

TAKING A STAND



**ON SOCIAL. ■ *HOW BRANDS CAN
TACKLE RACISM IN SPORT***

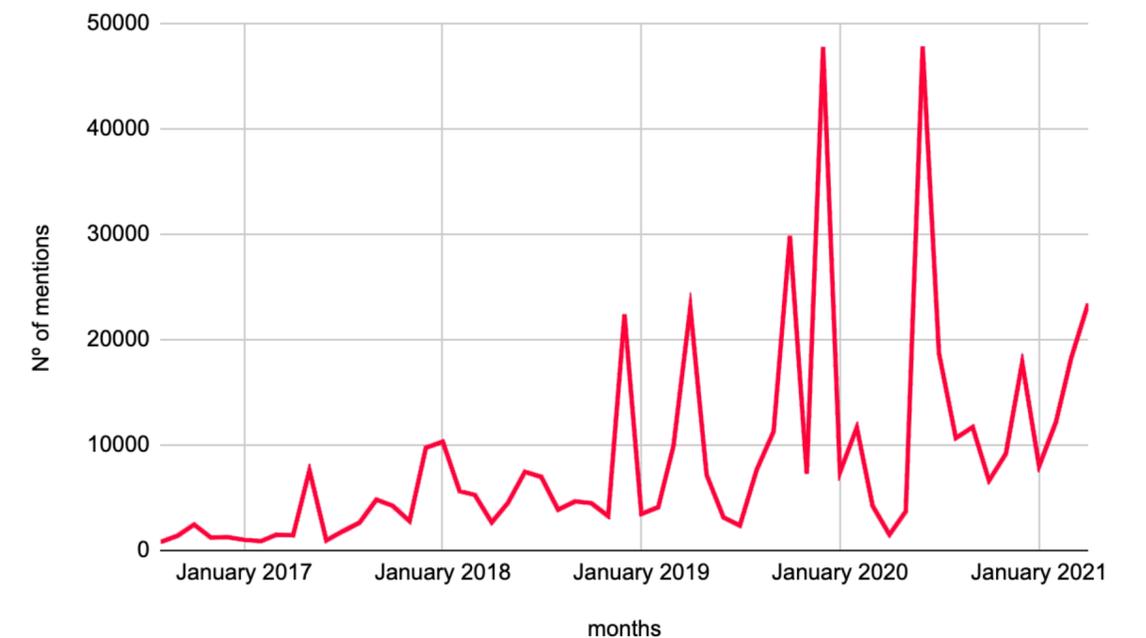
HOW SHOULD BRANDS TACKLE THE EVER-INCREASING PROBLEM OF RACISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA WITHIN SPORT?

Back in April, a UK sport industry-wide social media boycott took place—the first of its kind. Many of the top sporting bodies and brands stood together in response to the continued issue of racism in sport, with discrimination against Black athletes on the pitch and increasingly online, moving the problem back to the top of the conversational agenda.

As the issue has moved from the back pages to social newsfeeds, it should have also embedded itself in the

strategic planning of every brand in sport. Its prominence in the social sphere is far from a recent trend, but how did we get here?

Over the last year, the Black Lives Matter movement has brought the subject of systemic racism to the forefront of media, culture and everyday conversations. Following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin, social media mirrored society as the BLM message entered mainstream discourse.



The topic of racism in sport has been increasingly mentioned on social media over the last few years.

Sport, as with every level of society, was implicated in the conversation. From fan forums to family mealtimes, the topic of racial inequality rose to the fore. And for good reason. In the UK alone, 25 years on from the foundation of Kick It Out, Black players are still subjected to daily racist abuse. Home Office statistics reveal that there was at least one incident of hate crime logged at more than 10% of fixtures played in England and Wales last season.

This season, first time football fans could be forgiven for thinking that taking the knee before Premier League matches was always the norm. The decision of every club to kneel before kickoff was an act of commitment to anti-racism, led by players no longer willing to ignore targeted racial discrimination. The seemingly small gesture of taking the knee holds much more weight than first meets the eye.

The act of kneeling was borrowed from blacklisted former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. In 2016, the ex-San Francisco 49ers player took the knee during the national anthem to protest the killing of unarmed Black Americans at the hands of the police. The gesture transcended the NFL, with 'taking the knee' becoming a broad symbol of defiance against the discrimination of Black people.

