

'[K]neeling only goes to highlight your ignorance. England is NOT! a #racist country': aversive racism, colour-blindness, and racist temporalities in discussions of football online

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‘[K]neeling only goes to highlight your ignorance. England is NOT! a #racist country’: aversive racism, colour-blindness, and racist temporalities in discussions of football online

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on theories of aversive racism and colour-blindness, which stress the invisibility of contemporary racism, this article analyses online discussions on taking the knee (TTK) during EURO2020 men’s football tournament. While highly visible racist abuse directed at Black English players after losing the final to Italy (dominative racism) received most public attention and repudiation, based on 6,850 English language tweets published on Twitter/X, this article shows how subtle racism and colour-blindness were reinforced in discussions around TTK over the duration of the tournament (aversive racism). The article also shows how individuals online developed a variety of strategies (evidence, othering, critique, and activism) to challenge the main arguments against anti-racist activism in football (identified in four themes: BLM, Marxism, virtue signalling, and woke). The article makes an original contribution by examining the changing intensity of online conversations on TTK over the duration of the tournament. Our analysis identifies key moments in the tournament, political elites’ rhetoric, and trends of success and failure as relevant factors that shaped vernacular conversations online. The discussion ultimately argues that investigating the temporal patterns of public discussions on (anti)racism provides valuable insights to understand the contemporary complexity of racism in football and society more broadly.

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1. Introduction

It is widely recognised that the act of professional athletes taking the knee (TTK) at a sporting event first entered mainstream public consciousness in 2016, through the American football quarter back Colin Kaepernick’s protest against racism in American society (Duvall 2020). TTK became an even more popular international political gesture against

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racism and police brutality with the intensification of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Many of the mass-attended protests in 2020 in the US, and internationally, ended with demonstrators reproducing this historical gesture. In support of these anti-racist international mobilisations, many football players, clubs, fans, and media companies adopted variants of anti-racist messages. The English Premier League took on the slogan 'No Room for Racism' and players adopted the anti-racist gesture of TTK before kick-off during the Premier League in the summer of 2020 (Premier League 2020). The anti-racist protest of kneeling was repeated by four of the 24 football national teams during EURO2020 men's football championship celebrated between 11 June and 11 July 2021.

Far from passing unnoticed, the decision to take the knee during EURO2020, especially the England men's team, became highly controversial. British media outlets published contested views on the decision of TTK by the England team (Stone 2021; Wilcock 2021), and while some key political figures criticised the gesture and defended those who opposed it, other public figures embraced it (e.g. Southgate 2021). The dispute also became noticeable in the stadium where some football fans booed players and others supported the anti-racist gesture with applause (BBC 2021a). Notably, public discussions on kneeling during EURO2020 were held online, particularly on the social media site X, formerly known as Twitter, where thousands of tweets were published on the issue (Kearns et al., 2023). This is not surprising considering that Twitter/X is the main platform where current affairs, especially football, are discussed by millions of users daily (Twitter n.d.; Burgess and Baym 2020).

Investigating responses to the adoption of an anti-racist expression in one of the most popular European sport championship enables us to identify contemporary discourses on (anti)racism among lay citizens. The summer of 2020 was characterised by unprecedented anti-racist mobilisations not only in the US, but also remarkably in Europe. Scholars place this 'new wave' of anti-racist protests in Europe in a moment of 'growing level of public debate on racism' on one hand and 'rising nationalism and polarisation' across different European countries on another (Beaman et al. 2023, 498). The particularity of this paradoxical moment of change makes it even more urgent the analysis of public debates on racism and anti-racist activism in Europe post-2020. Nonetheless, while a vast amount of research focuses on public and media reactions to the act of taking the knee by American football player Kaepernick in 2016, the recent adoption of this anti-racist gesture by European national teams in the context of the EURO2020 has attracted little academic attention. This article makes an important contribution by identifying and discussing key themes and strategies employed by individuals to support or oppose this anti-racist statement, and analysing the complex temporalities of these online discussions. Social media content serves as a lens through which to observe the evolving manifestations of racism, influenced by significant events, political rhetoric, and the perceived achievements or setbacks of racialised individuals. By examining online posts, this article demonstrates the dynamic nature of racism, highlighting its reproduction and contestation over the tournament.

2. Research on taking the knee and athlete anti-racist activism

Kneeling as a form of social justice activism has a long history. Some scholars attribute the origin of TTK to Martin Luther King, who in 1964, 'knelt on one knee, praying' in

response to the arrests of many peaceful protesters in Selma (Alabama) (Buongiovanni et al. 2022, 3). According to others, this form of protest goes as far back as the late eighteenth century when the British Society for the Abolition of Slavery adopted the image of a kneeling enslaved man in its anti-slavery campaign, and Richard Allen, a Black minister and founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, took a knee to protest against racial segregation (Lennox 2022; see also Webster 2009). Solomon Lennox identifies several key moments between the late 1700s and 2016 in which the act of kneeling became ‘a gesture linked to racial justice reform’ (2022, 474). These include the widely circulated act of TTK by American football player Colin Kaepernick during the performance of the US National Anthem in 2016 prior to the start of matches.

