UNITED AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE

COALITION TO STOP HATE SPEECH IN SPORT

FIA REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON ONLINE HATE IN SPORT

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2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 D1.3(b), namely a review of scholarly articles on the topic of online hate speech in sports.

Online hate speech is a widely referenced and complex problem. Nockleby (2000,p.1277) defines hate speech as "any communication that disparages a person or a group on the basis of some characteristic such as race, color, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristic." The European Union's Committee of Ministers' definition (adopted on the 20 May 2022) of hate speech provides greater detail and includes "all types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation" (Council of Europe, 2022). Importantly, the EU Council of Ministers note that hate speech varies in terms of severity, some of which may be prohibited or subject to criminal and/or civil or administrative law, and "other offensive or harmful types of expression which are not sufficiently severe to be legitimately restricted under the European Convention on Human Rights" (Council of Europe, 2022). Due to its subjective nature and the varying cultural and legal contexts in which it exists, measuring and designing responses to hate speech is challenging. This is further complicated by a tension between protecting individual rights to human dignity and protection from harm on the one hand and protecting freedom of expression on the other. Social media and online platforms have exacerbated the spread of hate speech by enabling rapid and widespread dissemination of harmful content to a global audience, often with limited oversight or effective moderation. This ease of sharing and the anonymity offered by these platforms can embolden individuals to express and amplify hateful messages without immediate real-world consequences. Indeed, in some instances, the algorithms used by online platforms may inadvertently enable the propagation and persistence of hate speech.

The purpose of this report is to review existing scholarly articles on online hate speech in sport. Sport has long been recognised as a site for outpourings of emotion and expressions of shared cultures but also one in which negative, sometimes violent, subcultures could exist (Kearns et al. 2023). Unfortunately, the mediatisation and digitalisation of sporting events has also resulted in the persistence and growth of such subcultures and the positioning of sporting events as flashpoints for offline and online hate (Kearns et al. 2023). Scholarly research can play a crucial role in combatting online hate by deepening the understanding of its causes, dynamics, and impacts, thereby informing more effective policies and interventions. Additionally, scholars can engage in public discourse and education, using their expertise to raise awareness about the nature of hate speech and strategies to counteract it. The objective of this study is to identify potential gaps in research coverage to highlight areas where there is insufficient knowledge and to guide future studies towards under-researched topics.

This report explores how scholarly research on online hate has evolved over time, the methods by which the topic is being researched, the contexts that are attracting most focus, hypotheses on the prevalence of online hate in sport, and ultimately, recommendations for how to address online hate in sport. We analyse 66 peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles in the English language only published from 01 January 2000 to 18 October 2023. The study found:

- A rapid increase and acceleration of research on online hate in sport in the last two years (2022 and 2023).
- Over half of the articles focus on three geographic regions – USA (24%), UK (21%) and Australia (6%).
- Over 75% of the articles focus on just ten sports – four of which (Soccer, American Football, Basketball, and Australian Rules Football) account for over 62% of the articles.
- Over 72% of the research articles focus on just three online platforms – Twitter (42%), Facebook (19%), and Instagram (11%).
- Approximately 75% of the publications focused on three types of online hate – racism (38%), misogyny (23%) and/or homophobia (15%).
- Most of the articles (62%) focus on athletes as the target of online hate with fans being (83%) being the primary perpetrators of online hate in articles in the study.
- 80% of research primarily used secondary data and 62% of research was qualitative in nature.

This review finds that while research on online hate in sport is growing and accelerating, there is a significant dearth in coverage in terms of types of online hate, sports, and geographic regions.

The remainder of this report is organised as follows. Section 3 sets out the methodology used in this study. Section 4 presents a summary of the main results for each topic explored. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for future study in Section 5.

[1] Note: the study is only of texts in the English language and this may impact results.

3. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY DESIGN

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Scoping reviews are an established form of identifying and mapping evidence and identifying potential knowledge gaps (Tricco et al., 2016). In line with the purpose and objectives of the study as outlined in Section 2, we aim to map the field to highlight areas where there is insufficient knowledge and to guide future studies towards under-researched topics. It is important to note that scoping reviews are not exhaustive but provide a comprehensive and feasible means for rapid evidence assessment.

