

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Hate Speech in Sports through New Media Platforms A Critical Review of Italian Stadium Studies

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Abstract

This study aims to present a critical reading of Italian research that has addressed hate speech, with a particular focus on the sports domain, especially football. The paper draws upon a set of academic articles by Italian scholars, most notably a collective study conducted by researchers from the University of Turin, including Giuliano Bobba and Marcuso Moreno. This research was part of a project titled "Hate is Not a Sport". Additional sources include Elia Panetta's study on "Football Cities", which approached the topic from an anthropological and communication perspective.

These studies explored various manifestations of hate in the sports context, examining historical dimensions of hate speech through slogans and chants, as well as different forms of incitement to physical violence in stadiums. The research also classified types of hate speech based on intensity and origin.

This paper also aims to move beyond existing studies by offering critical commentary and initiating broader discussions. It includes field interviews with Italian fans to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of hate speech in sports settings.

Keywords: Hate speech, racial discrimination, stadium violence, Ultras, digital hate speech.

Introduction

Sport is a fundamental part of human life. It provides vitality, agility, and health. It is also a source of enjoyment, entertainment, and leisure. These characteristics have made sport a shared space for people from all social backgrounds, regardless of age, race, or appearance. It is not unusual to see an elderly man running, a woman throwing the shot put, or a child playing football. Sport is embedded in daily human activity. It is, quite simply, life.

Over time, sport has evolved in form and significance. Excellence in sport is now linked to performance, perseverance, skill, and creativity. These qualities are essential for success at national, continental, and global competitions. As a result, sport attracts fans and supporters from around the world who identify with teams or athletes. This identification may be based on geographic proximity or admiration for athletic skill.

Among all sports, football holds a unique place. It is a collective and widely followed sport that has reached almost every corner of the globe. It engages people from diverse backgrounds and has become one of the most influential sports in shaping individuals, communities, and cities. Football has influenced social, political, cultural, and even religious relationships, particularly in stadiums. These stadiums have become spaces where fans exchange chants, written slogans, and messages. Sometimes, these expressions are positive and celebratory. At other times, they carry messages of hate, violence, and racism directed toward rivals in domestic or international competitions.

Given this complex reality, this study seeks to explore Italian academic research on hate speech in football. The goal is to uncover the roots and causes of this phenomenon, especially among youth, both inside and outside stadiums. The paper also identifies the main forms of hate speech prevalent in Italian football culture.

1. Hate Speech in Italian Football

The discussion of hate speech in Italian football requires us to begin with definitions of this complex term. Hate speech appears in multiple forms and carries a variety of meanings. Defining it precisely is difficult, as its meaning can vary depending on the level and intensity of hostility. One cannot equate explicit, direct hostility with the more subtle or indirect expressions of animosity. Likewise, there is a clear difference between hate that arises from an extremist ideology and hate that results from anger following a defeat in a football match.

For this reason, several researchers have proposed definitions to clarify the concept and to help limit its harmful consequences. A clear definition is also necessary for authorities and organizations to take appropriate legal or disciplinary measures, particularly in cases that violate sportsmanship ethics and laws. At the same time, defining hate speech is essential to preserve enjoyment, ensure stability, and prevent riots and violent behavior in or around stadiums.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe defined hate speech as: "Expressions that spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and all forms of intolerance, including nationalism and ethnocentrism, abuse, harassment, labeling, prejudice, stereotyping, and slurs that are offensive or dehumanizing." (Recommendation No. R(97)20, Council of Europe, October 30, 1997) (Bobba, 2024).

Earlier, the European Union, in 2008, described hate speech as: "Verbal expressions that publicly incite violence or directly threaten individuals or groups based on ethnic, religious, or racial identity." (Council Framework Decision, 2008).

Although both definitions highlight key aspects of hate speech, the concept still requires empirical investigation. More precise indicators are needed to assess how hate speech manifests in Italian football stadiums.

The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance defined hate speech as: "The promotion or incitement to defame, attack, or humiliate an individual or a group, including harassment, insult, stigma, or the use of negative stereotypes or threats, based on race, skin color, religion, national or ethnic origin, as well as age, disability, identity, or sexual orientation (ECRI, 2016).

This definition adds important indicators that help clarify the concept. For example, it includes skin color and disability, two key factors highlighted in Italian research on football-related hate speech.