Nearly all academic research on TTK focuses on the US context and analyses data collected during 2016 and 2017, following Kaepernick’s anti-racist activism. Academics have researched how Kaepernick’s activism in 2016 has been portrayed by the media in the US (Boykoff and Carrington 2020; Doehler 2023). Related literature has examined the nearly absent media representation of female athletes, such as footballer Megan Rapinoe, who took the knee in solidarity with the movement and Kaepernick (Kappeler and Flory 2019), as well as US women’s soccer fan’s responses to it (Cavalier and Allison 2021). Researchers have also turned to social media to investigate public conversations around Kaepernick’s TTK in 2016 and 2017. For instance, Schmidt et al. (2019) analysed Facebook comments made to Kaepernick’s and Rapinoe’s Facebook pages in response to their activism during 2016, and Boatwright (2022) explored the role of online opinion leaders in Twitter conversations related to Kaepernick and Rapinoe’s activism during 2016 and 2017. Elsewhere, Duvall (2020) examined online far-right communities’ discourses on Kaepernick’s act of kneeling, and Cosby (2019) explored the hashtags employed by Facebook and Twitter/X users following Donald Trump’s controversial statements against TTK during 2017–2018. Dunbar (2019) conducted an analysis centred on the visual elements of online discussions, examining the prevalence of popular memes shared in the aftermath of Kaepernick’s anti-racist gesture controversy.

The high amount of academic attention paid to athletes TTK in the US contrasts with the attention that the most recent adoption of TTK by European national football teams has received. To date, academic examination of public discussions on TTK post-2020 and in the context of EURO2020 is scarce. The complexity of public online discussions towards TTK during EURO2020 was partially explored by Black et al. (2023), who analysed tweets against TTK and their relation to alt – and far-right conspiracy theories. Elsewhere, Rudwick and Schmiendl (2023) examine Czech online discourses on kneeling and BLM in football on Facebook, and Buongiovanni et al. (2022), analyse the development of Echo Chambers in Twitter/X discussions around TTK as it emerged during EURO2020. Through online surveys, Dixon, ; Cashmore, and Cleland (2023) investigate 1001 football fans’ experiences and beliefs on racism in football, and their views on the particular act of TTK. The authors argued that objectors to TTK were not motivated by racism despite not capturing demographic data of the respondents. Taking this colour-blind approach, as the next section highlights, uncritically perpetuates the invisible whiteness of portrayals of both the nation and the national football team.

There is a range of literature that analyses media discussions of nationhood and race. Hate speech by political leaders, such as Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, can influence public understandings, and make online discussions more difficult to moderate (Yeon

Kim and Kesari 2021; Zempi 2019). This is complicated by the media ecology that turns racism into a discursive game about the debatability of racism (Titley 2019). Digital media plays an important role in facilitating this debatability. The role of politicians can help inform public discussions online and offline (Titley 2019). This is amplified by the printed media, who, as Mauro (2024) incisively identifies, presents who is permitted into national consciousness through images and the written word. In particular, the use of pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘they’ demarcate who is seen as being part of the nation and who is merely tolerated. Consequently, Mauro (2024, 17) argues that the media ‘foreground hierarchies of belonging, which place Black and ethnic minority players and fans under a form of conditional, temporary inclusion’. Similarly, Hylton (2009) highlighted how white athletes were de-racialised; a process that could occur to Black athletes who were seen as ‘good’. This was reflected in the ‘white-centrism’ of the media who centre white athletes, whilst simultaneously making their whiteness invisible. Hylton uses the term ‘enlightened racism’ to illustrate how athletes are used as an image of racial success which simultaneously reinforces the inferiority of Black people outside of sport. Similar to the concepts of ‘aversive racism’ and ‘colour-blind racism’ discussed in the next section, ‘enlightened racism’ underpins the post-racial myth that everyone can succeed as long as they make the right individual choices.

3. Aversive racism, colour-blindness, and racist temporalities

Overt and/or blatant expressions of racism are the easiest to spot and most often the ones that cause major controversy, and make the headlines, particularly in football. This was the case for the online racism directed at Bukayo Saka, Marcus Rashford, and Jadon Sancho, the Black English players who missed the penalties for England in the final (BBC 2021b). This article argues that whilst racist abuse directed against the three players captured the media and public attention, other (not as visible) racist expressions passed unnoticed in online discussions on TTK during EURO2020 tournament. This section introduces the concept of ‘aversive racism’ (Kovel 1970; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Pearson 2017) and the dominant frames of colour-blind ideology proposed by Bonilla-Silva (2014) as useful analytical lenses to investigate online discussions on (anti)racism activism during EURO2020. The concept of aversive racism is underused in studies of sport, but as Hylton (2018, 32) highlights, it is useful because ‘racial bias can be exercised without fear of recrimination for actors in sport because their unconscious or implicit biases effect racially troubling decisions’. The section also proposes to explore the temporality of racism in order to redirect our attention to the complex movements of submersion and emersion (hide and show) in which racism operates. The approach we suggest challenges linear accounts of racism by focusing on how racism changes over time and how external factors (such as political discourse and other real-world events) play a role in the shifting manifestations of racism.

