Kicking It Out? Football Fans' Views of Anti-Racism Initiatives in English Football

Abstract

This article explores the views of 906 football fans (96% of whom self-identified as White), collected via an online survey from May-June 2019, regarding the impact of the leading equality and inclusion organization, Kick It Out, in delivering initiatives to challenge the multifaceted expressions of racism by some White English football fans. Whilst fans recognize the importance of raising awareness of racial discrimination, nearly three quarters of White fans do not engage with any Kick It Out initiatives. In the face of new challenges, including the largely unregulated space of social media, and a socio-political climate that has facilitated the resurgence of overtly expressed bigoted, colour and cultural-based racisms, the article stresses that the English football authorities must support the work of anti-racism organizations to increase their potency amongst White fans if racial discrimination is to be more effectively challenged in the future.

Research context

After the formation of the English Football Association (FA) in 1863, a pattern emerged that was to last for over 100 years; namely that English football was a game governed, played, and watched by mainly White men. Although Black players did play, including Arthur Wharton in the late nineteenth century and Walter Tull in the early twentieth century, the culture of English football was overwhelmingly White. It was only in the late twentieth century that there was a blurring of racial boundaries amongst players due to increased migration from the mid-twentieth century, which led to the emergence of first and second-generation Black footballers from the 1970s. Almost immediately, the majority were met with racial hostility through the presence of significant levels of overt racism, irrespective of performance, amongst the predominantly White fan base in attendance (Cashmore & Cleland, 2011).

To devise a public-facing means of opposing its continuation into the 1980s and 1990s, a national anti-racism campaign was launched by the Commission for Racial Equality and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) in 1993. Originally titled 'Let's Kick Racism Out Of Football' (before becoming 'Kick It Out' in 1997), it represented the first high-profile and targeted football-specific anti-racism campaign that aimed to 'eradicate racism and racist

language from football through the implementation of prescriptive written codes of conduct to which supporters had to adhere to while attending matches' (Cleland, 2016, p. 67).

Kick It Out, a registered charity, is widely recognized as English football's leading equality and inclusion organization and is active at every level of football, from the elite level down to the grassroots. The organization has helped raise awareness of racial discrimination in football, not only amongst fans, but also in relation to the under-representation of what has been termed BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) individuals in managerial, coaching, and administration positions across the professional and amateur game (see Bradbury, 2013; Bradbury & Conricode, 2020).

Despite it being over 25 years since the introduction of various initiatives seeking to address racial discrimination in English football, racial prejudice remains socially and culturally embedded as an empowering discourse for some White fans (Burdsey, 2014, 2021; Cleland & Cashmore, 2016). One of the reasons for this is that the practice of contemporary fandom in England remains located in a historical White football identity where stadia continue to be predominantly White spaces (Lawrence & Davis, 2019). For example, figures released to the authors by the English Premier League (EPL) from its annual consumers research for the 2018/19 season showed that just 15% of those attending EPL matches were from the BAME adult population (personal communication, 2020).

Given the centrality of a White identity within English football fandom, this article foregrounds the views of 906 football fans (96% of whom self-identified as White) to three important research questions surrounding the presence of racisms in English football and the current initiatives in place to challenge it: (1) What are fans' opinions on the impact of Kick It Out in tackling the presence of racisms in English football?; (2) How far do fans engage with the work of Kick It Out?; (3) What do fans think can be done to combat the various expressions of racisms in English football in the future?

We use the term 'racisms' to denote how various ethnic groups might experience racism in different ways and by different means, 'since racism is both partial and complex and its expressions are flexible and diffuse' (Bradbury, 2002, p. 17). Indeed, Hylton (2009, p. 6) advocates for a move away from the rather 'flabby' use of the term 'racism' given the plurality of racisms in postmodern times. For instance, both overt and covert expressions of racism in English football manifest in a multiplicity of ways and spaces by some White fans, including those based on biological phenotypes such as skin color and, on cultural differences underpinned by an imaginary definition of the nation as a cultural community often united by whiteness (Spaaij & Viñas, 2005). As Back et al. (2001, p. 9) remind us: 'there is no one monolithic racism but numerous […] situated racisms.'

After analyzing the results, we believe the significance of this research is four-fold. Firstly, it provides empirical insights into how mostly White football fans view anti-racism efforts in English football. Secondly, it challenges the dominant assumption that anti-racism practices in English football possess the necessary resources to tackle the different ways in which racisms are being expressed by some White fans. Thirdly, it exposes how the persistent lack of meaningful action taken against the presence of racisms by the English football authorities, who possess the power to implement positive change, is a precarious vote for the status-quo of whiteness to remain unchallenged. And fourthly, it argues that anti-racism organizations, football authorities, and social media organizations must include more drastic interventions and punishments to challenge expressions of racisms in the future.

English football and whiteness

For a number of 'race' scholars (see, for example, Bradbury, 2013; Bradbury et al., 2018; Burdsey, 2011, 2021; Hylton, 2018; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015; Lawrence, 2016, 2017; Lawrence & Davis, 2019), whiteness is a central concept in examining racisms in English football. Of particular relevance for this article is how Hylton and Lawrence (2015, p. 766)

refer to ‘white people as a social category and whiteness as a racialized process’ that affords power and privileges to only those bodies perceived as White. Explaining this further, Frankenburg (1993, p. 237) describes how ‘‘whiteness’ signals the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage.’

