



Sport in Society

Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fcss20>

An analysis of responses on Twitter to the English Premier League's support for the anti-homophobia rainbow laces campaign

Matilda Hansen, Emma Kavanagh, Eric Anderson, Keith Parry & Jamie Cleland

To cite this article: Matilda Hansen, Emma Kavanagh, Eric Anderson, Keith Parry & Jamie Cleland (2023) An analysis of responses on Twitter to the English Premier League's support for the anti-homophobia rainbow laces campaign, *Sport in Society*, 26:2, 302-316, DOI: [10.1080/17430437.2022.2028774](https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2028774)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2022.2028774>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 04 Feb 2022.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 3454



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)



Citing articles: 3 [View citing articles](#)

An analysis of responses on Twitter to the English Premier League's support for the anti-homophobia rainbow laces campaign

Matilda Hansen^a, Emma Kavanagh^a , Eric Anderson^b, Keith Parry^a  and Jamie Cleland^c 

^aSport and Event Management, Bournemouth University - Talbot Campus, Poole, UK; ^bFaculty of Business Law and Sport, Winchester University, Winchester, UK; ^cSchool of Management, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the responses by users of the social media platform, Twitter, to the English Premier League's (EPL) support, via four tweets from their official Twitter account, for the annual Rainbow Laces anti-homophobia in football campaign. Locating our analysis within the corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda of the EPL, the four tweets received a total of 24,997 'likes', 4,951 retweets, and 1,865 comments. Of those comments directly responding to the campaign and wider CSR agenda of the EPL (n = 407), 236 contained supportive comments and 171 contained negative comments. Despite support for the Rainbow Laces campaign, the comments also reflected some resistance to the overall CSR agenda of the EPL. Here, responses called for a greater focus on issues outside of LGBT+, such as mental health and reducing the financial burden placed on fans to consume football.

KEYWORDS

Football; LGBT; social media; corporate social responsibility; homophobia

Introduction

A report by the leading equality and inclusion organization in association football (hereafter football) in the United Kingdom (UK), Kick It Out (2020), suggested that abuse based on sexual orientation was rising. This statement was primarily based on the 117 reports of sexual orientation abuse Kick It Out received during the 2019/20 football season (out of nearly 33 million fans who attended games during the season – see Statista 2020a). Outside of fans attending matches in person, social media platforms have also presented the opportunity to anonymously direct abuse towards footballers and celebrities associated with football, with platforms such as Twitter and Instagram seemingly reticent to personally identify those hiding behind a wall of secrecy by using pseudonyms to conceal their true identity (Kilvington and Price 2019).

To understand the relationship between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+ – we use the + to represent all other identities related to sexual orientation and gender identity)

CONTACT Keith Parry  kdparry@bournemouth.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

individuals and sporting culture, it is first necessary to examine some of the trends which have shown increasing tolerance and empathy towards members of LGBT + communities (Allen and Leslie 2019; Greenburg and Gaia 2019). Key to this is a shifting of attitudes. In the UK, for example, generational changes are evident when comparing the 1987 British Social Attitudes Survey which outlined that two-thirds of respondents believed homosexuality was wrong, with this reducing to one-fifth in the 2013 survey (Clements and Field 2014).

Likewise, in their longitudinal analysis of the British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles, Watt and Elliot (2019) illustrated how one-fifth of respondents viewed same-sex sex as 'always wrong' in 2010, a reduction from half of respondents in the 1990 survey. It is impossible to provide the precise locus of this change. It is certainly multi-causal with Anderson (2014) suggesting that the decline of homophobia since the early 1990s among Anglo-American countries is likely to be heavily influenced by the advancement of the internet, and the visibility it gave, chiefly, to gay people. Other variables include a rising emphasis on femininity; the influence of the expanding media; the influence of out gay men and women; and the prominence afforded to the LGBT + movement.

Globally recognized sports organizations are increasingly promoting and engaging in diversity and social inclusion as an important component of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) agenda. According to Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury (2013) and Babiak and Wolfe (2009), sports organizations engage in various favorable CSR activities and initiatives to maximize their long-term positive impact on society and help demonstrate social responsibility by reflecting their social values, goals, and practices to a wide audience.

Since its inception in 1992, the English Premier League (EPL) has become one of the world's most recognized and popular sporting competitions. Not only has it built significant commercial success, but it has also put a focus on its commitment to social responsibility given the global audience it has managed to capture. To put this into perspective, research conducted by the EPL (Premier League 2019) found that its cumulative global audience for all programming was 3.2 billion (a figure that did not include out of home and mobile device viewing). Matches were broadcast in 188 of the 193 countries recognized by the United Nations, with live coverage reaching 978 million homes across the world.

For Morgan (2013), the global popularity of the EPL to people of all ages and backgrounds gives it the ability to engage, inspire, and motivate. Indeed, the CSR strategy of the EPL is to use the power of football to develop partnerships both nationally and internationally that have a shared value in promoting good causes (such as investing in community and charity programs) that result in positive social change, which ultimately will strengthen the brand of the EPL and enhance the league's reputation.

Of particular importance is the engagement in partnerships and networks that assist in achieving positive CSR. In terms of LGBT + diversity in English football, partners include Football v Homophobia, Stonewall, and the Justin Campaign. One particular partnership occurred in November 2018, when the UK-based LGBT + advocacy organization, Stonewall, and the EPL joined together to promote the annual Rainbow Laces campaign – an anti-homophobia campaign showing solidarity with LGBT + people in football and beyond. Having initially started out as a campaign to encourage footballers to show their support for LGBT + rights by wearing rainbow-colored laces in their boots, it was expanded in 2018 to take place over a two-match period using flags, ball plinths, and captain's armbands decorated with the colors of the LGBT + rainbow flag. As part of this joining of forces, the EPL,

via its official Twitter account (followed by 26 million other individual or organizational accounts) publicly showed its support of the campaign via four tweets.

