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Virtual Football Violence: Exploring the resurgence of Football's Deviant Leisure Cultures in England

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Abstract

This paper examines the resurgence of deviant leisure cultures in football, with a focus on virtual football violence. Despite advancements in curbing violence in UK football stadiums, new challenges emerge online. By analysing social media discourse from three English Premier League matches in 2022, the study reveals the prevalence of several forms of virtual violence, including threats of physical and sexual violence, emotional violence, and discriminatory violence. The research highlights the resurgence of 'traditional' norms of masculinity, aggression, and misogyny facilitated by anonymity in online spaces. Paradoxically, the results show that fans engage in derogatory language while simultaneously condemning similar actions by others. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the category of discriminatory violence, where comments are frequently challenged, indicating a 'raising of consciousness' and a growing intolerance to certain forms of discriminatory language. However, despite some evidence of social consciousness and pushback against discriminatory language, the prevalence of virtual violence remains concerning on multiple levels. This underscores the need for continued efforts to promote respectful discourse and foster inclusive environments online.

Keywords: Hooligan, Football, Violence, Netnography, Twitter.

The Death of Football Violence?

The phenomenon of football violence has long been regarded as a manifestation of deviant leisure, representing a leisure activity that challenges socially accepted norms, values, and ethical standards (Williams, 2009). This behaviour constitutes a clear departure from

societal expectations, embodying a subculture within football fandom characterized by aggression, tribalism, and defiance of authority (Dunning et al., 1982). Historically, this subculture has been evident through organized violence, disorderly conduct, and confrontations among rival fan groups, often centred around football stadiums (Frosdick and Marsh, 2013). Despite its disruptive nature, studies have shown that football violence was perceived of as exciting and enjoyable for participants (Rookwood and Pearson, 2010), with certain forms of media contributing to its glamorization, including the popularity of Hit and Tell Books (Redhead, 2004). Thus, the appeal of football violence appears to stem from its transgression of social norms, ethical standards, personal safety considerations, and even legal boundaries.

Such instances of deviant leisure, often labelled by the media as ‘hooliganism,’ characterized by "rowdy, possibly criminal, football-related behaviour’s" (Leeson et al., 2012, p.213), have decreased since their peak in the 1970s-80s. Conduct within stadium premises has gradually become more regulated and sanitized over time, as supported by recent research. For instance, Cashmore and Dixon (2024) highlight that while sporadic incidents of fan violence may still occur, the landscape of football violence in Britain has been reshaped following the Hillsborough disaster in 1989, where ninety-six Liverpool fans lost their lives due to a crush at Sheffield Wednesday’s ground.

Whilst the Hillsborough disaster itself did not involve football violence, its aftermath prompted significant changes aimed at fostering a safer and more inclusive football environment. These changes include the introduction of all-seated stadiums, the rise of The Premier League, the integration of football into the entertainment industry, and efforts to promote football as a secure space for women and families. These improvements led to increased ticket prices and concomitantly, a more diverse audience. Additionally, the implementation of CCTV within stadiums and innovative approaches to communicative

policing have played crucial roles in reshaping the physical landscape of football (Atkinson, 2022). Moreover, effective stewardship and a shift in the unwritten code of silence among fans have reduced the likelihood of violent individuals evading identification within this context. In sum, the epidemic of football violence in the 1970-80s, once labelled ‘the English Disease’ has been effectively managed over the last 30 years.

However, it is important to note that across the same period, football's relationship with violence has evolved beyond its physical spaces. While football violence, in the ‘traditional’ sense centred on physical gatherings, the advent of online spaces has introduced new challenges and spaces to enact violence. The online landscape presents a fundamentally different experience, marked by a lack of regulation and, as we will uncover, a proliferation of interactions that are anything but sanitized. The aim of this paper is to explore how the intersection of football fandom and internet culture has spawned a new breed of virtual fan behaviour characterized by aggression, tribalism, and online vitriol. Through this analysis, our study’s originality lies in its suggestion that while traditional forms of football violence may have diminished, they have evolved and found new avenues of expression in the digital realm, shaping the landscape of football violence in contemporary society.

Beyond the Physical

Writing in 2005, Vittorio Bufacchi delineates two distinct ways of conceptualizing violence which are useful in the context of this paper: a ‘minimalist’ and a 'comprehensive' approach. The minimalist view restricts violence to physical force and bodily responses to harm, neglecting broader social contexts and non-physical forms of harm such as psychological damage. Bufacchi explains, in a similar vein to Ray (2018) that violence encompasses more than just physical acts; it includes behaviours like hate speech, cyberbullying, and online

harassment, all of which are now punishable by law. Though not explicitly criminalized, these behaviours can be subject to legal action in the UK under statutes such as the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 (which covers threatening behaviour and harassment) The Malicious Communications Act 1988 (covering communication with the intent to cause distress and anxiety), and The Communications Act 2003 (covering electronic messages that grossly offend or are of obscene or menacing character).

With this in mind, the comprehensive conception of violence, acknowledges these broader forms of harm and is more in tune with contemporary societal developments, particularly the growing influence of the internet. By defining violence as actions that impede human realization or violate individual rights and integrity, this approach offers a more encompassing understanding. Thus, in the context of this paper, we find utility in Mary Jackman's (2002) definition of violence which succinctly captures this broad perspective. She defines violence as:

> "actions that inflict, threaten, or cause injury, whether corporal, written, or verbal...psychological, material, or social."

