. Their role in the research has been that of presumed perpetrator, without much empirical investigation of that very role (Kearns et al., 2023). We stress 'presumed' here. The high profile instances which have been the subject of much of the media coverage of this issue typically involve a multitude of perpetrators engaging in online attacks against a single (or small number of) target. It is difficult to discern which of these perpetrators are actually football fans, but the presumption that all, or the majority, are, is a feature across a notable amount of media coverage of such cases. The Literature Review section of this paper expands on the complexities of defining football fandom. In any case, the tendency to focus on fans solely as the perpetrators of online abuse echoes the reductive way football fans have been historically framed by authorities (both sporting and government) and media, specifically regarding the problem of hooliganism (see Gow & Rookwood, 2008). There is clearly more to the role of fans regarding online abuse than that of perpetrator. In this paper, we work to expand the conception of fans and the issue of online abuse in football, exploring how fans themselves are often targets of abuse, as well as the impacts of this abuse on them and how they respond to it.

Despite a long history of critical research in equality, diversity and inclusion, as well as social justice, to date, there has been very limited research into online abuse across leisure studies. The notable exceptions are Manoli et al.'s (2024) exploration of deviant leisure and football, with a specific focus on what the authors call 'virtual football violence'; Bond et al.'s (2025) social network analysis of responses to the English Premier League's position on Black Lives Matter and the White Lives Matter response; and, Cao and Matsuoka's (2024) scoping review of social media and sport (though the latter's focus was not online abuse per se). In general, however, despite the importance of fandom and spectatorship to many peoples' leisure lives, there is no research on fandom and spectatorship in the context of online abuse. The closest research that exists does so within the sub-field of what some refer to as 'digital leisure studies' (Fletcher et al., 2024; Redhead, 2016), or, in the context of this paper, 'digital football studies' (Lawrence & Crawford, 2022).

Online abuse, especially in the context of sport and leisure, is, therefore, a growing and required area of study. As Kearns et al. (2023) demonstrate in their review of academic papers published on the matter, research has increased markedly since 2016 (with NFL player Colin Kaepernick's protest against systemic racism and subsequent blackballing by the sport being a turning point case). The majority of such research focuses on cases wherein athletes are the targets of online abuse from fans of their sport (Manoli et al., 2024). Very little of this literature has examined cases where fans themselves are the targets of online abuse. A notable exception is the burgeoning research regarding the

treatment of female fans in online football spaces (e.g. Fenton et al., 2023). However, while gender relations undoubtedly shape the character of some abuse, the problem extends well beyond gender or any other single identity category. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for researchers to pay greater attention to the complexity of intra-fan online abuse. At present, there is the risk of researchers conceiving of fans on a reductive binary of passive spectators and active abusers.

Major media outlets (Liew, 2021) and sports governing bodies, some of which have commissioned research into online abuse (e.g. Signify, 2021), have also focused on the problem through the prism of instances of fans abusing athletes. Little attention has been paid to the impact of online abuse on fans, whether as direct targets of harassment and insults, or from the wider perspective of how such a climate of ready abuse affects the experience of following football online. Sporting institutions and grassroots organisations have been more concerned with supporting research concerning the issue of hate and abuse that fans experience in the stadium. A survey commissioned by anti-racist grassroots organisation, Kick it Out, in which nearly 3000 fans were asked about their views on the level of racism in football, did include a question on online racism; identifying that 76% of respondents were concerned about the level of online abuse in the sport (BBC, 2023). Though a useful contribution, this survey did not focus centrally on online abuse, and there is thus, still much work to be done in gaining fans' insights into this issue.

Our findings address this lacuna through highlighting both the frequency and the effects – particularly on mental and emotional well-being – of online abuse experienced by fans. They also shed light on the factors that provoke such abuse and the ways in which some fans themselves become perpetrators. This paper makes a significant contribution to leisure studies in four ways. Firstly, we advocate for the significance of leisure as a social milieu for understanding online abuse. Secondly, this is the first paper within leisure studies to draw on primary data around online abuse collected from fans themselves. Thirdly, by focusing specifically on fan experiences, as opposed to athletes, we develop our understanding of the impact of online abuse on a broader community of football stakeholders. And finally, by challenging reductionist depictions of football fans as perpetrators of online abuse, we advocate for a more nuanced picture of football fans, and the roles they can and do play in receiving, circulating and combatting online abuse.