One new dimension of CSR is utilizing social media as it allows messages to be conveyed by organizations to a more globally dispersed consumer market that results in benefits in monetary and non-monetary ways and, in doing so, can strengthen as well as create new relationships. For example, in 2018, when the EPL publicly supported the Rainbow Laces campaign, it was recorded that there were over 2.65 billion social networking users worldwide (Statista 2020b). One way that social media has impacted the public specifically is through the ability for individuals to consume, debate, and experience sport in many different ways (Litchfield et al. 2016). However, such an approach can also lead to resistance and negative commentary.

To date, there has not been any research that examines LGBT + inclusion as expressed through the social media accounts of sports organizations like the EPL as part of a social responsibility agenda. Instead, Bury (2015) and Magrath and Stott (2019) examined the anti-homophobia and sexual orientation inclusion policies by the governing body of the English game, the Football Association (FA). To address this shortfall, it is the response by users of Twitter to the publication of these four tweets that forms the context for our primary research question: What is the reaction by fans when global sports organizations like the EPL engage with social issues, such as LGBT+, on social media sites like Twitter?

Shifting perspectives

Sport was historically conceptualized as the training ground where young boys learned to demonstrate their masculinity that included bravery, power, sacrifice, chivalry, and stoicism, as well as enact an orthodox form of masculinity that included homophobia (Anderson 2009). This was particularly the case in football where the characteristics of masculinity quickly became synonymous with the game and were then subsequently passed through generations of boys and men into the twentieth century. As illustrated by Cashmore and Cleland (2014, 30):

For boys and men, football became a 'proving ground' that gave them a social and physical space to construct, express and validate masculine notions of identity and embodiment (particularly over women). Masculinity during this period (and into more modern times) was something to be earned: it had to be achieved through deeds, and physically demanding challenges such as sporting competitions were ideal.

The relationship between sport, gender, and sexuality began to morph from one of near-total exclusion throughout much of the twentieth century into the struggles faced by gay men and lesbians from the 1980s (see Griffin 1998; Lenskyj 1986; Messner 1992; Pronger 1990). Indeed, there are recent studies which indicate a challenging environment for LGBT + in a range of sport settings (Denison, Bevan, and Jeanes 2021; Hartmann-Tews, Menzel, and Braumüller 2021; Storr et al. 2022). However, there are also studies which have indicated a shift from antipathy toward the inclusion and, progressing acceptance, of gay and lesbian people in sport. Here, studies increasingly show that people are accepting of homosexuality within the broader cultural context of sport and society (Anderson, Magrath, and Bullingham 2016; Cashmore and Cleland 2011, 2012; Cleland 2018a; Cleland et al. 2021; Magrath 2020). For example, studies of male athletes who actually come out (Cleland

2014, 2018b; Cleland, Magrath, and Kian 2018; Magrath, Cleland, and Anderson 2017; White, Magrath, and Morales 2021) show that they are almost unanimously accepted among their teammates, fans, and the wider media.

In many Western countries, international developments have coincided with domestic cultural and political change that has advocated for more sexual orientation equality. LGBT+ groups have increased their positive influence, achieving success as they gain political power and establish social change. According to McCormack (2013), LGBT+ communities are represented worldwide through increasing visibility, whereby gay rights are now seen as human rights in a large number of countries.

While reflected across many societies, particularly Western Europe and North America, such acceptance is not echoed equally globally. For example, countries in Africa, South America, and parts of Asia, still promote cultural and legal discrimination toward LGBT+ people (Moreno et al. 2019). Yet, even in some countries that have the death penalty for being gay, attitudes are slowly improving (Pew Research Center 2020). Thus, as we discuss below, it is important for governing bodies, professional clubs, and sports organizations such as the EPL to reflect this element of social change as part of its CSR agenda.

Corporate social responsibility in sport

Across the world, sport has the power to unite as well as divide communities. Before the 1990s, CSR was rarely applied to sport, but as many sports organizations, leagues, and teams became more business-like and professionally managed, it has emerged as an important feature. Carroll (1991) outlines how CSR comprises four key elements: (1) *economic* (aiming to make a profit); (2) *legal* (obeying laws and regulations); (3) *ethical* (conveying social norms and expectations); (4) *philanthropic* (engaging in additional behaviors outside of those expected by the organization to improve the quality of life of the community).

As CSR has evolved in the twenty-first century, diversity has been one emerging feature where there is a need to consider the interests of different groups and to positively benefit them or to minimize the negative impact. These can be more community specific or be part of a socially responsible initiative that may be broader in scope. This is reflected by Hamil and Morrow (2011, 143) who outline that social activities are increasingly ‘integral to an organization’s decision-making and its activities and to delivering on a social contract with the rest of society.’

Zeimers et al. (2019) identify three approaches in managing CSR directly in football: *in-house* (activities and initiatives that clubs individually manage); *foundation* (where football authorities, such as national associations, develop policies and collaborations with partners on inclusion, such as homophobia, diversity, and refugees); and *collaboration* (where football authorities, such as UEFA, collaborate with partners on various topics surrounding inclusion, including LGBT+, homophobia, and racism).

For researchers such as Parry et al. (2021), some sports organizations often highlight a commitment to LGBT+, but fail to engage in appropriate action to enforce attitudinal and behavioral change. Since the second decade of the twenty-first century, policies have been specifically introduced in English football that promote sexual orientation and seek to address homophobia. However, as Magrath and Stott (2019) found in their analysis of the English FA’s policy on homophobia, statements of support are not always met with any

meaningful action. Likewise, in his analysis of the English FA's Action Plan entitled 'Opening Doors and Joining In', launched in 2012 and aimed at including LGBT + as well as addressing discrimination, Bury (2015, 211) outlined that it created the perception that the organization was 'doing' something, but was actually a 'non-performative institutional speech act'.