Prior to exploring the manner of fan interactions in contemporary social media threads, which will follow later in this paper, it is first important to chart the rise of the internet within the lives of football supporters providing context through which to identify and discuss new forms of football violence associated with the technological revolution.

Football Fandom, Technological 'Progress', and Violence

Throughout its short history, internet use has evolved through several phases. During the Web 1.0 era, which emerged in the early 1990s, internet use among football fans was characterized by static websites and basic online forums. Fans primarily relied on websites offering text-

based content, such as match reports, player statistics, and club news (Leonard, 2009). Online forums provided a space for fans to engage in discussions and share their views on various aspects of the game. However, interaction was limited, and content creation was mostly restricted to website administrators and a select group of contributors.

The transition to Web 2.0, which gained momentum in the mid-2000s, marked a significant shift in internet use among football fans. This phase was characterized by the rise of social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube. Football fans embraced these platforms as they offered more interactive and participatory experiences (Lawrence and Crawford, 2022). Social media enabled fans to connect with each other in real-time, share their experiences, and engage directly with clubs, players, and fellow supporters. Hashtags, trending topics, and viral content became integral to the football fan experience, amplifying the reach and impact of fan discourse. In short, the internet became an implicit part of the fan leisure experience, routinized in daily existence, and inseparable from 'real life' (Gibbons and Dixon, 2010).

Furthermore, the emergence of user-generated content platforms such as blogs, podcasts, and fan forums facilitated the democratization of football fandom. Fans were no longer passive consumers of content but active participants in shaping the narrative around their favourite teams and players (Bond et al., 2023). Fan-generated content offered diverse perspectives, insights, and analyses, catering to the specific interests and preferences of different fan communities (Dixon, 2022).

But there is a paradoxical side to 'progress'. As the rise of social media platforms and interactions became more immediate and public, fans have found themselves embroiled in volatile heated debates, potentially fuelled in part by anonymity, echo chambers, and the ease of spreading inflammatory content with little emotive regard for the feelings of opposing fans

(Gibbons and Dixon, 2010, p.606).Thus, what began as a platform for information, connection and expression has, in some cases, devolved into a breeding ground for toxic behaviour, including online harassment, cyberbullying, and hate.

Online Hate and Football Violence

Every day, over four billion individuals worldwide engage with the internet (Global Web Index, 2022). While the internet provides a platform for free expression, it also facilitates the expression of violent tendencies through hate speech (Kilvington, 2021). In this context, hate speech encompasses any communication expressing prejudice or hostility towards individuals or groups based on attributes such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. This can manifest through verbal insults, derogatory remarks, threats, or dissemination of discriminatory ideas via written or online platforms. Importantly, hate speech qualifies as a form of violence as it can inflict psychological and social harm on individuals or communities. It fosters feelings of fear, marginalization, and insecurity among targeted groups, perpetuating discrimination and escalating societal tensions. Moreover, hate speech often rationalizes and normalizes acts of discrimination or harassment against its targets, further deepening social divisions and eroding fundamental human rights and dignity. Simply put, online hate constitutes a form of violence.

Research on online hate and its intersection with sports is still relatively new. Initially, the focus was on message boards and fan forums, with only six papers published before 2014. However, between 2015 and 2022, the number of related studies has significantly increased to over thirty-five, with X (formally Twitter 2006-2023) emerging as the most popular data source for researchers (Kearns et al., 2023). X, with its user base exceeding 300 million – predicted to reach 503 million users by 2028 (Statista, 2024), stands out as an open social

media platform facilitating direct and indirect communication among users, regardless of their social status or celebrity. The ease of accessibility and interconnectivity between fans, players, clubs, related groups, and influencers has made this medium a particular focus of attention for scholars (Williams et al., 2019).

Of those studies on sport, hate, and social media exchanges, several recurring themes emerge from the literature. Firstly, there's a discernible line between 'banter' and hate, where humour often blurs the boundaries between harmless jest and unwarranted violent abuse. For example, Millward (2008) examines this phenomenon concerning racism, Cleland (2018) regarding sexuality, and Pope et al (2022) regarding misogyny. Secondly, while some studies focus on the targeting of individual players (Doidge, 2015), others highlight broader targets such as marginalized groups (Love and Hughey, 2015). Thirdly, certain researchers underscore the communal nature of sports, where expressing hate garners support from peers despite facing criticism from others (Stick et al., 2021). Fourthly, some argue for the significance of anonymity, suggesting that users feel emboldened to express online hate in ways they might consider taboo offline (Page et al., 2016).

While there's currently no specific conceptual discussion on online football violence, it's worth noting the work of Kavanagh et al. (2016), who have developed a typology termed ‘virtual maltreatment in sport.’ They define this as behaviour that:

> encompasses direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulating, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional and psychological upset, distress, alarm, or feelings of inferiority (p.778).