To help understand this, Hylton and Lawrence (2015) outline how it is important to consider the notion of white supremacy, not in the sense of crude and hostile acts of racial hatred (such as far-right nationalists and neo-Nazi sympathizers), but to examine how it operates in more subtle, hidden, and pervasive forms. White supremacy can be understood as an ideology which ‘places into motion a set of policies, practices, and beliefs that ensures the dominance of White identity and advantage over all other identities’ (Mowatt, 2009, p. 511). In football, racial inequality has retained a pervasive presence across international and continental governing bodies and national associations, club boardrooms, non-playing staff members at clubs, the media, and supporters (Cleland & Cashmore, 2014). In some ways this color-blindness – where Whites deny or ignore any marginalization or disadvantage felt by non-Whites – results in the continuation of racialized practices and structures (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Indeed, as Gillborn (2005) argues, ignorance normalizes the existence of whiteness and is perhaps the worst incarnation of White supremacy.

For English football fans, traditional notions of whiteness and masculinity have pervaded through the generations since the late nineteenth century and could be a reason why 83% of 2,500 fans surveyed by Cleland and Cashmore (2014) stated how racism remains culturally embedded in football. Thus, Sallaz’s (2010, p. 296) contention that ‘individuals who came of age in one racial formation will tend to generate practices that simultaneously preserve entrenched racial schemata’ has legitimacy in explaining the racial practice of English football fandom. This is illustrated in Lawrence’s (2016, p. 293) exploration of supporters of Walsall

Football Club, who refer to a discourse and performance of whiteness through a form of collective remembering located in 'a historically and culturally white, working-class, (masculine) culture.'

It is pertinent to reflect on the historic symbolization of white masculinity in football for hundreds of millions of boys ever since it became a regulated game in 1863 and was subsequently diffused across the world during the period of British (and European) colonialization (Cleland, 2015). Emerging at a time of rapid urbanization and industrialization, the display of masculine characteristics (including the demonstration of power, courage, strength, skill, and bravery) quickly became engrained in generations of boys and men that subsequently continued throughout the twentieth century (Cashmore & Cleland, 2014).

In explaining the subsequent intersection of masculinity and whiteness across English football, Cleland and Cashmore (2016, p. 40) refer to the existence of a 'white habitus' which 'normalizes whiteness by giving power and specific social and cultural profits to white supporters through their participation in the game.' Given the historical dominance of whiteness from a playing and spectating perspective, for some White male fans, English football continues to provide a platform for overt expressions of racism. Indeed, multiple examples have occurred in recent years, including the online racist abuse directed towards three of England's Black players, Marcus Rashford, Jordan Sancho, and Bukayo Saka, after all three missed penalties in the Euro 2020 final defeat to Italy (MacInnes & Duncan, 2021).

As Burdsey (2021) illustrates, the current racialized socio-political climate in the UK, namely in relation to the decision to leave the European Union in 2016, has (re)elevated racial divisions to the surface with more frequent occurrence, particularly on the internet. Not surprisingly, this presents further challenges to the role of anti-racism organizations in football such as Kick It Out, as well as those operating outside of the sporting/football context such as the Runnymede Trust or the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.

On a global scale, the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement – driven by the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in 2020 – reverberated throughout the sport. Indeed, the EPL's immediate response to the BLM movement was to replace players names on the back of their shirts with the phrase *Black Lives Matter*, whilst simultaneously supporting players who knelt before matches. However, the EPL reversed this decision and replaced the BLM iconography with the slogan 'No Room For Racism' at the beginning of the 2020/21 season (MacInnes, 2020).

Launched in 2019, 'No Room For Racism' is a campaign run by the EPL which aims to eliminate racial discrimination from football stadia and on the internet. However, as we discuss later, institutional approaches to racism require a proactive, long-term strategy rather than reactive public relations exercises (Hylton, 2021). This is particularly true in English football, as despite the Chief Executive of the EPL, Richard Masters, stating 'Discrimination in any form, anywhere, is wholly unacceptable and 'No Room for Racism' makes our zero-tolerance stance clear' (Reuters, 2020), overt expressions of racism directed towards players still exist, particularly on social media sites like Twitter and Instagram. Not only are attacks more frequent on social media, they are also more offensive because of the faceless process of communication. This was a point Burdsey (2011, p. 7) raised when he stated how racism now operates 'in complex, nuanced and often covert ways that go under the radar of football authorities and beyond the capacities of anti-racist groups.'

Kick It Out and anti-racism initiatives in English football

Kick It Out is the most recognizable organization committed to tackling racisms in English football, with Gardiner and Welch (2011, p. 227) stating how it is a 'crucial component in promulgating education and attitude-changing initiatives.' Since its inception, Kick It Out has worked to promote awareness of the benefits of inclusion and diversity in football, as well as challenging all aspects of discrimination at all levels of the game. It has deployed multiple anti-

racism initiatives intended to combat racist ideologies amongst the mostly White fan base and encourage social transformation through its educational work with clubs, players, managers, stewards, fans, and communities. For instance, it has delivered a range of equality workshops with these different groups of stakeholders on key issues surrounding racial discrimination, underrepresentation, and stereotypes. In addition, Kick It Out also introduced a smartphone application in 2013 that enables fans to anonymously report incidents of discriminatory abuse that they experience or witness at football matches.