3.2 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

The main purpose of developing inclusion and exclusion criteria is to ensure that we only select the studies that are relevant to our review. As this review focuses on online hate in sports, we only included peer reviewed journal articles that examine this topic. For example, we do not include articles on 'online hating', an act that does not necessarily have to contain reference or discrimination towards an individual's real or attributed personal characteristics (Malecki et al., 2021, p. 2). Moreover, we considered only the peer-reviewed journal articles that were included in the Scopus database. Conference papers and books were excluded. We limited our search to studies published to a 23-year period between 01 January 2000 and 18 October 2023. Furthermore, we only considered studies published in the English language. Table 1 summarises the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The final sample comprised 66 peer reviewed journal articles.

TABLE 1 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA.

INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
01 January 2000 – 18 October 2023	Papers published outside the selected period of time
Cyberbullying, online abuse, online hate speech	Other forms of offline abuse and offline bullying. Online hating.
Peer-reviewed journal papers	Conference papers. Books and book chapters. Non-scholarly publications
Available in Scopus	Papers published outside the selected databases
Written in the English language	Non-English language publications

3.3 DATA CODING

After finalising the final dataset, we read the full text of each article, and extracted and organised the information relevant to 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. Each article was carefully read, and the data coded according to the article title, year of publication, methodology, data source, sport, geographic region, online platform, type of online hate speech, target and perpetrator of online hate speech, hypotheses for online hate speech, and responses.

4. RESULTS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this section, we offer a descriptive analysis of literature on online hate in sport between 2000 and 2023 from four perspectives: time, research approaches and methods, context, and online hate themes.

4.2 EVOLUTION OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH RESEARCH

Our study identifies three distinct phases. In the first phase (2000-2014), only six outputs were published on the topic of online hate and sports between 2005 and 2014. In the second phase from 2015 to 2021, 31 articles were published, a substantial increase. This increase aligns with the rise in social media and increased online engagement, polarisation and societal tensions, as well as notable high-profiles incidents in a variety of sports not least the Colin Kaepernick's NFL protest which commenced in the 2016 preseason. In the third phase, 2022 and 2023, the growth in publications accelerated again with 29 publications in just over a year. The literature identifies a number of reasons for this uptick, beyond the obvious increasing presence of social media in our daily lives. Prominent flashpoint incidents such as the racist abuse of English players following their loss in the European Championships soccer final (see Cable et al. 2022), movements such as taking the knee against systemic racism (Duvall, 2020) and campaigns against everyday sexism in sport (e.g., #morethanmean) (Antunovic, 2019), have enveloped sport into the broader culture wars. The growth of the far-right across the world but particularly in Brazil, UK and the USA has attracted the attention of scholars because of the impact it has had in escalating tensions in sporting contexts (see Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Furthermore, as is evident from the sporting industry response, increased attention from a wider number of stakeholders has helped to spur on research in this space.