In her work on how effective diversity policies and practices are in institutions, Ahmed (2012) argues that the language used is important and can ultimately have no direct impact surrounding any form of actual behavior change. According to Ahmed, the rhetoric is often directed towards diversity and inclusivity, yet there is often a lack of meaningful action or genuine commitment for change which means it just subsequently becomes a non-performative performance – what Parry et al. (2021) refer to as 'aspirational speech acts' that are an illusion rather than lead to any actual policy implementation. Instead, image management and the perception that change will happen becomes a more important message to convey. One mechanism in which this can be communicated is on social media, which can instantly promote the values of sports organizations to millions of followers. However, according to Bury (2015, 218), this may simply 'cement the perception of inclusion' rather than lead to some form of positive action that ultimately leads to greater equality.

Method

To address our research question, an online analysis was undertaken of the responses in English to the four tweets made by the official EPL Twitter account in its support of the Rainbow Laces campaign. As our data consisted of archival, publicly expressed sentiment (i.e., it is already in the public domain) and because it was obtained in an unobtrusive manner, which had no impact on the participants (Parry, Cleland, and Kavanagh 2020), consent was not needed, nor sought. As identified by Cleland, Dixon, and Kilvington (2019), studies in online environments often allow researchers to collect data with limited participant involvement in the process (see also Kozinets 2015; Townsend and Wallace 2016). However, to ensure we followed the ethical guidelines when conducting online research of this nature, the names of the accounts that posted comments to one or more of the four tweets have been excluded from our presentation of the results. Moreover, no tweets have been included in full 'to minimise the 'reverse-searchability' of data' (Fenton and Parry In Press).

Whereas a primary benefit of our approach is that the participants were not affected by any researcher presence, the principal limitations of it are that it is impossible to know if the expressed views of participants are representative of their actual beliefs. For example, we know little about each participant and we cannot be sure if the (limited) information included on their profiles is accurate given that a proportion of Twitter accounts do not contain the true identity of users (i.e., their name and a legitimate photograph used on their profile page).

The breakdown of responses to the four individual tweets can be found in Table 1. The total number of 'likes' of the four tweets ($n = 24,997$) indicated support for the campaign. Likewise, the 4,951 retweets amplified the visibility of the campaign by being shared with followers who might be unaware of the origins of the initial post (through not directly following the EPL's Twitter account).

In presenting this table we note that the official EPL Twitter account has over 26 million followers, thus illustrating how the overall engagement with the four tweets represented a

Table 1. EPL Tweets and the response by users on Twitter.

Tweets	Likes	Retweets	Comments
Clubs and communities are stronger when everyone feels welcome, and it's down to all of us to make that happen. The Premier League stands proudly alongside @stonewalluk in promoting equality and diversity http://preml.ge/RainbowLaces . #RainbowLaces	17,194	3,427	1,100
This is everyone's game. We are supporting the #RainbowLaces campaign this weekend	2,135	510	150
The Premier League will be celebrating @StonewallUK's #RainbowLaces campaign in a show of support for all LGBT people in football and beyond preml.ge/ZtZqt	2,313	557	257
Premier League clubs support #RainbowLaces	3,355	457	358
TOTAL	24,997	4,951	1,865

very small proportion of actual followers. However, the numbers are significantly higher when compared with the response to tweets in support of other social movements from the EPL's official Twitter page. For example, at the time of writing, a 'Pinned Tweet' (a tweet that is always located at the top of the profile page of an individual or organizational account) in support of an anti-racism campaign in football had 2,800 'likes', 394 retweets, and 132 comments.

With regards to our analysis of the 1,865 qualitative comments, different stages of inductive coding were employed. We started by copying the comments into a document exactly as the tweeter had written them and we did not grammatically change them in any way. At the first stage of analysis, 1,458 comments were disregarded using open coding as 'not relevant' to the focus of this study because they made no mention of the campaign nor responded to the CSR agenda of the EPL. This included comments such as 'that'll learn 'em, Karen', and 'cancel the Prem'. In addition, a small number of tweets ($n = 18$) were deleted by Twitter for not adhering to its policies when posting comments. Without knowing the exact detail of such comments, it is difficult to judge whether they all contained homophobia or contravened Twitter's policy in another way.

This left 407 comments for further analysis which eventually resulted in 236 being interpreted as supportive of the campaign or CSR agenda of the EPL and 171 comments as negative. If the tweets had homophobic intent (to examine for this we followed the ICE – intent-content-effect – matrix devised by McCormack, Wignall, and Morris 2016), or were critical of the wider CSR agenda of the EPL, they were subsequently located in the 'negative' category. By way of illustration, this included tweets such as 'say no to LGBT', 'sickening, misguided campaign', and 'LGBT is not a human right. It is a disease and don't campaign for something wrong like this'. Comments that were located in the 'supportive' category illustrated something positive towards the EPL's support of the campaign or the wider CSR agenda and included tweets such as 'the world needs more campaigns like this'.

Following this process, we then engaged in thematic analysis to start identifying patterns and commonalities within the narrative of the comments chosen for further analysis (Bryman 2015). After going through various stages of coding, the process of interpretation and verification eventually resulted in the emergence of four recurring themes that we expand on below: (1) minimizing the importance of LGBT + rights in society; (2) financial motivations behind support of the Rainbow Laces campaign; (3) the significance of country and religion; and (4) concerns for the mental health of the LGBT + community.

