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To cite this article: Kevin Dixon, Ellis Cashmore & Jamie Cleland (2022): 'A little less conversation': an exploration of soccer fan attitudes towards 'the knee' protest and the anti-racism message, Soccer & Society, DOI: [10.1080/14660970.2022.2108018](https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2108018)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14660970.2022.2108018>



Published online: 01 Aug 2022.



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# 'A little less conversation': an exploration of soccer fan attitudes towards 'the knee' protest and the anti-racism message

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## ABSTRACT

Taking the knee has become an enduring feature of many sports since 2020: it is a powerful social and political gesture signalling a resistance against racism, not only in sports but in all forms. The research sampled 1001 sports fans, inviting them to share their beliefs, experiences and perspectives on racism in football. In particular, they were asked whether the knee should remain an expression of the sport's fight against racism. While 34.8% believed it was a worthwhile gesture and should remain, 65.2% opposed its continuance. The reasons are varied but shared a basic assumption: that the gesture has replaced the actual fight against racism. In other words, football has effectively done little to combat racism and instead offers a symbolic ritual of opposition. This finding contrasts with popular understandings of aversion to the knee, which presume it is a racist reaction. The present study concludes it is quite the opposite: fans accept football's disapproval of racism, but question the efficacy of the knee in countering it. "What change has it actually made?" one fan asked rhetorically "We need action not continuous posturing" demanded another. "A little less conversation." The authors conclude: 1. Fans do not object to the sport they feel belongs to them being used to promote good causes. 2. While objectors to the knee are not motivated by racism, racism still has a residual presence in football. 3. Fans urge football's organizing bodies to clamp down on racism with severe punishments rather than ground closures or fines. 4. Fans see the knee as window dressing, disguising football's failure effectively to challenge racism.

## Introduction

On 16 June 2020, in a Premier League fixture featuring Aston Villa and Sheffield United, all players and officials dropped to one knee prior to kick-off.<sup>1</sup> They remained there for a matter of seconds and then the match began. What seemed like a non-invasive but nonetheless intriguing ritual signified the beginning of a high-profile protest designed to use England's national sport, association football (soccer), to draw attention to racial injustice throughout the world and to show solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM came into existence in 2013 with protests against police brutality and all racially motivated violence in the United States (US).<sup>2</sup> In 2016, the BLM narrative found its way into mainstream American sport when San Francisco 49ers quarterback, Colin Kaepernick 'took the knee' during the national anthem, rather than stand which was customary. When he addressed his protest to members of the media he said:

I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses people of colour. To me this is bigger than football and it would be selfish of me to look the other way.<sup>3</sup>

Kaepernick's protest received polarized reactions. Whilst some applauded his moral stance against racism, others depicted him as unpatriotic and disrespectful.<sup>4</sup> The latter position is not unusual in the history of sport protest. For example, at the 1968 Olympics, two black sprinters, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, were sent home in disgrace after signalling their allegiance to Black Power, a militant movement that was sweeping across the US at the time. They were expelled from the games, censured and prevented from continuing their athletic careers.<sup>5</sup> The reputations of Smith and Carlos were rehabilitated over time. This was also true for Kaepernick, though he did not need to wait so long.

In 2020, when responding to the police killings of African Americans George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the US, athletes from major leagues across the world aligned themselves in solidarity with BLM and replicated Kaepernick's stance time and again before sporting events.<sup>6</sup> The effects were felt not only in sports but also on the broadcasters who transmitted them, the sponsors who supported them and, crucially, the governing organizations that controlled and regulated them.<sup>7</sup> With such collective and sustained support (perhaps for the first time in history<sup>8</sup>), sport had found its moral voice, or so it would seem.