Race scholars identify a historical transformation in which racism passed from being ‘overt’ (or ‘blatant’) to ‘subtle’ (Dovidio, Gaertner, and Pearson 2017). Joel Kovel (1970) first introduced the distinction between ‘dominative’ and ‘aversive’ types of racism to explain the historical development of racism in the US. Whilst dominative racism responds to more visible and violent/heated expressions of racial discrimination

(which sometimes involves direct violence and/or 'open racial hostility'), aversive racism is characterised by its 'coldness' and reduced visibility (Kovel 1970, 32–53). In 1970, Kovel (1970) noticed how expressions of dominative (obvious) racism were largely being replaced with aversive (non-obvious) racism as the socio-political landscape was being transformed by the Civil Rights movement. In this socio-historical context, being an openly racist person was not seen as something desirable/acceptable anymore, and, while racism did not vanish, its visibility was significantly reduced (Kovel 1970). Though the distinction introduced by Kovel (1970) highlights that the decrease of expressions of prejudice towards under-represented racial and ethnic groups in the public sphere should not be interpreted as a reduction and/or disappearance of racism, it nonetheless shows that racism comes in multiple shapes and forms.

From being the law and norm up until the 1960s and 1970s, racism turned to be understood as immoral and undemocratic by many white people in Western democracies (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004). But the persistence of racial disparity and discrimination shows that racism still remains, although it does not tend to manifest itself as openly (Dovidio and Gaertner 2004). Dovidio, Gaertner, and Pearson (2017) use Kovel's notion of 'aversive racism' to describe the racial biases of those who 'believe that they are not prejudiced, but whose unconscious negative feelings and beliefs nevertheless get expressed in subtle, indirect, and often rationalizable ways' (2017, 270). The concept of aversive racism sheds light on the contemporary functioning of racism that characterises itself from its invisibility. This notion of imperceptibility has also been stressed by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2014), who employs the expression of 'racism without racists' to explain how racial inequality and discrimination still persists, even if few individuals claim to be racist and/or consider race to be relevant.

Subtle and apparently non-racial 'new racism' practices have been labelled by Bonilla-Silva as colour-blind racism (2014, 3). According to Bonilla-Silva, colour-blind racism has become 'the dominant racial ideology' in the post-civil rights era and he proposes four frames to detect/understand it: abstract liberalism, naturalisation, cultural racism, and minimisation of racism (2014, 74). The 'abstract liberalism' frame (Bonilla-Silva 2014) enables individuals to engage in racist practices while rationalising their actions with ideas associated with political liberalism (such as equal opportunity and individual choice). This involves, for instance, opposing affirmative positive actions in the name of equality, against 'preferential treatment', and invoking the notion of individual choice to the decision of living in a (racially) segregated neighbourhood (Bonilla-Silva 2014). The naturalisation frame functions when individuals 'explain away racial phenomena by suggesting they are natural occurrences' (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 76), and cultural racism occurs when culture is used in arguments to explain racial inequality. These two frames have replaced earlier arguments (unequivocally identified as racist) based on a presumed biological inferiority of people of colour (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Thus, whilst biological views are accused of racism and only defended by white supremacists, both the naturalisation and cultural racism frames manage to maintain the racial status quo while passing as non-racist. These frames turn more effective thanks to the dominant tendency of the colour-blind society to minimise racism. According to the 'minimisation of racism' frame, racism is regarded as something from the past and no-longer important (Bonilla-Silva 2014). This feeds into the work of Titley (2019) who argues that racism

in the media is constantly debated. Downplaying the importance of racism leads to overlooking instances of racial discrimination, except in cases of overt dominance-based racism, which consequently leads to delayed or absent responses and the perception of anti-racist measures as unnecessary or exaggerated (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Race in contemporary Europe is 'a slippery object that keeps shifting and changing' (M'charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014, 459). As a result, racism, like race, is best understood as 'an absent presence, something that oscillates between reality and nonreality, which appears on the surface and then hides underground' (ibid., see also Black 2020). Racism is no longer overt and visible at all times, but operates in a 'now you see it, now you don't fashion' (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 3). Kovel argued that under particular circumstances aversive (non-visible) racism can 'lapse into dominative racism' and vice versa (1970, p.55). In other words, at certain times, subtle and invisible racism might emerge on the surface (turn visible) calling into question the highly-extended colour-blind (Bonilla-Silva 2014) and post-racial society myth (Goldberg 2015).

Drawing on these notions of contemporary racism to explore vernacular discussions on (anti)racism during EURO2020 tournament, this article proposes the notion of racist temporalities to examine the instances in which racist expressions decrease and/or increase and hidden racism (aversive) turns visible (dominative). This approach, elaborated upon in the subsequent discussion, aims to shift our focus towards the fluidity and non-linear nature of racism, as well as its intricated connection with specific events. By doing so, it endeavours to enhance our ability to identify and address various forms of racism more adeptly.

4. Data and methodology

For the purposes of this study on public discourses on (anti)racism in football, Twitter/X was used as the empirical context. While a number of social media platforms have emerged over the years, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter/X are the social networking sites with the largest user base in the UK (Kemp 2021). These three platforms, however, are fundamentally different from each other in terms of functionalities, type of content they enable users to share and how it is shared among users. Instagram, for example, is an image-based social media platform where text is only use for captions (Anagnostopoulos et al. 2018), and attracts a younger and female-oriented audience profile (Kemp 2021; McCarthy, Rowley, and Keegan 2022). On the contrary, Facebook and Twitter/X are primarily designed around textual content and have an older and more male-oriented user profile (Kemp, 2021). Furthermore, Facebook encourages and rewards long-form content while Twitter/X's algorithm is primarily designed to promote short-form content and enable information sharing (McCarthy, Rowley, and Keegan 2022).