In the year since it has been adopted by players before games across UK football, kneeling has increasingly polarised opinion. Detractors claim the action to be politicising sport, citing tenuous political connections of those involved with Black Lives Matter the organisation, as a means to discredit the public display of anti-racism.

Since fans have been allowed back into grounds post-Covid there has been a small but vocal chorus of boos during the kneeling at most games. However it is a viewpoint rejected by those on the field. England, led by their Coach Gareth Southgate, have maintained their support for the act, explaining in op-eds and social posts their commitment to equality and kneeling while distancing themselves from any claims of political affiliation. Fans may have a right to boo, but with a clear message and anti-racist rationale behind the act of kneeling, it is a stance that brands and sporting bodies should continue to support.

In the case of Colin Kaepernick, he ultimately found savvy brands aligning with his principled stance as the importance of purpose crept up their list of priorities in a changing cultural climate. His marketing message was simple: "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." Brands found that if they could brave the initial backlash, they could create a stronger connection with consumers and better protect their communities.

On-pitch incidents of racial abuse have been increasingly visible across the European game all season. Paris Saint Germain and Istanbul Basaksehir abandoned play following inappropriate language from a UEFA match official last December. Glen Kamara of Rangers was forced off the pitch after being abused in a Europa League match in March. The entire Valencia team walked off in support of abused teammate Mouctar Diakhaby against Cadiz in April. The rising frequency of high-profile incidents in stadiums is a hateful crescendo that has been mirrored online.

Where fan abuse was once largely directed from the stands, social platforms place players in the direct line of abuse 24/7. While it's harder to quantify incidents of unreported abuse online, we have seen several clubs take matters into their own hands. Swansea's response to abuse of their own players was a week-long blackout which was joined by Rangers and Birmingham City.

Initially, Swansea's decisive action was scoffed at. Moments of defiant protest often are. But, from that single act by a Championship club, a conversation gathered momentum and ultimately led to the most recent social blackout across UK sport.

From the 30th of April to the 3rd of May, athletes and corporations across football, cricket, rugby union, rugby league, netball, Formula 1 and more enacted a joint social media boycott to protest racism. Brands took clear action, with Sky Sports, Cadbury, adidas and BT Sport among the major names to blackout their socials.

To understand the impact of the boycott, we need to appreciate sport's footprint on social media. Turning to football alone, in 2018 Facebook reported having 400 million football fans on the platform, with a further 140 million on Instagram. Those numbers have continued to rise since, while there have been over 11 million Tweets from the UK about football since September 2020. During the blackout, users searching for their daily dose of punditry were fed clear anti-racist messages, in turn sparking conversations about the reason for the boycott. The brands involved were willing to sacrifice traffic, clicks and views in order to fight for their values. In the search for social justice, it's a small price to pay.



THE DECISION OF EVERY CLUB TO KNEEL BEFORE KICKOFF WAS AN ACT OF COMMITMENT TO ANTI-RACISM, LED BY PLAYERS NO LONGER WILLING TO IGNORE TARGETED RACIAL DISCRIMINATION.

THE ROLE *FOR* BRANDS

EDUCATE YOUR AUDIENCE

Sport, as with every level of society, was implicated in the conversation. From fan forums to family mealtimes, the topic of racial inequality rose to the fore. And for good reason. In the UK alone, 25 years on from the foundation of Kick It Out, Black players are still subjected to daily racist abuse. Home Office statistics reveal that there was at least one incident of hate crime logged at more than 10% of fixtures played in England and Wales last season.

CREATE AN ANTI-HATE POLICY

All sport brands need to be equipped with anti-hate policies to handle racism and discrimination in all forms. These values should be publicly visible in order to educate audiences and hold the brands themselves accountable to the values they signpost. Sky Sports' new 'Hate Won't Stop Us' manifesto makes a public commitment to using the power of its reach to highlight the scale of online hate and lobby platform policymakers.