Minimizing the importance of LGBT + rights in society

As we highlight above, across the comments were specific examples of support as well as resistance to the EPL's promotion of the Rainbow Laces campaign. Although people from most western cultures accept and support anti-discrimination efforts and attitudes towards LGBT + communities, there are still some who choose to spread negativity. By creating a Twitter account and 'tweeting', people can voice their own thoughts and opinions for wider public consumption. For some individuals, the ability to create an anonymous account has emboldened them to comment negatively towards people or certain groups or communities without being held personally accountable (Parry, Cleland, and Kavanagh 2020). This is often referred to as 'cyberbullying' (Kowalski and Limber 2013) or 'trolling' (Cashmore, Cleland, and Dixon 2018).

A prominent theme of comments surrounded the intention of Twitter users to deflect attention and discussion away from the EPL's focus on the Rainbow Laces campaign as part of its CSR agenda. Such interactions adopted language that questioned the relevance of the campaign to football, sought to minimize the purpose of the campaign, and/or reduced the significance of the issue of LGBT + rights. For example, some comments outlined that there are more important things in society that need to be addressed ahead of LGBT + rights, including, 'I'd rather you [EPL] support climate change if you must support something', and 'Why don't you support children at war or children with cancer instead?' Some of the reasons behind comments like this could be reflective of a general apathy towards LGBT + inclusion or evidence of more silent support (as seen through the number of likes and retweets of the four tweets) given it has been a topic of social debate for a period of time and legislative changes across most Western societies have advocated for greater LGBT + equality through examples such as same-sex marriage and adoption rights.

Within a proportion of comments, other issues including gender equality, racism, political agendas, and social standing were also a prominent point of discussion. For example, comments such as 'when is it racism day?', suggest that, for some respondents, this topic should be more of a focus rather than LGBT + rights. Indeed, research in many areas of male football in the UK is finding a more inclusive space surrounding sexuality and could be one reason why responses to the four tweets made by the EPL tended to address other areas of social importance rather than resist campaigns seeking to promote LGBT + issues in football. For example, Magrath's analysis of academy players (2017) and football fans use of homosexually-themed epithets (2018) found a changing culture towards the use of homophobic language (see also Cleland et al. 2021). Likewise, Cashmore and Cleland (2011, 2012) analysis of 3,500 football fans from across the world found that 93% would support a gay player on their team. Cleland (2014) has also found support within the wider media regarding players who come out and across fan message boards with regards to the presence of gay male players in the professional game (Cleland 2015).

Financial motives of the EPL in supporting the campaign

Another recurring theme concerned comments that collectively questioned the motivation of the EPL in supporting LGBT + rights through accusations that support for the Rainbow Laces campaign was financially motivated. Comments such as 'the Premier League stands for money makers – the fans do not matter one jot', and 'well yeah, but they help line the

pockets of the Premier League executives so no one gives a shite about them,' identify that by showing support for marginalized groups, such as LGBT + communities, the EPL is able to increase ticket and merchandise sales, which would increase demand for the product on offer and boost the economic element of its approach to engaging in different CSR activities (Carroll 1991).

According to Cunningham (2015), when sporting organizations actively include LGBT + communities, a customer might be more positively inclined towards what impact the organization is trying to achieve with its position on certain social issues. In this way, for respondents such as those referenced above, there were questions as to whether the intentions of the EPL are to genuinely support LGBT + communities through the Rainbow Laces campaign or whether it is just another way for them to increase their financial wealth by improving their following via a new market segment as part of its wider CSR agenda.

As referred to by Herring (2009), one of the benefits to organizations of engaging in diversity is increased revenue and a wider consumer base with which to engage in the future. For example, it has been noted that the LGBT + community prefers to buy brands which have been directly marketed to them (Kates 2000). By supporting the Rainbow Laces campaign, the EPL has enhanced its image of being socially responsible by promoting it on social media platforms, such as Twitter, as well as receiving positive coverage from other media platforms surrounding its stance on the issue. Yet, comments such as 'football only cares about money!!! That's why Russia who don't recognise same sex marriage were given the World Cup in 2018 and 2022 Qatar who prison people for being gay', further question the authenticity of campaigns by organizations to support LGBT + rights in football.

In her analysis of social media usage by national governing bodies in the United States, Eagleman (2013) found that it was being used more for public relations and communications, rather than for marketing purposes. However, Storr (2021, 417) argues that sports organizations engagement with LGBT + inclusivity is 'actively managed to protect the brand and image of the organization, benefiting from the pink dollar and associated rainbow merchandise.' Some respondents to the four tweets shared similar thoughts by arguing how the EPL had simply capitalized on increased media interest given the focus of the Rainbow Laces initiative in English football. As one comment stated: 'you [the EPL] have priced the majority of people out of going to games. LGBT fans are welcome as long as you're rich should be the message,' whilst another illustrated: 'You [the EPL] seem to have hoodwinked a lot of people with this sort of cynical, PR driven, good cause bandwagon jumping. Those with more sense know you actually care about nothing but £££'.

The significance of religion and culture

Reference to religion was another recurring theme amongst the comments, with some responses such as, 'What is point of supporting LGBT. It's the great gate to hell and HIV', and 'No to LGBT...Leviticus 18:22. Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable'. Comments like this illustrate how LGBT + communities continue to face discrimination due to a strong correlation between religiosity and negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Campbell, Hinton, and Anderson 2019; Gibbs and Goldbach 2015). In doing so, it continues to result in prejudice towards and oppression of sexual minority

groups (Pietkiewicz and Kotodziejczyk-Skrzypek 2016). A further example of this religion-based negativity can be seen through comments like, 'Saying that homosexuality is sinful is not phobic, it's the biblical truth', where religious beliefs were again used as a justification for more orthodox views of sexuality. Indeed, Hoffarth, Hodson, and Molnar (2018) confirm that opponents to homosexuality and LGBT + rights often justify their views on the basis that it is immoral or sinful and argue that it is against their religious beliefs.