Research suggests that Twitter/X is a valuable tool for sports fans (Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman 2014; McCarthy, Rowley, and Keegan 2022) for characterising football supporters, and to investigate phenomena at the intersection politics and sports (Hayat, Samuel-Azran, and Galily 2016; Guzmán, Zhang, and Ahmed 2021). Scholars use Twitter/X for a variety of reasons across social sciences as it 'provides a convenient means of developing a broad understanding of a population's activities and attitudes' (McCormick et al. 2017, 394–395). As Twitter/X provides a timely source of data

(Hull 2014) that can increase the immediacy of communication with athletes and other fans (Kassing and Sanderson 2010) as well as play a role in team identification (Williams, Chinn, and Suleiman 2014; Fan et al. 2020), it should not come as a surprise that football is the most tweeted about sport on this platform (Twitter 2021). Historical research on Twitter/X suggests that approximately 56% of Twitter/X users were fans of the Euros (Twitter 2021). Football fans not only discuss sport but also express their views on social and political issues, and the intersection of sport with society and politics (Fan et al. 2020; Meier et al. 2021; Black et al. 2023). Indeed, Twitter/X's functionality, and, in particular the use of hashtags, facilitates the emergence and coordination of ad hoc and calculated publics comprising acquaintances and strangers with similar and opposing views (Bruns and Burgess 2015). Similarly, hashtags allow researchers to bind analysis to a specific event or discourse, for example, in this case to #Euro2020. Furthermore, hashtags, like social and political movements, may not be specifically tied to a single event but may travel across events or sports, and in some cases have different meanings. For example, while #takeaknee (and variations) initially referred to Kaepernick's 2016 refusal to stand during the playing of the national anthem in protest of police brutality against African Americans (Rosenbaum 2019), both the act of TTK and the hashtag were used in a wide range of sports and cultural contexts outside of the US and the National Football League (NFL) (Boykoff 2022).

This study leverages a dataset of 6,850 English language tweets related to EURO2020 – i.e. these tweets featured the hashtag '#Euro2020', the expression 'Euro 2020' or any of the match-specific hashtags such as '#ENGvITA'. Collected tweets made explicit reference to TTK – i.e. they featured the expression 'take the knee', 'taking the knee', 'kneeling' or corresponding hashtags – and were posted between 10 June 2021, the day before the opening match of the competition, and 17 July 2021, one week after the final. Bearing in mind that our objective was to explore how conversations and counter-narratives developed during the tournament, we subsequently examined 5,198 original tweets posted by 4,221 discrete users, which expressed either favourable or unfavourable opinions in relation to the protest. This sits in line with other studies that have used similar datasets (see, for example, Agudelo and Olbrych 2022; Agudelo 2023). Even though there are no geographical limitations on where tweets can be posted from, the vast majority focus on national teams within the UK – which makes sense considering that it was only the UK teams and Belgium that adopted the gesture of TTK.

Themes and thematic categories were produced through an inductive coding process (Braun and Clarke 2006) which was iterative and evolved throughout the analysis. Initially, each tweet was coded as Favourable (supportive of TTK), Unfavourable (unsupportive of TTK) or Other (uncertain or irrelevant). During the coding process, themes were not strictly predefined but emerged as deeper insights were gained from the data and discussion amongst the authors. Codes were then grouped into evolving categories reflecting broader patterns and themes. As new themes emerged, the categories were refined to better capture nuances in the data until ultimately, the final eight categories were arrived at (i) Black Lives Matter, (ii) Left Wing Politics, (iii) Wokeism, (iv) Virtual Signalling and Gesture Politics, (v) White Victimisation, (vi) Anti-Police, (vii) No Politics in Sport, and (viii) Other opinions on TTK. Then, these tweets were further analysed by date to identify abnormal peaks and obtain insights regarding the temporality of online discussions on TTK during EURO2020.

5. Findings

During this period, a total of 6580 tweets engaged with TTK. Under the Taking the Knee code (TTK), six themes emerged, three which clearly indicated an opinion on the gesture ($n = 5198$) and three that were either false positives ($n = 23$), linked to betting companies ($n = 36$), or expressed no opinion ($n = 1593$). Of these three categories that expressed an opinion, 3009 (58%) were supportive of the gesture, 1388 (27%) were against it, and 801 (15%) ambivalent. Spikes in activity clearly coincided with matches involving England. Over the course of the tournament, there was a clear drop in the intensity of tweets discussing TTK up until July 11 when the England team played the final against Italy and the day after (when spikes in online activity continued). What is also striking about the discussions is that after the initial intensity, the highest volume of tweets ($n = 3,009$, or 58%) were from those who were pro-TTK. [Figure 1](#) highlights the spread of the tweets over the duration of the tournament.

