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Hate speech on social media: behaviour of Portuguese football fans on Facebook

Sandra Miranda^a, Célia Gouveia^b, Branco Di Fátima^c and Ana Cristina Antunes^d

^aSocial Sciences Department, Escola Superior de Comunicação Social (ESCS-IPL), Lisbon, Portugal; ^bCommunication Sciences Department, Centro de Investigação E Estudos de Sociologia (CIES-IUL), Lisbon, Portugal; ^cLabCom - Universidade da Beira Interior (UBI), Covilhã, Portugal; ^dHuman Sciences Department, Escola Superior de Comunicação Social (ESCS-IPL), Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This article examines how Facebook is shaping the nature of hate speech. The observation field is the Facebook pages of the 18 Portuguese football clubs of the Portuguese League – the main professional competition in the country. Data extraction was performed automatically via Facebook Graph API in the first three months of the 2020/2021 season. The analysed dataset has 5,192 publications and 276,231 fan comments, which registered over 5 million reactions (like, haha, love, sad, wow, etc.). The findings reveal that the volume of hate speech material on Facebook pages has a low incidence. In any case, the most significant comments are racists, xenophobes, and regional antagonisms. These cases are also the ones that have attracted the most reactions from fans.

Introduction

Hate speech emerged in the 1970s as a major problem for the world of sports and remains until today. In January 2013, Kevin-Prince Boateng, A.C. Milan's Ghanaian midfielder, walked off the pitch in a friendly match against Pro Patria club. He had received sustained xenophobic abuse from the home fans and was supported by his teammates in his decision to leave the field. In Portugal, in February 2020, the FC Porto player Marega, from Mali, left the pitch before the referee's final whistle, visibly upset, no one could stop him – not even the coach. He had heard racist chants from the opponents' team supporters, to which Marega also returned signs of displeasure to the stands by turning his thumbs down.

Although hate speech has become more policed in stadiums, these examples show that incidents do not only occur in physical spaces. In recent years, hate speech has gone beyond these physical temples of football and has found a new field on which social media platforms thrive.¹ As a result, hate speech has gained a new nature and duration, bringing more visibility to these issues, especially, when it is used to target players.

The UEFA Euro 2020, had been partnered by off-field conflict over the anti-racist “taking the knee” practiced by most of the teams, especially the England team. However, in the penalty shoot-out that saw Italy defeat England, the skill of the goalkeepers was overshadowed by the perceived failure of the English players who missed their shots. Three young players – Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka – were subjected to torrents of racist online abuse.²

Once again in FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 France's Coman and Aurelien Tchouameni have been subjected to online racist abuse after missing their penalties in the final against Argentina. They were bombarded with vile messages – including monkey and banana emojis.³

These cases have shown how athletes around the world experience widespread hate speech. The insults may be associated with sports performances, an athlete's personal conduct, or the team with which an athlete may be associated, it has become a systemic prejudice, particularly on social media. Social media and digital technologies have had a significant effect on traditional methods of fan-athlete interaction,⁴ sports teams and athletes connect with audiences creating a social media experience.⁵ Real-time interaction occurs and fans do not need to attend events to experience a sense of connection.⁶

This paper examines how Facebook is shaping hate speech, from the pages of the 18 Portuguese (PT) football clubs of the Premier League (PL). Data extraction was performed automatically via Facebook Graph API in the first three months of the 2020/2021 season. The dataset has 5,192 posts and 276,231 comments, which registered over 5 million reactions. The theoretical framework is divided into two sections. The first examines the issue of hate speech has been viewed as merely an extension of wider concerns about public order and anti-social fan behaviour. The second provides some concepts of virtual communities and cyberhate to explore the online culture that has emerged around diverse hate speech, such as racism, xenophobia, homophobia, incitement to violence, etc.

“Us” versus “Them” social configuration

Sport brings people together. It contributes to health and well-being, breaking down barriers and building trust and community spirit. However, it can also exacerbate tensions or rivalries and foster discrimination against certain categories of the population.⁷ Football presents itself as a fertile ground to think about the complex interindividual, group, and communicative processes, with all its inherent socio-psychological phenomena.⁸ It is considered a space to expressonging and communal identities,⁹ for developing peer and prosocial relationships, build relationships across cultural boundaries,¹⁰ and create strong or even extreme forms of social cohesion.¹¹

Since it inevitably produces the “Us” versus “Them” social configuration, football also gives rise to intergroup conflicts, outgroup hate, intergroup violence,¹² and other collective action tendencies elicited by the negative perception of outgroup members.¹³ Football can embody a popular aesthetic of collective endeavour, but it can also encourage prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, and ethnocentrism.¹⁴ It can bring different cultures together in a common celebration, but it can also provide the basis for forms of abusive language, such as “hate speech”, encompassing all expressions and manifestations of racism, xenophobia, and homophobia (in addition to many other prejudices).¹⁵

In recent decades, a vigorous academic discussion has evolved hate speech. Not surprisingly, academic attention has focused largely on racism within the structure of football.¹⁶ Thus, Burdsey¹⁷ argues that the focus on racism by the relevant organizations is very superficial, selective, and ultimately “colour-blind”. Accordingly, King¹⁸ states that racism in football is nothing more than a mirror of racism in society.