The European Committee against Racism and Intolerance adopted General Policy Recommendation No. 15, issued on December 8, 2015, and endorsed by the Council of Europe on March 21, 2016. Later, in 2019, during the launch of the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, the U.S. document defined hate speech as: "Any type of communication—whether spoken, written, or behavioral—that attacks or uses discriminatory or offensive language to refer to a person or group based on identity, including religion, race, nationality, ethnicity, gender, descent, or any other identity factor. This communication is often rooted in intolerance and can provoke division and conflict." (UN Strategy and Action Plan on Hate Speech) (Fotia, 2022).

This definition focuses on the different ways hate speech is expressed—whether through spoken words such as chants, songs, and slogans, or through visual elements such as banners, signs, and images meant to insult or provoke others. It also includes both traditional and modern forms of hate speech, especially those intended to create division and conflict between rival fans.

In stadiums, hate speech often appears in the form of banners or chants that carry messages of violence, discrimination, and exclusion. These may be political, religious, racial, or social in nature, especially when targeting foreigners perceived as economic or cultural competitors (e.g., in jobs or housing).

Less common forms of racism also appear, such as hostility directed at Black players who play for the home team. This behavior is known as "preventive racism", where fans protest a club's potential signing of a Black or African-origin player (Tavoni, 2014, p.16).

In Italy, Law No. 205/1993 is most relevant to this issue. It criminalizes the dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, and any acts that promote racial, ethnic, or religious discrimination. It also penalizes those who incite or commit acts of violence for such reasons. Under this law, the media is not allowed to broadcast any content that incites hate or intolerance based on race, religion, nationality, or gender (Altre, 2024).

Thus, hate speech in the media is a punishable offense. Neither journalists, athletes, nor analysts are allowed to use offensive or hate-filled language in newspapers, radio, or television, especially when discussing football matches.

The Italian scholar Tulio di Mauro defines hate speech as: "Words intended to harm and cause pain due to their inherently offensive nature—especially when used by someone from a dominant group against individuals who belong to historically oppressed or minority communities." This includes power imbalances such as men over women, or whites over Blacks.

All of these definitions agree that hate speech attacks human dignity, whether through discrimination based on gender, race, color, nationality, or physical disability.

Audience reactions also vary depending on the player's role. If a Black player is part of the opposing team, reactions are often more aggressive and openly racist. However, if the player is on the home team, opposition may come in the form of protest against their inclusion. Therefore, the context determines the form and intensity of hate speech, and fan background—especially among Ultras groups—plays a central role in escalating tensions.

The term Ultras refers to an organized supporter affiliated with a sports club. This individual strongly identifies with the group and shows daily commitment to supporting the team (D'Auria, 2009). Ultras often express loyalty through harsh language, even violence, directed at rival teams.

As shown in earlier sections, hate speech varies in form and intensity. In some cases, it involves criminal expressions that fall under extreme hate speech and go beyond vulgar language. These include calls for physical violence, such as assault or stabbing, directed at immigrants by Ultras outside the stadium. This reflects xenophobia and racial discrimination. Other forms of Ultras violence involve calls to attack rival fans or confront security forces.

Thus, hate speech exists on a spectrum. Italian researchers have outlined a set of indicators to measure it in online sports discourse, including the use of profanity, verbal aggression, discriminatory language, and threats of physical violence.

2. The Origins of Hate Speech in Italian Football Stadiums

In this section of the study, we aim to examine the roots of hate speech in Italian football stadiums. The objective is to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon and to uncover the underlying factors behind the expressions—both spoken and written—that frequently appear in the stands, voiced by rival fans during football matches.

From the definitions discussed in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that hate speech is a layered concept. It may carry political, religious, racial, or geographic meanings. For example, some expressions reject everything outside the geographic boundaries of the city where the club is based. Despite these differences, all such expressions fall within the broader context of football match rituals. This leads us to question the origins and sources of such expressions, particularly within the Italian context.

The Italian researcher Giulio Tavoni, in his field study on racism and violence in Italian football, analyzed statistical data and found that incidents involving hate speech—including verbal and physical violence as well as religious, gender-based, or ethnic discrimination—become more complex when they occur in stadiums with a history of fascist or neo-Nazi ideologies. This is especially evident in certain far-right ultras groups that often occupy strategic and dominant positions within the stadium. These groups frequently coexist with less politicized ultras, and in rare cases, with left-wing ultras groups.

This analysis suggests that ultras groups hold positions of power and influence, often aligning with ideologically driven factions. This alliance strengthens their capacity to organize and direct fan behavior within the stadium.

