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Digital marketing and AI integration with robotics for the fight against racism in football: A cross-cultural investigation.

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the prevalence of racism in football, using data collected from individuals of various age groups from diverse European countries. Descriptive statistics were utilized by researchers to analyze the data, revealing a high rate of racist incidents in sports. The findings also suggest that socio-demographic factors influence individuals' tendencies toward racism. Racist behavior was commonly attributed by respondents to a lack of education, fear, and broader social unrest. The study demonstrates how strategic marketing can be utilized to combat racism and fascism in football. A more inclusive and positive environment can be cultivated through digital marketing's ability to shape perceptions, raise awareness, and influence behaviors. Strong policies and accountability measures are necessary to achieve meaningful change through marketing efforts. Hence, football can move towards a more inclusive and anti-racist environment with the incorporation of AI and robotics. Finally, this paper discusses a comprehensive approach to enhancing regulations to fight racism and abuse in football, providing practical suggestions for policymakers and stakeholders.

Keywords: *Racism in football, racist insults, tackling racism, educational marketing, digital marketing strategies, EU*

Introduction

Speaking about racism in football, many researchers argue that the sport has a vital role in creating a peaceful and inclusive society as it offers the unique opportunity to bring together millions of people, regardless of their sex, color, gender, age, nationality or religion (Back, et al., 2001; Bradbury, 2011; Hylton, 2010; Ruddock, 2005). In today's society, there is a growing consensus that racism in football is particularly prevalent. In almost every game, we witness instances where certain players or fans of a team are targeted with racist insults. Numerous football organizations are working to combat racism in football and actively encourage people to report cases of discrimination. Similar to other fields, there has been a growing number of anti-racism campaigns in football, but most of them seem to significantly fail to address the societal causes of this behavior. Therefore, this paper aims at presenting the results and will try to fill in the lacuna identified in the previous paragraphs, by trying to investigate what is the current status of the beliefs towards the phenomenon of racism in football.

The Context

According to a report from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights in the field of racism and exclusion on different sports, it was found that there currently exists a limited scientific research that can assess positively the values of diversity and social inclusion that arise from descriptive data in the EU context of the specific field (Bell, 2009; Köseoğlu, 2020). For example, Roberson (2006) argued that diversity and inclusion create a competitive advantage for businesses. Alike, Shore et al. (2010) noted that inclusive work groups create high-quality employee relationships, enhance creativity, and strengthen pride in one's tasks. Similarly, it was found that social pressures from external stakeholders can also compel an organization to have strong morals (Johnston & Malina, 2008; Trevino & Nelson, 2021). Therefore, all of these examples positively represent diversity and inclusion engagement practices (Tarnanidis et al., 2024). Whilst towards that direction a number of relevant measures have been implemented by relevant stakeholders (like legal monitoring systems and awareness raising campaigns) at the European level in order to prevent the spreading of racist acts and unethical behaviors that occur on a daily basis to all kind of sports, this issue remains a pervasive challenge as it is too difficult to overcome the existing barriers and to provide a unified critical assessment, which will encourage all the participating bodies, such as athletes, players, officials and fans to build a shield against the growth of racism.

As for its manifestation, racism can take a diverse range of forms. There are cases where people are disadvantaged (consciously or not) due to their ethnicity. This is what can be referred to as everyday subconscious or indirect racism (Cunningham, 2011; D'Hoore & Scheerder, 2024; Long, 2000; Moran, 2013) and it can originate from frustration, insecurity, lack of knowledge or understanding. It can derive from the existence of a perception of endangerment of the indigenous/national identity (Llopis -Goig, 2015) due to the presence of "others". Moreover, the problem of racism has sharpened at a time when players have become more mobile than

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ever, not only between countries but between continents, and at a time when ethnic families have been otherwise integrated in their adopted homeland for several generations. Nonetheless, the trend also coincides with a deeply worrying increase in extreme right-wing activities outside the football stadium (Iganski, 2011; Lindgren & Barker-Rucht; 2017; Holland, 1995) In general racism can be defined as negative beliefs and attitudes which advantage or disadvantage people because of their color, culture or ethnic origin. In its more subtle form it is as damaging as in its overt form (Chu et al., 2014; Cleland & Cashmore, 2014; Macpherson et al., 1999; Hoberman, 2006; Tarnanidis et al., 2020). For example, the research carried out by Tarnanidis et al. (2020) concentrate on the problems associated with racism in football, particularly examining how racial discrimination manifests within the game and its wider implications for players, fans, and the entire football culture. Their study typically involves analyzing the prevalence of racist behaviors, attitudes, and practices within the sport, including examining incidents involving players of diverse racial backgrounds who may face discriminatory treatment on the field, in the media, or from fans.

