

## Abstract

*This article presents the findings of 2,415 posts collected from two prominent Australian Football League message boards that responded to a racist incident involving a banana being thrown at Adelaide Crows player, Eddie Betts, in August 2016. It adopts Bourdieu's concept of habitus to examine the online practice of fans for evidence of racist discourse and the extent to which this was supported or contested by fellow fans. The overall findings are that online debates about race in Australian Rules Football and wider Australian society remain divided, with some posters continuing to reflect racial prejudice and discrimination towards non-whites. However, for the vast majority, views deemed to have racist connotations are contested and challenged in a presentation centering on social change and racial equality.*

Port Adelaide have indefinitely banned the woman who ignited a racism controversy by throwing a banana at Indigenous star Eddie Betts. The Power completed an investigation into the ugly incident after speaking with the club member on Sunday, concluding it was racially motivated. Betts was targeted by the fan in Saturday night's 15-point Showdown victory by the Crows at Adelaide Oval. The supporter was seen waving her middle finger at Betts before throwing the banana in his direction. Betts had just kicked his fifth goal in a near best-afield showing during his 250th AFL game, and did not notice the incident. Port Adelaide chairman David Koch said before the club spoke with the woman that he'd be "absolutely disgusted" if racism was found to be the motivation. "We're a club, we're an industry, we're a code that doesn't shirk away from these sorts of incidents," he said. "If it was racially motivated, not only would she be banned for life from the club, we would encourage her to come and sit with our players, our Aboriginal players and try to understand what these actions mean to them." The club also relied on testimony from Port Adelaide fans in the vicinity, who said her action was accompanied by racist sledging through the match (*Guardian*, 2016).

This extract from the *Guardian* newspaper followed an Australian Football League (AFL) game between local rivals Port Adelaide and Adelaide Crows at the Adelaide Oval on 20 August 2016.<sup>1</sup> Although the individual publicly apologized for her actions and players from both clubs presented a united stance against racism, the incident and subsequent coverage was particularly challenging for Port Adelaide given the number of Indigenous players on its roster (for example, Walsh (2017) illustrated that Port Adelaide would have a record 10 Indigenous players for the 2018 AFL season).

To contextualize this incident within a wider frame of continuing overt racism faced by Indigenous athletes, Browne-Yung, Ziersch, Baum and Gallaher (2015, p. 718) reflect on the institutional racism and prejudice Aboriginals have historically faced in Australian sport

and how it “mirrors society where it is entwined with race, ethnicity and Aboriginal peoples’ experiences and position.” Prior to the 1970s, Aboriginal people were absent from historical records (Knijnik, Hunter & Vozzo, 2017), with the Australian Constitution only amended in 1967 to include Indigenous Australians. According to Walsh (2014, p. 283), the implementation of the White Australia policy by the Australian government up until it was rescinded in 1973 “provided a powerful expression of racialized nationalism and template of societal development.” For Hage (1998), this created a cultural hegemony of whiteness within Australian society that Judd (2010) states was also reflected in sport, with non-whites excluded on the grounds of race in the mid-twentieth century.

This changed in the second half of the twentieth century when the Australian population doubled due to migration from overseas. From a society that was “British, White, and/or Anglo-Saxon and Christian” at the start of the last century (Moran, 2011, p. 2156), Australia has developed into one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the world. Yet, a historically-seated resentment of immigration and multiculturalism (fueled by right-wing politicians such as Pauline Hanson) has continued to trouble Australian society. For example, as recently as 2015, 20 per cent of Australians were discriminated against based on race, ethnicity or religion (Soutphommasane, 2017).

Thus, despite increased migration race relations in Australia remain fraught. For example, Australia Day, one of the formal state-instituted celebrations of Australianness, has been identified as a fiercely nationalistic event when the Anglo-Celtic traditions of Australia are celebrated ahead of those of multiculturalism (Garbutt, 2011). It is a day that celebrates the arrival of the first fleet of convict ships from the United Kingdom and is historically insensitive to the country’s Aboriginal community, some of whom refer to it as Invasion Day or Survival Day (Fozdar, Spittles & Hartley, 2015).