In general, the current literature suggests ambiguity in hate speech. It is therefore, commonly defined as spreading, inciting, or promoting hatred, violence, and discrimination against an individual or group based on their protected characteristics, which include “race”, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, among other social demarcations.¹⁹ However, for the identification of content as hateful, is that there is no universally accepted deflagration of hate speech, mainly due to vague and subjective determinations about whether speech is “offensive” or conveys “hate”.²⁰

Looking across football, the issue of hate speech identified some elements of racism underlying many common sports-related notions such as “temperament, sexuality, athletic ability, and

aesthetic preferences”.²¹ Even today, fans express hate attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours in sports contexts in a manner that mainly resembles and reproduces stereotypes still present in society.²²

Long²³ points out that despite the conspicuous incidents in football that grab the headlines, everyday hate speech is insidious and very difficult to address. For example, Bale,²⁴ argues that these forms of abuse are often located within fan rivalries. Therefore, racism, xenophobia, or homophobia can be excused on the basis that they occur as a result of the highly charged nature of competition. To deny rivals takes part in this ritual²⁵ and highlighting what we dislike is reasserting what we are not.²⁶ Abuse is therefore widely targeting those who do not fit into what is called “a structure of antipathy”.²⁷

Looking at football, hate speech has not been relegated to the distant past. However, if in the past the hate manifestations include banners, banana throw, monkey-like chanting and derisive singing in matches, today this phenomenon is more complex.²⁸ In contemporary football, as a result of information societies, people use technology in an almost automated way, making racist or xenophobic abuse openly expressed within the digital culture.²⁹ Thus, hate speech has gained a new nature and duration, bringing more visibility to these behaviours.

Cyberhate in the football arena

The exponential growth of social media has brought with it an increasing propagation of hate speech, increasingly engaging new practices with old ones. While hate speech and discrimination have always been problems in sports, the growth of social media has seen them exacerbated exponentially.³⁰ The digital arena has brought more visibility to hate speech, roasting, flaming, and trolling,³¹ thrives on including through covert tactics such as the weaponization of memes.³²

Accordingly, despite numerous campaigns, initiatives, and movements aimed at combating hate speech, it remains, has made online hate diffusion a serious problem.³³ The rise of anti-social and morally questionable behaviour in such online spaces poses wider questions concerning the acceptance of abuse and what means an acceptable leisure behaviour.³⁴

Social media can be both friend or foe in combating racism, xenophobia, regionalism, or homophobia. These social phenomena take many forms and significantly differ based on socio-cultural context³⁵; accordingly, social media can act as an echo chamber,³⁶ propagating and amplifying their negative effects.³⁷ On the one hand, cyberspace allows or even makes inevitable the fragmentation of identity, meaning that ongoing engagement has allowed individuals to cycle through different characters, genders, races, and other assorted identities.³⁸ In practice, this means, as Perry and Olsson³⁹ claim, that those with embedded biases may find affirmation on social media. On the other hand, there is an understanding that alongside these fragmenting tendencies, the online community interaction also reinforces tolerance.⁴⁰

However, Cyberspace is proving itself a practical tool for users’ communities motivated by cyberhate, which have quickly learned to harness this medium and take advantage of its benefits through systematic and rational use.⁴¹ Usually, these are communities composed of extremist organizations, groupings, and individuals presenting themselves to new audiences, recruiting activists, and emerging from a relatively clandestine existence.⁴²

As a result, European initiatives aimed at identifying the problem have emerged. The European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia⁴³ found, for example, that 10.0% of websites managed by football fans expressed racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic views. This report revealed that Italy and Spain have a higher number of racist websites, whereas France and Portugal had a lower incidence of racism.⁴⁴

The literature on cyberhate on social media, its evolution, and contemporary cultural transmission, is vast.⁴⁵ However, there is no standard definition of what is cyberhate. It follows a long-term strategy and usually targets one or several opposing groups. But, although there are unifying characteristics and functions, there is also a lot of internal variation between different cases of cyberhate.⁴⁶ As a result, it has been argued that the

Internet fosters the globalization of cyberhate, as users work together and build virtual communities across national borders extending its unifying principle to the full range of transnational ideologies.

In contrast to other hateful forms of online communication, cyberhate is typically embedded in the actions of larger and more enduring hate movements or campaigns.⁴⁷ These are targeted at whole groups defined by criteria such as ethnicity, gender, religion, race, and not a single victim. Therefore, cyberhate usually has specific characteristics, defined functions, and is strategically planned.⁴⁸

Online life and cyberhate are both constructed cultural phenomena, not products of nature; are made up of ongoing process of definition, performance, enactment, and identity creation.⁴⁹ Just as cyberspace is not a place, but rather a locus around which coalesce a hypertext of texts, modes of social interaction, commercial interests, and other discursive practices, so too race or gender need to be understood as categories created by narratives and social performance.⁵⁰

The advent of online publications and websites has provided clubs with a means of controlling the official information flows.⁵¹ However, in fandom's case, Millward⁵² points out that "relatively little is understood about the impact of the Internet". Even the behaviour of fans on Facebook – one of the oldest social media still in operation – remains understudied.⁵³

Method and data

This paper examines how Facebook is shaping hate speech, from the pages of the 18 PT football clubs of the PL. The methodological procedure is based on a quantitative approach, consisting of three distinct moments – data extraction, mining, and visualization, in a logic-based on the big data paradigm.⁵⁴ The sample is composed of data from the Facebook fan pages of the 18 clubs from the PL – the main professional competition in Portugal. The research question says: What is the frequency and hate narratives in PT football on Facebook?

A comprehensive set of Facebook data was used, mainly for three reasons: i) among PT social media users, Facebook is the platform with the highest penetration, ii) its utilization is transversal to all clubs and updated more frequently, iii) and gathers the highest number of fan page followers compared to other platforms, such as Twitter or Instagram.

Data extraction was performed automatically via Facebook Graph API, from the ID of the fan pages and the publications, with the help of Facepager parameters.⁵⁵ The sample covers the first three months of the 2020/2021 football season, between September 18th and 17 December 2020. The extracted data is very diverse, such as the clubs' posts, the date of publication, the URL address of the posts, ID, the followers' comments, the number, and type of fans' reactions per post (likes, shares, love, angry, sad, wow, etc.). The scope of this research is also founded on digital methods,⁵⁶ with social data that displays the actual behaviours of Facebook users rather than their representations.