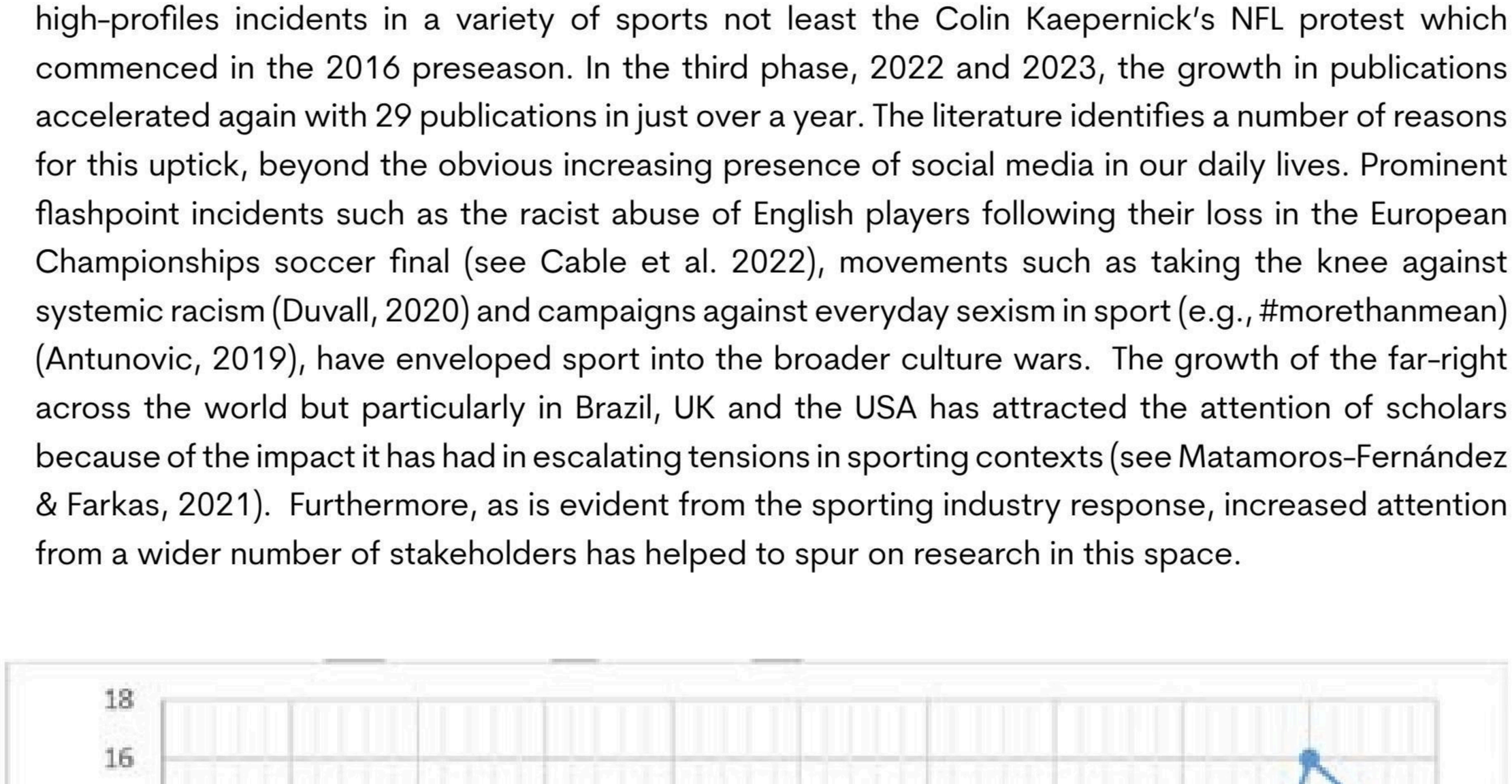


Figure 1 Publications in sample by year

4.3 CONTEXT

This subsection examines the literature from three distinct contexts – sporting context, geographic region, and online platform.

4.3.1 SPORTING CONTEXTS

Over 75% of the articles focus on just ten sports – four of which (soccer, American football, basketball, and Australian rules football) account for over 62% of the articles. Soccer alone accounted for 38% of the sporting contexts focused on. This isn't a surprise considering it is the world's most popular sport and it is characterised by its intense and tribalistic fandoms (Hughson, 1999). Furthermore, it has a long history of racism and homophobia that is now transferring itself to online spaces (Cleland and Cashmore, 2014; Cashmore and Cleland, 2012). However, the small number of sports that have attracted attention is problematic for developing universal measures to combat online hate across all sport. American Football (12%) has the next highest number of studies with the remainder split between only 8 other sports (see Table 2), one of which is the Olympics, with the rest of the studies concerning sport in general or a mixture of the sports already identified in the table.

TABLE 2 SPORTING CONTEXT OF SAMPLE

INCLUSION CRITERIA	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
Soccer	26	38.23
American Football	8	12.12
Aussie Rules	4	6.10
Basketball	4	6.10
Tennis	3	4.55
Baseball	2	3.00
Weightlifting	2	3.00
Olympic Sports	2	3.00
E-Sports	1	1.52
Skateboarding	1	1.52
General/Various	16	24.24

4.3.2 GEOGRAPHIC REGIONS

Given the language inclusion and exclusion criteria and the sporting contexts outlined in 4.3.1 above, it is unsurprising that four English-speaking countries attract the most research in the sample. As can be seen in Table 3, over half of the articles focus on three geographic regions – USA (24%), UK (21%) and Australia (6%). Overall, the sample largely represents an Anglo-centric, western discourse.