Literature review

Online abuse and sport

The study of online abuse is complicated by the number of overlapping but ultimately distinct terms used to characterise the problem. Online abuse, online hate and online harms are used by researchers and activists to refer to similar, but by no means identical, developments. Regarding 'online hate', for instance, hate speech has been described as 'spreading, inciting, or promoting hatred, violence and discrimination against an individual or group based on their protected characteristics; which include "race", ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, among other social demarcations' (Kilvington, 2021, p. 258). Castaño-Pulgarın et al. (2021, p. 1) expand this definition to expound on the nature of online hate, writing how such hate speech is communicated

through 'the use of internet and social networks, based on power imbalance, which can be carried out repeatedly, systematically and uncontrollably, through digital media and often motivated by ideologies'. Indeed, as Siegel and Badaan (2020) argue, hate speech is notoriously difficult to define, with disparate government policymakers and online platforms offering markedly different definitions, meaning that 'our knowledge of the causes, consequences, and effective means of combating online hate speech remains somewhat clouded by definitional ambiguity' (Siegel & Badaan, 2020, p. 59). Regardless, conceptions of online hate speech fall within a broader outline of online abuse, in which hate need not concern a protected characteristic, nor be limited to directly hateful or threatening communication. Kavanagh et al. (2016) draw from Willard's (2007) classifications of seven forms of online hate to develop a typology of virtual maltreatment in sport, which distinguishes between direct and non-direct maltreatment, and provides further sub-categories for physical, sexual, emotional, and discriminatory online abuse. This codifying approach was more recently taken up by Thomas et al. (2021) who developed a taxonomy of online abuse, including toxic content (bullying and threats), content leakage (doxing) and overloading (organising coordinated attacks by a mass of users). Such indirect aggressions (doxing, overloading) are elsewhere referred to as 'online harms' to distinguish them from the direct attacks of online abuse (toxic content).

Research has outlined how the problem of online abuse and related problems arise and evolve in various fields, such as politics (Farrell et al., 2020) and celebrity (Scott et al., 2020). Within leisure studies, online abuse is a form of 'dark leisure' (Kavanagh et al., 2020; Scriven, 2024). Sport is one such notable field where research into online abuse is expanding. From just six papers published on the topic before 2015, there has now been over 60-peer-reviewed papers on online abuse in sport (Sinclair, Lynn, et al., 2024). Sport, particularly football, is a relevant context with regard to online abuse for several reasons. Firstly, major sports events are among the most widely discussed topics on online platforms (Gross, 2014; Madhok, 2023). Secondly, sport has historically been connected to the shaping and clashing of different identities and subcultures, and is thus subject of particularly heated online discourse (Kilvington, 2021). Indeed, research has articulated how the nature of social media platforms, and online fan communities, facilitates abuse (Hirsch, 2021; Kian et al., 2011). Finally, the culture that has evolved around sport, and again particularly football, facilitates a level of 'acceptable' antagonistic banter that can readily escalate into abuse against both those in the in-group and those in the out-group (Hirsch, 2021; Manoli et al., 2024).

Most of the literature, regardless of what solutions are proposed, presumes a significant level of impact that abuse has on its targets (Kavanagh et al., 2016). The lack of primary research means the nature of this impact is seldom expounded upon (Kearns et al., 2023). Research on online hate and abuse in other areas, however, has uncovered notable impacts on victims, such as increased anxiety and insecurity in both on- and offline environments (Dreißigacker et al., 2024). Further impacts on victims include exclusion from cultural and social communities (Cover, 2023), and disruption of their personal and professional lives (Sinclair, Kearns, et al., 2024). Research in this space is, therefore, fragmented and has failed to build momentum and a cohesive theoretical and methodological identity. Indeed, while research into online abuse and football fandom has existed for two decades, significant gaps remain. In the context of football

fandom, McMenemy et al. (2005) focused on online sectarian abuse between fans of Glasgow football clubs, Celtic and Rangers; Shadmanfaat et al. (2018) explored the likelihood of sports fans to engage in cyberbullying of rival fans; and McLean et al. (2017) discussed the backlash against fans engaged in activism concerning the changing of their team's mascots, which were perceived to be racist. Notably, this type of intra-fan online abuse is better understood in the context of female fandom. Fenton et al. (2023), for example, explore how problematic masculine hegemonies are reinforced in response to women increasingly participating in historically male football fan spaces.

Across research on digital communication, online leisure, and online abuse, more active participation in online spaces is consistently associated with greater visibility and, consequently, a heightened likelihood of encountering antagonistic or abusive responses (Lenhart et al., 2016; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2024; Thomas et al., 2021). Within football-specific digital environments, where discussions frequently involve identity negotiation, rivalry, and emotionally charged commentary, active contributors become particularly exposed to hostile exchanges as their posts are more readily seen, engaged with, and contested (Hirsch, 2021; Kilvington et al., 2022; Millward, 2008). These dynamics suggest that participation may operate as a mechanism of exposure: the more fans contribute to online football discussions, the more opportunities arise for others to target them with abuse. A first question guiding our analysis, therefore, concerns the extent to which the frequency of participation in online football discussion is associated with the likelihood of being targeted by abuse.