BUILD A DIVERSE WORKFORCE (AT ALL LEVELS)

A diverse workforce is needed to ensure that the correct decisions are made for a diverse audience. In order to dismantle systemic racism in sports, people of colour need to have clear pathways to leadership positions. The Premier League's No Room For Racism Action Plan gives six clear commitments, three of which pledge more accessible routes into positions for underrepresented groups. Inclusive companies create inclusive environments.

SPEAK UP ON SOCIAL

If a social account intended to be an inclusive space is a hotbed for hate, silence on the side of the brand can be deafening. Hiding comments isn't enough; the ethos needs to be underlined and affirmed through community management. Brands that come prepared with strategies will always have more success in fostering the desired environment on their accounts. Messages of hate are not quelled by silence but by education and community support - this is the same when it comes to tackling all issues of online hate, from racism to body shaming.

For instance, ahead of a collaboration with model Nelly London on Instagram, Gymshark identified a strong possibility of hateful comments and body shaming on the post. The team grouped together ahead of launch, agreeing on a policy to respond to as many hateful comments as possible. Staff from other teams within the organisation were drafted in and upskilled on community management in order to allow the brand to be as agile as possible in managing hate and creating an inclusive space. The result was an overwhelming success in drowning out the trolls and reinforcing the body-positive values of the brand's community.

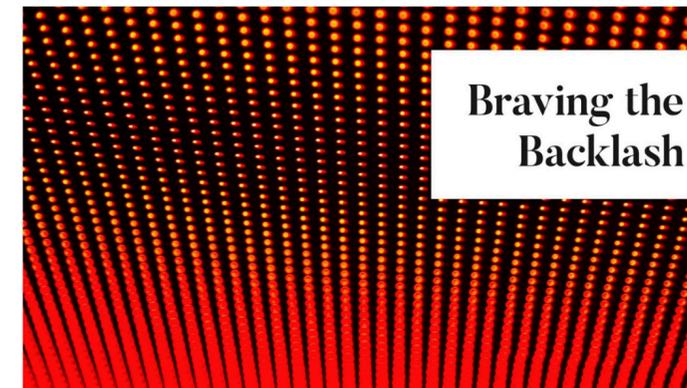


PREPARE AHEAD FOR KEY MOMENTS

While not all brands have the resources to be so hands-on, looking ahead to content and cultural moments that are likely to attract hate is a vital form of preparation. For smaller scale community management teams, responding to a select few catch-all comments sets the tone and shuts down bigotry. If hateful comments crop up regularly, consider a post sign-off that reinforces the tone of the page. Brands that set the parameters for community engagement often find their community defending their brand values for them, creating a positive social environment that stands in stark contrast to online messages of hate.

BRAVE THE BACKLASH

We refer to fighting bigotry on brand channels as 'Braving the Backlash' for a reason: companies must be willing to take the hit when setting out anti-racist policies. Likes and Retweets may be replaced by negative comments, unfollows and scathing Quote Tweets from portions of a given follower base. It's necessary to weather these conditions and for brands to be brave if true change is to be achieved. Our Braving the Backlash whitepaper consolidates all of our advice for brands looking to stand up to online hate, and is available to download from our website.



While critics claim that politics and sport don't mix, it's worth remembering that racism isn't politics, it's a human rights issue. To stand by the sidelines and ignore it in sport is to deny its existence. In the push towards equality, sport needs brand leaders to be actively anti-racist and take ownership in their communities and of their communities.



KNOW WHEN TO ESCALATE

Knowing when to escalate is also a key part of the fight for equality on social. While platforms need to do more to quash hate online, it's on brands to take proactive steps to eradicate hate from their own communities. Last month, Manchester United launched its 'SEE RED' campaign. While spotlighting the diverse heroes of the team's past and present, the club set up a new online reporting system for fans to flag incidents of online abuse. Users of the service are promised that all reports will be escalated to platform officials in tandem with the Premier League, providing a clear way to call people out for racism online.



This report was compiled by We Are Social Sport's Editorial team. Our aim is to continually connect brands to communities and culture and, when it comes to Braving the Backlash, we do this by helping our clients work out both when to take a stand and how to engage with their audience.

From community management guidelines to long-term editorial content strategy, it is crucial that all sports brands have a clearly defined approach to tackling issues like racism on social. Without it, they will never be seen as an authentic voice in their community.

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