The statistical data also indicate that ideological factors, particularly those related to fascist thought, are among the primary causes of hate speech in Italian stadiums. This challenges the idea that such behaviors are simply part of football fan "rituals" used as a form of emotional release. Tavoni's conclusions, drawn from the data, are supported by the historical development of ultras culture in Italy, which has been shaped by decades of political engagement, dating back to the 1960s. This history reveals a long-standing politicization of football supporters, especially with the growing presence of neo-fascist activists within ultras groups during the 1980s and 1990s.

In Tavoni's study, it was found that more than half of all racist incidents occurred within just 11 clubs, each of which had at least one or more ultras groups with known ties to neo-fascist ideologies. These findings call for a deeper investigation using comprehensive research tools such as discourse analysis, participant observation, and in-depth interviews, alongside media content analysis, to understand and interpret the full dimensions of the phenomenon.

At the same time, it is necessary to draw a clear line between ultras culture and the neo-fascist culture that infiltrated it. While both may exhibit violent tendencies, the forms and origins of that violence differ. Violent acts such as stabbings and beatings that occurred between 1979 and 1995—especially those resulting in the death of rival supporters—are rooted in ultras culture itself. These actions belong to a logic of gang warfare, which is integral to the original identity of ultras groups.

Such behavior reflects an internal moral decline within the ultras subculture, as it existed before the infiltration of fascist or neo-Nazi elements. The key distinction lies in the ideological racism introduced by the far-right groups. Unlike the original ultras, whose violence was primarily territorial or symbolic, neo-fascist groups brought with them an explicitly racist ideology, exploiting the stadium environment as a platform to spread their beliefs.

Still, there is a cultural overlap between ultras and neo-fascist groups. In ultras culture, there is a strong admiration for violence, power, masculinity, and dominance. These values closely align with the far-right mindset, particularly fascism and neo-Nazism, which give these traits an ideological and political dimension. There is often fascination among ultras with those who appear more resolute, courageous, and capable of imposing respect. However, it is the ideological foundation that distinguishes traditional ultras from the far-right extremists.

In an interview conducted via WhatsApp with a veteran supporter of the Napoli football club, we asked about the roots of hate speech by ultras groups of Northern Italian teams such as AC Milan, Juventus, and Inter Milan against Napoli. The aim was to understand the motivations behind this ongoing hostility.

Michele Saiz, the interviewee, shared the following insight: "Based on my own humble experience over the years, I can say that the hate speech and racist chants targeting Napoli and its people come from a deep-seated inferiority complex in the minds of northern Italians. This goes beyond football. It reflects broader lifestyle differences. They cannot accept anything good coming from the South—especially from Naples—that they themselves are unable to achieve.

It's true that Napoli fans are not perfect. They make mistakes too. But we have a strong sense of humanity in how we treat others. That bothers them. The people of Naples—i Napolitani—have big hearts. And that generosity unsettles others who may lack it.

You can quote me on this in your article: 'The racist songs and hate slogans heard in Italian stadiums over the years—especially those calling for the eruption of the volcano in Naples—reflect their hatred. But in contrast, we never wish disasters on them. In fact, when disasters strike in the North, you'll find Napoli fans among the first to help. You'll never see us with banners asking rivers to flood their cities. That's the difference between us and them. It's just an inferiority complex, nothing more'" (Saiz, 2025)

During this interview, it became clear that, according to a Napoli football fan, the issue is not primarily political ideology. Rather, it stems from social sensitivities linked to the social disparities and inequalities within the social hierarchy. These disparities often provoke tensions between different social groups, whether in terms of cultural level, economic status, or the geographic location of the city.

Researcher Giulio Tavoni identifies two main reasons why football stadiums have become a preferred space for fascist and neo-Nazi groups to spread hate speech.

The first reason is related to the social and cultural composition of football spectators. The majority of them, though not exclusively, belong to the working class and have low levels of education. This social group is more susceptible to developing and adopting forms of racism. It provides fertile ground for the acceptance of extremist ideas that promote hatred against others. For example, ultras groups firmly reject immigrants, seeing them as competitors in the labor market. They believe that these foreign immigrants threaten their social position, competing for housing in suburbs or deprived neighborhoods and reducing job opportunities. Such beliefs fuel emotions and instincts that blame newcomers for social difficulties.