Football fandom

There is a significant literature on football fandom and leisure studies which, although not specifically discussed in the context of online abuse, can be drawn from to help build a picture of the dynamics of online abuse within fan communities. Fandom, whether that be associated with sport, events, or serious hobby-ism, is an important aspect of many peoples' leisure lives (Hopkins, 2024; Manoli et al., 2025). Football fandom is a notably broad and fluid category. Indeed, Doidge et al. (2020, p. 5) argue that 'football fans are inherently heterogeneous'. There have been many attempts to create taxonomies of fandom. These create binaries like 'active' and 'passive' (Cleland, 2010) or 'participatory' and 'non-participatory' (Redhead, 1993). Giulianotti (2002) suggested four ideal types of fan, which intersected between 'hot' and 'cold' styles between traditional and consumer fans. In contrast, Crawford (2004) suggested there was a spectrum of fans, with fandom being a career. What emerges from existing scholarship is a picture of fans as a highly diverse group, both in terms of identity and activity, and one which should not be conceived of in monolithic terms (Hopkins, 2024). This heterogeneity of fan conception is particularly pertinent with regard to online abuse, as abuse in online football spaces may occur to casual fans making a rare visit or contribution to such spaces, and to more dedicated and regular participants in them. Moreover, the perpetrators of such abuse may range from football fans motivated to heights of emotion by their commitment to their team to non-fans leveraging a notable flashpoint football event to inflict abuse on those discussing it.

Football fandom is an important way of understanding how social groups form (Doidge et al., 2020; Manoli et al., 2025). Football fandom helps create a sense of

belonging around a collective identity in an increasingly fragmented and individualistic society. As Doidge et al. (2020, p. 22) argue, 'football fandom is an extension of the self. Ontologically, the team becomes an extension of the individual'. A strong illustration of this is how fans identify with a team and refer to it as 'we' (Maguire, 1999). Yet, this does not operate in isolation. Archetti (2001, p. 154) states that 'no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives and contradictions'. Crawford (2004, p. 62) argues that fandom is 'defined on the basis of not only who members are, but also who they are not, and that individuals may be excluded from supporter groups on the basis of social divisions such as ethnicity, disability, gender and social class (amongst others)'.

Fandom now extends into digital spaces, where fans follow news, engage in debate/banter, and participate in online communities. These online environments have become integral to how fans express identity and maintain social ties, yet they also expose fans to forms of hostility that can disrupt the pleasures typically associated with leisure (Kilvington et al., 2022). In this way, digital interactions are not peripheral to fandom but shape the affective texture of the leisure experience itself. Research on digital leisure spaces shows that hostile interactions, whether directly targeted or passively observed, can diminish users' sense of enjoyment, belonging, and psychological safety, all of which are central to leisure participation (Massanari, 2017). Studies of online fan communities similarly suggest that exposure to abusive content can prompt individuals to disengage from digital discussions, limit their contributions, or avoid certain platforms altogether, thereby constraining opportunities for social connection and identity expression that fandom typically affords (Schoenebeck et al., 2023). Even when abuse is not personally directed at the fan, witnessing aggression within supporter networks can, we suggest generate discomfort, moral tension, or even digital fatigue, all of which subtly reshape how fans negotiate their place within these communities. This body of work, albeit limited, supports the view that online abuse does not merely coexist alongside leisure practices, but actively alters them, challenging the assumption that digital extensions of fandom are inherently pleasurable or socially enriching.

With this in mind, there has been limited research into online engagement between fans. That which does exist has focused on the performance of fans online (Doidge et al., 2020; Manoli et al., 2024), or how online fan forums have operated as spaces of discussion and consensus-forming (Kearns et al., 2024; Kilvington et al., 2022; Millward, 2008). On fan forums especially, users 'are more likely to offer considered judgements [. . . and] forum posts tend to be longer and more nuanced than those found on certain social media sites' (Kilvington et al., 2022, p. 850). Here, debate and contestation are common in online discussion. Millward (2008, p. 304) identified that: 'the fan may not so easily be forgiven, and his or her comments may be criticized, mocked, politely tolerated, or completely shunned'.

The absence of fans' perspectives and the abiding focus on them in the role of abusers echoes previous discontent expressed by fan representative bodies concerning their treatment by football governing bodies and other political authorities about matchday issues, such as, hooliganism and bigotry. Reductive views on hooliganism position fans as the problem – either as passive victims or active threats. There is a danger of those same tropes being used to articulate the fans' role regarding the problem of online abuse. Rather, we should consider the role of the fan in a more active sense.

There is a rich vein of research into football fan activism (Cleland et al., 2018; Millward, 2023; Turner & Millward, 2024). Much of this work focuses on what might be termed the vertical relationship between fans and football authorities (be they club ownership regimes, administrators or political figures). However, less has been written about the horizontal clashes between these supporter activists and other football fans who oppose their cause. In the football activism context, a rare discussion on intra-fan discord was identified by Dunn (2014). Her findings indicated a gendered dimension to comments directed to female fans engaged in fan activism. Taken together, more analysis is required of abuse between fans and the role that activism plays in exacerbating such abuse.