Aligning with our earlier conception of violence, the authors delineate four primary forms of abuse prevalent in social media platforms, each presenting substantial risks to the psychological and individual well-being of users. Firstly, they underscore the concept of

‘virtual physical maltreatment,’ encompassing threats of physical harm intended to instil fear, or aggressive remarks aimed at causing emotional distress. Secondly, ‘virtual sexual maltreatment’ entails threats of sexual violence, including lewd comments and references to rape or assault. ‘Virtual emotional maltreatment,’ the third category, involves behaviours such as spreading rumours, ridicule, terrorizing, humiliation, belittlement, and scapegoating. Lastly, the typology identifies ‘virtual discriminatory maltreatment,’ comprising derogatory remarks targeting an individual’s social group based on factors like gender, race, religion, nationality, disability, and sexual orientation.

The typology presented by Kavanagh et al (2016) provides a useful framework for categorizing online violence and maltreatment. However, there remains a need for deeper exploration, particularly regarding its relevance to the evolution of football violence as a form of deviant leisure. Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by conducting a detailed analysis of these categories, specifically within the context of online football discourse.

The significance of this research is underscored by the alarming prevalence of online abuse within the Premier League during the 2020/21 season. The Professional Footballers' Association (2021) reported over 100 posts per month on platforms like X and Instagram containing direct discriminatory abuse and serious threats. Furthermore, two in five Premier League football players experienced vile and threatening abuse on X alone.

In response to what appears to be an escalating issue, various initiatives have been implemented to combat online hate. The Premier League has launched campaigns such as "Kick It Out" and "No Room for Racism" to raise awareness and address discriminatory exploitation. Additionally, measures such as extended football banning orders have been put in place to penalize online abusers. A notable action was the four-day social media boycott in

2021, aimed at pressuring platforms like X and Instagram to take more decisive action against online abuse.

By analyzing live discursive comments from three English Premier League matches, this study aims to provide insights into the complex dynamics of online football violence. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for informing effective interventions and strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of online hate within the football community.

Methods

This study utilized netnography to examine online discourse among football fans. Netnography is a qualitative research approach that adapts traditional ethnographic techniques to the study of online communities, practices, networks, and systems (Kozinets, 2010). It aims to understand cultural experiences reflected within social media contexts (Kozinets, 2019). This naturalistic approach enables researchers to analyze social interactions online, immersing themselves fully in the online environment to study social experiences in their everyday contexts (Kozinets, 2010). Netnographic research is often conducted covertly, allowing for participant anonymity and reducing researcher biases (Kozinets, 2010). The research team were experienced in netnography, ensuring the systematic gathering of relevant contextual information (Cleland et al., 2020).

A non-participant approach to data collection was employed in this study, adopting the role of a 'lurker' to avoid disturbing the field. This approach was chosen to ensure the integrity of the data needed to address the research aims effectively. The data were collected from X, a microblogging social media platform (X, 2022). X was selected for its public nature, making privacy concerns less problematic and facilitating access to data from large audiences. While other platforms such as fan forums, Instagram and Facebook were

considered, X provided an abundance of data on Premier League fixtures making it the preferred choice for exploring the topic of online football violence. In our initial examination of other popular platforms for example, it was found that Instagram posts during a match of the teams examined would get less than 100 user comments per post, with some getting as few as 21, in stark contrast to the user comments the same football clubs' posts on X would get (more than 200) when posted at the same time, making X the preferred social media platform for our study. At all times, the researchers closely adhered to the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers.

There are ethical considerations within any study of an ethnographic nature that must be engaged with, namely how those under observation are impacted by the data collection. When considering the use of data from internet sources, two main issues need scrutiny, data collection without the participants knowledge and harm derived from the collected data. In this study, the research team did not wish to adopt a more overt collection, for example by getting involved with discussions between fans or start their own discussion topics to illicit responses (Enyon et al, 2008). The aim of this study was to collect covert data from users of X without disturbing the field to allow for natural, undisturbed discussion to take place without revealing the identity of the research team (Roberts, 2015). A discussion to what was and what was not private and public data was also held (Griggs, 2011). Due to the publicly available tweets and responses on X (as the tweets came from unlocked accounts), it was also felt that the participants with unlocked accounts did not have the same level of privacy expectations.

Somewhat alarmingly, users of X, and other social media platforms have been tracked down through their postings with personal details revealed causing harm in the 'real word'. Therefore, in terms of harm derived from the collected data, it was necessary for those

participants to have their X handles removed, along with any other identifiable information to protect their confidentiality (Cleland, 2014).

This study aimed to collect archival data, defined as saved social networking site interactions spanning over time without direct involvement (Kozinets, 2014). The netnographic approach used in this study required minimal equipment, including a laptop, storage cloud, internet connection, and an X account. The researchers used their personal X accounts to collect data, adopting a covert stance. It is crucial to note that when collecting replies, this study did not delve into the profiles being researched but only identified their affiliation with English Premier League clubs through usernames, profile icons, or evident allegiance displayed in their interactions.

The study focused on online discourse during three English Premier League matches. Considering the risk of data overload, Kozinets (2019) suggests limiting transcribed data to 1000 double-spaced pages of text. Thus, analyzing three games was deemed sufficient for in-depth examination. Archival data was collected over three months until data saturation was reached where no new themes emerged (Kozinets, 2019).