TABLE 3 GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE SAMPLE

LOCATION	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
USA	16	24.24
UK	14	21.21
Australia	4	6.10
Canada	2	3.00
Netherlands	2	3.00
Turkey	2	3.00
Czechia	2	3.00
Brazil	2	3.00
Other Country	9	13.64
Intl/Online	16	24.24

4.3.3 ONLINE PLATFORMS

The literature largely follows the evolution of online platforms. Publications in the early 2000s primarily emphasised message boards and fan forums. However, in the 2010s, the focus shifted to major social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. These platforms facilitated widespread, real-time reactions to sporting events, with a significantly larger number of posts compared to the more specialised web 1.0 discussion spaces. Twitter (42%) was the main social media research context. This can be explained by a number of factors. Twitter (now known as X) operates at a more real-time cadence than other social media platforms and so is particularly suited for live discourses that take place contemporaneously with sporting events. It is not only a popular medium to discuss sports but also social and political views. This is enabled by its functionality that enables users to follow those with similar or opposing views using its search engine and hashtags. Furthermore, up until recent ownership changes, researchers had relatively low-cost access to data through the Twitter API (application programming interface).

TABLE 4 ONLINE PLATFORMS IN THE SAMPLE

LOCATION	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
Twitter	28	42.42
Facebook	13	19.70
Instagram	7	10.61
YouTube	4	6.10
Reddit	2	3.00
Website	2	3.00
Forums	10	15.15

It is important to note that, as in the past, the online platform context is likely to change moving forward. Firstly, with the change in ownership of Twitter (now known as 'X'), research using the Twitter API is significantly more expensive and as such may be prohibitive for research at scale. Additionally, changes in moderation policies at X have resulted in a reported increase in online hate speech in the platform (Frenkel & Conger, 2022). While there has been some churn in Twitter audiences and the use of Twitter as a primary platform for sporting events, it would still seem, anecdotally, to be popular for sports fans (Jimenez, 2023). Secondly, new online platforms continue to emerge. Platforms such as TikTok are increasingly the primary information source and social network for younger consumers. TikTok has only released access to their research API. At the same time, a number of niche platforms have emerged for users with more extreme views e.g., Trust Social, Gab etc (see Jasser et al., 2023). These niche platforms place less emphasis on content moderation of the main platforms. These platforms can act as breeding grounds for hateful discourses and are often seen as 'lifeboats' for users who have been blocked on Instagram and Facebook (Ali et al., 2021). Similarly, there is a need for research on encrypted messaging apps such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Signal. Fourthly, no research on the intersection of the dark net, hate speech and sports was identified in the literature. Finally, new analytical techniques are enabling analysis of multimedia including audio, images and video. This opens new research opportunities on content from platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, amongst others. Bad actors on the far right have historically proven adept at repurposing otherwise innocuous language and images for hateful means. These new techniques will open potentially massive datasets of content that has previously been ignored due to lack of automation.

4.4 ONLINE HATE THEMES

This section explores the type of hate speech, the targets and perpetrators of hate speech, as well as hypotheses for hate speech and associated responses.

4.4.1 TYPES OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

As discussed in the Executive Summary, hate speech is often based on real or attributed characteristics such as "race", colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation (Council of Europe, 2022). Racism is the primary concern for the published research with approximately 38% of the studies focusing on this (see Table 5). Over 75% of the work is focused on racism, misogyny, or homophobia. There is only one identified study concerning ableism hate speech and a very small number concerning transphobia, antisemitism and islamophobia. The growing discourse concerning the participation of transgender athletes in professional sport should see a growth of research in that space. We should also expect there to be more concerning islamophobia considering the soccer World Cup just took place in Qatar and the high-profile investment of middle eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia at the top level of sport. The lack of diversity in hate speech types is perhaps reflected in the relatively narrow sporting context (see 4.3.1) and geographic scope of the sample (see 4.3.2).

TABLE 5 TYPE OF HATE EXAMINED IN THE SAMPLE.

TYPE OF HATE	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
Racism	25	37.88
Misogyny	15	22.73
Homophobia	10	15.15
Transphobia	3	4.55
Anti-Semitism	3	4.55
Islamophobia	3	4.55
Sectarianism	1	1.52
Ableism	1	1.52
General Abuse	8	12.12

4.4.2 TARGETS AND PERPETRATORS OF ONLINE HATE SPEECH

The primary targets of online hate speech in the articles reviewed were athletes (62%) while the primary perpetrators were fans (83%). This is understandable considering (a) the relative size of the populations, and (b) the profile of athletes. However, the research significantly overlooks the wider impact of online hate speech directed at other stakeholders such as fans and officials. Targeted hate speech directed at such stakeholders may result in lower participation harming the sport but also creating adverse health outcomes. Furthermore, fans are not homogeneous. The research does not delve deeper into different types of fans, either as targets or perpetrators e.g., by parental status or occupation which may provide additional insights or opportunities for counter responses.