A list of 78 expressions commonly used in cyberhate was constructed through the analysis of this dataset and specialized literature on PT toxic language on social media.⁵⁷ The list was organized into six large categories: personalities, origin, ethnicity, animals, appearance, and others. The goal was to map the universe of potentially hate speech vocabulary in football, based on data mining. The list included terms directly associated with racism or xenophobia in the PT language (Chinaman, monkey, slum, nigger, etc.), but also other expressions that could give a more detailed and less visible reading of the phenomenon, such as banana, hair, yellow, gringo, skin, cockroach, etc.

The next stage consisted in submitting the original dataset to a two-step mining process. In the first one, with the help of an algorithm developed in Visual Basic, the textual variables were crossed with the list of potential hate speech expressions. At this point, the algorithm filtered, in full, the texts that presented at least one term from the list. In the second phase, all terms identified by the algorithm were selected for all 18 clubs in the sample. From there, these texts were read, evaluated, and categorized.

The procedure to visualize the results followed a comparative approach between fan pages. The data were treated with different filters and algorithms in open-source software. To calculate engagement, the standard Facebook formula was used: comments + likes + shares ÷ followers × 100.⁵⁸ Voyant Tools was used to ascertain the frequency of terms and calculate the vocabulary density. In this case, a list of the stopwords in PT was applied to filter out expressions without semantic content, such as articles, prepositions, numerals, etc.

The Gephi statistical package was used for the network narrative. Modularity was calculated, which groups the associated terms, and Force Atlas 2 algorithm was applied, which approximates the expressions within the clusters by the number of associations.⁵⁹ Given the characteristics of this study, ethical issues were considered. Data was extracted globally and aggregated, to comply with the Data Protection Regulation, operation in the European Union.

Findings: the new nature of hate speech

The 18 clubs of the PT PL have a very diverse reach, ranging from FC Porto, with more than 4 million followers on Facebook, to B SAD, with less than 7 thousand fans. Table 1 reveals that, in total, almost 12 million profiles follow these fan pages, a number that expresses the impact of football on the PT scene (the PT population is estimated at 10,5 million). The followers tend to reflect the size of the organized supporters, but also indexes of access to technologies and possible cases of digital fracture. Clubs from big cities and places with well-established information structures tend to have pages with more followers.

In the first few months of the season, clubs made 5,192 Facebook posts. The ranking is led by Nacional (424), from Madeira Island, followed by Benfica (418) and Sporting (399), two big clubs from the PT capital, Rio Ave (367) and FC Porto (357), the biggest team from the north of the country. These results may reflect the workforce employed by the clubs' communication departments in managing social media. It is noteworthy that three of the top five places are from the clubs with the most investment made in strategic communication and with the biggest budgets in Portugal.

However, the data also reveals that the fan engagement rate is not only associated with the number of followers and frequency of publications. Smaller pages, like Vitória SC (1.68) and Portimonense (1.80) engaged more than twice as many fans, in proportional values, than Sporting (0.70), FC Porto (0.43), or Benfica (0.33). The phenomenon can occur for many

Table 1. Followers, posts and engagement by team.

Team	Followers (n)	Posts (n)	Engagement (%)
FC Porto	4,101,553	357	0.43
Benfica	3,750,194	418	0.33
Sporting	2,558,077	399	0.70
Braga	326,144	333	0.71
Vitória SC	183,815	334	1.68
Boavista	151,028	134	0.77
Rio Ave	130,810	367	0.85
Marítimo	130,553	322	0.33
Portimonense	130,151	261	1.80
Gil Vicente	92,136	274	1.29
Paços de Ferreira	92,054	248	0.68
Tondela	62,998	273	0.32
Famalicão	59,526	265	1.10
Santa Clara	49,017	283	1.00
Farense	46,040	244	1.66
Nacional	44,722	424	0.66
Moreirense	35,210	134	0.36
B SAD	6,860	122	0.98
Total	11,950,888	5,192	0.87

Source: Facebook Graph API.

reasons (a good moment of the club in the league, for example), but mainly by the ability of the page to produce social media content perceived as relevant by its online community. The perception of relevance is indicated by the fans' engagement with the content. [Table 2](#) presents the absolute number of shares, comments, and reactions (like, angry, sad, wow, etc.) on pages. It is important to note that these metrics are not weighted by the clubs' followers.

Engagement reflects the behaviour of networked fans when they express a reaction, a share, or a comment. In many cases, they assume themselves as manifestations anchored in historical and political roots, social trends, and community – the fan likes something because it also reflects his identity. It is about the affirmation of subcultures of supporters that incorporate their identity senses in an exacerbated way.⁶⁰ At this point, the biggest clubs – Sporting, FC Porto, Benfica – exceed one million reactions each, while other clubs, such as Moreirense or B SAD, have a few thousand reactions. This same phenomenon can also be seen in shares and comments. The comments are particularly important because they allow mapping the discourses of the followers, to measure the different expressions of cyberhate, especially racism, homophobia, and xenophobia against fans, players, referees, coaches, etc. These comments can also contribute to the creation or reinforcement of a negative public perception of certain social groups, such as individuals from different countries or social attributes.

Fans wrote almost 280 thousand comments on the pages of PT football clubs, with an emphasis on the biggest national teams. From the database, the algorithm identified 6,651 potentially hate speech comments, which represented 2.4% of the sample. Those comments contained at least one of the 78 words identified as toxic language in the PT established list. From there, artificial intelligence gave way to human validation, with the reading and analysis of the comments identified automatically. The final data would confirm the researchers' initial surprise. Only 422 comments, or 0.15% of the universe, were directly associated with cyberhate. [Figure 1](#) shows the distribution of hate comments.

Xenophobic insults against foreign players and fans, especially South Americans, Africans, and Asians lead the hate speech in Portugal (183, 43.4%). Racist comments (97, 23.0%) and regional antagonisms (94, 22.3%) have almost the same reach, followed by sexist discourses (28, 6.6%). Interestingly, there are also comments against hate speech (13, 3.1%), which strongly condemn attacks on gender, race, sexual orientation, and toxic jokes.