The cultural historian Richard White (1997) suggests that sport provides a rare platform in Australian society where people can openly express their Australianness (a construct typically associated with white, masculine, Anglo-Celtic ideals – see Kearney, 2014). Despite its multicultural history, being an ‘Aussie’ is not always typically associated with those who have white skin from Anglo-Celtic backgrounds or are, indeed, male (as the basis of this article suggests). For those that do not identify with this definition, Kowal (2012, p. 19) states that they “willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly, participate in the racialized societal structure that positions them as ‘white’ and accordingly grants them the privileges associated with the dominant Australian culture.”

Rich and Giles (2014) state how studies concerning race and ethnicity have shifted focus from a race and/or ethnic-centered inquiry to one that also addresses the broad area of whiteness. McDonald (2009, p. 9) defines whiteness as “institutionalized discourses and exclusionary practices seeking social, cultural, economic and psychic advantage for those bodies racially marked as white.” According to Newman (2007, p. 317), whiteness emerged as a “conservative reaction to political and cultural threats to White male hegemony: a clinging to the vestiges of the previously unchallenged (material and symbolic) spaces of privilege reserved for white males”. Thus, the social process of whiteness reinforces the dominant ideologies and privileges of whites, as evidenced by the reactionary white cultural nationalism re-emerging in post 9/11 America (Kusz, 2007).

Focusing on whiteness as a practice, Gunstone (2009, p. 1) describes how it “involves the marginalization, discrimination and oppression of non-white groups and individuals”, with the demonstration of white power through attitudes and ideologies prominent in extending social inequalities through racial exclusion. In many ways, this is unconscious in individuals, but it helps construct and reinforce whiteness as normal in the everyday practice of individuals. In explaining this further, King (2005, p. 399) states how whiteness is “a

complex, often contradictory, construction: ubiquitous, yet invisible; normalized and normative; universal, but always localized; unmarked, yet privileged.”

Australia’s sporting fields and media outlets are not immune to racial tensions and there is a long history of racial abuse of athletes. In September 2018, Penguin Football Club from Tasmania was forced to apologize after a number of players wore ‘blackface’ costumes at the club’s end of season celebrations (Burgess & Dunlvie, 2018). This incident is just one of a number of cases where Australian athletes have adopted this practice, displaying a lack of understanding of its racist history and nature. A week before the blackface episode, an Australian newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, published a racist cartoon of tennis player Serena Williams and, to make matters worse, the newspaper subsequently defended the cartoon in the face of international condemnation (Lentin, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

These occurrences indicate the continuing problematic relationship between race and sport in Australia. For example, Australia’s best supported sport, Australian Rules Football (hereafter Australian football), has often been a site of negotiations and struggles for power and acceptance by the Indigenous community (see Cashman, 2010; Gorman, 2012). Indigenous involvement in the sport can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Gorman, 2012), yet even though there is an over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders playing in the AFL (the 2016 national Census estimated that the Indigenous population was 3.3 per cent compared to 10 per cent who play in the AFL), attitudes and behavior towards them by some fans continues to reflect racial difference. As a result, racial hierarchies and social divisions and inequalities have been reproduced in Australian football that normalize white privilege in many different ways such as through a retention of power and by defining cultural habits, tastes and styles. Highlighting this, Coram (2007) details how non-Indigenous and Indigenous players are perceived differently, with the latter often defined by their bodies and how they play the game, live their lives and how they behave in

comparison to non-Indigenous players who are rated more on their skill and talent. In recent years, Indigenous players such as Adam Goodes, Lance Franklin, and Eddie Betts have been racially abused during matches, with Hallinan and Judd (2009, p. 2359) stating how this is indicative of racial ideologies resulting from “multiple structural, individual, psychological, social and historical events.”

In 1995 the AFL implemented Rule 30 (subsequently becoming Rule 35) and in doing so became the first major Australian sporting league to ban on-field racial abuse. Off the field, the AFL has developed feature rounds to acknowledge both Indigenous and multicultural involvement in Australian football and electronic screens at venues continue to display anti-racism messages and frequently broadcast high-profile anti-discrimination campaigns. However, the effectiveness of these measures is being challenged with a number of players like those mentioned above continuing to suffer from racist abuse, whilst there are others who are demanding that the AFL do more to combat discrimination. These include Heritier Lumumba, a former Collingwood and Melbourne player, who claimed that the AFL has created a “culture that condoned racism through a combination of ignorance, habit, and arrogance” (Lumumba, 2017).