The second level of coding highlighted specific descriptors that were aligned with those against TTK. These terms were 'BLM' or 'Black Lives Matter', 'woke', 'virtue signalling', 'anti-police', 'all lives matter' or 'white lives matter', 'no politics in sport' or 'divisive'. Of the 1,388 tweets that expressed an opinion against TTK, 685 (49%) mentioned at least one of these descriptors. This represented 13% of the 5198 tweets that expressed an opinion. [Figure 1](#) highlights the frequency of mentions. Meanwhile, 703 (51%) did not mention one of these terms in relation to their criticism of the gesture. Most of these tweets (521 or 75%) showed an opposition towards TTK but did not provide a reason for it, 190 (27%) contained insults, online abuse, and/or negative terms towards footballers or individuals who supported TTK, and 149 (21%) of these tweets stated that their support during EURO2020 tournament had shifted towards teams that did not kneel and/or stated that they did not support the England or Scottish national teams anymore due to their adoption of the anti-racist gesture.

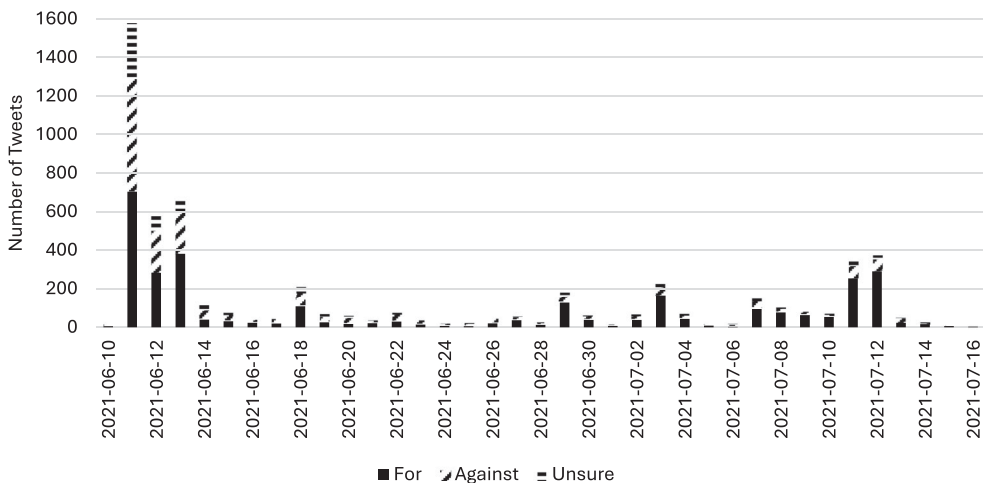


Figure 1. Temporal distribution of tweets with and without an opinion on 'Take a knee'.

6. Analysis and discussion

6.1. Arguments for and against taking the knee

6.1.1. Online narratives against TTK

Despite mainstream media, academics, and key figures arguing that there was no racism behind the opposition to TTK and fans booing players for adopting this gesture (Dixon, ; Cashmore, and Cleland 2023), our research shows that nearly half (49%) of those who tweeted against England players TTK reproduced colour-blind ideology frames in their statements.¹ These tweets employed wider descriptors such as ‘woke’, ‘virtue signalling’, and ‘BLM’ as being against the police, ‘anti-white’, ‘Marxist’, and/or ‘divisive’ to oppose the adoption of the anti-racist gesture and reinforce colour-blind ideology. Online statements against TTK resorted to abstract liberalism, naturalisation, and minimisation of racism frames (Bonilla-Silva 2014) to oppose anti-racist activism in the field during EURO2020. Drawing on the notion of aversive racism, our analysis shows how racism was reinforced in online discussions around TTK whilst passing unnoticed through the employment of subtle colour-blind strategies.

Even if liberal discourse is most often employed in an affirmative way (e.g. stressing individuals’ right to decide, equal opportunity, and freedom of expression), many statements against TTK reproduced another liberal myth according to which particular actors and spheres are political and others (traditionally identified as the private sphere) are (and should remain) apolitical. Many tweets containing ‘Marxist’ and ‘divisive’ themes repeated the assumption that sport and football are non-political realms, and therefore, political statements, such as anti-racist gestures in the stadium, are inappropriate and ‘divisive’. These tweets criticised footballers’ right to protest (especially highly-paid ones) stressing the idea that athletes are employees and/or entertainers, not political figures.

Why must the fans respect the players choice to take the knee, it’s the fans who have paid extortionate amounts of money to be there and watch football not political virtue signalling. Perhaps the multimillionaire players should respect the fans and just kick off! (12/6/23 09:35)

Denying players’ right to protest and arguing that sport is and should remain apolitical (i.e. ‘politics has no place in sport’), many individuals opposed anti-racist activism during EURO2020. 61 tweets against TTK contained the theme of ‘no politics’ and framed TTK as an act that disrupted the liberal separation between political and non-political realms. In this way, colour-blind ideology (and aversive racism) was notably reproduced in online discussions through the ‘abstract liberalism’ frame (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Ironically, these fans did not see any problem with performing their own protest and bringing their politics into football. This might be because these individuals saw their protest as apolitical defence of the ‘normal state of things’. I.e. ‘no politics in football’.