As outlined with the examples we used earlier, despite the introduction of various Kick It Out initiatives, overt expressions of racism inside stadia and on the internet continue to be directed at players from various levels of the game and has resulted in criticism from fans, players, and media outlets. In April 2019, for instance, several Reading players refused to wear Kick It Out branded t-shirts during their warm-up against Hull City as they were reported to have lost faith in the organization in influencing behavior change amongst White fans (Ashton, 2019). Likewise, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, Manchester City player, Raheem Sterling, stated that 'wearing [anti-racism] t-shirts is not enough to combat racism' (Bachman, 2019).

In their analysis of the reasons behind the continued presence of racisms in English football, Cleland and Cashmore (2014) stated how 79% of their mostly White participants believed Kick It Out had only been partially effective in tackling racial inequality. One of the reasons behind this, according to Randhawa (2011), is how the organization is 'politically comprised' because of its reliance on key funding partners, such as the FA, PFA, and EPL. Indeed, the Kick It Out chairman, Sanjay Bhandari, stated in November 2019 that the organization's engagement with the whole football industry is compromised through their annual budget of approximately £800,000 only allowing them to employ 18 staff members (Magowan, 2019). Making up this budget is funding from a combination of the FA and PFA,

which collectively subsidized approximately £250,000, while the EPL contributed no more than £270,000 (The Guardian, 2019).

This budget, however, will increase as a result of a new partnership between Kick It Out and the main satellite subscription UK broadcaster of EPL matches, Sky, until 2024. In addition to committing a total of £3m to Kick It Out's budget, Sky is promoting educational initiatives and making it easier for people to report incidents of racial discrimination, both on the internet and inside football stadia (Kick It Out, 2020). However, it is worth highlighting the financial disparity between the wealth of clubs in the EPL and the money distributed towards tackling discrimination. For example, Ludvigsen (2019) reports how the EPL acquired a television broadcasting deal worth £4.464bn in 2018.

Method

To address the three research questions raised earlier, our methodological approach was to use an online survey to gather responses from fans across England. The use of online surveys has proven an effective method in numerous research projects examining a multitude of social issues in sport (see Cashmore & Cleland, 2011; Cleland & Cashmore, 2018; Knight et al., 2016). This process started after the lead author developed a relationship with moderators of more than 50 English football fan message boards who provided permission to use their respective platforms for academic research purposes.

Following the ethical guidelines established by The Association of Internet Researchers, the lead author wrote an opening post on each of the fan message boards explaining how the study was looking to gather anonymous responses (no personally identifiable details were asked from participants outside of their sex, age, and ethnicity) concerning fans' views, experiences, and engagement with the work of Kick It Out. Contained within the post was a link to the online survey and this subsequently presented those fans who clicked on the link with a participation information sheet outlining a more detailed overview

of the project, the contact details of the lead researcher, the ethical considerations relative to the research project, including the level of confidentiality provided to participants and how their data would be stored. In doing so, this approach avoided any 'identity deception' (Cleland et al., 2020) as it enabled potential participants to voluntarily consent to providing their views by proceeding with the survey questions. For those participants who did proceed, at the end of the survey they were reminded that they were providing informed consent when they clicked 'submit' to register their views.

Located within the online survey were a number of closed and open-ended questions. The closed questions primarily focused on demographic information such as the sex, age, and ethnicity of the participants in addition to several 'yes', 'no' or 'don't know' questions based on fans' engagement and experiences with the work of Kick It Out. The open-ended questions asked participants to share in more detail their views and experiences of Kick It Out and how the organization could better engage with fans as well as identify any strategies that English football could adopt in challenging racisms in the future.

The research was purposely conducted from May 2019 to June 2019 as the season had just ended and it allowed fans to reflect on their experiences without the influence of matches taking place. In this timeframe, the total number of responses recorded was 906. The demographic breakdown of the participants illustrated that 93% identified as male; 96% as White; 2% as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and 2% as Asian/British Asian; 16% were aged 18-29; 16% were aged 30-39; 20% were aged 40-49; 22% were aged 50-59 and 26% were aged 60+.

Although the research had an in-built bias towards those who had internet access, the fact that the internet is regularly available on computers, smartphones, and other electronic devices via mobile networks, was considered an acceptable bias. It also allowed the participants to complete it in their own time in an open and honest way knowing that their responses would

be anonymous. On the other hand, as well as providing advantages, the self-selection nature of online surveys has the potential to create an inflated bias in the findings (Cleland et al., 2020). One way we sought to reduce this was by engaging with over 50 fan message boards from all over England. Moreover, despite capturing a large number of responses, we make no claim to be representative of all English football fans, but the results do provide a significant empirical account of mostly White football fans' views and experiences of the impact of Kick It Out in tackling racisms in English football.

Even though the qualitative paradigm attains primacy in presenting the data below, Bryman (2015) explains that the combination of methodological practices and techniques can enhance the depth, richness, and rigor of research findings. In analyzing the quantitative data, a statistical breakdown illustrated the key descriptive results of the closed questions. With regards to analyzing the qualitative data, it was initially undertaken independently by each author who began identifying patterns and commonalities via an inductive approach of manual open coding across first-order and second-order phases, where multiple layers of data were broken down and eventually located into more significant thematic categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once complete, the authors then collaborated together in a process of interpretation and verification that subsequently identified three recurring themes that informs the results section of this article: (1) the effectiveness of Kick It Out in tackling racisms in English football; (2) football fan engagement with Kick It Out; and (3) revising anti-racism initiatives.