More broadly, sport is a platform where discrimination of this nature occurs. Thus, there is a correlation between religion and culture and, as Achim et al. (2019) confirm, the cultural imprint of a country can often be seen as religious proxy for more orthodox views. For example, some comments identified cultural differences in the acceptance of LGBT + rights, including responses such as: 'Queue [sic] angry people from Africa and the Middle East', and 'Awaiting the response from people from outside the UK'. Indeed, further analysis of tweets under this theme did reveal that when geographical location was mentioned, it was common for posters to come from overseas countries. Thus, whilst the EPL has become a globally recognized brand with followers from around the world, such expansion into different social and cultural locations can cause issues when the EPL supports campaigns that are in opposition to the dominant beliefs and cultural norms of other countries (Moreno et al. 2019).

The different views expressed regarding the EPL's Rainbow Laces campaign are indicative of the varying progress of LGBT + rights around the world. Homophobia remains a persuasive phenomenon in some countries and LGBT + people face societal and physical violence that states often ignore, while in other countries homosexuality remains criminalized (Frary 2019; Lee and Ostergard 2017; Janssen and Scheepers 2019). Indeed, other comments identified African and Middle Eastern countries, in particular, containing laws, political stances, and societal views that do not correlate with Westernized views on LGBT + communities. For example, one comment referred to, 'it's all dirty foreign men who are hating this', whilst another highlighted the contradiction between the EPL's support and (assumed) attitudes from some EPL club owners:

The champions of 2017/18, Man City, are owned by a company [Abu Dhabi United Group] who are based in a country [Abu Dhabi] where punishments for being LGBT range from jail time, floggings, beatings, torture, death, fines and deportation if you are a non-citizen.

Pointing to more equality and inclusivity, as well as those comments we present above, other comments were critical towards those nations and cultures not accepting of same-sex relations. For example, one comment stated: 'try pulling this in east Africa they'll hang you with them', whilst another response consisted of, 'uh oh, here come the angry arabs and africans'.

Concern for the mental health of the LGBT + community

The final recurring theme consisted of comments which collectively raised the issue that discrimination towards LGBT + communities causes increased mental health problems. According to Baker (2020), over 2.1 million adults and 0.6 million children accessed the NHS mental health services during the 2018–19 financial year in the UK. Mental health amongst the global population has become an increasingly larger topic of relevance as the

number of people suffering from anxiety, depression, and suicidal feelings has grown exponentially. Of particular significance is how discrimination and social exclusion are contributors to mental health differences associated with gender identities and minority sexual orientations (Steele et al. 2017). Some of the comments reflected an awareness of this issue, such as: ‘LGBT people are significantly more likely to be affected by depression and suicide. So, this Is a REAL issue’, and ‘I would point out that suicide/depression occurs higher in the LGBT community’.

Barringer and Gay (2017) outline how poor mental health and lower levels of subjective wellbeing are common amongst sexual and gender minorities, as they are more susceptible to prejudice and discrimination. Indeed, comments identifying the increased risk of suicide for males such as, ‘Young gay men are amongst the highest risk of suicide’, continue to highlight the importance of avoiding stereotyping in sports such as football that have typically been thought of comprising a heterosexual culture (Anderson 2009; Cashmore and Cleland 2014). Thus, even though there is evidence that suggests greater inclusive views towards sexual orientation and homophobia in men’s professional football in the UK (see Cashmore and Cleland 2011, 2012; Cleland 2014, 2015, 2018a; Cleland, Magrath, and Kian 2018, Cleland et al. 2021; Magrath 2017, 2018, 2020; Magrath, Cleland, and Anderson 2017), mental health concerns remain not only a significant issue within the LGBT+ community, but also across society more broadly.

Other comments suggested that, to some extent, mental health is a more important societal issue than the Rainbow Laces campaign and LGBT+ rights. As such, although tweets did not always reflect negatively on the campaign, they used the platform being offered by the EPL to prioritize the importance of mental health. Ironically, comments claiming that mental health issues are worthy of more consideration than LGBT+ rights may potentially further impact negatively on the mental health of LGBT+ fans. For example, research by Sowe, Taylor, and Brown (2017) outlines how higher levels of anxiety, stress, and shame are predicted to be higher when there is greater exposure to anti-gay prejudice, as well as also facing an increase in instances of physical and verbal abuse.

Conclusion

It is easy to get caught up in headline stories, such as when a professional athlete makes a homophobic comment (Thompson and Muller 2021), or when a small group of fans chant homophobic abuse (Cleland et al. 2021; Magrath 2018). It is even easier to over-generalize antipathy toward LGBT+ people from a few to the whole when there are no openly gay, bisexual, or transgender males playing in the professional ranks of the EPL (or in the major professional football leagues across the world more broadly). In addressing the cultural environment of football from a different perspective in this article, we analyzed responses to four tweets from the official EPL Twitter account that helped publicize the importance of the Rainbow Laces campaign as part of its agenda to be more socially responsible as a globally recognized sports organization.

The findings illustrate that of the 26 million followers of the EPL’s official Twitter account, collectively, there was very little engagement, but among those who responded to one or all of the tweets, the number of likes and retweets demonstrated support for the campaign. However, the lack of engagement with the tweets in-themselves indicates at least a general

apathy from the vast majority of followers of the EPL's official Twitter account. While we cannot say this with statistical confidence because we do not know what percent of followers actually read the tweets, we do note that this response rate (judged by 'likes', retweets, and comments) was higher than for the promotion of other social movements by the EPL's official Twitter account, such as those surrounding anti-racism campaigns in English football.

Of the 407 comments selected for further analysis, a number of key themes emerged regarding the CSR agenda of the EPL. First, a proportion of comments sought to deflect attention away from the Rainbow Laces campaign, by minimizing its importance and significance. In this instance, it was common for tweets to propose a variety of social movement campaigns that the EPL should support as part of its CSR agenda. We believe it is significant that despite this, it was not out of antipathy towards LGBT + people. Instead, sexual orientation equality is now more normalized than at any previous time in most Western countries. This is despite the fact that the globalization of the EPL includes countries that still discriminate against LGBT + people on religious and cultural grounds. However, this process also results in tension between two cultures at opposing spectrums with social media a vehicle where these tensions are increasingly played out.