Additionally, there is the need to draw from the research in the preceding section on the motivations for online aggression in exploring what other factors (including and beyond the misogyny examined by Dunn, 2014) prompt football fans to abuse their peers online. There is also a need to examine the cumulative impact of such abuse on online football spaces and the fans that populate them. Additionally, it is worth considering the relationship between activism and online abuse. Lenhart et al. (2016) highlight how activists, particularly those advocating for social justice causes, are often targets of online harassment. In a sporting context, research into abuse against athletes has also identified a tendency for online attacks against athletes who use their social media platforms for social and political activism (Signify, 2021). Given that recent research has uncovered how the spectre of online abuse from fans can impact journalists (Sinclair, Kearns, et al., 2024), and athlete activists (Duvall, 2020), there is a pressing need to extend this question to the topic of fan/supporter activists. Political and socio-cultural debates in football tend to activate stronger forms of identity-protective cognition than routine match talk. Research on online hate speech demonstrates that political expression, particularly when connected to social justice issues, attracts heightened hostility because it challenges perceived in-group norms, intensifies ideological polarisation, and reduces tolerance for dissent (Castaño-Pulgarın et al., 2021; Lenhart et al., 2016). These mechanisms suggest that fans who participate in socio-political discussions face additional risks of being abused, due to the moralised and polarised nature of these exchanges within football cultures.

These mechanisms suggest that fans who take part in socio-political discussions within football may face additional risks of being abused, given the moralised and polarised nature of such exchanges within football cultures. A second question for our analysis, then, is whether participation in online discussion of political, economic and social issues in football is associated with a heightened likelihood of receiving abuse, over and above general participation in football discussion.

Hurt people hurt

The picture that emerges, then, is that there has been comparatively little crossover between the historically rich field of research into football fans' complex roles and identities, and the rapidly growing field of research into online abuse (with the aforementioned recent, research into female fans and online spaces notwithstanding). This has left key questions unanswered, such as the extent of online abuse against football fans, the factors that trigger it, the nature of the impact it has on them, and how they react to this.

Furthermore, a less discussed impact is how exposure to online abuse leads to targets becoming the perpetrators of online abuse. In their analysis of online aggression across a wide number of age groups, Pabian and Vandebosch (2024) found an association between victimisation and perpetration. Other studies have shown how victims often experience aggression and victimisation in their offline lives (O'Connor et al., 2021) and have a tendency towards sadism and psychopathy (Sorokowski et al., 2020). The relative dearth of primary research into the motivations of those perpetuating online harms and abuse points towards the need to investigate this potential 'vicious cycle' whereby online abuse begets abusers. Within football spaces, where antagonism, rivalry, and boundary-policing are culturally embedded, these dynamics can create a cyclical pattern in which targets of online abuse are more likely to engage in abusive behaviour themselves. From a dark-leisure perspective (Kavanagh et al., 2016), such exchanges may even become routinised components of the online fan experience.

From a dark-leisure perspective (Kavanagh et al., 2016), such exchanges may even become routinised components of the online fan experience. A third question, therefore, is whether fans' prior experience of receiving online abuse from other fans is associated with a greater likelihood of perpetrating online abuse themselves, a possibility that speaks directly to the 'vicious cycle' suggested by the wider literature on online aggression.

Method

Sample and procedures

In aiming to address the absence of fans' perspectives in research into online abuse in sport, we designed a survey to gather fan insights into activism, abuse, and the wider experience of being a football supporter online. A survey was chosen as the primary method of gathering data as it facilitated the collection of data from thousands of respondents (surveys having 'greater potential reach' than other communications methods according to Deacon, 2007, 66]) which would allow us to gather a sample that was representative of the diversity of football fans across the UK and Ireland. Additionally, given the sensitivity of the subject of personal experiences of online abuse, the anonymity of a survey compared to in-person or online interviews made it more likely that participants would feel comfortable giving honest answers on a potentially painful topic.

The sample was constructed using stratified quota sampling, with quotas defined on four demographic variables: age, gender, region of residence within the UK and Ireland, and ethnicity/nationality. The target population was football fans, aged 18 or over, residing in the UK or the Republic of Ireland, who take some part in online football discussions (see filter question below). Quota targets for age, region and ethnicity/nationality were derived from the most recently available UK and Irish census data, so that the composition of the sample on these dimensions would broadly mirror that of the adult population across both countries. The survey was conducted between the 8th and 22nd of January 2024 via Qualtrics, an online survey service provider (see, for example, Tang et al., 2022), which was responsible for recruiting respondents in line with the quotas specified by the research team. Qualtrics were instructed to admit to the survey only respondents who self-identified as football fans and to monitor the demographic

composition of the sample during fieldwork, closing individual quota cells once their targets had been reached.

For gender, a quota of approximately 70% male and 30% female respondents was specified. This figure does not reflect a strict census proportion of the general population, but rather an evidence-informed approximation of the gender composition of football fandom in the UK and Ireland, where existing industry and survey-based evidence indicates that the majority of fans are male (Football Supporters Association [FSA], 2023; Malone, 2020). At the same time, women constitute a substantial and growing share of the fan base, and their experiences of online football spaces have been shown to differ from those of male fans (Fenton et al., 2023). The 70/30 quota was therefore set with the dual aim of approximating the overall gender skew of fandom while ensuring that female fans were sufficiently represented to permit meaningful subgroup analysis. Respondents who described themselves as non-binary, or who preferred not to disclose their gender, were not subject to a numerical quota but were retained in the sample where they passed the filter question (and accounted for 0.6% of final respondents). The resulting sample is therefore best understood as quota-stratified rather than probability-weighted; no post-stratification weights are applied in the subsequent analysis, and the demographic variables enter the model as controls (see 'Control Variables' below).