The selected games were Manchester United versus Leeds United (20th February 2022), Tottenham Hotspur versus West Ham United (20th March 2022), and Chelsea versus Arsenal (20th April 2022). These games were selected primarily to coincide with the research team's readiness for data collection. Each game occurred on the 20th day of consecutive months during the data collection period. This scheduling enabled the team to collect, inspect, and organise the data before the next match. Coincidentally, all three matches selected represent significant rivalries for the respective clubs, largely due to the geographical proximity between the competing clubs. This provided an opportunity to explore fan communications during local derby matches, observing discussions from pre-match build-up

to the final whistle, as well as immediate post-match reactions. This approach closely replicated the match-day experience for fans, capturing the entire spectrum of emotions and interactions from start to finish.

Data were sourced from official accounts of football clubs and user replies, including '@ManUtd', '@LUFC', '@SpursOfficial', '@WestHam', '@ChelseaFC', and '@Arsenal'. The collection focused on tweets from pre-match build-up to immediate post-match analysis, allowing for variance in discourse. Only tweets and replies with emojis were included; photos, GIFs, and links were excluded for lack of contextual evidence. With an average of 14 tweets per club in each match, and an average of 246 user replies to each tweet, a total of 20664 tweets were collated and analysed for the study.

While a number of methods exist for the collection of data on X, such as the use of X (formerly Twitter) API and automated dashboard vendors (Chen et al., 2022), we adopted a manual approach of capturing screen shots of the data using a snipping tool application and subsequently transcribing the data. This approach was chosen for this study because of the abundant volume of data produced by Tweets, its ease, and its lack of associated costs. Tweets and transcriptions were transferred onto Microsoft Word and saved to a password encrypted cloud to guarantee privacy and data protection. The transcriptions were then thematically analysed.

Netnography employs an inductive approach to qualitative data analysis (Jong, 2019), making thematic analysis a suitable method for textual inquiry. This study adhered to Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step model, including: becoming familiar with the dataset; generating initial codes; identifying themes; reviewing potential themes; defining themes; and presenting results. Thematic coding facilitated the capture of relevant data features aligned with the research aims, while the identified themes provided a framework for organizing qualitative

data (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Intra- and inter-coding reliability were assessed, with researchers comparing their coding at different times and between themselves to enhance study reliability (Van den Hoonaard, 2008).

Findings and Discussion

Through the analysis of the data, four themes emerged from the online discourse during the selected Premier League games. While it was not the sole intention of the research to adhere to the taxonomy identified by Kavanagh et al (2016) for categorizing online violence and maltreatment, the researchers discovered that all emerging themes could be incorporated into this model. Consequently, the categories identified were as follows: ‘Virtual Physical Violence’, referring to physical violence, aggression, and masculine dominance; 'Virtual Sexual Violence', referring to explicit, offensive, and lewd terminology directly related to sexual contexts, including threats of sexual violence; 'Virtual Emotional Violence', referring to attempts to humiliate, belittle, or ridicule; and 'Virtual Discriminatory Violence', referring to slurs towards a minority social group. In what follows, we explore and explain each of these themes in more detail.

Virtual Physical Violence

“F**ing into the bastards today! I expect Carnage as a minimum”, wrote a Leeds United fan ahead of a match with Manchester United in February 2022. The cry was heard by others in cyberspace who responded in unison with the following communication: “Rip and tear boys”, “Hurt them”, “F**ing kill them” “Get into those disgusting bastards”, “Destroy them f**ers”, “Get some blood on your boots Leeds”, “Yes, F**ing INTO THEM TODAY LEEDS! NO F**ing ABOUT!”

Of course, violent rhetoric was met with a violent retort: Manchester United supporters responded with statements like "We are ready for war! Bring it on twats", "Let's hammer these bastards", "F**ing dickheads Leeds", and "Soft f**ing dickheads Leeds". There's nothing unusual in this exchange of views, and this is precisely the point. As with all elite-level fixtures, there is a rich history to draw on, and the rivalry between Leeds United and Manchester United, fuelled by the geographical proximity of the two clubs (approximately 40 miles apart), has historically been marked by high level competition and its accompanying hostility. Although there has been no violence in their respective stadiums since 1992, prior to the inauguration of the Premier League, virtual threats of physical violence persist in our late-modern sporting world. Of course, the violence displayed is only virtual, but this raises another question: what function does it serve?

Sports have long been regarded as a domain for cultivating masculinity (Walser, Fletcher & Magrath, 2021). For instance, the origins of many team sports can be traced back to the Muscular Christianity movement at the end of the 19th century, which emerged amid concerns that modern living was making men 'soft' (Gaston, Magrath, & Anderson, 2017). Anderson and White (2017) similarly argue that men's team sports emerged as a response to fears about male softness, offering men of the time a platform to showcase their physical prowess in a world that was becoming increasingly sanitized.

Likewise, focusing specifically on football cultures, Matthew Taylor (2008) explains that the performance of masculinity extended beyond the players themselves. It provided an opportunity for supporters of newly established professional teams to embody values of masculinity as they fulfilled their role of supporting their teams and defending the reputation of their locale from the ridicule of other ‘tough men’. Football fandom quickly evolved into a form of serious leisure (Manoli, Dixon, Antonopoulos, 2024), and for some, it became a form of deviant leisure, with football stadiums serving as arenas for breaking laws and engaging in

physical violence. But while such behaviour has largely disappeared from physical spaces, threats of physical violence persist online.

