UNITED AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE

COALITION TO STOP HATE SPEECH IN SPORT

FIA BRIEFING NOTE ON ISF AND INDUSTRY PRIMARY RESEARCH REPORTS ON ONLINE HATE IN SPORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document is a partial deliverable of D1.3 under the collaboration agreement between the FIA and DCU signed by the FIA on 13 October 2023. A summary of the preliminary findings (D1.2) was submitted to the FIA on 30 November 2023. This deliverable comprises a partial component of D1.3(a), namely a review of industry-related reports on online hate speech in sports.

One of the measures to combat online hate speech in sports is by conducting research to measure the prevalence and understand the causes and effects of hate speech in sport. International Sports Federations (ISFs) are non-governmental administrative bodies that oversee the regulations, promotion, and development of specific sports on an international level. ISFs are typically responsible for organising international competitions, setting the rules and codes of conduct of a given sport, and promoting their sport globally. With respect to this report, they play a key role in both athlete development and safeguarding and protecting athletes including anti-doping efforts and the protection of athletes from abuse. There are over 300 sports federations representing a wide range of sports and varieties of sports worldwide.

The purpose of this report is to explore the extent to which ISFs conduct and report **primary research** on hate speech in their sports. After searching the websites of 206 ISF websites and emailing 196 ISFs from October to November 2023, we identified only 6 English language research reports published by ISFs individually or with other parties. We identified a further 6 related research reports. In this Briefing Note, we provide an overview of these 12 reports.

2. METHODOLOGY

A list of 306 sports and variations of sports were compiled in October 2023. A database of websites for the associated ISF was developed. From October to November 2023, two researchers visited each website looking for research reports on hate speech or online abuse. Furthermore, each site was searched using Google using the site: operator to restrict results only to the target website. Contact emails were also collected for each website and a request sent to each ISF if no research was found requesting research undertaken by the target ISF on hate speech or online abuse in their sport. It should be noted that many of the contact e-mails were generic and only a small number of responses were received.

Six reports were identified from ISFs. As can be seen in Table 1 below, this represents six organisations from four sports – motorsports (FIA), soccer (FIFA, FIFPRO), athletics (World Athletics), and basketball (NBPA, WNPBA).

TABLE 1 RESEARCH REPORTS PUBLISHED BY ISFS

REPORT TITLE	AUTHORED BY	PUBLISHED BY	YEAR PUBLISHED
A Strategic Response to Online Hate Speech in Sport	FIA University & Arwen	FIA	2023
AI Monitoring: Protecting Professional Players Euro 2020 Final and AFCON 2022 Final Study	Signify	FIFA	2022
FIFA Social Media Protection Service: World Cup Qatar 2022 – Analysis	Signify	FIFA & FIFPRO	2022
World Athletics Publishes Online Abuse Study Covering World Athletics Championships Oregon 22	Signify	World Athletics	2022
Decoding Online Abuse of Players: Collective Responses by Players and Unions	Signify	FIFPRO NBPA WNPBA	2021
World Athletics Publishes Online Abuse Study Covering Tokyo Olympic Games	Signify	World Athletics	2021

A further six reports were identified through references on ISF websites. As per Table 2 below, these reports were published by five organisations – the Professional Footballer's Association (PFA) - a trade union for professional association footballers in England and Wales, Kick It Out – a UK-based NGO set up to combat discrimination in soccer, Ofcom – the UK's communications regulator, Hate Lab - a UK-based online hub for data and insight into hate speech and crime funded by the ESRC, and Crisp, a commercial risk intelligence service. Again, a small number of sports are covered. Five cover only soccer (HateLab (2), Ofcom, PFA, and Kick It Out) while Crisp's report addresses online abuse towards athletes from five sports (soccer, tennis, basketball, golf, and athletics).

TABLE 2 RESEARCH REPORTS PUBLISHED BY NON-ISFS

REPORT TITLE	AUTHORED BY	PUBLISHED BY	YEAR PUBLISHED
Online Abuse in Sports: Understanding the Risks to Athletes, Fans and Brands	Crisp	Crisp	2023
Online Hate Speech Targeting the England and Wales Men's Football Teams During the 2022 FIFA World Cup	Arron Cullen & Matthew Williams	HateLab	2023
Tracking Abuse on Twitter Against Football Players in the 2021-22 Premier League Season	Alan Turing Institute	Ofcom	2022
Online Hate Speech Targeting the England Women's Football Team During the UEFA Women's Euro 2022	Arron Cullen & Matthew Williams	HateLab	2022
AI Research Study: Online Abuse and Project Restart	Signify	PFA	2021
AI Research Study: Online Abuse and Project Restart	Signify	Kick it Out	2020

It is important to note that nine of the 12 reports in Table 1 and 2 were authored in conjunction with commercial online monitoring and analysis services – Signify (6), Arwen (1), and Crisp (1).