Following on from Tatz’s (1995, p. 43) assertion that “sport is a measure of Australian racism”, this article centered on 2,415 posts collected from two publicly available and prominent AFL message boards that discussed the Betts incident and reflected on its broader significance within the AFL and wider Australian society. Advancing Sallaz’s (2010, p. 296) claim that “ethnographic research grounded in Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus can help us clarify how paradigms, practices, and identities travel across racial formations”, it focuses on the online practice of fans for evidence of racist discourse and the extent to which the presence of this was supported or contested by fellow fans.

## **Habitus**

Bourdieu (1984) describes the habitus as an embodied series of internalized dispositions, rules, tastes, habits, perceptions, values and expressions learnt through the process of socialization that are reflected in the everyday thought processes and practices of individuals (see also Bourdieu, 1990). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 133) outline how the habitus is “an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure.” According to Mennesson (2010, p. 6), “the more long-lasting, the stronger, and the more concerned by emotional relations a socialization process is, the stronger the constructed dispositions will be.”

Although Bourdieu states that individuals are rarely conscious of them, Claringbould, Knoppers and Jacobs (2015, p. 320) illustrate that an understanding of the world “contains conscious and unconscious ideological and normative assumptions” that are “inextricably bound to a person’s history and informs future dispositions.” Despite them being person-specific, Bourdieu states how an individual’s practice is compatible with influential objective conditions that include their social group, family and community. Based on “mutual acculturation”, Bourdieu (1984, p. 243) explains how an individual’s habitus is matched with others through “the immediate affinities which orient social encounters, discouraging socially discordant relationships, encouraging well-matched relationships, without these operations ever having to be formulated other than in the socially innocent language of likes and dislikes.” A consequence of this is that the opportunities and constraints created by these social conditions then inform personal taste, relations and practice.

Although the origin of Bourdieu’s conceptual focus on habitus centered on social class, there have been a number of scholars adopting it to explain what Perry (2012, p. 90)

refers to as “the structural and cultural conditions associated with an actor’s location within the racialized social system” (see also Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2007; Browne-Yung et al., 2015). Perry describes how this has led to an emerging focus on the racial habitus, which he describes as “a matrix of tastes, perceptions, and cognitive frameworks that are often unconscious (particularly for whites), and that regulate the racial practices of actors such that they tend to reproduce the very racial distinctions and inequalities that produced them” (p. 90).

Extending the debate on race and habitus, Bonilla-Silva (2003, p. 104) illustrates the presence of a white habitus that emerges from a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters.” Bonilla-Silva explains how geographical and psychological separation from non-whites is evidence of a white habitus as it conditions and promotes dominance and solidarity amongst whites and helps reinforce their practice of white privilege whilst at the same time negatively impacting on non-whites. Expanding on this, Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick (2006, p. 232) refer to the presence of a white identity that “becomes a set of deliberate practices used to coordinate and advance the interests and positions of whites”, that is continuously recycled and legitimated in a discourse of racial prejudice.

What this article argues is that online fan message boards are a platform that reflect the everyday thought processes and practices of individuals, including their position in the racial social system. According to Sallaz (2010, p. 294), the “dispositions of the habitus should prove durable and may even improvise new practices that transpose old racial schemata into new settings”, such as across various platforms on the internet. As outlined above by Claringbould et al. (2015), although often deemed to be unconscious, they also contain conscious norms where the learnt habitus can be openly expressed in the posts that

are constructed on fan message boards. In the case of AFL fans debating matters of race online, what shall be illustrated is the presence of a white habitus through the promotion of racial distinction, inequality and prejudice, but this is openly challenged by a number of fans who contest these views and demand social change.

## **Method**

The emergence of the internet has created a new dimension to sports fandom by allowing more active fans to participate in synchronous and asynchronous communication with other fans across a range of platforms including Twitter, Facebook, blogs and message boards. For those fans who want to engage in the exchange of information and/or thoughts on the sport or specific club on a fan message board a simple registration process often takes place. Once approved the vast majority of those posting comments often use a pseudonym to protect their identity with only the moderators of the message board knowing more of their identity (notwithstanding the fact that this could also be fake).

This anonymity has resulted in increased racial hate speech taking place in online settings (see Banks, 2010; Cleland, 2014, 2016, 2017; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014, 2016), with Banks (2010, p. 234) illustrating how the internet “has become the “new frontier” for spreading hate, as millions can be reached through an inexpensive and unencumbered social network that has enabled previously diverse and fragmented groups to connect, engendering a collective identity and sense of community.” These new channels of online communication have allowed researchers to examine the extent of racism present in an unobtrusive way by simply observing, recording and analyzing the ‘live’ discourse taking place.