In contrast, anti-racist activism was consistently referred to as ‘woke’ by online users during the tournament (see also Black et al. 2023). Naming anti-racist activism as ‘woke’ reinforced the ‘naturalisation frame’ (Bonilla-Silva 2014) which perceived anything as woke (and its supposed ideology of ‘wokeism’) that sought to dismantle political neutrality and/or the natural state of things. Whilst the original meaning of ‘woke’ was to be aware of racial injustice, Cammaerts (2022, 737) argues that nowadays ‘everything ‘woke’ is positioned as aberrant, politically deviant, as extremist, as going against the

sovereign will of ‘the people’ and ‘the common good’, as a threat to ‘our’ Britain’. The term ‘woke’ is applied by ‘anti-woke’ campaigners ‘to any group or practice they wish to discredit’ (Davies and MacRae 2023, 2) and, thus, intolerant individuals accuse ‘those who are fighting intolerance of being intolerant extremists’ (Cammaerts 2022, 737). This anti-woke culture war, reflected in online discussions around TTK during EURO2020 could be interpreted as a reinforcement of the ‘naturalisation frame’ (Bonilla-Silva 2014) according to which there is no need for affirmative action because there is no racial discrimination and/or inequality – only a natural order of things ‘woke extremists’ seek to disrupt.

The ‘minimisation frame’ (Bonilla-Silva 2014) was another way in which colour-blind ideology and aversive racism were reproduced in online conversations against TTK during the tournament. Colour-blind ideology (aversive racism) was enacted in many tweets through gaslighting and minimising the existence of racism (Davis and Ernst 2019). For example, the following tweet explicitly stated that England was not a racist country:

Dear Insincere ignorant double standard virtue signalling race baiting hypocrites Agitators ... kneeling only goes to highlight your ignorance. England is NOT! a #racist country. All those Kneeling. look around YOU! Fuckin idiots. (11/6/23 20:16)

Despite the insistence that England is not racist, some tweets sustained that protesting against racism is ‘race baiting’, and asserting that by TTK, football players were legitimating ‘anti-white behaviour’. Thus, despite the inference of a post-racial society, support for BLM was depicted by many as ‘anti-white’ racism. The minimisation frame reproduced in online conversations on TTK reinforced the myth of a post-racial society by ignoring, minimising, and gaslighting experiences of racism (Davis and Ernst 2019) as well as regarding as ‘hyper-sensitive’ (Bonilla-Silva 2014) anyone who denounced racism. This results in those who expose racism as being dismissed with an ad hominin condemnation of ‘anti-white racism’ (Joseph-Salisbury 2019). As van Dijk (1992, 90) observes, ‘[t]he person who accuses the other as racist is in turn accused of inverted racism against whites, as oversensitive and exaggerating, as intolerant, generally as ‘seeing racism where there is none’’. Racism then ‘becomes about white distress, white suffering, and white victimisation’ (DiAngelo 2018, 134). This victimisation acts as a subtle form of racism that ignores inherent power imbalances that result from racism (aversive racism).

6.1.2. Counter-narratives

Our analysis identifies four main approaches to challenging those who argued against TTK online: evidence, othering, critique, and activism. Interestingly, whilst the first two strategies focus on targeting highly-visible racism (dominative racism), the other strategies challenge subtle expressions of racism (aversive racism) that reinforce colour-blindness.

The first strategy consisted of using the evidence of racist abuse (overt racism) directed at Sancho, Rashford, and Sako after the final to justify the need for kneeling throughout the tournament.

The racist abuse of the 3 young players after the match last night by own fans IS the reason why people take the knee. How hard is it to understand? (12/7/23 16:57)

Notably, whilst many of these comments referred to individualised racist insults (instances of explicit racism that colour-blind racism seeks to diminish and/or ignore), expressions of subtle racism (aversive racism) were less frequently used as evidence of racism by individuals online who defended the gesture of TTK.

Othering individuals who protested against TTK constituted another way of challenging narratives online. This involved labelling those booing as ‘stupid’, ‘morons’, ‘idiots’, and similar terms that deplored their position as irrational and uninformed:

Some idiots would still boo the taking the knee gesture. That’s standard, not expecting anything else. And the smart ones would applaud to drown the boos from the idiots. (13/6/23 12:55)

In a similar fashion to those who criticised the players for TTK, some of those supporting the protest divided individuals into ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. In this case, ‘us’ were ‘smart’ or ‘educated’, in contrast to the ‘stupid’ and ‘uneducated’ fans who were booing (dominative racists). Thus, challenging overt expressions of racism (problematically) involved drawing on processes of ingroup and outgroup stigmatisation that mainly targeted dominative racism/racists.

The third way that supporters of TTK challenged online narratives against the gesture was through highlighting the hypocrisy of individuals who initially supported those who booed players and then criticised the racist abuse directed at English Black players after the final. Much of the criticism over hypocrisy was directed at government ministers (notably at Boris Johnson and Priti Patel) who, in one breath, denounced the protest and justified fans booing (see the next section), and, in another, spoke of their horror over (dominative) racism received by the three players. Thus, some individuals online challenged aversive racism and colour-blindness by stressing how the acceptance of particular attitudes (subtle racism) enabled overt racism that was later condemned.