Similarly, Back et al. (2001) investigated the intricate connection between race, identity, and multiculturalism in English football (soccer). On their research they analyzed how football in England has evolved as a space of racial tension, cultural negotiation, and transformation, particularly in the context of increased racial and ethnic diversity both on and off the field. The authors explore the topic of racism in football, both among players and fans, emphasizing how discriminatory attitudes and behavior have shaped the English football experience in the past. The broader social implications are also addressed, with an examination of how football culture both reflects and confronts issues of race and multiculturalism in England.

Additionally, the major focus of research and campaigning in the past was on fan behavior. Recently, attention has shifted towards institutional racism, which simply refers to the collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their color, culture or ethnic origin (Fernando, 2017). It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviours which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (Macpherson et al., 1999; Feagin, 2013). Inherently, institutional racism has its roots in society; it was used by employers who were reluctant to recruit immigrants upon their arrival to Britain during the 1950s and 60s. However, there is still little evidence to suggest that significant advances have occurred against entrenched forms of racism (Back & Solomos, 2013; 2020). Based on the literature, we can see that racism behaviours are influenced by many factors, like personal characteristics, cultural and situational factors. Therefore, our research focuses on providing smart and impactful marketing strategies to combat racism in football across different study settings.

Methodology and Data Analysis

A survey was implemented through a well-designed, printed and online, questionnaire that resulted both from literature review and with relevant discussions with experts in the specified field. In that spirit, anonymous surveys were designed and developed in each participated country, and distributed in seven different languages to football fans and officials, with the purpose of analyzing trends in their opinions and experiences. The primary survey was conducted on different country specific samples to more than 650 respondents. It should be mentioned that among others, we were also interested in assessing the differences or the similarities that exist among the participated countries against racism in football. Keeping the above in mind, we collected data from people who were willing to show an insurmountable zeal and a willingness to help us with this effort.

The data analysis was implemented through the use of descriptive statistics, and the method of Pearson's correlation (Hair et al., 2008). The method of Pearson's correlation was selected, in order to measure the level and the strength of the relationships between the variables that examine the importance of racism in football. Pearson's correlation identifies the strength of the linear relationship between variables (Proctor, 2005; Brace et al., 2003; Chisnall, 1997; Bryman and Bell, 2007). The conductors provided the interviewees all the necessary explanation information prior to the completion of the questionnaire. For example, it was deemed appropriate to inform participants about the purposes of that study and their rights. Clear instructions and guidance on how to proceed on each part of the questionnaire were given.

In order to ensure that the study tapped a wide range of respondents the data was collected from a purposive or judgmental sample (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2006). The technique of non-probability judgmental sampling was used to ensure, firstly, that the sample included people who go to football matches, they play football, or in different ways and with varying degrees of involvement they are occupied in the specific field. And secondly, judgment was used to ensure that the sample included a wide range of different aged groups. Therefore, based on these arguments, we selected to employ the specific methodology, in order to best describe the situation of racism in football.

Figure 1 illustrates the exact number of the questionnaires collected from each country, both printed and online questionnaires. Specifically, we manage to collect 672 responses from six countries (i.e. Italy, Romania, Greece, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria).

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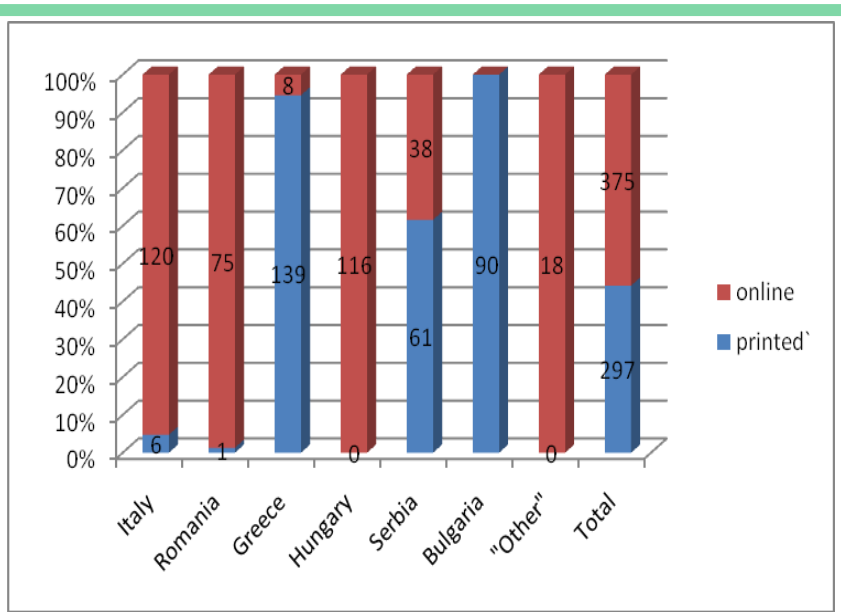