As with the lead author’s previous experience of examining racism on fan message boards (see Cleland, 2014), caution was taken with regards to the 2,415 posts collected for analysis across the two prominent AFL message boards as participation in topics is a process of self-selection. This could result in some participants engaging with certain topics to



‘perform’ in a narrative that could bear no similarities to their offline behavior or they could simply ignore a topic area that they actually might have strong feelings about (Kozinets, 2010). Anonymity cannot also be assumed either as some posters will know each other, even if this is only through the pseudonym they use and this can lead to lying or exaggeration in their comments in order to impress or provoke other posters. Therefore, the article makes no claim to be representative of all AFL supporters but it provided an opportunity to examine the real-life discourse taking place with regards to the continued presence of racism and the extent to which this was being challenged or supported by fans.

For the purposes of analysis, each unique poster identified through their pseudonym was given a number based on where they joined the conversation, such as Message Board A Fan 5, Message Board B Fan 23. Even if they contributed later in the thread they still retained this original number. Although Bryman (2012, p. 679) suggests that “the more the venue is acknowledged to be public, the less obligation there is on the researcher to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of individuals using the venue, or to seek their informed consent”, we protected their identity even further by not publishing the pseudonym they used. The first phase of analysis involved each author inductively analyzing each comment through open coding into first order themes of appropriate categories reflecting patterns, commonalities and differences before further phases of reduction took place that eventually led to the emergence of three recurring themes that form the analysis part of the article: (1) interpreting racism; (2) white habitus; (3) the need for social change.

### **Interpreting racism: Ethically excusable or inexcusable?**

Despite anti-racist measures being introduced in the AFL to control for on and off-field abuse, the historical practice of fandom has not changed for some supporters. Instead, the internet has allowed for racial prejudice that was once only openly expressed at matches to now be broadcast online. To highlight this, the following thread from one message board

provided examples of posts that sought to defend the racist behavior of the fan who threw a banana at Eddie Betts. What it highlights is that for some supporters, actions such as throwing a banana at an Indigenous player does not demonstrate racial prejudice or racist intent, but for others these views are strongly contested as inherently racist:

**Message Board B, Fan 121:** If the girl threw an apple at Eddie would it be racist? Perhaps she only had a banana available to throw. This is NOT a racist issue...it's a player safety issue.

**Message Board B, Fan 126:** It's not a racist issue when a banana is the projectile of choice for someone to throw at an Indigenous player? I am continually baffled by the ignorance of many in our society, yourself being no exception. So long as people in (white) privilege dismiss or are ignorant to historical significance of how this kind of behaviour affects those whom which are the target for such behaviour, then we're still a long way off true racial equality.

**Message Board B, Fan 216:** It should be a ban for life for throwing something at a player but I'm not going to accept this banana/monkey/racist argument though. I've never thought ape = racist so I don't think calling anyone an animal is racist.

**Message Board B, Fan 220:** You can mount a reasonable argument that she wasn't intending to be racist by throwing a banana.

**Message Board B, Fan 259:** If the intent behind the action had "banana = monkey" connotations then it should be an instant ban. I've had enough of the abuse and disdain that some arseholes level at Indigenous people and other marginalized groups in our society. Unless they're kicking goals for the right team of course, then suddenly they're worthy of being treated as humans. It's disgusting and a disgrace.

**Message Board B, Fan 270:** Spot on mate. People shouldn't kid themselves that this is a Port supporter problem. No club has a monopoly on racist morons. This just highlights the racist undercurrent that still exists in some parts of Australian society sadly. People harbor these attitudes towards Indigenous people and then wonder why they still suffer poorer life outcomes and inequality compared to non-Indigenous Australians. The attitudes of people like her and the inequality Indigenous Australians face today are inextricably linked.

**Message Board B, Fan 302:** I can't see how throwing a banana at someone is inherently racist. Maybe she'd already eaten all the sandwiches. But if she's yelling out some racist abuse at the same time I'd say that is. I really hope it blows over quick and doesn't end up like the Adam Goodes farce.

**Message Board B, Fan 321:** Throwing a banana at somebody of a race which has been denigrated with slurs inferring that they are subhuman and primates is what makes throwing a banana at an Aboriginal "inherently racist", even without her confirming it beyond all doubt by calling him a monkey. This is why the "if it was thrown at a white person nobody would bat an eyelid" comments that seem to be all over the place are completely irrelevant.