The effectiveness of Kick It Out in tackling racisms in English football

Since its inception, Kick It Out has demonstrated the successes and challenges of anti-racism initiatives in English football. There have undoubtedly been positive outcomes that have resulted from the work of Kick It Out, with some White participants praising the organization for its contribution in reducing the extent of overt racism in English football stadia over a period of time. As one Huddersfield Town fan (White, male, aged 30-39) indicated: 'Kick It Out is

part of wider government policy that has increased the awareness of racism and has helped to educate society and football.' Likewise, in reference to the extensiveness of overt racism that existed before anti-racism initiatives were implemented from 1993, a Doncaster Rovers fan (White, male, aged 60+) noted: 'Without being complacent, we have come a long way in the last 25 years, and this is undoubtedly down to the work of Kick It Out.'

Reflections like these support the view that Kick It Out has strengthened the narrative of racial progress in English professional football since the turn of the 21st century. Indeed, Burdsey (2021) outlines that the very consensus of racial progress regarding the 'containment' or 'decline' of overt racism has paradoxically instilled color-blind suppositions among many fans, players, clubs, and governing authorities. Thus, while the existence of Kick It Out signifies the presence of active anti-racism structures, the continuation of overt and covert racisms at all levels of the game illustrates the recurrent challenges facing English football.

Considering this, our participants were asked to share their views on the effectiveness of Kick It Out in challenging the presence of racisms in English football. Overall, 83% of our White participants stated that Kick It Out has only been moderately effective in this task. One key issue raised was the lack of a cohesive understanding of what Kick It Out aspire to achieve. For example, echoing the thoughts of many of our White participants, this Sheffield United fan (White, male, 18-29) stated: 'Kick It Out make people think about the issue of racism. Although they don't provide the detail, we see banners in stadiums, but what are we actually challenging?' For participants like this, Kick It Out's limited delivery of its key aims and objectives present challenges to the effectiveness of the anti-racism message that it is seeking to convey. On this point, Lawrence (2017, p. 145) illustrates: 'how do we say 'no' to something if we do not collectively understand what we are saying 'no' to?' – a view shared by this Walsall fan (White, male, aged 30-39):

> Kick It Out don't do enough visible work with the average fan; they don't make it clear how they aim to change things; they just react to incidents that have already happened.

Reflecting views like this, in an interview in 2018, Troy Townsend, Kick It Out's education manager, stated that football's response to racial discrimination is 'too slow' and the relevant authorities are not 'advocating change' (Morgan, 2018). In fact, such diminutive progress in recent years has raised significant questions regarding the implementation of the anti-racism message as well as anti-racism policy and legislation (Dixon et al., 2016). This was also a feature of our data, with this Rochdale fan (White, male, aged 30-39) reflecting the thoughts of many White participants:

> I don't think Kick It Out do enough. It's just a name, a logo and a poster. I don't see the actual work they are doing to tackle racism. They simply hold no authority and are, therefore, powerless. Their equality policy means nothing without punishments for offenders.

In contrast, however, one female Fulham fan (White, aged 40-49) suggested that any criticism was unfair considering the limited resources Kick It Out are working with to deliver an anti-discriminatory message across the whole country: 'No organization can be proactive without full financial backing.' Equally, this Crystal Palace (British Asian, male, aged 30-39) fan stated: 'Kick It Out have reached their limit with the current resources they have.' As Hylton (2010; 2020) contends, while social change requires a strategic, proactive, and radical approach, in the absence of collaborative and sustained action and support from key stakeholders within the governing structures of football, little change will occur. Indeed, Randhawa (2011, p. 245) maintains that for Kick It Out to be more effective in challenging racisms:

> …they must strive to be an independent voice which challenges the football hierarchy. This can only be achieved if they develop strategies to become self-sustaining and not reliant on key stakeholder support.

Building upon this point, Burdsey (2021, p. 26) argues, 'the most substantial impediments to implementing more effective anti-racism measures in English football are the unequal power dynamics and expedient relationship between anti-discrimination bodies and the professional game'. Hence, because anti-racism organizations like Kick It Out do not possess a genuine

regulatory mandate in English football, they are unable to hold the game's governing bodies, clubs, and players accountable for their actions. This view was also reflected by the responses of some of our White participants who argued that the lack of a tangible commitment towards challenging racisms (or other forms of discrimination) by English football's key stakeholders illustrates how limited Kick It Out is in its efforts to provide an effective challenge to bring about social change. For this male Cheltenham Town fan (White, aged 30-39), Kick It Out must be more proactive in the way it delivers the anti-racism message for it to have a bigger impact on the discourse and behavior of White fans: 'Kick It Out appear to be mainly reactive instead of proactive. They only appear after a player or fan has been racially abused.' Similarly, this Birmingham City fan (White, male, aged 30-39) stated:

> The only time I hear about Kick It Out is when it puts out reactive statements condemning already committed acts of racial abuse which by that stage is pointless. They [Kick It Out] don't have a high enough profile to aggressively challenge clubs and the FA to influence supporter behavior.

As we highlighted earlier, in the multi-billion pound business of English football, most notably the EPL (Ludvigsen, 2019), the combined payments to Kick It Out from the key governing bodies leaves the organization with limited financial powers to fully engage in an approach to influence social change amongst White fans. For Hylton (2010), this type of scenario can be referred to as one of 'interest convergence', where anti-racism sentiments from English football's governing bodies are often 'reactive' to incidents of racism that ostensibly advance the interests of racial equality but, in reality, produce little evidence of any long-lasting behavior change amongst those White fans who harbor racist thoughts and are willing to express them publicly.