To ensure all respondents were appropriate for the survey, a filter question was included at the outset. The question read 'How often do you read about football on social media, online forums and/or comments sections?' and gave respondents the option of answering from a six point scale (from 'Very Frequently' to 'Never'). Any respondent who answered 'Never' – thus indicating that they take no part in any manner of online football discussions – were exempted from the rest of the survey. While, of course, not all football fans are active in online spaces, as our research concerns fans' relationship and reaction to online harms, fans who were not active online were not relevant to this study. The fans active online examined in our survey represent no small minority of football fandom, but a vital element to understanding the sport's modern culture; as Lawrence and Crawford (2022) argue 'we can no longer seek to understand football cultures without considering the role of the digital, to greater or lesser degrees, within their perpetuation and formation'.

Bearing in mind the conceptual complexities around defining online abuse, the survey discussed herein adopted a broad definition of online abuse in football, defining it as 'harassment, threats and/or hate speech made by one person or persons to another/others in online discussions about football and/or on online football spaces'. This definition was outlined to respondents at the beginning of the survey. Its conception of online abuse is drawn from Kavanagh et al. (2016) and Thomas et al. (2021) taxonomies (see Literature Review), though it simplifies their ideas in order to ground the respondent with a straightforward, comprehensible definition to anchor their understanding of the survey's more specific and complex questions. It ensured that all those filling out the survey did so from a shared understanding of what online abuse entails.

Measures

Each of the core constructs included in our model were measured using individual survey items and a multilevel Likert Scale, with the only exception being the question pertaining

Table 1. Main survey items & measurement scales.

Construct	Question	Measure
Participation in online football discussion	How often do you post/participate in discussions about football on online platforms?	6-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'very frequently'
Participation in online discussion on socio-political issues in football	How often would you post about/participate in online discussions on political, economic and/or social issues in football?	6-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'very frequently'
Prior experience with online abuse from other fans	Roughly how frequently are you the target of online abuse from other football fans?	6-point Likert scale from 'never' to 'very frequently'
Perpetration of abuse	Has watching football ever led you to engaging in online abuse against others?	Yes/No

Table 2. Age ranges of respondents.

Age Range	Percentage of total	Respondents
18–24	7.70%	158
25–34	23.80%	487
35–44	36.90%	755
45–54	12.90%	263
55–64	10.50%	215
65–74	6.30%	129
75–84	1.60%	33
85+	0.30%	7

to perpetration of abuse, which was measured as a yes or no binary answer. Table 1 provides a summary of the main survey items included in the analysis and corresponding measurement scales. Follow up questions were included in the survey for respondents who had received online abuse from other fans to better understand what triggered such experiences and the impact on their mental health.

Control variables

Of the total 2,011 survey respondents, approximately 30% were female and 70% were male. The remaining 0.6% were respondents who would describe themselves as non-binary or respondents who did not wish to declare their gender. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the age ranges of the respondents. In terms of ethnicity, 80% of respondents were white, 11% were black, 7% were Asian, and 2% of mixed heritage. The ethnicity quota was derived from the most recent census data for both the UK and Ireland. These respondent characteristics were included in the regression model as control variables to avoid our results being driven by underlying demographic factors. Including these variables as controls, rather than applying post-stratification weights, allows the model to estimate the associations of interest while explicitly accounting for any residual imbalance between the quota-stratified sample and the underlying population on age, gender and ethnicity.

Data screening and analysis

To answer the research questions presented above, responses were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling in Stata 18 (Kim et al., 2021) as it allows us to estimate

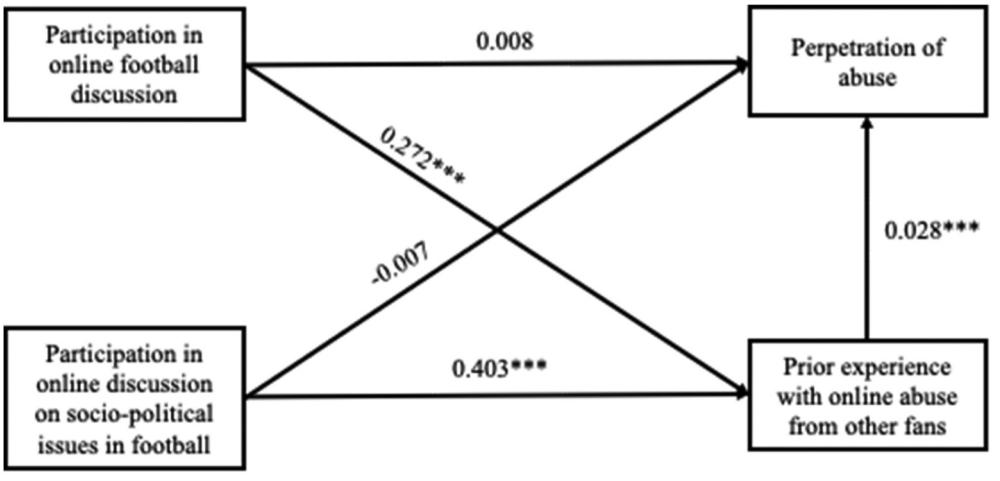

Figure 1. Representation of the results of our analysis.

complex relationships with multiple dependent and independent variables within a single model. Correlations among different constructs were calculated to ensure that multicollinearity (i.e. where two or more predictor variables are highly correlated) was not a concern. None of the relationships exceeded a correlation of 0.85 (Kline, 2005), suggesting that multicollinearity was not an issue.