Some of the comments that questioned the CSR agenda of the EPL argued that it was only supporting the Rainbow Laces campaign for commercial reasons. This view may not be entirely misplaced as it has recently been shown that sporting organizations make use of social media to convey their support for social movements but frequently fail to provide direct evidence of actions in support of these movements (Parry et al. 2021; Storr et al. 2022). Of collective importance amongst the comments was also concerns surrounding mental health awareness, with respondents often claiming that this topic should be the focus for a CSR campaign rather than LGBT + rights. However, other comments also displayed an awareness of the poor mental health and lower levels of subjective wellbeing for sexual and gender minorities.

Out of the 171 overtly negative comments in response to one of the four tweets, the low number of discriminatory comments towards the LGBT + community is noteworthy for two reasons. First, given that Twitter offers its users anonymity in being able to hide their true identity when creating an account, there were very few individuals that used it to be abusive towards the LGBT + community. Instead, as we outline above, these tended to be more critical of the wider CSR agenda of the EPL. Second, there is a danger in focusing on a small number of cases of discrimination and missing the broader picture of support for not only LGBT + rights amongst wider society, but also within sport. While we acknowledge the criticism Parry et al. (2021) levied towards sporting organizations taking to social media to claim their support for social movements, it does provide further evidence of the progress of gender and sexual minorities within the culture of sport.

This study is, of course, not without limitations. Only those posts in English were analyzed and the focus was solely on the four posts made by the EPL's official Twitter account. Thus, we acknowledge that this is not a representative analysis of the EPL's support of LGBT + and only addresses a small minority of fan opinions of the CSR agenda of the EPL. Instead, we have provided a starting point for future research to advance this knowledge base further given the increasing opportunities to use the internet, including social media, to examine the extent of social change taking place as the channels with which sports

organizations can communicate their CSR agenda continue to expand and become multi-faceted in how they are being consumed by fans from all over the world.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Emma Kavanagh  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9984-1501>

Keith Parry  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9025-9101>

Jamie Cleland  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8852-2257>

References

- Achim, M. V., S. N. Borlea, L. V. Găban, and A. A. Mihăilă. 2019. "The Shadow Economy and Culture: Evidence in European Countries." *Eastern European Economics* 57 (5): 352–374. doi:10.1080/00128775.2019.1614461.
- Ahmed, S. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Allen, S. H., and L. A. Leslie. 2019. "Considering the Role of Nativity in the Health and Psychological Wellbeing of Black LGBT Adults." *Journal of Homosexuality* 66 (13): 1769–1796. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1511134.
- Anagnostopoulos, C., and D. Shilbury. 2013. "Implementing Corporate Social Responsibility in English Football: Towards Multi-Theoretical Integration." *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal* 3 (4): 268–284. doi:10.1108/SBM-05-2013-0009.
- Anderson, E. 2009. *Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*. New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, E. 2014. *21st Century Jocks: Sporting Men and Contemporary Heterosexuality*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Anderson, E., R. Magrath, and R. Bullingham. 2016. *Out in Sport: The Experiences of Openly Gay and Lesbian Athletes in Competitive Sport*. London: Routledge.
- Babiak, K., and R. Wolfe. 2009. "Determinants of Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Sport: Internal and External Factors." *Journal of Sport Management* 23 (6): 717–742. doi:10.1123/jsm.23.6.717.
- Baker, C. 2020. *Mental Health Statistics for England: Prevalence, Services and Funding*. London: House of Commons Library. <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/34934/1/SN06988%20%28redacted%29.pdf>.
- Barringer, M. N., and D. A. Gay. 2017. "Happily Religious: The Surprising Sources of Happiness among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Adults." *Sociological Inquiry* 87 (1): 75–96. doi:10.1111/soin.12154.
- Bryman, A. 2015. *Social Research Methods*. 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bury, J. 2015. "Non-Performing Inclusion: A Critique of the English Football Association's Action Plan on Homophobia in Football." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 50 (2): 211–226. doi:10.1177/1012690213479789.
- Campbell, M., J. D. Hinton, and J. R. Anderson. 2019. "A Systematic Review of the Relationship between Religion and Attitudes toward Transgender and Gender-Variant People." *The International Journal of Transgenderism* 20 (1): 21–38. doi:10.1080/15532739.2018.1545149.
- Carroll, A. B. 1991. "The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility: Toward the Moral Management of Organizational Stakeholders." *Business Horizons* 34 (4): 39–48. doi:10.1016/0007-6813(91)90005-G.
- Cashmore, E., and J. Cleland. 2011. "Glasswing Butterflies: Gay Professional Football Players and Their Culture." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 35 (4): 420–436. doi:10.1177/0193723511420163.