Lawrence (2017) suggests it is only when the resources and capacity to deliver race equality education through football are in place, and once the football industry recognizes the different ways in which racisms are being expressed, can Kick It Out begin to effectively bring about sustainable social and behavioral change. As Cleland (2016) contends, despite the

organization's current educational work with fans, players, and club affiliates, it has become increasingly challenging to oppose *all* White individuals internalized racial dispositions and enforce behavior change amongst those White fans continuing to express racist thoughts. Thus, whilst it is impossible to stop some White fans thinking negatively about 'race', the challenge is to stop these thoughts from manifesting into racist behaviors, discourse, or actions in public spaces (such as football stadia) and on social media platforms (Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; Kilvington & Price, 2018, 2019). Whilst we must recognize the increased visibility of anti-racism messaging through the recent partnership between Kick It Out and Sky, it is beyond the scope of this article to draw any conclusions as to the impact this will have on racial discrimination in English football.

Football fan engagement with Kick It Out

In order for the multifaceted expressions of racism in football to be challenged effectively, it requires collaborative action from all sectors of the football industry, including anti-racism organizations, policy makers, governing bodies, the media, politicians, clubs, players, and fans (Doidge, 2014, 2017). From a more specific standpoint, Burdsey (2015) illustrates how fans must be positioned at the vanguard of anti-discrimination for it to have a greater chance of being effective. As argued by Cleland and Cashmore (2014), all too often the relevant English authorities and anti-racism organizations have failed to successfully engage with the game's key stakeholders – the fans – particularly White fans given their significant presence in English football (as highlighted earlier by match day figures captured by the authors from the EPL's annual consumers research for the 2018/19 season).

The normalization of a White identity in English football fandom could be a reason why 73% of our White participants stated they have not engaged with any of Kick It Out's initiatives. This finding reflected the thoughts of Doidge (2017), who highlights how Kick It Out tend to be viewed as distant from fan groups, which can lead to a sense of resentment from

some White fans. Such resentment was evident across the responses, with this Oxford United fan (White, male, aged 30-39) typifying the mood amongst a number of our White participants:

> I feel Kick It Out alienate many fans with their pronouncements and attitude. I certainly don't condone racist abuse, but they feel more like a political organization than anything.

Several other White participants noted how Kick It Out could do more to promote the anti-racism message and engage with fan groups directly: 'Kick It Out should be more involved with individual fan groups', said one Liverpool fan (White, male, aged 18-29), whilst this Newcastle United supporter (White, male, aged 30-39) believed Kick It Out should 'encourage clubs to reach out better to fans.' On this point, club-specific anti-racism approaches across Europe are working directly with fans to educate them about the impact of racial discrimination. In Germany, for instance, fan projects are part-funded by clubs and regional authorities and operate as social work schemes (see Doidge, 2014, 2017). Using Borussia Dortmund as an example, anti-racism workshops and other football-related activities are overseen by fans on match days and are attended by star players of the club. Doidge (2014, 2017) illustrates how these projects operate as a nexus between the clubs, authorities, and fans and help to depoliticize the anti-racism message as fans remain loyal to the club, rather than the football authorities or anti-racism organizations.

In developing ways to enhance these relationships across other countries such as in England, Gardiner and Welch (2011) claim that the introduction of a coherent bottom-up approach that is spearheaded by clubs in partnership with anti-racism organizations could be deployed to mobilize the involvement of White football fans and help to foster attitude changing initiatives. However, for Garcia and Zheng (2017), this must be complemented with a top-down approach that is supported by the respective government and the relevant football governing bodies if the manifestation of racisms are to be challenged more effectively. Educational schemes designed by Kick It Out but disseminated via football clubs may provide one alternative approach for engaging with White fans and challenging the multifaceted

expressions of racism in English football, but given that nearly three quarters of White fans in this research do not engage with any of Kick It Out's initiatives this would be a significant challenge. Some of our White participants, such as this Mansfield Town fan (White, female, aged 40-49), felt it would be better directed to the younger generation of White fans:

> There's a generation of White fans that think racist abuse is acceptable, and it would be difficult to engage these fans. But work could be undertaken to better educate younger fans through football sessions in schools, after school clubs or at the local football club.

In theory this suggestion is valid, but in practice it could be difficult to achieve, particularly given Dixon et al.'s (2016) argument that the long-term effectiveness of school education programs is questionable when considering the effect of outside influences (e.g. peers, parents, media, and football role models) as well as pressures to do with the longer-term funding of these projects. With these challenges facing anti-racism projects, they argue that one-off educational sessions do little to suppress the momentum of the cultural penetration concerning racist views and tend to have limited impact on those taking part. As a result, the normativity of whiteness and process of racialization within the culture of English football fandom continues to remain largely unchallenged (as suggested by Cleland & Cashmore, 2014, 2016; Hylton & Lawrence, 2015; Lawrence, 2016; Lawrence & Davis, 2019).

Another way Kick It Out promote the anti-racism message and attempt to involve football fans is through the 'Kick It Out' smartphone application that was officially launched at the start of the 2012/13 season. Kilvington (2019b) explains how the application provides a robust reporting system that plays a significant role in encouraging fans to self-police and report incidents of discrimination. Indeed, this new measure facilitated a 269% increase in discriminatory reports during its first season in operation (Magrath & Stott, 2019), with reports subsequently increasing on an annual basis as more fans became aware of the application (Kick It Out, 2019).