England's Premier League was one of the first to permit players to take the knee before every game in the fight against racial inequality. But with such a laudable, sustained and timely protest, the reaction of English soccer fans has been perplexing. Quiet and respectful at first, and yet, 8 months into the protest, soccer fans began to voice their disapproval. In December 2020, fans of Millwall Football Club in southeast London booed roundly. In the media, they were condemned as racists and, though an investigation was promised, it did not materialize.<sup>9</sup> In another incident, supporters of the England national football team jeered when players took the knee before a game in Middlesbrough in June 2021.<sup>10</sup> Counter protests have been sustained by soccer fans, though the reasons for this have not been explored in any meaningful way. The media have assumed three positions. Those who disapprove of players taking the knee: (1) harbour racist tendencies, (2) do not understand why players are taking the knee and (3) are misguided in their actions. But despite high-profile attempts from the England manager, Gareth Southgate, to explain the protest from the perspective of the England men's football team,<sup>11</sup> or the many media's 'fact sheets' produced to explain the position of the knee in layman's terms,<sup>12</sup> disapproval from soccer fans persists. As the player protest continues into a second year, scholarly research finds itself in an unenviable position. Whilst athletes and governing organizations have been able to make their positions clear, fans have been effectively silenced. The present study sets out to discover what fans think and feel via an online survey conducted between May and June 2021.

## **The knee in the context of racism in soccer**

In the history of soccer in the UK, the knee is the latest gesture in 'the fight against racism'. We place this phrase in inverted commas because the nature of 'the fight' in UK soccer is contestable. Why? Because soccer in the UK continues to create the conditions under which racial inequality persists. After all, association football was created and controlled by white men and nothing much has changed. For example, despite the inauguration of the Premier League in 1992, the first truly global soccer league in which players from 113 of the world's 195 countries have been represented, the governance of topflight soccer in England has maintained its white middle-class structure. In fact, the hierarchy of contemporary European soccer remains a whitewash too. For instance, in key governance and organizational roles within soccer's world governing organization, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association), the European federation UEFA (Union des Associations Européennes de Football) or the English FA (Football Association), there is a lack of representation from ethnic minority groups.<sup>13</sup> And, while it may seem as though strides have been

taken since the 1970s and 1980s in terms of the number of high-profile BME stars that grace soccer pitches in the UK, and notwithstanding the fact that these athletes are much loved by soccer audiences, several issues persist.

In 2016, Kevin Hylton asked: why do so few black players progress into substantive leadership roles after their playing career ends? He points out that approximately 25% of soccer players since 1992–93 have BME heritage and yet only 4.4% have taken on leadership roles as coaches or managers within the profession.<sup>14</sup> Ideological stereotypes about the capabilities of BME, old boys' networks and initial resistance to the implementation of the Rooney rule (a policy first introduced by Dan Rooney, owner of the US National Football League's Pittsburgh Steelers in 2003 to ensure the shortlisting of at least one BME candidate for any senior coaching role) have all been listed as barriers to racial equality within soccer's culture of whiteness.<sup>15</sup> We use the term 'whiteness' in the same way that Mary McDonald does in her 2009 paper 'Dialogues on whiteness'. It consists of 'institutionalized discourses and exclusionary practices seeking social, cultural, economic and psychic advantage for those bodies racially marked as white'.<sup>16</sup>

In soccer, this is also evidenced by the piteous financial penalties sanctioned for racist behaviour across the professional game. For example, FIFA's disciplinary code states that when a team's supporters are found guilty of exhibiting racist behaviour, the association or club can be fined CHF30,000 (£23,000<sup>17</sup>). Such punishments appear lenient, but given association football's history, perhaps this is to be expected. Soccer organizations claim to 'understand' racism and frequently campaign against it. They are associated with charities who are dedicated to anti-racist messages. But contradictions are everywhere.<sup>18</sup>

In the wake of the 1999 Macpherson Report into the racist murder of UK teenager, Stephen Lawrence in 1993 (unrelated to football) and the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 which followed, all national institutions were under increasing pressure to publicly promote their commitment to race equality.<sup>19</sup> In UK soccer, the Commission for Racial Equality launched 'Lets Kick Racism Out of Football' in 1993, later changing its name to 'Kick It Out' in 1997 to reflect a widening of objectives to cover all aspects of discrimination, inequality and exclusion. This was the first non-punitive charity to gain universal support from the FA, the PFA and the Premier League, and its initial objective was to eradicate racist language from soccer through the implementation of prescriptive written codes of conduct for supporters to follow. This was convenient to governing institutions and professional soccer clubs. After all, attention was concentrated on collective fan behaviour rather than structures of power within UK soccer.