Table 2. Reactions, shares and comments by team.

Team	Reactions (n)	Shares (n)	Comments (n)
Sporting	1,671,839	68,911	59,945
FC Porto	1,628,716	70,304	56,556
Benfica	1,100,810	42,695	79,731
Vitória SC	290,687	9,913	7,921
Braga	212,591	10,492	8,546
Portimonense	208,021	5,925	20,287
Rio Ave	105,675	1,977	3,980
Gil Vicente	103,887	2,880	11,761
Boavista	102,095	6,246	8,223
Farense	68,406	4,889	3,085
Famalicão	59,450	3,415	2,522
Paços de Ferreira	56,587	2,965	2,829
Santa Clara	44,911	1,830	2,089
Marítimo	38,691	1,796	2,946
Nacional	25,024	900	3,403
Tondela	18,262	822	1,130
Moreirense	11,515	450	797
B SAD	5,983	244	480
Total	5,753,150	236,654	276,231

Source: Facebook Graph API.

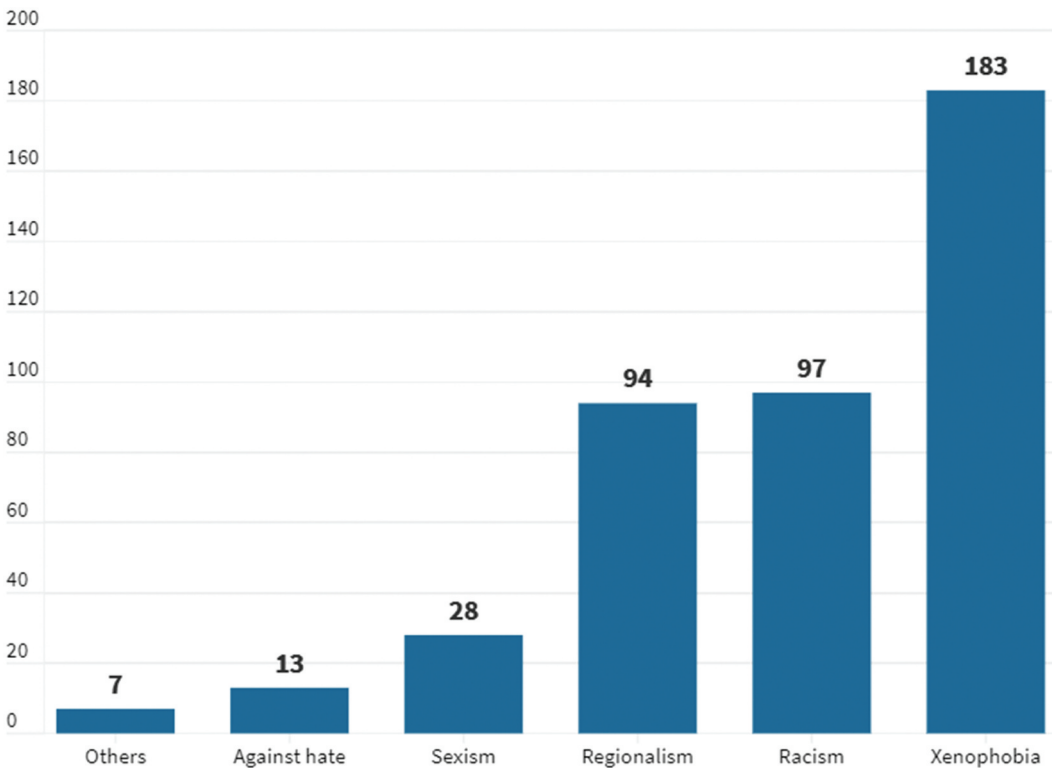


Figure 1. Distribution of hate comments by type of attack ($n = 422$).

Some comments were categorized as others (7, 1.7%). These texts group different types of hate expressions, but mainly violent speeches, such as “now to be perfect it is Otamerdas (contraction of player surname Nicolás Otamendi and the word crap) to appear floating in a black bag”.

The main results present important findings. It goes against the studies that indicated the growth of hate speech on social media. In fact, only a small portion of the PT comments could be categorized as hate speech. However, it does not mean that there is no reason for concern. On social media platforms, this type of speech can take various forms, such as veiled support or disguised jokes, reactions, or emojis. Table 3 compares the average number of likes in general comments and hate comments.

A significant difference was found between the two types of like reactions. On average, each general comment received 0.88 like, while each hate comment got 1.81. These findings suggest a new nature for hate speech. Although the total number of openly racist, sexist, or xenophobic comments is low, the support for these statements tends to be much higher than for the remaining general content. Thus, hatred as an expression of the collective is more visible. This is like saying: I am not racist. . . but that [racist] comment even makes sense. Data from some clubs reinforce this hypothesis: Vitória SC (6.89), Famalicão (6.00), and Boavista (4.85).

Situations without hate comments and reactions were also identified, for example at clubs like Tondela or B SAD. However, in general, the data shows almost twice as many reactions to hate comments.

If racism, homophobia, or xenophobia immerses on social media as a phenomenon associated with football, it would be interesting to try to unravel the meaning of such discourses. What are the most recurrent words? How are the words associated? Who are the preferential targets of these hate

Table 3. General comments versus hate comments by team.