Findings

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the analysis results and the key relationships tested. To present the descriptive findings in a clear and coherent manner, the findings are organised into four parts. We begin by outlining the frequency with which fans experience and perpetrate abuse. We then examine the types of abuse reported, before turning to the contexts and triggers associated with abusive exchanges. Finally, we explore the impacts of abuse on fans and consider how they respond to it.

Frequency of online abuse

Online abuse appears to be a routine part of the online experience for football fans. Almost three quarters (72.78%) of respondents reported receiving abuse from other football fans. Consistent with the first question outlined above, the analysis reveals a positive association between the frequency of participation in online football discussion and the likelihood of receiving abuse. Over one third (36.34%) described suffering abuse 'occasionally', 'frequently', or 'very frequently' (see Table 3), highlighting the extent to which abusive exchanges have become normalised in football-related online spaces

Figure 1 also indicates a positive correlation between participation in online football discussions and the likelihood of receiving abuse, suggesting that visibility and engagement heighten exposure to hostility. Online football discussions are therefore, spaces fraught with the risk of abuse, with those who participate more frequently being more likely to be abused. This indicates that, despite the lack of attention from the popular

Table 3. Frequency of abuse.

Roughly how frequently are you the target of online abuse from other football fans?	
Very Frequently	3.66%
Frequently	13.53%
Occasionally	19.15%
Rarely	18.32%
Very Rarely	18.12%
Never	27.21%

Table 4. Types of abuse.

Has the abuse featured any of the following? [choose as many or few options as appropriate]	
Insults against you/your family	37.82%
Threats of violence against you/your family	31.45%
Threats of sexual violence against you/your family	26.35%
Dogpiling (one abuser inviting/inciting others to attack you)	21.02%
Hate speech against your identity (gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, etc.)	37.02%
Misinformation	27.79%
Conspiracy theories	13.30%
Doxing/Threats of doxing (publishing your private information online, ie. home address)	22.45%

media, fans are frequent targets of online abuse. A similar pattern emerged for participation in discussions of socio-political issues within football, indicating that this more contentious form of engagement is also associated with a higher likelihood of being targeted by abuse. By contrast, no significant correlation emerged between participation (football or socio-political) and the likelihood of perpetrating abuse, suggesting that the act of participating more frequently does not, in itself, explain abusive behaviour.

Types of abuse experienced and perpetrated

Respondents experienced a broad spectrum of abusive behaviours. As Table 4 illustrates, insults (37.82%) and identity-based hate speech (37.02%) were the most common forms. More severe forms included threats of violence (31.45%), threats of sexual violence (26.35%), and doxing or threats of doxing (22.45%). Dogpiling – i.e. coordinated group attacks – was reported by 21.02% of respondents. These findings map closely onto Thomas et al. (2021) taxonomy, highlighting that football spaces contain both direct attacks (e.g. threats, insults) and indirect harms (e.g. coordinated pile-ons, doxing). Misinformation (27.79%) and conspiracy theories (13.30%) were also reported, underscoring the diversity of abusive content circulating in football discourse.

Trigger points and contexts

Table 5 shows that triggers for abuse varied considerably. Match results or performances (54.72%) and refereeing decisions (48.68%) were the most common, reflecting the emotional volatility of match-related interactions. Player transfers (29.21%), and political or activism-related issues within football (34.64%), also featured prominently as triggers, supporting Hp2. Strikingly, almost a fifth (17.36%) of respondents cited gambling or gaming as a trigger. Although understudied, these findings suggest that gambling-related

Table 5. Topics that triggered abuse against fans.

Are there particular discussion topics that have triggered online abuse against you? *[choose as many or few options as appropriate]*	
Gambling on football and/or football video games	17.36%
Match results/performances	54.72%
Player transfers	29.21%
Refereeing/Official decisions	48.68%
Political issues/activism in football (e.g. Taking the Knee, Rainbow Armbands/Laces, etc.)	34.64%
Political/social issues or events outside of football	25.96%

frustration and emotional volatility may spill over into abusive behaviour, aligning with growing leisure and sociological interest in gambling cultures (Bond et al., 2024; Irving et al., 2024).

Impact of abuse

The impacts of online abuse were significant. Among those who had received abuse, 83.15% reported a negative effect on their mental well-being (Table 6), with over a third describing the impact as 'Very' or 'Extremely' significant. These findings align with wider research identifying anxiety and insecurity as common consequences of online abuse (Dreißigacker et al.,). More severe forms of abuse were common: over a quarter of respondents reported threats of physical or sexual violence (Table 4). The prevalence of such threats illustrates that online football spaces can involve behaviours far more harmful than playful antagonism.