It should also be noted that almost a quarter of the research places emphasis on the impact of such hate speech on already marginalised groups. Online hate speech can act in a variety of ways. For example, online hate speech can be used to explicitly delegitimise participation in a sport by a marginalised group e.g., targeting specific transgender athletes or female officials or commentators of traditionally male sports. It can also have a more abstract function by reinforcing in- and out-group boundaries e.g., while there may not be overt discrimination within the sport, it may persist online and be vocalised through interpretations of athlete actions.

TABLE 6 RECIPIENTS AND PERPETRATORS IN THE SAMPLE.

IDENTITY CATEGORY	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
Fans/Users	5	55
Athletes	41	5
Journalists/Pundits	8	3
Officials	1	0
Marginalised Groups	22	0

4.5 HYPOTHESES FOR HATE SPEECH AND RESPONSES

We have identified some of the factors that have driven the increasing research output but what does the research have to say about why online hate is a problem in sport? The simple answer is that wider societal problems are, of course, likely to articulate in sporting contexts. However, the research consistently recognises the unique characteristics of sport; the tribalism, the emotional intensity and liminality of the sporting space that can often provoke and allow for behaviours that would be deemed unacceptable outside of sport (Kearns et al., 2023). Furthermore, because sport provokes such intense feelings and identities, it is ripe for political, cultural and economic adoption. Sport is the theatre from which such vested interests are played out locally and internationally (Messner, 2011).

Scholars have focused on what can be done internally by sports organisations and social media platforms (e.g., O'Hallarn et al., 2018; O'Hallarn et al., 2019; Sveinson & Hoeber, 2020). Blaya (2019) identifies four strategies for combatting cyberhate in the literature (a) strengthening the legal frame,

(b) automated identification of cyberhate to regulate and support intervention; (c) education, and (d) counter-communication. In our sample, emphasis is placed on education and training to both media professionals (Kilvington, 2021, players (Sanderson et al., 2020) and children (Merga & Booth, 2017). The influence of community values and the cultivation of digital spaces are key factors examined. Within these spaces, those who propagate hate often find acceptance and praise from their peers, even if it results in disapproval from others (as discussed by Stick et al., 2021). Some argue that online environments relying on user-driven moderation, as outlined in McCarthy (2021), may intensify the prevalence of hate. Our review suggests that greater research is required on the breadth and effectiveness of intervention strategies being used within sport at different levels.

While some researchers have proposed anonymity as a central driver behind the spread of online hate (as noted by Sanderson, 2010; Love & Hughey, 2015; Page et al., 2016), others have advocated for a more nuanced perspective. They argue that the issue goes beyond a simplistic assumption that merely promoting transparency can effectively mitigate online hate by reinstating mainstream societal norms and concerns related to social stigma (as discussed by Steinfeldt et al., 2010; Matamoros-Fernandez, 2017; Love et al., 2017; Litchfield et al., 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2019). This is particularly interesting when we consider Twitter's response to the Euro 2020 incident involving the English national soccer team. Twitter (2021) issued a statement, indicating that 99% of the users banned from their platform for engaging in racist abuse were identifiable.

4.6 RESEARCH APPROACHES AND DATA SOURCES

As can be seen from Table 7, research in the sample is primarily qualitative (62%) in nature, making use of secondary data (79%). Only 14% of the reviewed texts used primary data sources. Consequently, we do not hear enough about the direct experiences of those stakeholders that are impacted and in turn, from the stakeholders charged with the responsibilities of tackling the problem. This is significant for example when we consider how little we know about perpetrators and why they use hate speech in sporting contexts. For example, few studies in the sample explored the psychological motivations of perpetrators - Sorokowski et al. (2020) conducted primary research regarding the psychology or motives of individuals often referred to as 'haters,' while another study, Meggs & Ahmed (2021), utilised psychological approaches to analyse hateful content on Twitter. Most of the research is based on the characteristics of the online spaces that are conducive to hate and their influence on the behaviours and attitudes of the users who engage in such conduct.