Each report was downloaded, read, with data extracted and organized for our review. Data was stored in a data extraction form to help record and summarise all the relevant information, address the review research questions, reduce human error, and provide a transparent procedure. The data was coded according to the report's key findings, recommendations, target stakeholders, research methodologies, scale of data, and the online platforms focused on.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 SPORTS CONTEXTS

As discussed, the reports cover a very small number of sports. Primary data is presented on only six sports in these 12 reports – soccer (9), basketball (2), athletics (3), motorsports (1), golf (1), and tennis (1). While it is unsurprising that as the world's most popular sport, soccer would be the subject of the greatest volume of online abuse, and consequently, the most significant reaction to it, there is a clear need for the governing bodies of other popular sports to take a more proactive stance in researching and addressing the impact of this problem on their athletes, officials, fans and other stakeholders. There have been notable reports of instances of online abuse in a wide range of sports including netball,1 rugby union,2 cricket,3 volleyball,4 amongst others. Our examination of the academic response to this issue attests to the persistence of online harms in many sports beyond football (see FIA Scoping Review on Scholarly Research).

3.2 GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS

Given the exclusive focus on English language and the limited sporting context coverage outlined in Error! Reference source not found. above, it is unsurprising that five of the 12 studies focus exclusively on the UK. Others are more general and focus on international competitions e.g., the World Cup, African Cup of Nations (AFCON) and the UEFA European Football Championships (Euros).

3.3 ONLINE PLATFORMS AND SAMPLE SIZES

As can be seen in Table 4, most of the reports reviewed focused on elite athletes as the targets (10). The Crisp report also included fans and brands, while the FIA report focussed on the organisation's accounts and employees, specifically executives. None of the reports focused on officials, other sporting levels, or other stakeholders e.g., journalists. The reports all focused on able athletes.

In most cases (7), there is no analysis of the perpetrators. In the HateLab reports (2), some analysis is provided on the inferred gender, geographic location, and likelihood of being spam or a bot. The Alan Turing Institute report for Ofcom provides some insight into the behaviour of perpetrators based on their frequency of posting while the Crisp report references fans and spokespersons as potential perpetrators.

The content analysis varied. In the reports based on Signify's Threat Matrix data, content is classified by type and severity. Signify provide analysis of multiple hate speech types including ableism, anti-GRT, antisemitism, homophobia. Intracommunity slurs, islamophobia, racism, sectarianism, sexism, transphobia, xenophobia as well as other abusive, threatening, or violent messaging.5 Crisp provided a proprietary set of classifications which included abusive (hate speech, severe abuse etc.), offensive (extreme profanity, sexual content, and violent statements), sensitive (drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and religious/political content), personal information, and spam/scam content. As such, some of their classification fall outside online abuse and include content that is more relevant to brand management. The Alan Turing Institute study for Ofcom takes a different approach. While indicating that they include a wide range of signals in their machine learning models, they are not specified. Merely a classification of abusive (personal or identity attack) or not is provided. The Arwen report for the FIA merely classified content as toxic.

TABLE 4 SUMMARY OF ONLINE THEMES IN REPORTS

REPORT TITLE	TARGET	PERPETRATOR	TYPES OF HATE SPEECH
A Strategic Response to Online Hate Speech in Sport	Organisation ISF Executives	Unspecified	Toxicity
AI Monitoring: Protecting Professional Players Euro 2020 Final and AFCON 2022 Final Study	Athletes	Geography	Multiple*
FIFA Social Media Protection Service: World Cup Qatar 2022 – Analysis	Athletes	Geography	Multiple*
World Athletics Publishes Online Abuse Study Covering World Athletics Championships Oregon 22	Athletes	Unspecified	Multiple*
World Athletics Publishes Online Abuse Study Covering Tokyo Olympic Games	Athletes	Unspecified	Multiple*
Decoding Online Abuse of Players: Collective Responses by Players and Unions	Athletes	Unspecified	Multiple*