For some fans, there is a separation of actions that could be deemed racist from their racial history or they are just ignorant of how such behavior is interpreted by other people. Of particular pertinence in the debate above was the differentiation between what Jones and Fleming (2007) refer to as ‘ethically excusable’ (unwittingly racist through ignorance) and ‘ethically inexcusable’ (deliberately racist and evil) in the language and actions being used by fans attending matches and on the internet afterwards. Although there has been a move away from the mid-twentieth century exclusion of Aboriginal people from participating in sport towards an increasing representation in sports like the AFL (see Judd, 2010), comments from Fan 302 “I can’t see how throwing a banana at someone is inherently racist”, Fan 220 “You can mount a reasonable argument that she wasn't intending to be racist by throwing a banana”, and Fan 216 not accepting “this banana/monkey/racist argument” reflect Feagin’s (2010) argument that people consciously and unconsciously act and speak in a way that continually reinforces racial inequality and prejudice. For some fans, Australian football remains historically located within a white, male, Anglo-Celtic culture where the continued presentation of Australianness marginalizes those who do not fit with this image (White, 1997). It is as if participation in the racialized social structure by whites grants them normalized privileges within the dominant culture of Australianness through categorizing racial difference and separation from non-whites.

For some fans, this then leads to racist discourse, which is defined by Teun van Dijk (2004, p. 351) as: “a form of discriminatory social practice that manifests itself in text, talk and communication. Together with other (non-verbal) discriminatory practices, racist discourse contributes to the reproduction of racism as a form of ethnic or “racial” domination.” Expanding on this, Van Dijk states how racist discourse takes two particular forms: (a) it is directed *at* ethnically different Others (viewing or treating a person or group that is distinct or opposite from oneself on the grounds of “race”) and; (b) it is *about*

ethnically different Others. Of course, the incidents involving Eddie Betts, Adam Goodes and Lance Franklin have been directed *at* them, whereas the focus of this article was to review the discourse *about* ethnically different Others on two prominent message boards.

Although there were accounts that still celebrated Australian football as a white sport that continues to discriminate against Indigenous Others, the majority of responses advocated equality and challenged those who continue to harbor racist thoughts. As Daniels (2013) argues, the internet is not a value-neutral space. In addition to new forms of racism that seek to represent cultural and social norms in an online space, it also offers new ways of challenging racism. The contestation by Fans 126, 259, 270 and 321 reflected the findings of Cleland (2014) in his analysis of British association football fans' expression of racist thoughts on message boards and Twitter by challenging, criticizing, mocking and shunning those posts that were not deemed welcome by the majority of the message board membership. Thoughts such as "So long as people in (white) privilege dismiss or are ignorant to historical significance of how this kind of behaviour affects those whom which are the target for such behaviour, then we're still a long way off true racial equality" by Fan 126 and "Throwing a banana at somebody of a race which has been denigrated with slurs inferring that they are subhuman and primates is what makes throwing a banana at an Aboriginal "inherently racist", even without her confirming it beyond all doubt by calling him a monkey" by Fan 321, are in response to earlier posts that contradict the group's consensus on racism. Resultantly, message boards are to an extent "self-policed" as the criticizing and challenging of posts marginalize those fans who continue to perpetuate racist discourses and demonstrate the existence of a white habitus.

### **White Habitus**

According to Sandvoss (2005, p. 34), the habitus functions as a simultaneous form of communication and identity construction "in that this communication is as much directed

inwards as outwards, forming a sense of who we are and believe ourselves to be.” Indeed, there are connotations with the practice of consuming Australian football when Bourdieu (1984, p. 211) states “it would be naïve to suppose that all practitioners of the same sport (or even any other practice) confer the same meaning on their practice or even, strictly speaking, that they are practicing the same practice.” The notion of normalized whiteness for generations of Australians and the perceived threat of Australian national identity being reshaped by new cultures has led to increased ‘cultural’ racism that is openly reflected in and out of sports such as Australian football (Taylor, Lock & Darcy, 2009). By way of illustration was this response by two fans:

**Message Board A, Fan 93:** I’ve met no shortage of people who’ll sneer about "Abos" in private. There’s no magic cure to prejudice, but combating ignorance with knowledge seems like the closest thing we’re going to get.