This has led some scholars to be heavily critical of anti-racism campaigns. For example, Kuljit Ranhawa argues that anti-racism campaigns are largely ineffective because they rely on and are satisfied by mediated rhetoric but without achieving any positive, sustained and meaningful change.<sup>20</sup> This was a view shared by 79% of fans (out of 25,000 participants) in a study conducted by Cleland and Cashmore in 2014.<sup>21</sup> In this study, participants argued that Kick It Out had only been partially effective in tackling racial inequality. For instance, conceding that overt racist behaviour appears to have decreased in modern elite soccer, participants explained that racist opinion has been driven underground and that colour-blind complacency within soccer clubs and governing bodies of sport remains a significant problem. It is in this context that we turn to discuss how we went about analysing fan responses to the controversy surrounding 'the knee' in UK soccer in 2021.

## Method

In May 2021, a mixed methods survey was constructed to ascertain the views of a sample of soccer fans on the following issue: if they thought that the political display of players kneeling before soccer games should continue. Participants were asked to support their answer with an explanation, which could be as brief or as extended as they wished. Some participants wrote concise passages, while others wrote several paragraphs to elucidate what was uppermost on their minds.

When canvassing views on sensitive issues, online surveys are particularly useful. One of the advantages of online surveys is that they enable the participant to complete in their own time and this significantly reduces the potential bias of social desirability that can occur on a subject like this with face-to-face research.<sup>22</sup>

The method is designed to maximize honesty and frankness from participants who were assured of their confidentiality and offered the opportunity to present their own views. With their identities protected, they had no motivation to lie or provide responses they believed were in sync with the zeitgeist. Online platforms are perfect for qualitative data: participants are able to take as long as they please, pausing if preferred; they can complete their responses on devices of their own choosing, at times of their own choosing, in environments of their own choosing.<sup>23</sup> They have the certainty of knowing they are able to participate in confidence, with their identity protected. Respondents were encouraged to give full vent to their views. Respective forum moderators permitted access for the research team to use their platforms to conduct academic research, and whilst the authors are aware of the limitations associated with non-probability sampling methods (through the participants choice of self-selection) we felt this was the right approach given the study's overall focus and our intention to capture a wide range of views from soccer fans.

### **Procedure**

The methods and design were scrutinized by Northumbria University ethics committee<sup>24</sup> and were fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), introduced by the Data Protection Act of 2018, and the study used the GDPR-compliant software, *Online Surveys*. During the planning phase, the researchers adhered closely to the guidelines established by the Association of Internet Researchers, emphasizing the importance of privacy, harm, informed consent and deception when engaging with participants.

Having initially gained permission to use fans forums for the purpose of academic research, we adopted the following procedures. First, we composed an initial post that included the project brief and a direct link to the participant information sheet for the research, containing a more comprehensive explanation of the project, contact details of the lead researcher and university ethics committee that approved the study, the inclusion criteria for the recruitment of subjects, their role as participants, level of confidentiality, data storage details and a note to remind subjects that by choosing to answer the survey questions they are consenting for their data to be used in academic research. Given the self-selecting nature of the research, participants were free to ignore the initial forum post.

### **Sample**

Between May – June 2021, the study solicited the perspectives of 1001 participants. Of those participants, 91% identified as male, 8% as female and 1% as non-binary. In terms of the age range of the sample, 42% were under 40 years, while 58% were over the age of 40. Specific age details were collected for each participant, and they are used in the discussion below to provide context for verbatim quotations. In the interests of conceptual consistency, we chose not to collect information about the religion or ethnic identity of participants. In some areas of social life, monitoring the groups with which people affiliate or into which they somehow fit is desirable and can disclose patterns that form the basis for action. But the cultural fluidity that has reshaped the landscape of the early twenty-first century poses a dilemma for many researchers schooled in collecting data that is capable of being sorted and assigned categories or types.<sup>25</sup> We considered asking participants to assign themselves ethnically to a group, before eventually deciding whether such attributions would be of limited value and might serve to impair the responses. There may well have been some correlation between responses and ethnic self-

identification, but, on balance, we opted for consistency. There are no recent reliable data on the social composition of English soccer crowds, but impressions suggest that crowds are overwhelmingly white.<sup>26</sup> This is also suspected of the source of our sample – the membership of sports forums.<sup>27</sup>