In the Arsenal vs Chelsea game, similar messages were exchanged: “Arsenal will die today”, wrote a Chelsea supporter. “Let’s kill them, come on the Blues!” wrote another. “Bunch of nob heads, yoos will get hurt today”, came the retort. The Tottenham Hotspur vs West Ham United game featured similar remarks again: “Soft lad, ready to get f**ed up?” wrote a Tottenham fan. “Haha Tottenham get battered everywhere they go”, came the retort.

The point here is that unanimously, through the threat of physical violence, fans online uphold the essence of toxic masculinity. This term, though popular, is often vaguely defined, but generally refers to the suppression of vulnerability and the promotion of aggression, dominance, and, in this case, threats of violence. Sports have long been implicated in fostering a form of masculinity that sociologist Raewyn Connell terms 'hegemonic'. In her 1990 essay 'An Iron Man', she connects sports to the teaching of masculine toughness, serving as a space for cultivating this character. Connell explains that there exists a dominant form of masculinity that emphasizes traits such as physical prowess, aggression, dominance, foul language, bravado, and misogyny. While we will delve deeper into the latter traits in subsequent sections, our evidence suggests that hegemonic masculinity is still prevalent in online conversations through the casual sharing of threats of physical violence.

Virtual Sexual Violence

Sexual violence emerged as a prevalent theme throughout all recorded conversations. The ease with which discourse promoting, glorifying, or encouraging acts of sexual assault, coercion, harassment, and exploitation occurred was evident across the sample. For instance, an Arsenal fan wrote, "Violation tonight is the only outcome, no lube and no love. It will be a

r*aping so prepare for a stingy-ring lads," ahead of their match with Chelsea. Predictably, a Chelsea supporter retorted, "We are spanking the @Arsenal ass tonight." Insinuations of rape often went unchallenged within the conversations and, on several occasions, they elicited replies that matched the crudeness of the original message.

Much of the rhetoric used in this sample carried sexual connotations, encompassing various scenarios. For instance, there were numerous references to oral sex, employed in different contexts. When Chelsea striker Timo Werner scored his goal, one Chelsea supporter remarked, "Anyone who said that #timowerner was shit cos he didn't score a lot of goals can suck my d**." Similarly, when discussing an impressive through-ball played by a Chelsea player, one fan remarked, "If Trent did that, people would be sucking him off," referring to Liverpool FC player Trent Alexander-Arnold. The insinuation being that Alexander-Arnold is overrated in the eyes of the mass media.

Likewise, when Manchester United scored in their game against Leeds United, one Manchester fan encouraged opposition fans to "SUCK ON THAT WANKERS hahah". Even the referee was "getting sucked off", said one Leeds fan and as per the rhythm of online chats, others tended to agree, claiming that the referee was favouring Manchester United. One Leeds fan offered a theory as to the favourable treatment: "McTominay got his bird to suck off the ref". Scot McTominay is a Manchester United football player who was playing in this match.

All these instances promote the use of sex acts in a violent context, potentially intending to demean. By treating sexual violence as a joke, participants are effectively belittling the serious implications that sexual violence has on individuals and society (Kavanagh et al., 2019; Glynn and Brown, 2023). Moreover, referring to women as 'birds,' as the last participant does (a common usage in English slang), objectifies women by likening

them to animals. This term reinforces patriarchal attitudes, suggesting that women are primarily valuable for the sexual pleasure of men. Such language supports the narrative of sexual violence and upholds the hegemonic authority of men. By using 'birds' to refer to women, individuals perpetuate the notion that women are lesser beings, which contributes to the broader societal issue of gender inequality and the normalization of disrespect towards women.

This study highlights yet another example of violence targeting females in virtual environments, a phenomenon that increasingly features in scholarly literature under various labels such as: e-bile, cyberviolence, gendered cyberhate, electronic aggression, online violence against women and online misogyny (Ging & Siapera, 2018). It is important to note that in the current study, much of the sexual violence speech was not necessarily directed at an identifiable individual per se. However, there is a clear understanding from the narratives that sexual violence is a degrading experience, yet participants unashamedly use it as ammunition to tease other fans.

The language of sexual violence extended into other contexts too. One Arsenal fan remarked, “I pray we don’t get d** too badly,” to which a Chelsea fan replied, “You are getting you’re a** drilled hard boy!” Making light of the comments, another Arsenal fan asked, “Use lube and be gentle on us?” Even admiration for players or managers was met with connotations of sexual violence: “I love Smith Rowe and would let him spank my wife any day!” wrote one Arsenal fan. Another had a straightforward message for Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta, “Shag me Mikel.”

The use of language associated with sexual violence is clearly not discouraged on this platform, and in fact, users appear to feel free to use it with impunity. But why? Using such

language in physical settings would seem unthinkable for many people, so why is it seemingly permissible online?

In his classic text, *Frame Analysis*, Erving Goffman (1974) uses the concept of 'key' to explain how individuals adjust their behaviour according to the social situations they find themselves in. Originally a musical term, 'key' emphasizes how musicians can alter the mood, emotion, or impact of a piece of music by changing key. In the context of the current paper, this concept holds importance on several levels.