Additionally, the study notes that stadium audiences tend to lean more towards the far-right rather than left-wing ideologies. Therefore, these social and cultural struggles create an ideal environment to disseminate racist political messages among Italian football fans.

The second reason for choosing stadiums as places for racist propaganda and hate speech is that these spaces are not strongly controlled by authorities. Stadiums are difficult to monitor effectively due to the large number of fans present. Consequently, the prohibitions in the stands are stricter and more severe compared to those enforced in other places. Thus, football stadiums offer a relatively safer space for such behavior compared to other venues.

We can also highlight several violent incidents caused by the rise of hate speech among Italian football fans, which resulted from the spread of extremist fascist and neo-Nazi ideologies:

The shift from conflicts between rival fan groups to alliances formed specifically to confront the police has certainly been facilitated by the presence of neo-fascist groups in the stands. Their shared political beliefs have spread widely, particularly among ultras groups. One clear example is the alliance between the fascist ultras groups of Roma and Lazio. This alliance began with a violent raid in Brescia on October 20, 1994, during a match between Brescia and Roma. The confrontation culminated in the stabbing of Deputy Police Commissioner Giovanni Selmin and injuries to ten other officers. On June 4, 1996, during Bologna's promotion to Serie A, a joint attack by neo-fascist ultras of Bologna and Roma, this time with racist and anti-immigrant overtones, resulted in the stabbing of an Algerian man and the beating of eight other non-EU citizens. On November 23, 1999, a highly symbolic attack took place: the bombing of the Liberation Museum on 158 Tasso Street, as part of a neo-Nazi and anti-Semitic strategy adopted by Roma and Lazio fans. These incidents represent only a few symbolic examples.

This evidence confirms that the danger of hate speech among competing parties in Italian football does not lie solely in the scale of its violence or material damage. Rather, its real threat lies in its ideological source and support.

In an interview with Michele Saiz, a 59-year-old loyal Napoli supporter from San Giovanni a Teduccio—one of the key fan districts of the old San Paolo Stadium (now named Diego Armando Maradona Stadium) in Naples—he shared his perspective on the relationship between Napoli fans' hate speech and political or ideological backgrounds related to fascism, neo-Nazism, or even organized crime in Naples. He stated: "Let me start by saying that Napoli fans are not politically motivated. Perhaps before De Laurentiis' presidency, there were economic interests by some ultras groups, but no political ones. Regarding the banners displayed by Napoli supporters throughout the stadium, they do not contain any racist slogans. Napoli fans are perhaps the only ones who always stand with people who have suffered violence, tragedies, or disasters in other cities. Even though Napoli is often attacked by chants and shameful banners from other Italian cities, our banners and chants are usually sarcastic; we even mock

ourselves, unlike other teams' supporters. As for organized crime, it has disappeared from Naples for some time. There may still be some organized groups, but they have no political or racist links because everything is under control now. I can assure you of that—not just because I am a Napoli fan, but because Napoli supporters truly do not know hatred. Like the people of Naples themselves, racism is not part of their DNA.”

Michele Saiz's explanation can be contextualized within the Italian reality. Napoli, as a Southern Italian team, is part of a long-standing and well-known conflict between the wealthy North and the poorer South—a division familiar throughout Europe.

From a historical perspective, the Southern question in Italy goes beyond sports and is constantly reflected in it. It is largely due to the South's lack of major industrial groups capable of financing Southern clubs to compete at the highest levels of Italian football. Northern clubs like Juventus, Milan, and Inter benefit from strong economic backing. This economic gap has been a barrier to building powerful, well-managed Southern clubs with lasting success. As a result, fierce competition persists between the two regions: the North strives to maintain dominance and suppress emerging rivals, while the South seeks to assert its presence and claim recognition (Baldini, 2024)

Hate Speech on the Internet in Sports Discussions on Facebook and Twitter in Italy A group of Italian researchers conducted a study examining hate speech on the internet within the context of sports conversations on Facebook and Twitter. They analyzed comments and interactions surrounding posts made by several well-known sports newspapers in Italian cities, such as *Gazzetta dello Sport*, *Tutto Sport*, *Corriere dello Sport*, *Sky Sport*, and *Sportmediaet*. The study raised a significant question: What is the extent of vulgarity, threats, and insults, especially those rooted in racism and sexism, that appear in online sports discussions in Italy?