Importantly, exposure to abuse of others also generated negative effects. Over four fifths (82.60%) reported that witnessing abuse directed at players, journalists, or other fans negatively impacted their mental well-being (Table 7), reflecting the ambient harms of abusive digital environments (Kent et al., 2024).

Table 6. Impact of abuse.

How would you describe the impact on your mental well-being of receiving online abuse from other football fans?	
Extremely significant	4.63%
Very significant	30.94%
Moderately significant	28.86%
Slightly significant	18.72%
Not significant at all	16.85%

Table 7. Impact of abuse of others.

How would you describe the impact on your mental well-being of viewing online abuse of others (players, journalists, other fans, etc.) from other football fans?	
Extremely significant	5.91%
Very significant	24.13%
Moderately significant	29.75%
Slightly significant	22.81%
Not significant at all	17.39%

How fans react to abuse

There is a desire from fans for more to be done by authorities to tackle abuse. Most fans (77.23%) have not been engaged by the sport's authorities in efforts to address the issue of online abuse in football. However, of the quarter (26.14%) of respondents who were members of independent supporters' groups, the majority (71.96%) said that their group had taken some kind of action against online abuse. Such findings point towards a willingness by fans to self police abuse that has gone largely ignored by authorities. This willingness is further borne out at the level of spontaneous and individual responses to abuse: 87.15% of respondents attested that they had intervened in the past when seeing others suffering abuse in online football discussions. Of those, over a quarter (26.09%) had done so 'Frequently' or 'Very Frequently'. Online abuse is evidently a problem that most football fans want to be addressed, yet despite this, they are rarely engaged with, or consulted by, the sport's authorities about how this might be achieved. This is a significant omission because this community is at risk of being pathologised as an integral part of the problem. Indeed, our findings point towards fans being somewhat jaded about authorities' (in)ability to address this problem. Almost half (47.50%) of our respondents did not report abuse they had seen to any authorities (social media platforms, footballing authorities, and/or police and legal authorities), suggesting that they did not see any value (i.e. meaningful action) in it.

Interestingly, the analysis points to a positive relationship between fans who receive abuse and those who perpetrate it, with perpetrators being more likely than not to have suffered abuse from others. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the earlier finding that almost three quarters of respondents have suffered abuse in online football contexts. It is a finding which builds on previous research which attests to online abusers being more likely to have experienced aggression in their offline lives (O'Connor et al., 2021; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2024). However, it is notable that perpetrators, so often discussed in terms of one-way abusive interactions with athletes, are not above or beyond receiving abuse themselves. Online abuse in football is, as outlined above, largely conceived of as a one-way process between fans/abusers and athletes/targets, with little understanding of the possibility of those roles blurring and overlapping (Kearns et al., 2023). Our research indicates that, not only are fans targets of abuse, but that the categories of 'target' and 'abuser' are not mutually exclusive in this context.

Discussion

Findings from this study point towards a more nuanced perspective of football fans and online abuse than previously documented. While some of this previous research emphasises the role of inadequate moderation from social media platforms (Hirsch, 2021; Kavanagh et al., 2019), or expounds on the socio-cultural and psychological factors which foster abuse amongst fans (Meggs & Ahmed, 2021; Sorokowski et al., 2020), the bulk of existing research in and outside of leisure studies, tends to present fans as perpetrators of abuse only. Our findings thus open a new perspective of fans as frequent and significant victims of a wider culture of online abuse in football. Abuse against athletes has often been triggered by specific flashpoint events, such as perceived poor performance or misconduct (Sanderson et al., 2020), or political activism (Bond et al.,

2025; Duvall, 2020; Signify, 2021). While the impact of such abuse should not be underestimated, the institutional structures that high profile athletes are a part of (clubs, players' organisations, sport governing bodies, etc.) means that they can, at least, avail of a certain degree of support. Fans who are or have been abused, on the other hand, are rarely noteworthy enough to attract wider media attention because the abuse they receive is spurred, more mundanely, by their engagement in an innocuous leisure pursuit: participation in online football discussions. As our findings indicate, they are victims (and, indeed perpetrators) of abuse surrounding their discussion of the sport. While this is noteworthy, perhaps more interesting to our study of leisure is how their experiences of online abuse can extend to their everyday participation as football fans. Simply put, regular participation in online football discussions comes with the ready risk of incurring abuse; it is the rule rather than the exception for many football fans. FIFA trumpets football as a 'universal language' (FIFA 2022), but according to academic research, it is fans who shape that language, influencing key discourses and attitudes within football culture (Cleland, 2010; Numerato, 2015). While decisions are made across the sport at an institutional level that fans may disagree with, they retain the influence to colour the perception of such decisions. As such, with regard to the evolving problem of online harms in football, there is a pressing need to take fans inside the tent, so to speak; for football authorities to engage with fan stakeholders and representative groups when developing responses to the problem.