First, evidenced through a history of violent incidents between and within football crowds, football cultures tend to operate in a different key from that of day-to-day life. As explained in the preceding section, football cultures historically provided spaces where hegemonic masculinity had a voice, and actions that might be permissible in sports crowds would be unthinkable in other social situations. However, while this historical context may have explained the reference to sexual violence in twentieth-century football stadiums, such behaviour is no longer tolerated in twenty-first-century stadia.

After all, there is growing evidence of multiple masculinities and liberal attitudes within twenty-first century sports cultures. For example, Dixon (2022) reported that 52 percent of his sample, composed of individuals with experience in men's football cultures, believed that football cultures were no longer oppressive, masculine environments. Gaston and colleagues (2017) also suggest that the social attitudes of sports crowds tend to reflect broader changes in social attitudes, ultimately leading to more liberal crowds. So, why does the evidence contradict this trend online? Once again, the concept of 'key' could provide the answer.

"On the internet, nobody knows you're a dog". This quote is from a famous cartoon, created by Peter Steiner and published in the New Yorker in 1993, featuring two dogs, one

sitting at a computer and speaking to another dog who is listening whilst sitting on the floor. Its aim is to acknowledge the potential pitfalls of the anonymity of the internet where you never really know who you are communicating with (Cashmore et al., 2018).

At first glance this example may not seem to translate directly to football discourse online, but on closer inspection, the underlying principle does. Anonymity encourages the conditions to nurture conversations that have the potential to adopt a more violent and sinister 'key' when compared to the physical setting of sports crowds (Page et al., 2016; Love and Hughey, 2015).

Online, sexually violent conversations occur frequently and under the veil of anonymity, thus reducing the likelihood of prosecution (Glynn and Brown, 2023). Specifically regarding X, Litchfield et al. (2018, p.13) reveal that sexualized threats of violence are prevalent within this virtual space, constituting a dark aspect of human behavior. They argue that "X can provide a complete abandonment of social restrictions that might otherwise be present in face-to-face interaction." Kilvington (2021) echoes this sentiment, drawing from Goffman's theoretical framework to explain how the anonymity of the internet blurs the boundaries between 'front stage' and 'backstage' thoughts, particularly in the context of hate speech. In other words, the online environment allows individuals to express themselves in ways that they might not in offline interactions, leading to heightened levels of aggression and hostility.

Moreover, if nobody to know you are a dog, then it is also possible for fans of violence to masquerade as fans of football online. In essence, similar to those physical spaces infiltrated by fans of violence over thirty years ago now, history might be repeating itself in the digital realm. It is at least conceivable that violent conversations online may not always

involve fans of football, but rather fans of violence who are attracted to new cultural spaces where violence can thrive without fear of repercussions.

Virtual Emotional Violence

Much emotional violence focused on ridicule, humiliation and belittlement was directed, not at other fans, but at the players themselves, with fans attacking players of both their own and the rival clubs. For example, a Leeds United fan wote, "Harry Maguire is a slab head pr**", targeting the Manchester United player. Arsenal fans criticized their own team's players with comments like "Ben White is shit" and "Ramsdale is shit." A West Ham fan expressed their views on a Tottenham player, saying, "Reguilon is an absolute fanny… disgusting garbage." Manchester United fans publicly criticized their players with remarks such as, "Luke Shaw is a fat shit" and "Lingard is a useless prick." Chelsea fans also added their own criticisms to their own players, stating, "Malang Sarr should get the f** out of my club" and "please look for some one-way tickets to the Ukraine for Sarr."

While no player was safe from virtual emotional violence, one player seemed to warrant special attention based on recent transgressions reported in the media. A social media video had recently surfaced featuring West Ham player Kurt Zouma being violent towards a cat. Despite the controversy surrounding the incident, he was selected to play in the featured match. Zouma was later sentenced to 180 hours of community service after admitting two counts of causing unnecessary suffering to a protected animal in June 2022 (Weaver, 2022). In the featured match, Zouma scored an own goal, prompting comments such as: "Meow! Zouma own goal. Cat-abusing wanker!", "Zouma #animal abuser #Fuck Zouma", and "Karma for a shameless club with an ignorant player. Being abusive to animals make you a man? Coward!" wrote Tottenham fans.

Such passages reveal a paradox in participant behaviour online. Fans engage in emotionally violent behaviour towards players, often through ridicule, humiliation, and belittlement, while simultaneously criticizing players for their own transgressions. It highlights a contradiction where fans feel justified in their own transgressive behaviour while condemning transgressions of players.

Further to this, findings reveal that the live action evokes emotions in fans online, which rapidly turns into violent rhetoric. For example, at the live match, Leeds United fans could be heard singing a disrespectful chant regarding the 1958 Munich air disaster in which 14 people died, including 8 first team Manchester United players, provoking the following comments from Manchester Fans: “Pricks! Singing Munich chants. Disgraceful scum”, “Dirty f** scum singing about Munich”. When Manchester United scored, more opportunities presented themselves. “HAHA SUII THE LEEDS SCUM GETTING WHAT THEY DESERVE FOR SINGING ABOUT MUNICH. Enjoy relegation nob-heads”.