Across the data, several White participants praised the application because of its ease of use and functionality: 'It actually encourages self-policing and helps those who are perhaps a bit quiet to act on whatever has been said because its anonymous', said this MK Dons fan (White, male, aged 40-49), whilst this Grimsby Town fan (White, male, aged 40-49) shared similar thoughts: 'I believe reporting an incident via the app increases the likelihood of it being dealt with, rather than simply reporting it to a steward.'

These participants were amongst the 23% of our White participants who were aware of the application and its capacity to report incidents of discrimination. Again, however, such findings reinforce the disconnect between Kick It Out and White fans, with this Wolves fan (White, male, aged 18-29) typifying the response by some of our White participants: 'It hasn't been promoted enough. All clubs should endorse the usage of the app; this way, people will be aware of it and potentially use it', whilst this Walsall (White, male, aged 18-29) fan stated: 'I haven't seen anything that advertises the app within the stadium – people aren't aware of it.' This is despite the widespread promotion of the application at football stadia in England, on television, and via social media, and reinforces Gillborn's (2005) explanation of White supremacy as White fans remain either unaware or ignorant of the application and, in doing so, further normalizes the existence and continuation of whiteness within the context of English football fandom.

In their study on anti-homophobia and football, Magrath and Stott (2019) discovered that it was a lack of confidence in the eventual outcome that discouraged fans from reporting incidents of discrimination. These views were also reflected by some of our Black participants, with one Brighton and Hove Albion fan (Black British, male, aged 40-49) stating: 'Reporting racial discrimination doesn't tackle racism in itself; that's down to how it's dealt with, and the relevant authorities are not dealing with it.' To address this, a number of participants suggested

that clear and concise punishments should be imposed to instill greater confidence in the reporting process – another recurring theme across our data that we now turn to.

Revising anti-racism initiatives

Considering the various testimonies already presented in this article, it is evident that a majority of our White participants think Kick It Out does not possess the necessary resources and authority to challenge the multifaceted ways in which racism can be now expressed on its own. While various interventions have delivered some success, the fact that discussions of racism are still very much on the agenda suggests alternative approaches must be seriously considered. Supporting the need for a review of strategy by the relevant governing bodies, 69% of our White participants believed English football should change the way it currently challenges racisms. Although Kick It Out promote racial equality, inclusion and diversity and deliver measures to achieve such outcomes, fans know they hold no authoritarian capacity to enforce punishments of any kind and are unable to make the game's governing bodies, clubs, and fans accountable. This current scenario was noted by one Newcastle United (White, male, aged 40-49) fan who stated:

> Although Kick It Out may raise awareness of racism, they have no power to tackle the issue. It was great to start with, but they have reached their limit unless they become self-sufficient and are able to implement legislation.

Likewise, this Huddersfield Town fan (White, male, aged 40-49) was also very skeptical of the impact Kick It Out can achieve in its current form:

> Kick It Out cannot take action against the perpetrators of racism. Therefore, they aren't fit for purpose, and a stronger approach is needed with people actively encouraged to report incidents to an authority that will act.

In fact, the future role of Kick It Out was brought into further dispute when the EPL launched an anti-racism campaign entitled 'No Room For Racism' in 2019, where it was widely reported that the EPL did not consult Kick It Out before implementing the campaign (Cunningham, 2019). Such claims support the conclusion of Dixon et al. (2016), who argue that the very

existence of anti-discrimination organizations is under threat as the task of tackling the different expressions of racisms are, perhaps, too great considering their current lack of resources and subsequent inability to employ more staff. Reflecting on the constraints, some participants felt that Kick It Out should continue to perform a supplementary role and focus exclusively on education, reporting and recording incidents, raising awareness, and providing support for victims. By way of illustration was this response from a Doncaster Rovers fan (White, male, aged 60+) who argued: 'Kick It Out should continue to provide support strategies for clubs, fans and victims', whilst this Crystal Palace fan (Black British, male, aged 40-49) explained: 'Kick It Out should educate fans on what racism is and why it is so harmful.'

Kilvington and Price (2018) advocate that Kick It Out must not be discounted entirely from any future role in anti-discrimination because of its relationship with influential organizations who hold the capacity to authorize positive change. Indeed, some of our participants sought to absolve Kick It Out of any responsibility for the increase in racist behavior. Instead, they demanded stronger action to be taken by the football authorities, most notably the English FA, but also from social media companies such as Twitter and Instagram to halt the spread of online racism. As this Manchester United supporter (British Asian, male, aged 18-29) illustrated:

> Racism occurs regularly on social media, which may be due to increased anonymity on platforms like Twitter and Instagram. It usually occurs between fans or against players, but little is ever done about it.

It has been widely documented that the largely unregulated space of social media has enabled racism to flourish online (see Cleland, 2014, 2017; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Kilvington & Price, 2018, 2019). Until recently, calls for the tightened regulation of social media companies have resulted in little change. However, in July 2021, British government officials including the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, brought forward discussions of the UK Online Safety Bill to enable the government to issue fines to social media companies who fail to remove

discriminative posts from their platforms. However, it remains to be seen whether social media companies can rectify what Kilvington and Price (2019, p. 76) say are 'systematic failings in their efforts' to halt the widespread expression of racisms towards members of BAME communities across the football industry. Until social media companies take action to combat racism, the idea that these platforms are White-only spaces will remain in place (Farrington et al., 2015). In turn, the often-unchallenged ubiquity of racism on social media platforms such as Twitter strengthens the presentation of football's White racial frame (Cleland, 2014) and exposes the challenges facing organizations such as Kick It Out.