- Cashmore, E., and J. Cleland. 2012. "Fans, Homophobia and Masculinities in Association Football: Evidence of a More Inclusive Environment." *The British Journal of Sociology* 63 (2): 370–387. doi:10.1111/j.1468-4446.2012.01414.x.
- Cashmore, E., and J. Cleland. 2014. *Football's Dark Side: Corruption, Homophobia, Violence and Racism in the Beautiful Game*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cashmore, E., J. Cleland, and K. Dixon. 2018. *Screen Society*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cleland, J. 2014. "Association Football and the Representation of Homosexuality by the Print Media: A Case Study of Anton Hysén." *Journal of Homosexuality* 61 (9): 1269–1287. doi:10.1080/00918369.2014.926765.
- Cleland, J. 2015. "Discussing Homosexuality on Association Football Fan Message Boards: A Changing Cultural Context." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport Journal* 50 (2): 125–140. doi:10.1177/1012690213475437.
- Cleland, J. 2018a. "Sexuality, Masculinity and Homophobia in Association Football: An Empirical Overview of a Changing Cultural Context." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 53 (4): 411–423. doi:10.1177/1012690216663189.
- Cleland, J. 2018b. "Britain's First Openly Gay Football Referee: The Story of Ryan Atkin." In *LGBT Athletes in the Sport Media*, edited by R. Magrath, 125–146. London: Routledge.
- Cleland, J., E. Cashmore, K. Dixon, and C. MacDonald. 2021. "Analyzing the Presence of Homosexually-Themed Language Amongst Association Football Fans in the United Kingdom." *Communication & Sport*: 216747952110058. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/21674795211005838>. doi:10.1177/21674795211005838.
- Cleland, J., K. Dixon, and D. Kilvington. 2019. *Online Research Methods in Sport Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Cleland, J., R. Magrath, and E. Kian. 2018. "The Internet as a Site of Decreasing Cultural Homophobia in Association Football: An Online Response by Fans to the Coming out of Thomas Hitzlsperger." *Men and Masculinities* 21 (1): 91–111. doi:10.1177/1097184X16663261.
- Clements, B., and C. Field. 2014. "Public Opinion toward Homosexuality and Gay Rights in Great Britain." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 78 (2): 523–547. doi:10.1093/poq/nfu018.
- Cunningham, G. B. 2015. "LGBT Inclusive Athletic Departments as Agents of Social Change." *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport* 8 (1): 43–56. doi:10.1123/jis.2014-0131.
- Denison, E., N. Bevan, and R. Jeanes. 2021. "Reviewing Evidence of LGBTQ+ Discrimination and Exclusion in Sport." *Sport Management Review* 24 (3): 389–409. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2020.09.003.
- Eagleman, A. N. 2013. "Acceptance, Motivations, and Usage of Social Media as a Marketing Communications Tool Amongst Employees of Sport National Governing Bodies." *Sport Management Review* 16 (4): 488–497. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2013.03.004.
- Fenton, A., and K. D. Parry. In Press. "Netnography – Researching the Field behind the Screen." In *Sage Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*. 2nd ed., edited by L. Sloan and A. Haase. London: Sage.
- Frary, M. 2019. "Hiding Your True Self: LGBT People Face Particular Discrimination at Some International Borders." *Index on Censorship* 48 (3): 23–25. doi:10.1177/0306422019876455.
- Gibbs, J. J., and J. Goldbach. 2015. "Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults." *Archives of Suicide Research : Official Journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research* 19 (4): 472–488. doi:10.1080/13811118.2015.1004476.
- Greenburg, J., and A. C. Gaia. 2019. "Interpersonal Contact, Stereotype Acceptance, Gender Role Beliefs, Causal Attribution, and Religiosity as Predictors of Attitudes toward Transgender Individuals." *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* 24 (1): 18–32. doi:10.24839/2325-7342.JN24.1.18.
- Griffin, P. 1998. *Strong Women, Deep Closets: Lesbians and Homophobia in Sport*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- Hamil, S., and S. Morrow. 2011. "Corporate Social Responsibility in the Scottish Premier League: Context and Motivation." *European Sport Management Quarterly* 11 (2): 143–170. doi:10.1080/16184742.2011.559136.

- Hartmann-Tews, I., T. Menzel, and B. Braumüller. 2021. "Homo-and Transnegativity in Sport in Europe: Experiences of LGBT+ Individuals in Various Sport Settings." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport Online Sport* 56 (7): 997–1016. <https://doi/10.1177/1012690220968108>. doi:10.1177/1012690220968108.
- Herring, C. 2009. "Does Diversity Pay? Race, Gender, and the Business Case for Diversity." *American Sociological Review* 74 (2): 208–224. doi:10.1177/000312240907400203.
- Hoffarth, M. R., G. Hodson, and D. S. Molnar. 2018. "When and Why is Religious Attendance Associated with Antigay Bias and Gay Rights Opposition? A Justification-Suppression Model Approach." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 115 (3): 526–563. doi:10.1037/pspp0000146.
- Janssen, D. J., and P. Scheepers. 2019. "How Religiosity Shapes Rejection of Homosexuality across the Globe." *Journal of Homosexuality* 66 (14): 1974–2001. doi:10.1080/00918369.2018.1522809.
- Kates, S. M. 2000. "Out of the Closet and out on the Street! Gay Men and Their Brand Relationships." *Psychology and Marketing* 17 (6): 493–513. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1520-6793(200006)17:6<493::AID-MAR4>3.0.CO;2-F.
- Kick It Out. 2020. "Discrimination in Football on the Rise." <https://www.kickitout.org/news/discrimination-in-football-on-the-rise>
- Kilvington, D., and J. Price. 2019. "Tackling Social Media Abuse? Critically Assessing English Football's Response to Online Racism." *Communication & Sport* 7 (1): 64–79. doi:10.1177/2167479517745300.
- Kowalski, R. M., and S. P. Limber. 2013. "Psychological, Physical, and Academic Correlates of Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying." *The Journal of Adolescent Health : Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 53 (1 Suppl): S13–S20. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.09.018.
- Kozinets, R. 2015. *Netnography: Redefined*. London: Sage.
- Lee, C., and R. L. Ostergard, Jr. 2017. "Measuring Discrimination against LGBTQ People: A Cross-National Analysis." *Human Rights Quarterly* 39 (1): 37–72. doi:10.1353/hrq.2017.0001.
- Lenskyj, H. 1986. *Out of Bounds: Women, Sport and Sexuality*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Litchfield, C., E. J. Kavanagh, J. Osborne, and I. Jones. 2016. "Virtual Maltreatment: Sexualisation and Social Media Abuse in Sport." *Psychology of Women Section Review* 18 (2): 36–47.
- Magrath, R. 2017. *Inclusive Masculinities in Contemporary Football: Men in the Beautiful Game*. London: Routledge.
- Magrath, R. 2018. "To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team': Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans." *Sociology* 52 (4): 709–726. doi:10.1177/0038038517702600.
- Magrath, R. 2020. "Progress... Slowly, but Surely": The Sports Media Workplace, Gay Sports Journalists, and LGBT Media Representation in Sport." *Journalism Studies* 21 (2): 254–270. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2019.1639537.
- Magrath, R., J. Cleland, and E. Anderson. 2017. "Bisexual Erasure in the British Print Media: Representation of Tom Daley's Coming Out." *Journal of Bisexuality* 17 (3): 300–317. doi:10.1080/15299716.2017.1359130.
- Magrath, R., and P. Stott. 2019. "Impossible to Implement?": The Effectiveness of anti-Homophobia Policy in English Professional Football." *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 11 (1): 19–38. doi:10.1080/19406940.2018.1479284.
- McCormack, M. 2013. *The Declining Significance of Homophobia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McCormack, M., L. Wignall, and M. Morris. 2016. "Gay Guys Using Gay Language: Friendship, Shared Values and the intent-context-effect matrix." *The British Journal of Sociology* 67 (4): 747–767. doi:10.1111/1468-4446.12203.
- Messner, M. 1992. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. New York: Beacon Press.
- Moreno, A., R. Ardila, K. Zervoulis, J. A. Nel, E. Light, and L. Chamberland. 2019. "Cross-Cultural Perspectives of LGBTQ Psychology from Five Different Countries: Current State and Recommendations." *Psychology and Sexuality* 11 (1–2): 1–27.
- Morgan, S. 2013. "The Premier League. A Commitment to Social Responsibility." In *The Routledge Handbook of Sport and Corporate Social Responsibility*, edited by J. L. Paramio Salcines, K. Babiak, and G. Walters, 251–262. Oxon, UK: Routledge.