Another in-match incident that had implications for emotional violence rhetoric coincided with the throwing of coins at Manchester United players at the live match. Comments from Manchester United fans included: “Scummy Leeds fans chucking coins again!”, “Leeds throwing their benefit money at Elanga… SHAMELESS”, “You’ll need those coins for your kids’ teas on the way home d**heads. Note: ‘shameless’, as it is used here refers to a British television series, ironically set in Manchester, about a dysfunctional working-class family.

These examples reflect a complex interplay of emotions evoked by live sports action, which swiftly transforms into violent rhetoric in online forums. Examples such as Leeds United fans singing disrespectful chants about the Munich air disaster and the subsequent retaliatory comments from opposing fans exemplify the volatile nature of online interactions

fuelled by live events. Moreover, incidents like the throwing of coins at players further exacerbate tensions, perpetuating a cycle of emotional violence. In essence, these passages illuminate the intricate dynamics of sports fan culture, where emotions run high, and online discourse becomes a battleground for conflicting sentiments and moral judgments.

Virtual Discriminatory Violence

Whilst there were examples of discriminatory violence within the sample, we must acknowledge that, when compared to other categories outlined in this paper, it was a fleeting presence only. For example, some of those tweeting in the name of Tottenham Hotspur, used discriminatory terms to describe their rivals, West Ham. “NO NOISE FROM THE PIKEY BOYS, NO NOISE FROM THE PIKEYS”, wrote one Tottenham fan. Following a goal, one fan declared “Have that Pikeys!” another gloated “Never in doubt Pikey boys”, while another concluded matters with “COYSSS beat the Pikeys!” COYS, translates to ‘Come on you spurs’.

It is difficult to ascertain the intent behind this slur in this context, though the aftermath of a match between West Ham and Tottenham in 2015 may hold some clues. As reported in the West Ham blog ‘Knees up Mother Brown’, police and the FA were to investigate offensive chants aimed at West Ham supporters which included reference to ‘Pikeys’. According to Kick it Out, football’s equality and inclusion organisation, Pikey is a derogatory term to refer to Roma traveller communities. It is considered offensive and disrespectful and is used in this context to insult West Ham fans as belonging to a ‘lower class’.

It is worth noting that there was no retort from West Ham fans regarding this slur. This is significant considering the history of discriminatory violence directed towards a faction of Tottenham fans in the past, with various rival fans using the term ‘Yid’ as a form of

anti-Semitic abuse (Poulton, 2016). The term "Yid" is a slang or colloquial term for a Jewish person, derived from the Yiddish word "Yid" or "Yidn," meaning "Jew" or "Jews" in the Yiddish language. Some Tottenham Hotspur fans have adopted the term "Yid" as a badge of pride or solidarity, reclaiming it from its derogatory origins.

The usage of the term within the Tottenham fan base is contentious, with some arguing that it is a form of self-empowerment and others asserting that it perpetuates stereotypes and can be offensive regardless of intent (Poulton and Durell, 2016). Tottenham fans in this sample, took the former view, typified by the following quote: “Let’s help our players with the Yid Army today #COYS”.

Within the sample there were only two other unchallenged instances of overt racism. One Chelsea fan said about his own player: “Malang Sarr has no business playing football. He should be somewhere in Africa repairing shoes”, and one Manchester united fan asked inquisitively: “why do black people always dance when they score a goal? I never see white dancing”.

All other instances of discrimination were met with rebuttal. For example, when a Leeds United fan stated, “Look at all the Africans”, a Manchester United fan responded sharply with, “fuck off you racist inbred cunt”. Similarly, when a Chelsea fan referred to an Arsenal player as a “retard”, another Chelsea fan quickly intervened with, “you can’t say that anymore mate”. Furthermore, when an Arsenal fan used the term ‘Artetaliban’ to describe manager Mikel Arteta’s tactical game, another Arsenal fan promptly challenged them, saying, “You are comparing our manager with a terrorist organization, wtf are u on about?!”

Similarly, when a Tottenham fan used the term “rent boy”, a West Ham fan reminded them of its homophobic nature, stating, “Homophobic ‘rent boy’ slur leaves fans open to prosecution, says Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)”, and attached a link to an article with

more detail. In response, the Tottenham fan retorted, “Not taking advice from racist Nazi-saluting Hitler-singing fans”.

In one example, the perpetrator of the offensive tweet provided his own rebuttal to clarify that he was not homophobic, stating, “Don’t include the porn hub snogging fest between you and the rent boys”, and later claiming, “nothing homophobic here – gays are on porn hub… facts only”.

The key point here, is that whilst there is evidence of discriminatory language through the online conversations, there is also evidence of a raised awareness of a growing intolerance of overt signs of discrimination in society more generally. Other scholars have discussed similar findings in sporting contexts. For example, Cleland et al (2023) analyze the presence of LGBTQ+ themed language amongst British football Fans at live matches, with results challenging the accusation that all fans are homophobic. Dixon et al. (2023) explore football fan attitudes towards ‘the knee’ protest and the anti-racism message, similarly challenging accusations of widespread racism among football fans. Of course, both scholars acknowledge that the issue of discrimination research should remain open until every last remnant of bigotry is eradicated from society.

In a recent paper, Dixon et al. (2023) utilize the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu to explain the paradox often found within sports cultures, where liberal attitudes and the partial acceptance of illiberal “banter” coexist within the same space. We contend that this approach is useful in the current context too.