Figure 1: Graphical distribution of the collected data
Source: The authors

It can be seen that the majority of the questionnaires were collected online (56%). This result was evident, due to the fact that the data were taken from different EU countries. Additionally, the study sample comprised of 71.7 % male, 25.4% female, and a small percentage of people who did not wish to identify a gender (1.5%) or answer the question (1.3%). It should be mentioned that an equal distribution exists in the category of the marital status; 42.3% were single and 41.8% were married. The respondents were mainly below the age of 24 (44.4%) and only 6.7% were above the age of 55. Their educational background was split equally among different classification of levels, where the majority of them have finished high school (32.0%) and have a bachelor degree (20.2%). For their employment status, it can be seen that most are working as employees (31.4%) and are simple football fans (meaning not professionally employed in any way in football, 26.3%).

The frequency distribution of the most common manifestation of racism abuse across the different countries participated in this study is shown in figure 2.

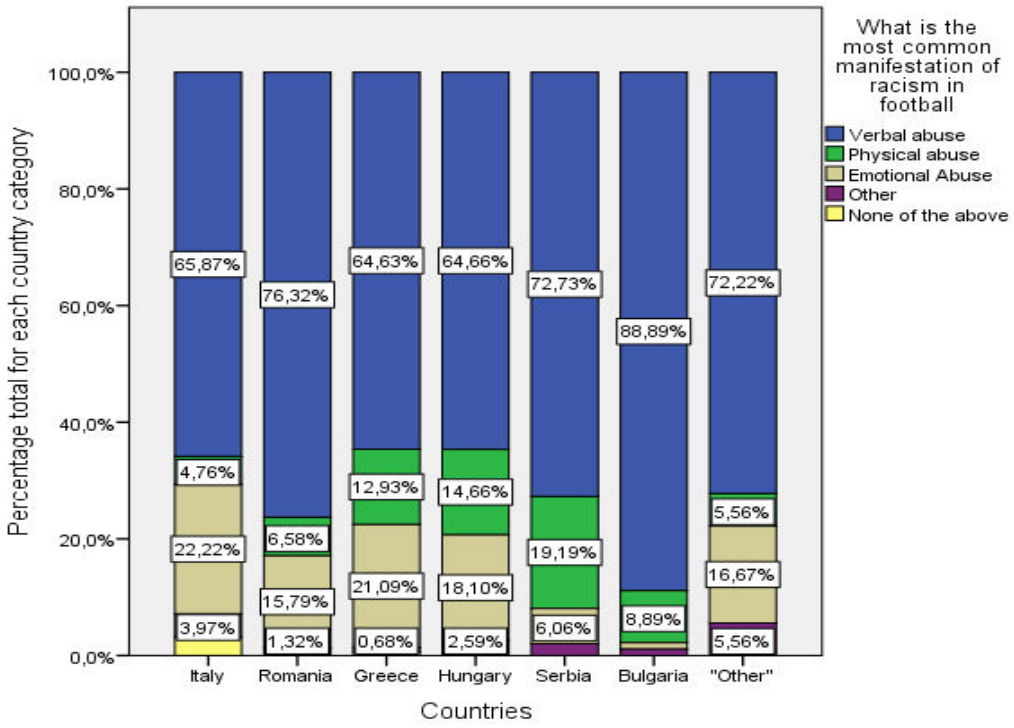


Figure 2: Graphical distribution of the most common manifestation of racism
Source: The authors

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It can be observed that verbal abuse is believed to be the most frequent type of racism in football (highlighted in blue colour). Speaking about country specific results, we can see that physical abuse seems to have high scores only in the contexts of Greece (12.9%), Hungary (14.7%) and Serbia (19.2%). Additionally, looking at the frequency distribution for the racism type of emotional abuse, we can see that it has scores above 20 percent to the countries of Italy (22.2%) and Greece (21.1%).