Team	General Comments		Hate Comments	
	Frequency	Average likes	Frequency	Average likes
FC Porto	56,556	0.80	72	1.63
Benfica	79,731	1.27	233	1.95
Sporting	59,945	2.07	10	0.50
Braga	8,546	0.66	7	0.86
Vitória SC	7,921	1.38	9	6.89
Boavista	8,223	1.54	33	4.85
Rio Ave	3,980	0.60	17	1.35
Marítimo	2,946	0.78	10	1.10
Portimonense	20,287	0.44	19	2.21
Gil Vicente	11,761	0.48	2	1.50
Paços de Ferreira	2,829	0.60	3	0.67
Tondela	1,130	0.35	0	0.00
Famalicão	2,522	0.79	1	6.00
Santa Clara	2,089	0.59	0	0.00
Farense	3,085	1.08	0	0.00
Nacional	3,403	0.34	3	0.67
Moreirense	797	0.89	3	2.33
B SAD	480	1.10	0	0.00
Total	276,231	0.88	422	1.81

Source: Facebook Graph API.

attacks? [Figure 2](#) shows the network graph, based on the most frequent words, of the general comments of fans of the clubs.

In the network graph above, the vertices represent the words, and the edges represent their associations. Thus, it is possible to see the vocabulary domain of PT fans on Facebook. Colours organize data by modularity, or clusters, whenever words appear together most frequently. As these tend to always appear together, in phrases or sentences, end up indicating a meaning for the interpretation of the narrative. The words are in the original language to preserve the narrative's authenticity, but an English translation has been provided in parentheses. A more in-depth examination of each insult or swear word's history, development, and current usage requires a specific study design.

In the centre of the graph, in different clusters, are the country's biggest clubs (Benfica, Sporting, FC Porto) associated with terms related to the world of football in PT: *vamos* (let's go), *equipa* (team), *melhor* (the best), *clube* (club), *vitória* (victory), *ganhar* (win), *campeões* (champions), *golos* (goal), etc. For example, there is a strong association between the words: *parabéns* (congratulations) and *força* (strength). It is the fans asking for the maximum commitment of the players and thanking them for their good performance on the field.

An outsider would readily grasp the significance of the conversation – expressing support for the athletes, showing passion for the club, aspiring for victory, rejoicing in positive outcomes, and fuelling the motivation of the coaches. Some examples of those almost 280 thousand comments are: “Let's support those who are on our side”; “What a memorable match”; “Congratulations and always with your head held high”; “Thank you, my heart and soul club”. Basically, it is the representation of the vocabulary universe of a typical sports environment. On the other hand, [Figure 3](#) shows the network graph of the hate comments.

The same methodological exercise, albeit only with hate comments, reveals a very different range of vocabulary. The narrative focus is not on the big clubs. Although the names of these teams appear in the graph, they are only one more element of the discourse. In different clusters, pulverized by a larger number of clubs, the PT words more associated with cyberhate that appear are *mouro* (Moors), *brasileiros* (Brazilians), *brincadeira* (play), *Brasil* (Brazil), *vergonha* (shame), and *equipa* (team).

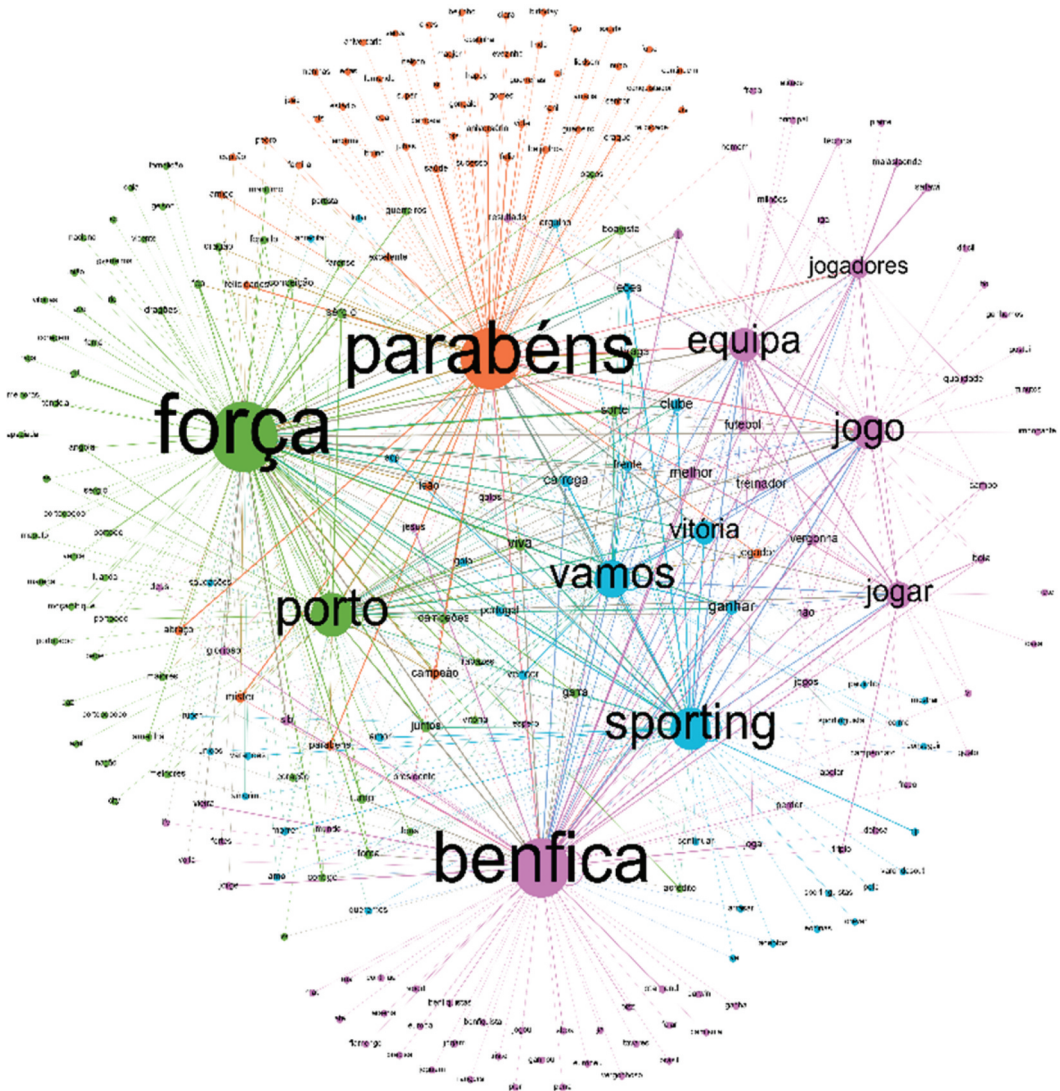


Figure 2. Network graph of general comments.