**Message Board A, Fan 98:** Much of the change has already taken place. The racist comments have been universally condemned. Not one person has come onto this forum and even half attempted to minimize the comments or defend the right of those people to make those comments. It’s now totally unacceptable in a social sense to hold these type of views or make these types of comments. Privately, I think there’s still an undercurrent of what you could call 'casual racism' in the community - that is, not necessarily aggressive or nasty but still crude and divisive.

In a similar analysis of racist behavior of British association football fans, Cleland and Cashmore (2016) argue that casual racism is a form of unintentional social ignorance and as a social issue occasional racial outbursts were inevitably going to occur within football given the white habitus in which some fans operate. The internal dispositions, perceptions and expressions surrounding race reflected in comments like those above illustrate how they are embedded in the cultural practice of some white fans and spread from one generation to the next. This is then reflected in the everyday practice of agents and gives them social meaning, particularly if the practice gains support from their peers. In the case of racist behavior, social and cultural platforms such as being inside a stadium or by engaging in an online message

board provide opportunities where these thoughts can be reinforced and enhance an individual's position. By way of illustration were these comments raised by three fans:

**Message Board A, Fan 119:** I honestly think that some of the racism that is spilled at the footy is just a vehicle to the underlying mentality of the dysfunctional relationship that exists between the Power and Crows supporters. We're brought up to hate each other's clubs which then in turn "justifies" pot shots at opposition players and supporters alike. The hate or dislike or negative thoughts then become the culture. The next generation don't need to know why, they've been brought up with a massive and unhealthy dislike for the other club and their players.

**Message Board A, Fan 130:** The media promote division and hate among the supporters of the two clubs. Increasingly, they're inciting violence and racism. They peddle a 'Crows good', 'Port evil' agenda. And they report and muck rake to promote that agenda, especially come Showdown time. It's not good enough and has a huge role in what took place on the weekend.

**Message Board A, Fan 156:** The main issue as I see it, and have for a very long time, is that all clubs have this issue because our society still has a long way to go in respecting others. When you have large numbers of people, you get a larger amount of idiots than there normally would be and the rule of mob starts up.

Although these fans were talking specifically about the Port Adelaide and Adelaide Crows local rivalry, it highlighted the deep dislike that have been instilled in generations of fans through family, peers, the media and other influences in their lives. On the topic of the social construction and overt presentation of the white habitus, Sallaz (2010, p. 296) explains how "individuals who came of age in one racial formation will tend to generate practices that simultaneously preserve entrenched racial schemata." For some white fans, the dispositions learnt in the process of socialization are so ingrained that they regulate their sporting practice by distinguishing themselves from the Indigenous Other at any opportunity that presents itself, whether that be verbally or physically at matches or on the internet where racist views can be anonymously protected through the use of pseudonyms.

### **Social Change**

For some AFL fans, it was unsurprising to see racial dispositions become an unwelcome practice at matches and on the internet, with calls across both message boards for social

change. Educating white fans about racial acceptance was a recurrent feature of the online discussion, but fans indirectly kept referring back to the white habitus and embedded racist dispositions that make any intervention difficult because of the belief that sport reflects wider Australian society. Thus, any individual action that is taken and promotion of wider campaigns does not directly address wider societal prejudices and misplaced interventions can actually strengthen opposition to them. Within the message boards, however, there were fans such as this who called for much stronger action:

**Message Board A, Fan 63:** Enough's enough. All the plans in place as they stand, simply aren't curbing the problem. Time for a zero tolerance life ban policy on racists. This is something that goes a little beyond sport, and it would be nice to see the AFL take the initiative on this and be at the forefront of change. Quite frankly, I'd question whether inaction from the AFL could be considered a sign of disrespect to the Indigenous players of the game.

Fan 63 is not alone in criticizing the current measures and perceived “inactivity” of the AFL. In his assessment of its tackling of embedded racism in the code and wider society, Philpott (2017, p. 872) claims that “the AFL’s diplomacy has done little to challenge colonial modes of thinking about Indigenous peoples or to establish pathways to genuine reconciliation.” Thoughts like this are also reflective of other scholars who report on color-blind ideologies existing within sports governing bodies like FIFA through the failure to recognize the extent to which racism exists (Burdsey, 2011; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Hylton, 2010). One of the reasons behind this is that those in positions of power across various sports governing bodies are almost exclusively white, with Burke (2011, p. 661) explaining how the “White habitus itself is the engine of color-blind ideologies, as the ideology of color-blindness explicitly legitimates and leaves intact the racial order that it purports to explain.” Indeed, this was reflected in these comments taken from a much longer thread on the topic:

**Message Board B, Fan 15:** Racism and other ignorant prejudiced and dangerous bullshit that requires social change on a broad level has been hidden and silently accepted for too long. Calling it out when it rears its ugly head and making sure the people responsible get held accountable in some way is how you start the right kind of conversations and give momentum to social change.