It can be said that social media platforms have become a primary arena for sharp verbal conflicts, subtle forms of discrimination, and attacks that may trigger real waves of insults (often referred to as "storms of abuse"). Social norms and standards appear less strict online, which may lead to such behavior gaining legitimacy in real life. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the spread of hate speech on the internet has a tangible impact on daily life, especially if violations are not monitored and proper laws are not enacted to limit the spread of hate in Italian football stadiums.

Regarding the role of sports, it has two faces. On one hand, sports can serve as a tool for integration and the transmission of values such as peace and love, particularly when practiced with diligence and sincerity. On the other hand, fan support for their clubs or teams can be a divisive force, sometimes intensifying competition and rivalry. This creates a fertile ground for conflicts among supporters of opposing teams.

Thus, support for sports teams has two sides: a positive side, represented by backing a favorite team or athlete, and a negative side, reflected in mocking and ridiculing rival teams.

A study conducted by Giuliano Bobba and colleagues reached a preliminary conclusion that the level of hate speech remains steady. Hate speech accounts for at least 10.9% of comments on Facebook and 18.6% on Twitter. These figures demonstrate the clear presence of the phenomenon. Although the percentages may seem relatively low, the real danger lies in the potential for expansion and spread if no effective and appropriate measures are taken to curb it.

This danger is further exacerbated by the absence of a clear legal framework regulated by Italian lawmakers to manage hate speech in the digital environment. This is especially critical given the

complex characteristics that distinguish this space, increasing the challenges related to its monitoring and control.

Italian Law No. 205 of 1993, which was previously discussed as the most relevant legislative framework addressing hate speech, has not kept pace with technological advancements. This gap complicates efforts to address hate speech in digital spaces. Although the law criminalizes acts of intolerance and incitement to violence, its response remains limited regarding hate speech spread online. Effective and clear mechanisms to combat hate speech in this context are notably absent.

Despite the broad and complex nature of this phenomenon, the European Commission acknowledged in 2016 that the internet and social media provide a platform where hate speech can flourish. On May 31, 2016, a Code of Conduct was published to combat illegal hate speech. This code called on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Microsoft, and Instagram to contribute actively to the fight against hate speech.

At this point, it is important to highlight the complexity social media networks present, especially concerning posts, comments on posts, and interactions among comments themselves. This chain of interactive episodes in digital environments makes the process very complicated, as these interactions are intertwined and continuous. Consequently, precise monitoring and constant surveillance are necessary. Additionally, investigating user identities is crucial, particularly given the prevalence of pseudonyms and anonymous pages that obscure the true identity behind posts or comments.

Italian scholar Umberto Eco pointed to this complexity by discussing the concept of *La Certezza* (certainty), where the source is unknown, and the recipient is anonymous. These factors create interpretative ambiguity due to the use of pseudonyms and floating identities in digital spaces (Eco, 2014).

Scientific research has confirmed that social media constitute a fertile environment for hate speech. Given their widespread presence in daily life, it is necessary to understand these platforms deeply, measure the extent of hateful content, and examine its modes of expression. This includes identifying the most vulnerable groups, victims, and preferred targets of hate speech that incites violence, aggression, and insults.

On another note, researcher Sherry Turkle, in her book *Alone Together*, explores the impact of digital technology and social media on humanity and human relationships. She argues that digital technologies and social media negatively affect people's ability to communicate and interact socially in the real world. The book provides a comprehensive view of how social media and digital technologies influence social life and human relationships (Abdelal, 2023). This supports the idea that there is a close connection between social media activities and lived reality. Hence, it is an extension rather than a separation or rupture. Therefore, researcher Surel criticizes those who claim no relationship exists between hate speech on social media and hate speech in the real world. Surel argues that while digital environments can facilitate positive outcomes by enabling free expression, they may cause harm when perceived as detached from reality. This detachment creates spaces for all forms of hate. Furthermore, the anonymity feature in digital environments complicates the issue, requiring careful and accurate study of hate speech, violence, and racism in digital contexts.

Kenski and Rains define hate speech within digital media forums as "a conversation or discussion that exhibits disrespectful tones towards the topics and individuals involved." They add that such content disrupts dialogue unnecessarily and inappropriately.