With less prominence, there are also terms like *preto* (negru), *cigano* (gypsy), *queimar* (burn), *favela* (slum), *macaco* (monkey), *árabe* (Arab), *África* (Africa), *angolanos* (Angolans), *malaios* (Malaysians), etc. There is a strong association between the words “go back” with the name of some players. This is how to say: go back to your country. These data suggest that sometimes, poor player performance can exacerbate xenophobic discourse. However, it is also possible to see the association between “no” and “racism”. In these cases, after a hate comment, the fans tend to deny that they are being racist, or they say it is a joke.

An external observer would easily perceive the meaning of the narrative – the repulsion of the different, *Us* versus *Them*, the harsh criticism of foreign players, the dissatisfaction with the origin of some fans, the use of regional antagonisms, the negative emphasis on players from former PT colonies. Some examples of these comments: “Our club deserves more respect, many Brazilians are like the Brazilian women, they just want money and luxury cars”; “These Angolans here commenting, I’m going to start blocking all of them”; “We’re

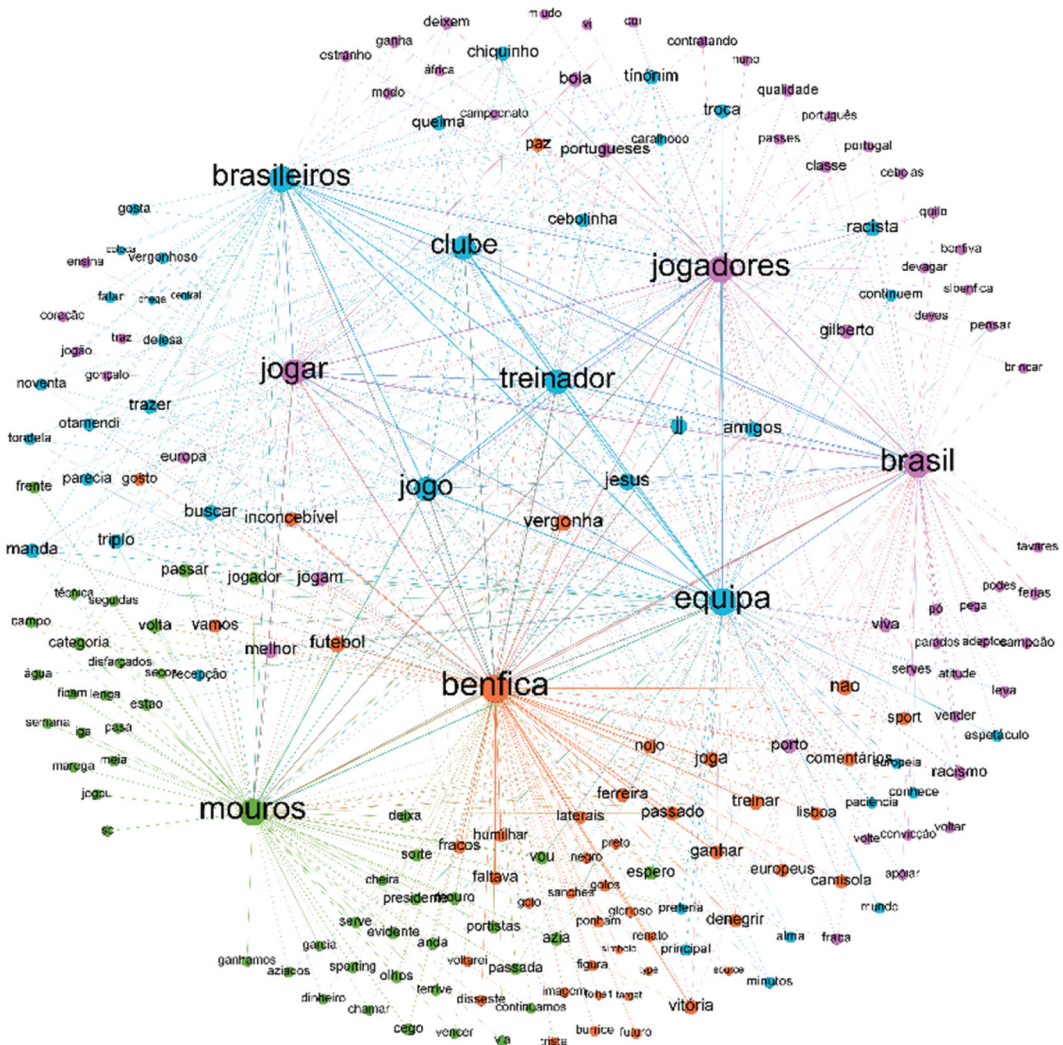


Figure 3. Network graph of hate comments.

going to stay at 8 points of the Moors. It's terrible >>>"; "They asked the black monk who governs us to put three days off"; "I only see Arabs here!"; "Well done. The Angolans' spell is strong", etc.

These are examples that highlight the complexity of cyberhate. They also reflect a set of values and beliefs historically rooted in people's mindsets – hence the difficulty of transporting the hateful sense carried by a word to other contexts. Although they always seem to emerge from the heat of defeats on the field, the poor performance of players or frustrated achievements, hate comments (0.207) have a higher vocabulary density than the general comments (0.030). Thus, they are longer, involve a larger number of words, and have better articulation between their different sentences. In essence, they appear to have been more thought out than the simple emotional phrases in the heat of the moment.