Online Abuse in Sports: Understanding the Risks to Athletes, Fans and Brands	Athletes Fans Brands	Fans Athletes "Spokespersons"	Abusive Offensive Sensitive Other
Online Hate Speech Targeting the England and Wales Men's Football Teams During the 2022 FIFA World Cup	Teams Athletes	Geographic origin Bots/Fake Accounts Gender	Racism Homophobia Transphobia
Tracking Abuse on Twitter Against Football Players in the 2021-22 Premier League Season	Athletes	Frequency of abuse	Personal attack Identity attack
Online Hate Speech Targeting the England Women's Football Team During the UEFA Women's Euro 2022	Teams Athletes	Geographic origin Bots/Fake Accounts Gender	Misogyny Homophobia
PFA Commissioned Study On 20/21 Season	Athletes	Unspecified	Multiple*
AI Research Study: Online Abuse and Project Restart	Athletes	Unspecified	Multiple*

*Signify provide analysis of multiple hate speech types including ableism, anti-GRT, antisemitism, homophobia. Intracommunity slurs, islamophobia, racism, sectarianism, sexism, transphobia, xenophobia as well as other abusive, threatening or violent messaging.

There are notable recurring themes among the findings and recommendations of many of the reports, which taken together paint a telling picture of the nature of the problem and the priorities regarding how to address it. Firstly, several of the reports identify that a majority of abuse is carried by users who are completely or easily identifiable. Anonymity, so often cited in public discussions of this problem as a key causal factor, is not as central as has been thought. Secondly, some of the reports note that abusive content forms a minority of the overall online posts directed at or about athletes. This is an important point as it underlines that the majority of fans do not partake in online hate and therefore can form part of the solution to this issue. Thirdly, several reports criticise the social media platforms on which the abuse takes place for a lack of moderation, with many finding that abusive posts which contravene the platforms' rules go largely unaddressed.

Indeed, a recurring feature of the recommendations of such reports is a focus on the need for greater action by social media platforms. Only six of the 12 reports detail specific recommendations and three of those focus in some part on steps that need to be taken by the platforms. Another frequent target of recommendations is the relevant public i.e., social media users and/or sports fans, who are encouraged to speak back to abusive users and report them to the authorities. The report commissioned by the FIA is notable for taking a self-aware approach, shaping its recommendations as promises for new policies and fresh actions by the organisation itself. Such a perspective is rare among the organisations commissioning these reports, most of whom turn their focus outward on other stakeholders.

Notably but unsurprisingly, the report commissioned by anti-racism activism group, Kick It Out, contains the most detailed recommendations, with its points pertaining not only to social media platforms, but also to government, football governance, football clubs, and athletes. This report advocates a coordinated approach between the game's various authorities, urging them to share data and develop a unified but multifaceted response to the problem.

4. DISCUSSION

While these reports represent a worthy step in a more proactive stance against online harms by major sports stakeholders, there is much that can be done to build on these efforts and improve the approach taken against the problem.

Firstly, while the original research conducted for these reports is rigorous, there is a certain narrowness of approach that persists across the various texts. The research conducted is almost unilaterally quantitative in nature, consisting of statistical analysis of big data accrued from major social media platforms. Such research undoubtedly yields significant insights but tends to narrow the focus of the reports' recommendations. Several of them limit their proposed solutions to advocating for action from major social media platforms. This approach neglects to take account of other major stakeholders in the issue of online hate in sport, such as sports governing bodies, athlete representatives, supporters' groups, policymakers, and sports clubs. Relatedly, many of the reports focus largely or solely on Twitter, continuing the neglect of non-text-based forms of hate and abuse documented in our examination of academic responses to the problem (though it should be noted that some reports examined image and emoji-based hate). Online hate in sport is a complex issue that will require complex solutions. Such solutions cannot come from one stakeholder alone, but, ideally, from all of them working in consultation to address the cultural, structural, and political factors which foster the problem.

Additionally, there is a need for greater clarity regarding the methodologies employed. While it is understandable that reports intended for public consumption do not encumber their readers with weighty technical detail, succinctly conveying how the data has been gathered would engender trust. Half of the reports we examined do not outline a clear methodology, while three of them do not include details on the scale of their analysis, rendering the true significance of the number of abusive posts they uncovered unclear. Clear, succinct illustrations of methodology are needed not only to engender trust in the findings of such reports, but also to facilitate future research building upon on its efforts to advance the fight against online harms in sport.

The struggle against online harms in sport will not be won, or even meaningfully advanced, by one party alone. It is a complex problem, sitting at the intersection of online communication, sports culture, underlying prejudice, policymaking, and sports administration. The reports examined here are a worthy first step for sport stakeholders, but further steps would be well advised to take a more nuanced and multifaceted approach, with a greater variety in methodologies and a wider scope for inter-stakeholder collaboration.