Researcher Santana offers a more precise and focused definition of digital hate speech content, outlining the following elements:

1. Insults
2. Threats
3. Vulgarity
4. Offensive language
5. Xenophobia
6. Aggressive language
7. Name-calling
8. Swearing
9. Racist and intolerant sentiments
10. Derogatory comments based on race or ethnicity
11. Use of rejected stereotypes

Italian researchers provided a broad and detailed definition of hate speech in digital environments, focusing on the analysis of sports content on social media. They identified four dimensions, ranging from lower, non-directed levels to higher, targeted levels:

1. Vulgar language: General use of rude expressions not specifically directed at others, serving as an early indicator of uncivil dialogue.
2. Verbal aggression: Intended to verbally harm an opponent, team, athlete, journalist, or any negative figure who cannot respond. It may be directed at one or multiple users, triggering cycles of hate speech.
3. Physical violence: A consequence of hate speech, this dimension is more severe, including threats aimed at opponents or participants in conversations, carrying implications for safety and security.
4. Discrimination: The core of hate speech, encompassing discriminatory expressions aimed at harming others based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical or mental conditions, compared to others' normative conditions.

The study by Giuliano Bobba and colleagues, focusing on written content, examined hate speech in comments on Facebook and Twitter. Facebook was chosen due to its broader public use and status as the world's most popular platform, with an average of 2.271 billion active users monthly. In Italy, Facebook remains one of the most widely used platforms, leading in active user participation through posts, interactions, and comments. Twitter ranks second, with only 32% regular users but serves as a unique platform for traditional elites (journalists, celebrities, politicians), committed minority groups, and highly active internet users.

This study, conducted over three months from October 7, 2019, to January 6, 2020—a period featuring numerous sporting events including weekly football, volleyball, and basketball championships; five Formula 1 races; five motorcycle Grand Prix races; ATP finals; European swimming championships; World Athletics championships; and racewalking competitions—revealed the following:

1. Football is the most present sport, with 4,161 Facebook posts and 4,061 tweets, far exceeding other sports combined, which totaled only 160 posts.
2. Football coverage dominates digital environments, sports media, and user commentary on social networks.

3. Football-related news attracts the highest rates of hate speech comments: 12.3% on Facebook and 31.3% on Twitter.

4. Verbal aggression is the most prominent form of hate speech in comments on Facebook (12.3%) and Twitter (23.7%), surpassing vulgar language, physical violence, and discrimination.

Focus on Football:

a) **Football Teams and Hate Speech** The analysis shows that football is the most covered sport in media and social networks (Facebook, Twitter). Verbal aggression is the dominant hate speech form in comments. The study highlights the main football teams and players involved in hate speech within digital environments.

The teams receiving the most media coverage on Facebook and Twitter were:

- Juventus ranked first with 1,362 mentions,
- Inter Milan second with 783,
- AC Milan third with 554,
- Napoli fourth with 454,
- Roma fifth with 289,
- Lazio sixth with 179.

This ranking corresponds to the popularity and long history of these clubs, especially Juventus from northern Italy (Turin) and Inter Milan.

The study noted a discrepancy between media coverage volume and the number of comments on Facebook and Twitter, reflecting differing logics between journalists and social media users. AC Milan ranked first in comments, followed closely by Juventus and Inter Milan with similar percentages (128, 127, 125), while Lazio, Napoli, and Roma received fewer comments (95, 90, 48).

The number of hate speech comments ranked highest on Facebook for Inter Milan (14.1%), followed by Lazio (13.5%), Juventus (13.2%), and Napoli (12.8%). On Twitter, Napoli led with 34%, followed by Inter Milan (32.8%), Juventus (30.9%), and Roma (30.6%).

Hate speech primarily involved verbal aggression, including insults and targeted abuse. On Facebook, verbal aggression rates ranged from 10.1% (Milan) to 14.4% (Inter Milan). On Twitter, which had double the Facebook activity, rates ranged from 20.4% (Milan) to 26.5% (Napoli).

Physical threats and racial discrimination were still limited and evenly distributed across teams. However, this does not imply these forms lack relevance or impact within the overall wave of online hate speech. The study recorded over 5,000 comments containing discriminatory and physical threat content.

B. Football Players and Hate Speech

In the second part, we focus on the most prominent figures appearing in the content of sports posts monitored on Facebook and Twitter.

- The study showed that fame plays a key role in making a team or player the central subject of sports posts. Cristiano Ronaldo, for example, was the most featured player on Facebook posts (354 mentions) and Twitter tweets (442 mentions).

- The study also indicated that the frequency of appearance in sports posts does not necessarily correspond to a high number of comments. Lukaku and Balotelli received the highest number of user comments, averaging 154 and 152 respectively. Cristiano Ronaldo, on the other hand, received 148 comments on his posts.