At the heart of these discussions, for some of our participants, was the need for stern punishments to be implemented that discourage any fan, player, or club from committing acts of racial discrimination, either on social media or at a football stadium. For one Blackpool (White, male, aged 50-59) fan: 'Football should be prepared to challenge underlying issues that encourage or empower racists. Clubs and authorities must develop and impose zero-tolerance policies.' Similarly, this Brentford fan (Black British, male, aged 30-39) argued:

> Clubs should have points deducted and be forced to play games behind closed doors, and fans should be banned if they are found guilty of racism in football stadia or on social media.

Despite views like this being a feature in the data, for other participants, the prospect of these sanctions being deployed consistently, however, is unlikely. As one Grimsby Town fan (White, male, aged 50-59) indicated:

> Football's governing bodies should be doing more to challenge racism through proper sanctions. Currently, the punishments FIFA, UEFA or the FA give out are inconsistent and meaningless to those involved. Essentially, if the authorities don't care, who will?

On this point, Lawrence (2017) refers to the shortcomings associated with color-blindness, as organizations who adopt a liberal approach to tackling racisms – such as the FA, FIFA, and UEFA – struggle to acknowledge that whiteness remains a central dominating principle in professional football. Likewise, scholars such as Back et al. (2001), Burdsey (2011, 2014; 2021), Cleland and Cashmore (2014) and Kilvington (2019a, 2019b) all maintain that

expressions of racial inequality in English football are deeply embedded in the game's institutions.

In her work on policies and practices in institutions, Ahmed (2012) argues that whilst there is usually a focus on diversity and inclusivity, there is often a lack of meaningful action or genuine commitment for change. Parry et al. (2021) refer to this as 'aspirational speech acts' that are often more concerned with the positive presentation of an inclusive image. In the case of English football, it is often too easy for stakeholders such as the FA and the EPL – and its member clubs – to align themselves with the anti-racism message without engaging beyond symbolic means and demonstrating a tangible commitment to achieving cultural and institutional change within the game. Conversely, while 'real' punishments for offenders must be imposed to help deter incidents of overt racism from occurring (Cleland, 2016), Gardiner and Riches (2016) argue that we cannot expect law and prosecution to resolve the issue on its own.

One way of addressing this is by challenging the relative homogeneity of whiteness that exists across the football industry (including the media), not just within the fan base. Within our data, several White participants emphasized how a greater presence of BAME individuals in football institutions could help reform racial stereotypes amongst White fans. For instance, this MK Dons fan (White, male, aged 18-29) indicated: 'Football as an establishment should look to better reflect society in the mix of people fulfilling roles in governance, administration and also coaching and management', whilst this Walsall fan (White, male, aged 30-39) disclosed: 'There remains a lack of BAME representatives at board-level, and this must be addressed.'

As outlined by Bradbury et al. (2018, p. 18), responses like this reflect the 'invisibility, centrality and normativity of hegemonic whiteness embedded within the senior organizational tiers of the professional football industry.' In turn, this subsequently adds to the plurality of

institutional and culturally coded forms of racisms existing across English football. Other participants also reflected on the role the media plays in challenging the relative homogeneity of whiteness in the culture of football. By way of illustration was this response by a Grimsby Town fan (White, male, aged 30-39): 'Football reporting media organizations should be investigated to see how many non-white people they have in senior roles.'

Addressing this issue at managerial and coaching levels was raised by a Wycombe Wanderers fan (White, male, aged 30-39): 'The Rooney Rule should be made mandatory for all English clubs to ensure BAME coaches and managers get a fair chance.' The permanent implementation of the Rooney Rule in the English Football League (EFL) (a policy that emerged in the National Football League in the United States in 2003 and named after the then owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers, Dan Rooney, stipulating that at least one ethnic minority candidate be shortlisted when recruiting for a senior coaching role) requires all 72 EFL clubs to interview – if an application is received – at least one BAME candidate for all managerial and senior coaching roles.

As illustrated by Lusted (2017), this demonstrates a progressive move that can start to challenge the White racial hegemony in the structures and subcultures of the professional game in England. On this point, Bradbury (2013), Bradbury et al. (2018) and Kilvington (2019b) all maintain that the implementation of action measures such as target setting and quotas would significantly help to 'open up' access for suitably qualified BAME candidates. Accordingly, if the number of these individuals in leadership, management, and boardroom positions across all of English football's institutions grow, progress would be made towards destabilizing the White hegemonic power relations which maintain the status quo of discriminatory social practices and possibly be reflected in a greater purpose behind anti-racism initiatives.

Although, as Burdsey (2021, p. 38) explains, the FA (and other football organizations) create an illusion of diversity through the visible inclusion of BAME individuals in limited

roles (such as advisory boards or coaching positions), rather than 'transforming occupational structures or the design and delivery of the organisation's programmes.' Without a more radical, long-term shift concerning ethics, values, and culture, the work of diversity advisory boards in English football become more about 'impression management rather than social change' (Burdsey, 2021, p. 38). As a result, organizations such as the English FA, it could be argued, continue to engage in 'practices and policies that perpetuate systemic whiteness' (Mayorga-Gallo, 2019, p. 1791).