- Parry, K. D., J. Cleland, and E. Kavanagh. 2020. "Racial Folklore, Black Masculinities and the Reproduction of Dominant Racial Ideologies: The Case of Israel Folau." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55 (7): 850–867. doi:10.1177/1012690219860355.
- Parry, K. D., R. Storr, E. Kavanagh, and E. Anderson. 2021. "Conceptualising Organisational Cultural Lag: Marriage Equality and Australian Sport." *Journal of Sociology* 57 (4): 986–1008. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1440783321991653>. doi:10.1177/1440783321991653.
- Pew Research Center. 2020. "The Global Divide on Homosexuality Persists." <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/06/25/global-divide-on-homosexuality-persists/>
- Pietkiewicz, I. J., and M. Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek. 2016. "Living in Sin? How Gay Catholics Manage Their Conflicting Sexual and Religious Identities." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45 (6): 1573–1585. doi:10.1007/s10508-016-0752-0.
- Premier League. 2019. "Premier League Global Audience on the Rise." <https://www.premierleague.com/news/1280062>
- Pronger, B. 1990. *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Sowe, B. J., A. J. Taylor, and J. Brown. 2017. "Religious anti-Gay Prejudice as a Predictor of Mental Health, Abuse, and Substance Use." *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 87 (6): 690–703. doi:10.1037/ort0000297.
- Statista. 2020a. "Number of Football Attendances in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2019, by League." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/686981/football-aggregate-attendance-by-league-united-kingdom/#:~:text=The%20Premier%20League%20is%20the,14.5%20million%20spectators%20in%202019>
- Statista. 2020b. "Number of Social Media Users Worldwide 2010–2021." <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/>
- Steele, L. S., A. Daley, D. Curling, M. F. Gibson, D. C. Green, C. C. Williams, and L. E. Ross. 2017. "LGBT Identity, Untreated Depression, and Unmet Need for Mental Health Services by Sexual Minority Women and Trans-Identified People." *Journal of Women's Health* (2002) 26 (2): 116–127. doi:10.1089/jwh.2015.5677.
- Storr, R. 2021. "The Poor Cousin of Inclusion": Australian Sporting Organisations and LGBT + Diversity and Inclusion." *Sport Management Review* 24 (3): 410–420. doi:10.1016/j.smr.2020.05.001.
- Storr, R., Jeanes, R., and T. Rossi, Lisahunter. 2022. "Are We There yet? (Illusions of) Inclusion in Sport for LGBT + Communities in Australia." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 57 (1): 92–111. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211014037>.
- Thompson, J. D., and D. Muller. 2021. "Freedom of Speech is Not Freedom from Ethics: The 2019 Israel Folau Media Controversy as a Case Study." *Media International Australia* 181 (1): 87–102. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1329878X21992890>. doi:10.1177/1329878X21992890.
- Townsend, L., and W. Wallace. 2016. "Social Media Research: A Guide to Ethics." <https://www.bolton.ac.uk/assets/Uploads/Social-media-ethics-study-Aberdeen-2018.pdf>
- Watt, L., and M. Elliot. 2019. "Homonegativity in Britain: Changing Attitudes towards Same-Sex Relationships." *Journal of Sex Research* 56 (9): 1101–1114. doi:10.1080/00224499.2019.1623160.
- White, A., R. Magrath, and L. E. Morales. 2021. "Gay Male Athletes' Coming-Out Stories on Outsports." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 56 (7): 1017–1034. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1012690220969355>. doi:10.1177/1012690220969355.
- Zeimers, G., C. Anagnostopoulos, T. Zintz, and A. Willem. 2019. "Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in Football: Exploring Modes of CSR Implementation." In *Routledge Handbook of Football Business and Management*, edited by S. Chadwick, D. Parnell, P. Widdop, and C. Anagnostopoulos, 114–130. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.