Indeed, taken alongside the finding that abusers are more likely to have been abused themselves, a picture emerges of online football discussions acting as a vicious cycle whereby participation invites attacks, and attacks spur further attacks. Online football discussions are environments fraught with the possibility of abuse for those who participate in them. Again, we return to the question of responsibility when we consider that many of the sport's authorities encourage fans to participate in such environments (McCarthy et al., 2014). While some fans were abused infrequently, according to the survey, the significance of such instances should not be dismissed, as research attests to the potential emotional impact of online abuse, regardless of frequency (Kavanagh et al., 2016). Our survey findings support this, as over four fifths of fans who had been abused described the experience as having a negative impact on their mental well-being. FIFA and other footballing authorities have acknowledged their responsibility to protect fans within football stadiums (FIFA, n.d.), our findings open up the question of how this responsibility extends to online spaces? Furthermore, in light of the 2021 boycott of social media by English football figures (Kilvington et al., 2023) which attempted to force social media platforms into action over online abuse by demonstrating the value football brought to these platforms; we may also extend this proposition to football fans. It is worth exploring the extent to which fans generate value through participation in football discussion on social platforms and the responsibilities such platforms have to protect them.

The significance, then, of the finding that fans who receive abuse will be more likely to perpetrate it – is in its contribution towards a continuing culture of abuse in online football spaces. It could be argued that the negative impact emotionally desensitises some victims to abuse and thus, makes the idea of committing abuse less of a taboo than these victims had previously considered. If, as O'Connor et al. (2021) argue, experience of trauma in the physical world inures abusers to online violence, then perhaps too, abusers

are also inured to the impacts by their own experience of online abuse. From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this paper situate online abuse in football in the realm of dark leisure (Kavanagh et al., 2020), positioning it as an issue which emerges from a combination of factors. These include the particularities of the community (football fandom's tendency towards antagonistic banter and the potential for lines to blur between argument and abuse), the spaces and rituals of that community (the emotional flashpoints represented by football matches and surrounding events, and the lax moderation of the social media platforms on which discussions of such flashpoints occur), and underlying cultural currents (deeper socio-cultural prejudices concerning race, gender, etc.). It is a problem that must therefore, be confronted in this full complexity, acknowledging the complex and overlapping roles of the participants in this leisure activity, rather than conceptualising them monolithically as previous examinations of fans' role in the issue has.

Conclusion

It is in this respect that the aforementioned findings make an important contribution to leisure studies, by advancing an understanding of the complex relationship between football fandom and online abuse. At its core, the article foregrounds leisure as a crucial social context for examining the dynamics of online abuse, particularly within digital environments shaped by sport and fan engagement. By foregrounding the digital dimensions of football fandom, and positioning fans as key subjects of empirical and theoretical interest, simplified characterisations of their roles in online abuse can be challenged. Ultimately, this expands the scope of leisure studies beyond traditional settings to include the increasingly significant realm of online interaction, where leisure practices and identities are continuously negotiated and contested.

A central contribution of the study is its use of primary data collected directly from football fans themselves – an approach that marks a departure from much of the existing research in leisure and sport studies, which has typically focused on athletes as victims or treated fans as undifferentiated perpetrators. Future research could usefully investigate whether there exists a common threshold of experienced online abuse beyond which individuals are more likely to become perpetrators themselves, or whether this propensity is better explained through demographic and social variables. Crucially, further studies that explore the affective and experiential characteristics of digital leisure spaces – potentially through in-depth netnographic approaches – are necessary to capture the complexity of these dynamics. This is particularly urgent, in light of increasing calls for leisure scholars to grapple more fully with the affective, political, and structural entanglements of digital leisure, especially where they intersect with questions of fandom, identity, and harm. In this sense, further investigations of online abuse in sport through the lens of 'dark leisure', viewing it as an activity dependent on spaces, rituals and communities which facilitate it, are key. In practical terms, the findings speak to the pressing need for more robust content moderation on social media platforms. When left unaddressed, online abuse tends to escalate, reinforcing harmful patterns of behaviour. Within the context of football, this underscores the vulnerability of fans and the lack of safeguards in place to protect them from abuse in digital environments. Unless governing bodies and authorities within the game acknowledge and take greater responsibility for

fans' online experiences, including their well-being and safety, the prevalence and severity of online abuse are likely to intensify.

Future research should build upon these findings in several ways. Longitudinal work is needed to examine how victimisation may develop into perpetration over time and to assess whether cyclical patterns of aggression intensify during key sporting events. Qualitative methods such as netnography or interview-based studies can provide deeper insight into how fans interpret and rationalise abusive exchanges, including the emotional labour involved in bystander intervention. Cross-cultural comparative work could illuminate how national football cultures shape norms of antagonism and acceptable behaviour. The identification of gambling and gaming as notable triggers suggests a critical new line of inquiry into how commercialised betting cultures and algorithmic sports gaming environments contribute to online hostility. Finally, further research should explore the broader effects of witnessing abuse, particularly given that indirect exposure appears to be nearly as damaging as direct victimisation.

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