Cyberhate as a social phenomenon has multiple facets. In this research, with a considerable sample, it is possible to say that hate comments on Facebook are channelled in three different groups. First, and the most recurrent, against foreign players and fans, mainly from Latin America and Africa. Then, against a set of ethnic-cultural populations, such as gypsies and Arabs. Finally, regional antagonisms were identified between PT from different geographical regions, such as North against South.

Discussion

In an increasingly digital world, a deeper understanding of social phenomena in cyberspace is a need, not an option. This is particularly true in the case of cyberhate, which has distinctive features of its offline counterpart. On one hand, the size of the audience, ease of access, and anonymity divide online and offline hate speech.⁶¹ On the other hand, the impact of social media on sports still warrants further research.⁶² This study brings together these perspectives to understand hate speech in football in the context of the PT PL football clubs.

Our results indicate that PT football fandom in online spaces is a serious matter, with the 18 football clubs of the PL mobilizing 12 million profiles on Facebook. The huge number of reactions to these clubs' posts can be explained by the plethora of reasons why fans use social media. This includes aspects so diverse as reacting to clubs' official channels, expressing collective and individual identification, or for social interaction and relationships development.⁶³ As the digital context enhances a participatory culture and adds meaning to the practice of being a fan,⁶⁴ and attending to the intensely active fans' behaviour on Facebook, the high PT football fans involvement with their club, namely in the case of the three clubs with a higher number of followers on SNS, comes with no surprise.

The analysis of fans' reactions on the Facebook pages of their club reveals that engagement is related to post frequency and the number of followers (Table 2). Yet, other factors, already documented in the literature such as the relevance of post topics, exclusive and behind-the-scenes content, and real-time access,⁶⁵ also play a relevant role in creating highly engaging posts. However, the findings suggest that is the community that decides what is important for its existence.

Football, with its own specificities, is a microcosmos of society, not a mirror but a projection screen for images of what individuals and groups think society should be like, combining positive or negative images.⁶⁶ Within these negative images we still find racism and hate speeches, that remain a central concern in the sporting universe for athletes, fan, and researchers.⁶⁷ Unarguably, the most important finding of this study is the low incidence (0.15%) of hate speech material on the Facebook pages under scrutiny, which isn't in accordance with the relative dissemination of a football-related racist discourse in Cleland⁶⁸ and Bennett and Jönsson⁶⁹ studies, which led Cleland⁷⁰ claim that SNS have "allowed racist thoughts to flourish online". Yet, these results echoed the study of the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia,⁷¹ which found that PT fans seem to be more tolerant.

The findings identify several types of hate speech, mainly centred on xenophobic insults and racist attacks, but also based on the so-called regional antagonisms (north versus south). These attacks frequently arise from poor athletic performance on the field or from bad periods faced by the clubs during the competition. Following González and Martín⁷² typology, a significant part of these comments can be classified as impulsive racism, in the sense that they convey a strong emotional tone and seem to emerge as an impulse from the fans' frustration with the football player or against the coach (Jorge Jesus, deemed as responsible for the selection of too many Brazilian players). With a minor expression, we also found evidence of an instrumental racist speech, one that is consciously transgressive and mainly directed against specific football players from non-European nationalities, from other ethnic groups but also against the coaches or referees. It is worth noting that simultaneously and in an antithetical movement, several comments of repudiation, discomfort, displeasure, or shame in the face of expressions of racism and a call to action by football clubs to stop these manifestations of racism also emerged.

To make the analysis more robust, further findings were articulated: the number of likes of hate comments compared to general comments (Table 3). More than overt racist behaviour, which presents a very small expression in our sample, there are hints of covert hate speech, providing support to this type of cyberhate and stimulating its dissemination and amplification. It is important to bear in mind that social media have the power, through algorithmic pathways, to

create echo chambers,⁷³ which limit users' exposure to a wider set of perspectives. By doing so, fans can be led to establish a preferential connection with like-minded individuals, creating a group where individual beliefs are framed, amplified, and reinforced by a shared narrative. This can ultimately result in group polarization, accentuating the "Us" versus "Them" social configuration that underlies football-related intergroup conflicts, violence, or hate manifestations.⁷⁴

When we consider, as Matamoros-Fernández⁷⁵ defends, the entanglement between football fans' practices that disguise and amplify racism and the contribution of platforms' features and algorithms in the circulation of overt and covert hate speech, we cannot assume that the limited number of racist comments found in our dataset is not worrisome, since its effects can be leveraged by the supportive reactions of fans. Thus, hate speech has gained a new nature, bringing more visibility to these behaviours. On Facebook, hate can also mean reacting (like, share, love, angry, sad, etc.).

The comparison of the network narratives for general and racist comments depicts a richer and wider portrait of the cyberhate propelled by football fans on Facebook pages. At the core of general comments, we find factors directly connected with the sports competition, such as "team", "goal", "the best", among others (Figure 2). By contrast, hate comments, that have a higher vocabulary density, present a tripartite focus directed at i) foreign players and fans, ii) ethnic-cultural populations, and iii) regional antagonisms (Figure 3). While the first two are already well documented,⁷⁶ regional antagonisms seem to be absent from prior evidence.

Conclusion

This study provided quantitative evidence of football's hate speech on social media. Three conclusions stand out. First, a small number of fans' comments reveal the existence of hate speech on the Facebook official pages of the Portuguese football clubs of the Premier League. These comments mainly involve xenophobic insults, racist attacks, and regional antagonisms. However, its incidence is low, suggesting an attitude of some tolerance of PT Fans.

A second conclusion is that despite the low incidence of explicit reports of hate speech, it is the racist and xenophobic comments that gather more support and reactions online from the clubs' fans when compared to general comments about the clubs and sports figures. This suggests that the (implied) presence, reach and dissemination of hate speech can be higher in the public sphere than their low prevalence could lead to assume.