When respondents were asked to indicate what are the most common types of racism in football (not limited inside the stadiums and during games) we found that the three most common types of racism are the "*color of skin*", the "*ethnic origin*" and the "*religion*). However, it should be stated that racism in football based on the religion type is being expressed only in the countries of Greece and Serbia. This may provide evidence for policy makers to provide awareness measures and marketing campaigns that protect religion diversity. Also, we observed that the manifestation of racism in football is moderately important for the country of Hungary (46.6%). And it is slightly relevant for the country of Romania (34.2%) and Hungary (29.3%). As a whole from the current analysis, we can conclude that the perception of people who participated in this study believe that racism in football is a societal problem, and thus additional regulations need to be crafted by Governmental authorities.

Additionally, we found that the racism incidents increased greatly in Greece and Hungary and for the other countries they remained the same with a minor increase. What is more, the most common victims or racist abuse are believed to be players and fans being submitted to verbal and physical abuse not only on the pitch, but outside the football arena as well. Also, it should be mentioned that police, referees and press have also suffered racist abuse, as they were ranked with a high score. Hence, we can draw sufficient conclusions about the trends of the most common victims of racism abuse in the field of football.

According to respondent perceptions on each country group the most important campaigns to tackle racism are the "Say no to racism", "Respect" campaigns and the "UNITE" against racism campaign is more familiar to people in Romania. Furthermore the majority of respontents prefer not to participate previously in an anti-racism/ discrimination campaign. Therefore, this is one of the hallmarks, and also is an important finding for all the participating countries as it portrays that in complex decision-making tasks, like the participation in anti-racism campaigns, people select sometimes not to engage in social activities. Therefore, they seem to lose their interest and their enjoyment. Such demanding tasks need to be assessed based on the promotion of intrinsic values, so that participants can fully understand the impact of their engagement in the fight of racism phenomena. This will minimize the disaffection result along with learning activities included in anti-racism campaigns.

When examining the causes of racism acts across countries it is found that people who perform racist behaviours are not well educated and mainly are influenced through the uses of social media communication tools (Tarnanidis, 2024a). However, it should be stated that the specific finding is relevant with the existing literature review, as it was found that many football fans and supporters in EU football tend to post daily in their online discussions racist thoughts. For example, the study carried out by Cleland (2014) in English football, ascertains that social media sites, like fan message boards, have allowed racist thoughts to flourish online, in particular by rejecting multiculturalism and Islam through the presentation of whiteness and national belonging and an outright hostility towards the 'other'. Based on that, it can be concluded that most of the respondents from each country group mentioned that racist comments in social media occur very frequently. Specifically, in the country of Hungary, a great percentage of people indicated that racism comments are rare in social media. The specific results show clearly that people inside the internet express more easily their racist behaviours, and thus policy makers or Governments need to create common policies and regulations for the fight of racist comments in different social media.

Discussion conclusion and recommendations

Our study examined the phenomenon of racism in football in six countries, on a sample of 672 people. To this end we investigated through a survey the impact that it has on a number of socio-demographic variables. Our findings suggest that the most common manifestation of racism, according to the responses, is verbal and emotional abuse for the majority of countries participated in the specific study. The specific form of racism was previously reported notoriously in many published reports, also this trends were analyzed in the literature review section. Therefore, by finding the same results it means that the problem still exists inside the EU territory and needs to be assessed more carefully by the relevant football decision-makers, in order to eliminate it in the near future. For example, many complaints about discriminatory behavior were observed by the people when attending a football match. This issue occurs continuously to those who belong to ethnic minorities and have different color of skin and ethnic origin. The specific incidents have been observed towards the category of players, fans, referees, and police. Also, racist behaviors towards the staff have been observed in the countries of Romania and Greece. Additionally, the case of referees was scored higher in the countries of Italy, Romania and Greece. Also, based on the current finding, during the first decades of the anti-racism movements in professional football, fans were considered the main instigators of racist behavior. Thus, the efforts were targeted towards penalizing them. However, people still believe that fans are the main source of racist behavior in football.

Likewise, regarding racism in social media occurs in a daily bases and we could argue that this communication tool becomes a catalyst for spreading racism in football. On the other hand, many of the people who participated in this study believe that the social media can help in the fight of racism. This could

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be achieved by the raising of awareness of the impact of racism on those who experience and witness it. Such events may include promoting anti-racism videos and poster campaigns, or a pilot training program for changing citizens' behaviour (Tarnanidis et al., 2025a; Tarnanidis et al., 2025b). Racist incidences in football are very frequent in all countries. It should be stated that during the last year racism phenomena were perceived to remain the same. However, they show an increase in the countries of Greece and Hungary. As far is the most important instigators of racism for all countries are players, fans, players and police. Thus, football policy makers need to focus on promoting intrinsic motivational values through the use of behavioral change marketing techniques, i.e. to develop learning environments that are intrinsically rewarding.