I HATE seeing nasty, vindictive politicians (Boris Johnson Priti Patel) grandstanding in their condemnation of racist abuse when they enabled that same abuse through trying to crowd please by criticising the kneeling. You. Should. Be. Ashamed (12/7/23 17:28)

The fourth way individuals challenged those who booed TTK was by focusing on the positives of anti-racist protest and activism in the field. These tweets were often outwardly critical of contemporary anti-wokeness culture war (aversive racism) and asserted that, far from dividing society and football, by TTK and standing up to racial inequality, the England team presented an image of a positive society:

Proud that wokeness, skill, talent, and real leadership wins football matches at a time of blather, incompetence, prejudice, and idiocy in Whitehall. Take a knee, wear a rainbow armband, be proudly multicultural and give a fuck about others. That’s a team to support (7/7/23 22:14)

While key figures and media outlets focused on challenging highly visible dominative expressions of racism at the end of EURO2020, our analysis shows how individuals online developed different strategies to challenge statements and behaviours that could be classified as subtle and/or non-visible racism (aversive racism). Rather than only focusing on overt and easily identifiable racism, such as, insults and online abuse directed at Saka, Rashford, and Sancho at the end of the championship, online discussions on (anti)racism in football turned out to be more sophisticated (and potentially long-term

effective) than mainstream media and political statements, which only condemned overt racism after the final. These strategies involved targeting subtle and/or invisible racism by challenging some of the colour-blind ideology frames reproduced both online and offline.

6.2. Temporality of online discussions on taking the knee

Despite empirical limitations on knowing what drove individuals to express their opinions online about (anti)racism in football in particular moments, and being aware that causality cannot (and should not) be attributed, our analysis of the temporal patterns of these conversations identifies three factors that might have potentially played a role in online activity during EURO2020 tournament: key moments in the tournament (i.e. matches), political elites' discourses, and trends of success and failure. Given this, the article tries to stress the importance of paying attention to the temporality of online conversations which are most often ignored in academic research on online hate. We argue that this can shed light on the contemporary functioning of racism as well as provide some valuable insights on how to tackle it.

6.2.1. Key moments in the tournament (match days)

As shown in the findings, online discussions about TTK changed over time and their intensity varied throughout the tournament. Unsurprisingly, the intensity of online conversations increased around football matches involving England on 13, 18, 22, and 29 June and 3, 7, and 11 July (see [Figure 1](#)). Expectedly, many individuals who were either for or against TTK shared their opinions while watching players doing the gesture. This reinforces the idea that Twitter/X functions as a second screen where football is experienced by many. Notably, the intensity around the Scotland game continued until 18 June when the team, after initially refusing to take the knee, announced it would adopt the gesture.

6.2.2. Political elites' rhetoric

Our analysis of the temporal patterns of online discussions about TTK also suggests that public statements by key political figures might have played a key role in social media conversations. Peaks on 11, 14, 15 June and 3 July match the days in which members of the British government expressed their opinions against TTK and/or publicly supported fans who booed the England team players. On 11 June, Education minister Gillian Keegan referred to England players as 'divisive', defended fans for booing the protest, and denied their racism (Walker 2021). In a similar manner, on 14 and 15 June, Home Secretary Priti Patel protected fans who booed the 'gesture politics' of TTK (Stone 2021), and the then Leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg called players 'Marxist' and described fans' jeering as a 'pushback against wokeness' (Wilcock 2021). The peak in online comments for and against TTK on 3 July also match then Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statement refusing to condemn football fans booing (Mathers 2021).

Even if top-down influence and/or causality is difficult to prove, our analysis suggests that high-profile political statements could be linked to vernacular discourses on anti-racist activism online. Many of those who opposed players TTK shared and supported

articles and quotes by journalists and government ministers who supported their opposition. Moreover, some fans explicitly drew on media articles and social media posts by journalists and politicians to support their arguments. Nonetheless, high-profile public statements against TTK also seemed to encourage significant online resistance and creation of counter-narratives, since the number of online statements supporting TTK also matches with the dates of the statements by the members of the government. Some individuals directly referred to political elites' statements to criticise those who opposed the adoption of the anti-racist gesture during EURO2020. Continued links to political elites' discourse were also clearly seen at the end of the tournament when in light of the racist abuse received by Rashford, Saka, and Sancho, players and individuals criticised Johnson and Patel for their support of those booing the players for TTK.

Although our research alone cannot demonstrate that political elites' discourses shape the discourses and narratives of lay citizens, it is important to note the correlation of themes and colour-blind frames against TTK employed by politicians and individuals online (i.e. 'Marxism', 'woke', 'gesture politics', and the abstract liberalism frame most notably). Previous research shows how Islamophobic statements by key political figures, such as, Boris Johnson, resulted in a significant growth of anti-Muslim hate in the UK (TellMama 2023). Moreover, the research illustrates how both online and offline attacks against Muslims had largely either referenced Johnson's statements or incorporated his specific language. Thus, strategies to tackle online and offline racism and discrimination in football, and society overall, should not limit their focus to lay individuals' openly racist statements, but should also focus on political elites' discourses which might be highly influential among the population. In other words, whilst public attention and repudiation often focuses on blatant racism and tends to target particular individuals (i.e. white supremacists and/or those deemed 'extremists'), research must investigate how subtle and non-visible racism strategically deployed by political elites might play a key role legitimising both dominative and aversive racism as well as maintaining the (racial) status quo.