There are a variety of reasons for this emphasis on secondary data and qualitative research. Firstly, gaining access to primary data from online platforms can be challenging. Online platforms may have strict privacy policies or may be reluctant to share user data, particularly data that may portray their platform or sponsors in a negative light. As discussed in 4.3.3, they may charge significant license fees to access data. Even if a researcher has access to raw data, data tagged with hate speech may have been removed by content moderators or the end users. Secondly and relatedly, online hate speech involves sensitive topics and potentially identifying or engaging with individuals who are either perpetrators or victims of online hate speech. In some instances, engaging with the former may expose the researcher to harm. In both instances, it raises significant ethical issues and adherence to privacy protection. Thirdly, from a methodological perspective, the subjective nature of language, varying definitions of hate speech, and the complexity of online interactions, particularly on social

media, make quantitative research challenging. Even where access is available, researchers may face scale problems (Lynn & Rosati, 2022). While the number of posts featuring online hate speech may be relatively small, identifying hate speech from very large datasets, such as those associated with mega sporting events like the World Cup, may require advanced techniques and specialist skills. This is further complicated by the dynamic and evolving nature of online platforms. Online platforms are continuously adding new features and functionality that can make it difficult to design studies that remain relevant, enable comparability, or to apply traditional research methodologies effectively. At the same time, qualitative research may allow researchers to gain deeper insights into the nuances and context of online hate speech with smaller samples or secondary data, which can be overlooked in quantitative analysis.

TABLE 7 RESEARCH APPROACHES AND METHODS IN THE SAMPLE

IDENTITY CATEGORY	# OF REVIEWED TEXTS	% OF REVIEWED TEXTS
Primary data	9	13.64
Secondary data	53	80.30
Quantitative research	4	6.10
Qualitative research	41	62.12
Mixed methods	18	27.27

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Online hate speech in sport is a complex and pervasive problem. Academic scholars have a significant role to play in deepening the understanding of the causes, dynamics, and impacts of hate speech, thereby informing more effective policies and interventions. Unfortunately, there are significant gaps in our knowledge about the nature and prevalence of online hate speech. Based on this scoping review, we propose the following recommendations for future research:

- Including a wider range of sports (including paralympic sports) in research on online hate speech.
- Extending online hate speech research to include both amateur and professional sports and sports at all levels from children to seniors.
- Increasing the number of media types (e.g., audio, video and images) examined in research on online hate speech research.
- Expanding the focus of online hate speech research in sports to include a wider range of targets and perpetrators including the intra- and inter-relationships between targets, perpetrators and other stakeholders. In particular, research needs to be intensified into the psychological motivations and antecedents of online hate speech both at an individual perpetrator level and otherwise. Additionally, researchers should explore differences in online hate speech in the same sport where the targets and perpetrators have different personal characteristics e.g., gender or ability.
- Widening coverage of online hate speech in sports to include under-researched types of online hate speech and specifically transphobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, sectarianism, and ableism, and the relationship between different types of online hate speech.
- Increasing the breadth of cultures and languages represented in research on online hate speech in sports.
- Extending the number of online platforms into which online hate research in sports is conducted including encrypted messaging platforms, niche social media platforms, and the dark net.
- Advancing our understanding of the effectiveness of different measures and measure designs to combat online hate in sports at different levels.
- Increasing the volume of longitudinal large-scale comparative research on online hate speech in sports.

To accomplish the broadening and deepening of research on online hate speech in sports, several enabling factors would be necessary:

1. Secure access to a broad range of sports stakeholders and communities, including amateur, professional, and paralympic sports, for comprehensive data collection and involving diverse communities, including those representing different genders, abilities, races, and ages, to understand varied experiences and perspectives.

2. Large-scale interdisciplinary collaboration including psychology, sociology, sports studies, linguistics, and data science, for nuanced research.

3. International research networks capable of conducting comparative and collaborative studies in multiple languages, understanding different cultural contexts, across multiple sporting contexts.

4. Comprehensive research funding for inclusive and extensive research projects including research infrastructure for storing and processing large datasets, long-term longitudinal studies and/or licensing historic data from online platforms.

5. Upskilling researchers to participate on teams developing and using advanced research methodologies suitable for analysing Big Data, complex online interactions, and different types of online hate speech.

6. Working in tandem with policymakers, online platforms, sports federations, and sports organisations to test, assess, and refine different measures and interventions to combat online hate speech.

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