Finally, fan engagement is high and appears to be related not only to the number of page followers or post frequency but mainly to the ability of the page to produce social media content perceived as relevant by the online community.

This research focused on the football fans' reactions during the first three months of the 2020/2021 season. Future studies can further explore the whole football season; or provide a comparative analysis of hate speech across several seasons. Emojis-based research can provide other perspectives on hate speech.

Notes

1. Ben-David and Matamoros-Fernández, "Hate Speech and Covert Discrimination on Social Media".
2. Gillett, "Racism in Sport".
3. Reuters, "France's Coman".
4. Sanderson, "Sport as social media networking studies".
5. MacPherson and Kerr "Sport fans".
6. Litchfield et al., "Social media and the politics of gender, race and identity".
7. Council of Europe, "Combating Hate Speech in Sport project".
8. See e.g. Garland and Rowe, "Racism and Anti-Racism in Football".
9. Giulianotti, 'Sport: A Critical Sociology'; Woods and Ludvigsen, "The Changing Faces of Fandom".
10. Nathan et al., "We Wouldn't have made Friends if we Didn't Come to Football United".
11. See e.g. Giulianotti, "Sport: A Critical Sociology".

12. Newson, "Football, Fan Violence, and Identity Fusion"; Weisel and Böhm, "Ingroup Love" and "Outgroup Hate" in *Intergroup Conflict between Natural Groups*'.
13. See e.g. Giulianotti, "Sport: A Critical Sociology".
14. Newson, "Football, Fan Violence, and Identity Fusion"; Weisel and Böhm, "'Ingroup Love' and 'Outgroup Hate' in *Intergroup Conflict between Natural Groups*".
15. Council of Europe, "Combating Hate Speech in Sport project".
16. Burdsey, "Race, ethnicity and football"; King, "Racism: Playing the White Man"; Cashmore and Cleland, "Football's Dark Side".
17. Burdsey, "Racism and English Football".
18. King, "Racism: Playing the White Man".
19. Tontodimamma, et al. "Thirty years of research into hate speech"; Kilvington, "The virtual stages of hate".
20. Strossen, "Freedom of speech and equality".
21. Burdsey, "Race, ethnicity and football".
22. Cashmore and Cleland, "Football's Dark Side"; van Sterkenburg et al., "Everyday Racism".
23. Long, "No Racism Here".
24. Bale, "The Changing Face of Football".
25. King, "The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe".
26. Doidge, "Racism and European Football".
27. Back et al., "The Changing Face of Football".
28. Garland and Rowe, "Racism and Anti-Racism in Football".
29. Back et al., "Racism in Football"; Garland and Rowe, "Racism and Anti-Racism in Football"; Ruddock, "Let's Kick Racism out of Football"; Hutchins and Rowe, "Digital Media Sport".
30. Kearns, et al., "A Scoping Review of Research on Online Hate and Sport".
31. Schafer, "Spinning the Web of Hate".
32. Lamerichs et al. "Elite Male Bodies".
33. Tontodimamma et al., "Thirty years of research into hate speech".
34. Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez, "Islamonausea, not Islamophobia".
35. Quandt and Festl, "Cyberhate".
36. Jamieson and Cappella, "Echo Chamber".
37. Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez, "Islamonausea, not Islamophobia".
38. Osokin, "User Engagement of NSO Supporters on Facebook".
39. Perry and Olsson, "Cyberhate: The Globalization of Hate".
40. McPherson, "Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected".
41. Cleland, "Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards".
42. Newson, "Football, Fan Violence, and Identity Fusion".
43. European Monitoring Center, "Racism, Football, and the Internet".
44. Cleland, "Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards".
45. Bennett and Jönsson, "Tackling Online Discrimination in Soccer"; Brown, "What is so Special about Online Hate Speech"; Cashmore and Cleland, "Football's Dark Side".
46. Quandt and Festl, "Cyberhate".
47. Perry and Olsson, "Cyberhate: The Globalization of Hate".
48. Quandt and Festl, "Cyberhate".
49. Kolko, "Race in Cyberspace".
50. Kolko et al., "Race in Cyberspace".
51. Price et al., "Changing the Game".
52. Millward, "Football and Social Media", 189.
53. Vale and Fernandes, "Social Media and Sports".
54. Boyd and Crawford, "Critical Questions for Big Data".
55. Vadivu and Neelamalar, "Digital Brand Management".
56. Rogers, "Digital methods".
57. Leite et al., "Toxic Language Detection in Social Media for Brazilian Portuguese".
58. Jünger and Keyling, "Facepager. An Application for Generic Data Retrieval through APIs".
59. Barabási, "Network Science".
60. Domingos, "Futebol e colonialismo".
61. Brown, "What is so Special about Online Hate Speech".
62. Millward, "Football and Social Media".
63. Nathan et al., "We Wouldn't have made Friends if we Didn't Come to Football United"; Newson, "Football, Fan Violence, and Identity Fusion".
64. Woods and Ludvigsen, "The Changing Faces of Fandom".
65. Osokin, "User Engagement and Gratifications of NSO Supporters on Facebook".
66. Cashmore and Cleland, "Football's Dark Side".

67. Garland and Rowe, “Racism and Anti-Racism in Football”; Ruddock, “Let’s Kick Racism out of Football”.
68. Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”.
69. Bennett and Jönsson, “Tackling Online Discrimination in Soccer”.
70. Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”, 1.
71. European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, “Racism, Football, and the Internet”.
72. Gonzalez and Martin “Fútbol y Racismo: Un Problema Científico y Social”.
73. Jamieson and Cappella, “Echo Chamber”.
74. Weisel and Böhm, ‘Ingroup Love’ and ‘Outgroup Hate’ in Intergroup Conflict between Natural Groups.
75. Matamoros-Fernández, “Platformed Racism”.
76. Cleland, “Racism, Football Fans, and Online Message Boards”.

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ORCID

Célia Gouveia  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5721-8922>

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