Speaking about the anti-racism campaigns in football, we could argue that the most known campaigns for all were the "Say no to racism" and the "Respect" and their impact was assessed as quite successful and moderately successful. Despite the fact that most of the people who participated trust the International institutions in football (like the organizations of FARE, UEFA, etc), they indicated that they haven't participated in an anti-racism campaign. Hence, more clear messages need to be embraced in the development of these campaigns, in order to attract the participation of the people, by providing to them messages that increase public awareness and discrimination in football, as the specific issue is a social problem and affects every citizen (Tarnanidis, 2025).

By shaping public perception, influencing fan behavior, and promoting inclusivity, marketing can play an important role in fighting racism in football (Tarnanidis, 2024b; Tarnanidis & Gkiouzepas, 2024). Branding, sponsorships, education, fan engagement, digital campaigns, and policy advocacy are all part of a comprehensive solution that involves a multi-faceted approach (Gkiouzepas & Tarnanidis, 2024). The following tactics are recommended specifically:

Table 1: Anti-racist marketing tactics

Marketing tactics	Actions
Messaging and branding	Integration of anti-racism messaging into their identity is necessary for football clubs, leagues, and brands
Sponsorship and brand promotion	Supporting clubs and leagues that commit to diversity is a way for sponsors to take an active stand against racism.
Fan engagement	Anti-racism workshops and zero-tolerance stadium policies are mandatory
Social media and digital Campaigns	Recognize and prohibit racist remarks
Youth development and immensive technologies with robotics	Future generations can be educated to achieve long-term change and human experiences

Source: The authors

When combined with strong policies and accountability, marketing has the power to eradicate racism in football. The creation of real change will be possible through a sustained, multi-platform approach that engages fans, players, clubs, sponsors, and authorities (Tarnanidis & Sklavounos, 2024). The crucial aspect is to consistently take action, not just react to racist incidents. Different policy makers and future incumbents should be guided by examining further the impacts on the variables that measure the phenomena of racism in football for each of the countries involved, as important variations and differences were found. An important issue for the fight against racism is the use of immersive technologies and computing capabilities (hardware and software) will shape the future of VR (Manda et al., 2025a; Singh et al., 2025; Manda et al., 2025b). For instance, AI is capable of analyzing stadium cameras to detect racist gestures, banners, or abusive behavior in the crowd. What is more, robotics can also be used to scan social media platforms for racist abuse directed at players, fans, or officials and flag/report the content. Thus, personalized educational programs can be created by AI for fans, players, and officials to raise awareness about racism and its impact.

Moreover, there has been considerable improvement in regulations, particularly on a European level, to combat the incidents of racism in the sphere of soccer, some EU countries can do far more on a national level to strengthen regulations. In general, a mix of stiffer penalties to counter expressions of hatred, as well as far more education and public awareness campaigns about the problem and possible countermeasures are considered the best solution to fight racism, even if most of the respondents aren't willing to participate in racism campaigns. There remains a pressing need for training programs for police, sports officials and referees. Fan groups that combat racism have become an important factor in putting the issue on the public agenda. Marketing campaigns and media coverage create pressure on soccer associations and clubs to take action, in order to maintain the necessary positive public image for club profitability (Tarnanidis et al., 2023a; Tarnanidis et al., 2023b). Regularly assessing the effectiveness of anti-racism campaigns through surveys, feedback, and engagement metrics is important for relevant practitioners in marketing campaigns.

It is important for future practitioners to examine both verbal and physical abuse directed at players based on their race, which is often documented in high-profile incidents at games. Racism can have a psychological and professional impact on players, as well as impacting team dynamics and personal well-being. Promoting initiatives that can foster inclusivity and

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equality in the sport is something they should try to do (Tarnanidis & Manaf, 2024). Finally, it is clear from the present study that racism is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and as there is the need for continuous research, there is also the need for continuous and education, as our findings provide only a snapshot of peoples' propensity towards the phenomenon of racism in football. Educational programs that address discrimination among children can be created to foster a culture of inclusivity from the grassroots level, for example. European football has the potential to tackle racism's root causes and create a more inclusive environment for all by implementing marketing and educational strategies. Hence, future studies should be implemented to different countries inside the EU context by trying to analyze the influences of personal characteristic traits on racism in general.

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