**Message Board B, Fan 24:** I think it's a pretty sad indictment that sections of supporters across all 18 clubs are unable to see an issue with what happened and some are pushing the line of 'she just grabbed the first projectile, this isn't a racial incident'. (1) Who thinks it's appropriate to hurl a projectile object at a footballer, regardless of how frustrated you might be? (2) The immediacy of our actions still carries consequences, be they intended or otherwise. (3) If you can't see something abhorrent with this incident, regardless of any ill-founded justification behind it, then you're as much a part of the problem as she is.

**Message Board B, Fan 43:** It's a discussion that gets shouted down because every time there's an incident involving an Indigenous player, this vocal group of individuals comes out of the woodwork and attempts to find ways to soften the stance of the perpetrator. This is all whilst attacking the character of the individual who was on the receiving end of the treatment. In this instance, it's been difficult for people to do so with Eddie Betts given he is such a naturally likeable individual, but I've still seen people throwing out 'she didn't mean it racist and he caused it by celebrating too much'? Can you honestly tell me that we'd be suggesting the same thing if Eddie Betts was white? Because we wouldn't. It's not like the banana throwing at the football matches in Europe was low key, we're talking widespread worldwide public condemnation.

**Message Board B, Fan 72:** To the people defending her actions and numerous people around social media complaining about 'WHAT IF IT WERE AN APPLE, WOULD IT BE RACIST THEN?' the majority of sane minded people out there pity people like yourself. You weren't raised properly, I pity your parents. Think you need to put yourselves in the life of an Indigenous person in Australia to know what it'd feel like...how anyone could defend her actions is absolutely disgusting.

**Message Board B, Fan 79:** Imagine having people tell you that because of your skin, your blood, your heritage, who your parents are, that you are subhuman. That irrespective of your actions, choices, or achievements that you are inherently worth less than they are. And then imagine knowing that others of your ethnicity have been told the same thing for generations.

Online message boards, and the internet more generally, have been identified as fertile ground for grassroots advocacy (Dimitrov, 2008) and the views of Fans 43 and 72 are indicative of calls to challenge the entrenched racial schemata in Australian society. As noted above, user-generated/maintained online message boards provide fans with a platform to advocate for social change (as Fan 15 does) and also empower them to contest embedded discriminatory behaviors and views.

There is also a long, if not extensive, tradition of athletes using their elevated societal status to advocate for social change (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). However, it is only relatively



recently that the elite levels of popular Australian sporting codes have been identified as being suitably placed to drive behavioral change by educating fans and the wider community (Reeves, Ponsford & Gorman, 2015). The country's elite sporting leagues, with players of many nationalities and backgrounds provide a visible challenge to presentations of the white habitus that are perpetuated in other areas of popular culture (Coad, 2002) and athletes (including Australian football players) are increasingly used as the "face" of anti-racism campaign, such as the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Racism. It Stops with Me* (Nissim, Davis & Darlison, 2015). However, the creation of effective racial equality campaigns was met by skepticism by some fans, as highlighted by the following extracts:

**Message Board A, Fan 29:** You can guarantee that everyone is in for some virtue signaling re-education masked as a "informational" campaign now. You cannot control what comes out of people's mouths when they are emotionally invested and lash out...somehow to a lot of people who have no perspective this is a cause to freak out that everyone is still a racist. There is no logical thinking in any of this and, as a result, there is no traction in this campaign.

**Message Board A, Fan 134:** Most of society might find racism wrong and intolerable with only a handful of people in society who would actually step up and say something if they witnessed racism, but there will always be people who will be racist...There's no point trying to change that because you won't succeed. They're beyond help. But what the clubs and AFL can do, is if the person is a member of a club, cancel their membership and ban them for life from every AFL match, venue and event. And then get on with the footy and stop giving the knuckle dragging campaigners any more attention than they deserve.