There is a similar paradoxical position within football conversations on X, particularly regarding social transformation. To explain, football fans' behaviour is deeply entrenched in past traditions, with discriminatory rhetoric, often disguised as ‘humour’, shaping these norms (Glynn and Brown, 2023). However, pivotal changes in UK football in the early

1990s, influenced by events like the Hillsborough disaster, global media expansion, and football's integration into the entertainment industry, transformed the landscape. Introduction of all-seater stadiums, season tickets, and entertainment infusion reshaped the fan base, prompting confrontations with old habits and an aging habitus.

As UK football embraced a global perspective, fans have had to reassess their traditional behaviours, accelerated by broader movements toward inclusivity. This shift leads to what Bourdieu calls a state of 'hysteresis' within sub-cultures, where old dispositions struggled to align with the new context, prompting a process of 'raising consciousness' and habitus modification. However, change is never uniform, and this helps to explain the presence of diverse attitudes toward discriminatory violent language among fans in this study.

Limitations and further research

Despite the positive findings, the study did present limitations. The employed netnographic research method meant that the data collected from online profiles were assumed to be fans of the football clubs, thus, a note of caution is due. Exploring only three games was another limiting factor as such small sample sizes can undermine the validity of the study (Faber and Fonseca, 2014), bearing also in mind the potential peculiarities of the particular matches studied due to the rivalries and passion among the football clubs in question. Although, as previously stated netnography can produce a vast dataset potentially hindering the quality and depth of analysis (Kozinets, 2010), we also argue that these matches present themselves as interesting platforms for analysis of football violence precisely due to the rivalry and passion of the fans, which is due to generate additional fans' responses online, thus providing us with more data for our study.

Future research could explore different football matches, or even adopt a longitudinal approach, in which the study focuses on one single club and how the fans respond to its comments on X or other platforms throughout a whole season. In addition, the trustworthiness of this study could have been further reinforced with the implementation of data triangulation. Future research could therefore utilise other data collection methods, such as focus groups and online surveys or questionnaires, which could enhance the scope of research and help better capture the phenomenon studied. Successively, an exploration into online hooliganism with a greater sample or an inquiry into different teams, leagues or competitions would be beneficial in research and may aid further insights.

Conclusions

The findings from this study offer a comprehensive exploration of the various forms of violence prevalent in online football discourse, shedding light on the complex interplay of factors contributing to such behaviours. The virtual realm serves as a platform where fans engage in verbal violence, exhibiting characteristics of toxic masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, and discriminatory attitudes, often under the veil of anonymity. These behaviours manifest in threats of physical violence, sexual violence, emotional violence, and discriminatory violence, creating a contentious environment where hostile exchanges and derogatory language thrive as a form of deviant leisure.

The phenomenon of virtual physical violence, characterized by threats of harm and aggression towards rival teams, reflects a historical legacy of sports culture linked to notions of masculinity and physical prowess. Despite advancements in societal attitudes towards violence and masculinity in physical settings, the online space provides a refuge for the perpetuation of these traditional norms, facilitated by anonymity and a lack of accountability.

Similarly, virtual sexual violence emerges as a prevalent theme, with fans employing sexually explicit language and innuendos to demean opponents and express dominance. The normalization of such discourse trivializes the serious implications of sexual violence, perpetuating harmful attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

Emotional violence directed towards players underscores a paradoxical dynamic in which fans engage in transgressive derogatory language and belittlement while simultaneously condemning the transgressions of others. This contradiction highlights the complex interplay between fandom, moral judgment, and the emotional investment in sports.

Discriminatory violence, though less prevalent in this sample, remains a concerning aspect of online football discourse, reflecting underlying societal attitudes towards race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. However, there is evidence of growing intolerance towards overt discrimination, indicating a shifting cultural landscape within football fan communities.

All these forms that virtual football violence takes, as they were uncovered in this study, represent different manifestations of deviant leisure that appear online, once again challenging socially accepted norms, values, and ethical standards (Williams, 2009). The online space thus acts as another, and most importantly less restrictive platform, in which football violence not only occurs but at times prevails among fans' discussions. In this way, football violence has not diminished but evolved and moved to an online space, becoming what we call 'virtual football violence', while continuing to shape modern-day football fandom.

Theoretical frameworks such as Goffman's concept 'key', and Bourdieu's theory of practice, offer valuable insights into the paradoxical nature of fan behaviour's, highlighting the tension between traditional norms and evolving social attitudes. The authors suggest that this could be a fruitful avenue of exploration for academics seeking to develop a theoretical

model of virtual football violence. As football culture continues to evolve in response to broader societal changes, confronting and addressing the prevalence of violence in online discourse remains imperative.

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in curbing violence within stadium environments over the past three decades, the emergence of new spaces for deviant leisure online has presented fresh challenges. Live communications on X vividly illustrate that behaviour's largely deemed offensive and unacceptable in physical stadiums persist in virtual realms. Despite some evidence of social consciousness and pushback against discriminatory language, the prevalence of virtual violence remains concerning on multiple levels. It underscores the need for continued efforts to promote respectful discourse and foster inclusive environments both online and offline. As we navigate the complexities of sports fan culture in the digital age, addressing virtual violence must remain a priority to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants in sports communities.

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