6.2.3. *Trends of success and failure*

Another interesting finding from our temporal analysis is that the success of the England team potentially correlates with a decline in tweets criticising TTK. As Hylton (2009) and Mauro (2024) have highlighted, racialised athletes are accepted as long as they are considered 'good' or productive. Over the course of the tournament, the criticism of the players diminished, and there was a clear drop in the intensity of tweets discussing TTK (see Figure 1). In the latter stages of the tournament, the intensity of tweets around matches was primarily driven by those who were supportive of the England team TTK. Thus, looking at the temporal distribution of online statements against TTK, it seems that the initial victory of the England team had the effect of silencing those who had initially opposed the adoption of the anti-racist gesture. In other words, it seems like critics grew quieter as the England team won, inferring that players were allowed to protest as long as they were winning. This temporal shift was also noticed by Ferdinand, Bustard, and Williams (2021) on the day of the final. Analysing tweets with the hashtag #Euro2020final, Ferdinand, Bustard, and Williams (2021) identified positivity and diversity before the match, early goal excitement during, and racial abuse after the England team lost to Italy.

Despite missing the penalties, it was not only Saka, Rashford, and Sancho who received a wave of racist abuse, but our research shows that online opposition against TTK also increased. This temporal pattern of expressions of dominative and aversive racism seems to show that both overt and subtle racism appear and disappear, emerge and submerge, according to trends of success and failure. In other words, Black players (and anti-racist activism) seem to be (more) accepted as long as they win. These events reiterate that being a Black athlete is conditional on success (Duvall 2020). Racism directed at the players who missed penalties exemplifies that 'they' are accepted into 'our' team/nation as long as 'they' win. As soon as they are perceived to fail, 'they' are reminded that 'their' presence is conditional. The conditional acceptance of racialised players is in stark contrast to the discourse of the post-racial society and colour-blind ideology that intimates that race and racism no longer exists (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Goldberg 2015).

Losing to Italy seems to have played a key role in the transformation of aversive racism into dominative racism. Our findings might indicate that failure in sport is a circumstance that makes public expressions of overt racism increase and non-visible racism 'lapse into dominative racism' (Kovel, 1970, 55). Even if our analysis cannot prove that those who publicly abused the players after the final had previously expressed racism more subtly, it is important to notice the complex temporality in which different forms of racism were manifested online. Our identification of temporal patterns of online racism opens up important new directions for research on racism and online harm. Future research should carefully investigate how real-world events, political elites' rhetoric, and patterns of success and failure (and more generally emotions such as disappointment, anger, excitement, and blame) impact expressions of dominative and aversive racism online and offline.

7. Conclusion

Public discussions on anti-racist protests at sports events provide a valuable opportunity to investigate popular discourses on crucial topics, such as, racism, activism, and social change in both sports and society overall. Drawing on theories of aversive racism (Kovel 1970; Dovidio, Gaertner, and Pearson 2017) and colour-blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2014), which stress the invisibility of contemporary racism, this paper has analysed online discussions on TTK during EURO2020. While public figures and the media focused on condemning highly visible racist abuse directed at Black English players after losing the final to Italy (dominative racism), this article shows how subtle racism was reinforced in discussions around TTK over the duration of the tournament (aversive racism). The article exposes how aversive racism passed unnoticed through the employment of colour-blind frames (Bonilla-Silva 2014). Nonetheless, the article also highlights how individuals online developed a variety of counter-narratives and strategies to challenge arguments against anti-racist activism in football, which involved targeting both overt and subtle racism. Our analysis concludes that attempts to tackle racism must investigate how subtle racism, strategically deployed by key political figures, plays a key role in legitimising both dominative and aversive racism and maintaining the (racial) status quo.

Our analysis of online discussions on TTK in the context of EURO2020 makes an original contribution by stressing the importance of examining the complex temporality

of racism. Key moments in the tournament (i.e. match days), political elites' discourses, and trends of success and failure are identified as important factors that shaped online discussions on and expressions of (anti)racism. Moreover, our analysis shows how both overt and subtle racism emerge and submerge according to trends of success and failure. The article emphasises the necessity of investigating the temporality of (anti)racism in public conversations, which is most often ignored in research on online hate. Exploring racist temporalities, we argue, might shed some light on the contemporary functioning of racism and provide some valuable insights on how to challenge it. This article also concludes that when investigating (online) racism, scholars should be cautious to interpret the lack of racist statements at any particular moment as a decrease and/or lack of racism overall. Future scholarship should carefully explore the conditions in which dominative and aversive expressions of racism appear and disappear, how these are reinforced and contested by different actors, particularly politicians and those in positions of authority, and what role emotions play in contemporary forms of racism. As our analysis of the complex temporality of online racism shows, in all its forms racism, like race, should be best understood as a 'absent presence [...] which appears on the surface and then hides underground' (M'charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014, 459). This innovative approach poses both new challenges and opportunities for tackling racism online and offline.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the other half (51%) mostly did not provide any reason behind their opposition to the anti-racist protest (see Findings).

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