**Message Board A, Fan 144:** You will never completely eliminate idiots, arseholes, racists, scumbags etc. Just like you will never eliminate murderers, rapists, violent thugs and those who abuse other people's fundamental human rights. And if you can't completely eliminate them from society you are not going to completely eliminate them from footy and sports...even a zero tolerance approach won't eliminate them completely - unfortunately that's how human beings are wired - there are always the extreme cases. It pisses me off that the media just lump everyone together. Yes tough laws should be implemented and tougher policing at the ground and continual education and name and shame the perpetrators, and ban them from being members.

For those above, the racist behavior of some fans is a frustration to the wider majority who do not behave in this way. Reference by Fan 134 that "there will always be people who will be racist" and that "there's no point trying to change that because you won't succeed. They are

beyond help”, presents a problem to the authorities but they cannot continue to just condone and ban those fans found guilty of racist behavior.

## **Conclusion**

While our investigation was spurred by a specific racist incident during an Australian football match in August 2016, the response by thousands of fans engaging on two prominent Australian football fan message boards addressed pressing questions concerning national identity, whiteness and multiculturalism across the AFL, sport and wider Australia society. As we have highlighted in this article, racial tension and racism are never far from the surface of Australian society, with those bodies, appearances and accents interpreted as being different to the dominant white culture continuing to face a sense of alienation through the perception that they are not Australian (Butcher, 2008).

In illustrating this, we applied Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to explain the existence of racism in everyday thought processes and practices of individuals engaging with online Australian football message boards. Our analysis revealed that, for some supporters, there is a presentation of a white habitus that legitimizes and promotes racial difference, prejudice and inequality which helps “perpetuate the normativity of White world views and maintain the privileged position of Whites” (Hartmann, 2007, p. 58). Some fans defend the existence of overt and covert racist behavior and language as a form of ‘casual racism’, which is justified through the presence of racism and social divisions in wider Australian society. In further support of our findings, we point to the emergence of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation political party in 1997 that reflected the general shift to the right in politics surrounding immigration. Through the presentation of whites as victims, there has been growing opposition to

multiculturalism and migration in Australia and this is increasingly reflected in the culture of sport.

Despite Judd and Butcher (2016, p. 69) reporting how the AFL brand has “closely aligned itself with the politics of Aboriginal reconciliation”, racism remains a prominent feature. With regards to the anonymous presentation of racist thoughts and actions in online social settings, Cleland (2014), Cleland and Cashmore (2016) and Sallaz (2010) have illustrated how racism never remains static and old racial schemata previously directed in person to non-white players can now also be consciously and unconsciously communicated online (see also Claringbould et al., 2015). Although moderators of message boards have the power to remove offensive or litigious posts, it is the self-regulated power of the group membership which can challenge or support posters’ views on certain topics like racism and demand the need for social change. As Bourdieu (1984) explained, when challenged the dispositions held by some individuals can be changed, but for a number of fans racism remains embedded in their everyday practice and sport provides one channel where this can be openly expressed.

Similarities to the Betts incident are also found in European football, where the throwing of bananas and overt racial chanting remains a feature of some countries (Cleland & Cashmore, 2014). Outside of this, racism amongst players and fans at association football matches and across the internet remains widespread with no sign of it abating despite governing bodies like UEFA fining clubs and forcing them to close sections of their stadia for future home matches if the club is found guilty of the racist behavior of their fans. Indeed, the embedded nature of racism in the everyday online and offline practice of some supporters presents similar challenges to the Australian football authorities looking to tackle racist thoughts and behavior. Given the evidence presented in this article with regards to the role the internet plays in allowing individual expressions of racial prejudice, the AFL has some

way to go before it can suggest that racial equality has been effectively achieved through its policies and campaigns. Instead it needs the continuation of key stakeholders in the sport, including fans, to continue to openly challenge and contest any racism that exists. Outside of the AFL, it also speaks more widely to Australian society as to how it engages with racial equality, identity and multiculturalism at a time where white privilege and power remain a prominent feature of online and offline discourse.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Port Adelaide is one of the AFL's oldest clubs having played its first game in 1870. Adelaide Crows was formed in 1990 to prevent Port Adelaide from entering the AFL. This rivalry grew in 1997, when Port Adelaide became the newest AFL team and competed in the first Showdown with the Crows on 20 April 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The decision to defend the cartoon highlighted some popular support for its publication. Moreover, in February 2019, the Australian Press Council decided the cartoon did not breach Australian media standards.

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