Conclusion

This article has provided a significant empirical account of mostly White fans' views of English football's leading anti-racism organization – Kick It Out – and the future role of anti-racism initiatives. The article has challenged the dominant assumption that anti-racism practices in English football possess the necessary resources to tackle the different ways in which racisms are being expressed by some White fans. In addition to this, the article has exposed how the persistent lack of meaningful action taken against the multiple manifestations of racisms by the English football authorities, as well as social media organizations, is a precarious vote for the status-quo. As such, our findings suggest more drastic interventions and punishments are needed to challenge expressions of racisms in the future. These findings are sociologically important because they demonstrate how the presence of anti-racism initiatives, including the current work of Kick It Out, do little to challenge the hegemonic whiteness existing within the structures and subcultures of the professional game in England.

Overall, our findings illustrate three fundamental issues underpinning the challenges faced by Kick It Out: (1) its financial reliance on key stakeholders such as the FA, PFA and EPL for, albeit limited, resources, and subsequent lack of independence that these relationships bring; (2) its inability to implement anti-racism legislation and punishments towards offenders; and (3) its inability to effectively engage with individual White fans and fan groups to instill

behavior change inside stadia and in the online spaces that an increasing number of White fans now inhabit.

Across English football, a white racial hegemony not only exists within the organizational structures of governing bodies and clubs, but also within its fan base given that only 15% of spectators at EPL games in 2018/19 were from a BAME background (personal communication, 2020). Moreover, the fact that nearly three quarters of our White participants do not engage with any Kick It Out initiatives highlights the potential shortcomings associated with anti-racism practices (see Berman & Paradies, 2010). This color-blind approach to racialization (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), where White fans fail to understand or ignore any sense of racial inequality as a problem is likely to have a significant effect in maintaining football fandom as a White activity that continues to express the historic normalization and privileges associated with whiteness. Thus, nearly twenty years later, our results continue to reflect the thoughts of Long and Hylton (2002, p. 97) who concluded from their own analysis of whiteness in sport that 'the normalization of whiteness continues, even where resistance from campaigns is making a difference.'

In their analysis of the impact of anti-racism legislation in sport, Long and Spracklen (2011) outline how it has only been partial, with inconsistent commitments to racial equality. However, in other international contexts, members of the civil society (i.e. White fans and fan groups) have gone beyond anti-racism legislation and developed bottom-up initiatives to try and combat its presence. From a European perspective, Kassimeris (2009) and Doidge (2014) provide examples of how fans and advocacy groups, such as Football Supporters Europe, Supporters Direct, Football Unites Racism Divides, and Football Against Racism in Europe exchange information and strategies about combatting racial discrimination.

As Llopis-Goig (2013) indicates, fan-led initiatives like *Football Without Borders* encourages fans to confront expressions of overt racism in football stadia and work with

governing bodies to produce educational workshops and campaigns against discrimination. In Spanish football, for example, the fight against the multifaceted expressions of racism that now exist consists of a continuous effort from various participants, including effective governmental intervention and those emerging from the civil society (Llopis-Goig, 2013; Spaaij & Viñas, 2005). Likewise, Doidge (2014) refers to the formation in 1992 of the anti-racism/fascism organization in Poland, Never Again, that collaborates with the Polish FA and its member clubs to promote multiculturalism by engaging in a range of anti-racism activities and campaigns inside stadia as well as on the internet targeted towards reducing discrimination. Although these approaches have not led to the full eradication of racism in their respective countries, they are still viewed as a way forward to better engage with fans – as we alluded to earlier with specific examples from Germany (see Doidge, 2014, 2017). However, in the case of English football, these approaches remain less visible.

Although some of our participants argue Kick It Out is invaluable because of its relationship with organizations who hold the capacity to authorize positive change, a large number of White participants stressed that as long as Kick It Out remain subordinate to the English FA, it can achieve little beyond promulgating education, reporting and recording incidents, raising awareness and providing support for victims. Coupled with a lack of financial investment in the organization by the game's key governing bodies, this raises serious questions about English football's genuine commitment to tackling the ways in which racisms are commonly expressed.

In essence, as Hylton (2016) points out, the football industry continues to stockpile the problem for a later date and, as a consequence, the central issues surrounding the continued presence of racisms in English football remain relatively unchallenged. To begin with, we suggest Kick It Out should strive to be more proactive in promoting BAME participation, while simultaneously applying pressure on various areas of the football industry to promote racial

equality and dismantle the deep-rooted nature of whiteness in the structures of football that continue to exist. This includes applying pressure on the game's key governing authorities to promote racial equality.

Fundamentally, however, to engender behavior change amongst those White fans harboring racist views and willing to publicly express them, the English FA, in particular, must take greater strategic and robust action. While it is crucial to impose concrete measures and punishments across the football industry to discourage any fan, player, or clubs from committing acts of racial bigotry (Gardiner & Riches, 2016), the football authorities must do more to support the work of anti-racism organizations and supply additional resources to increase their potency in the eyes of White football fans. However, it seems the English FA are preoccupied with internal regulatory issues (see Poulton, 2020), including their own lack of diversity which, as we have suggested, contributes to maintaining the status quo of discriminatory social practices in English football (see Burdsey, 2021). In turn, the normativity of hegemonic whiteness embedded in English football's key power brokers has enabled them to overlook 'race' (through the color-blind approach we referred to earlier) and disregard its influences on the social actions and behavior of White fans. At present, reports of overt racism in English football are surfacing with increasing occurrence. Until the football authorities recognize the ways in which racisms are being expressed and are willing to facilitate change, coupled with the indolent work of social media companies, the likelihood of it continuing to stain the 'beautiful game' remains inevitable.

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