- The highest proportion of hate speech comments related to football personalities appeared in posts about Mario Balotelli, with 17.9%, followed by Antonio Conte at 17.1%, and Lukaku at 14.8%. In contrast, posts about Cristiano Ronaldo had a lower rate of 12.9%, which is an interesting finding.

- The study noted a sharp decline in the number of comments on Twitter, yet the concentration of hateful content there was higher. It confirmed that all six sports figures studied received hate speech rates of no less than 25%.

- The most common form of hate speech in comments on Facebook, targeting sports figures, was verbal aggression. Mario Balotelli and Romelu Lukaku were the most targeted athletes, with hate speech rates of 16.7% and 15.5% respectively on Facebook, and 38.3% and 40.6% on Twitter.

- The content also included racist discrimination, which accounted for 2.1% on Facebook and 5.6% on Twitter for Mario Balotelli. For Romelu Lukaku, the figures were 1.9% on Facebook and 2.4% on Twitter (Pochettino, 2021).

- Verbal violence was the most prominent type of hate speech regarding sports personalities on Facebook. It centered mainly on Antonio Conte and Mario Balotelli, with rates of 16.7% and 16.5% respectively, and Romelu Lukaku at 15%. Cristiano Ronaldo received the lowest percentage of comments characterized by verbal aggression.

- Profanity ranked second on Facebook, with comparable rates for the top three personalities: Mario Balotelli at 3.2%, Antonio Conte at 3.3%, and Romelu Lukaku at 3.0%.

- The study found that racist discrimination comments were low overall and mainly focused on two players: the Italian Mario Balotelli at 5.6%, and the Belgian Romelu Lukaku, both of whom are Black athletes.

- Certain events tend to fuel hate speech on social media. These are often related to poor refereeing decisions, such as penalty kicks awarded to Lazio di Roma against Atalanta. Such incidents usually spark widespread debate among sports fans. One notable example was the controversy caused by the headline "Black Friday" in *Il Corriere dello Sport*, referring to Black players Romelu Lukaku and Chris Smalling during a match between Inter and Roma.

- Hate speech on Facebook peaks during heated debates among users in the comment sections of posts. This suggests that hate speech is not necessarily tied to the original content of the posts but emerges from the interactions within the comment threads. In other words, hate speech grows as a reaction to users' responses to each other rather than to the sports news itself.

- Finally, our interview revealed that hate speech prevalent in Northern Italy against Southern Italian fans does not stem from political ideology. Instead, it arises from psychological complexes and feelings of inferiority towards Southern cities. These cities reject racism and all forms of hatred directed at vulnerable and marginalized groups in society.

CONCLUSION

Italian football (Calcio Italiano) holds a significant place in the interests of researchers and scholars. This is due to its broad popularity across various social groups. Studies have confirmed its prominence compared to other sports such as basketball, volleyball, handball, tennis, car racing, and cycling, among others.

The issue of hate speech in football—both in real life and on digital platforms—has gained considerable attention. It appears in many forms across expressions, banners, posts, and comments. Most commonly, hate speech takes the form of verbal abuse, often including offensive language.

Physical violence and discrimination based on skin color are less frequent but still present. The latter has shown noticeable development both in Italian stadiums and on social media networks.

Because of this, it is crucial to pay attention to this phenomenon and to implement laws to prevent its spread. This is especially important if it is confirmed that some sources of hate speech are ideologically motivated by new fascist and neo-Nazi groups.

Researchers have noted a steady rise in hate speech comments on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, between 2019 and 2023. This trend urges the academic community to address the issue and propose effective solutions.

I would also like to highlight the efforts made by Italian researchers to tackle this problem, as shown in the theoretical and field studies discussed in this article. In my view, the main work on hate speech in Italian football stadiums by Italian researchers follows these stages:

- Stage One: Collect a range of Italian studies on hate speech in football stadiums. Extract preliminary results to identify the types, forms, intensity, and evolution of hate speech over the past 20 years or more.
- Stage Two: Apply two research methods—participant observation and discourse analysis—to the banners, chants, posts, and tweets containing hate speech collected in Stage One. This will help determine whether the roots of hate speech are political, ideological, or merely expressions of social frustration experienced by marginalized groups.
- Stage Three: Using these findings, identify the mechanisms and tools necessary to first address the deep-rooted origins of hate speech and second, reduce verbal and offensive violations by enacting laws that limit such behavior.

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