### **Analysis**

Whilst closed-ended data were examined via descriptive statistics, verbatim transcripts of qualitative responses served as the raw data to be analysed using a framework of thematic analysis.<sup>28</sup> Initially, each author read all answers to gain a thorough understanding of participant accounts and to record emerging themes. Once this phase was complete, the authors collaborated to collectively identify and verify master themes. The aim of this analytical process was to produce what Geertz<sup>29</sup> calls ‘thick description’: that is a thorough and accurate account of the range of responses articulated by all participants.

### **Discussion**

The results revealed that while 34.8% would like to see this anti-racism protest continue, two-thirds (65.2%) felt that taking the knee, which has become very familiar at all manner of sporting as well as other kinds of events, should stop. Before we explore the reasons underpinning this binary by engaging with in-depth qualitative views of fans, we feel that it is important to first address the issue of white privilege as it relates to the current project.

#### ***White privilege and fan privilege***

Recently, the historical and essential advantages possessed by whites on the basis of their ethnic background or identity in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice has been foregrounded as a major impediment to fairness, impartiality and social egalitarianism.<sup>30</sup> It is known as white privilege, and it would be remiss of us (all three authors are white males) to ignore what seems a glaring contradiction. As pointed out previously, soccer fans are overwhelmingly white and male; some are issuing notice of their discontent with a gesture seemingly favoured by, it seems, all players, black and white. Why, if black players in particular, wish to kneel, should white fans object, if not because they feel entitled? The suspicion is that white fans’ privilege empowers them to voice their dissent. This is not a question that can be answered empirically: no participant in the study acknowledged that they were authorized by whiteness. As we noted above, the research did not solicit self-descriptions of ethnicity, anyway. It is unlikely that any fan from whatever ethnic background would not feel fully accredited to express their views as vociferously and emphatically as they wished.

That is part of the enduring appeal of being a soccer fan. All fans feel entitled by virtue of the fact that they pay for season tickets, TV subscriptions and merchandise and, effectively, underwrite the players’ wages.<sup>31</sup> For outsiders, it might appear perverse for predominantly white fans to be exercising their privilege in a way that seems to undermine one of the features of the new ethos of football – inclusivity. But it is intelligible: football fans are cognizant that clubs are owned by tycoons, the competition is played by plutocrats and what was once a working-class pursuit has been hijacked and turned into a global entertainment industry. Yet, in their eyes, they remain in charge: it is morally their game.<sup>32</sup> The owners will sell, and the players will transfer or retire. The TV companies might even lose interest. But the fans will persist. So, the criticism of fans is not borne out of white privilege, but what we should properly call fan privilege – the prerogatives of people who unwaveringly follow a sport that offers scant reward for the vast majority yet continues to maintain its hold over sizable proportions of the British population. In what follows, and perhaps

for the first time in academic discourse, we provide a platform for a sample of soccer fans to express their views towards ‘the knee’ protest and the anti-racism message in soccer. We begin by disclosing arguments made by those participants who wish for the protest to continue.

### ***‘It’s good to talk’***

We need to keep racism in the public domain . . . It needs to be high profile and football gets people talking. As Bob Hoskins used to say, ‘it’s good to talk’.<sup>33</sup> (44, female, Yorkshire)

As a pleasurable pastime that engages many individuals at some life intersection, our participants drew attention to the power of soccer as a vehicle to stimulate conversations that may lead to social and cultural change. It is now commonplace to use the power of soccer cultures to engage hard-to-reach populations in physical and mental health initiatives,<sup>34</sup> and our participants are also aware that Premier League soccer can be used as a platform to deliver anti-discrimination messages to a global audience.<sup>35</sup> After all, the media carry coverage of the games and analysis across the globe. It is taken to 212 territories by more than 80 different broadcasters, giving it a potential combined audience of over 64% of the entire world population – 4.7 billion people.<sup>36</sup> For this reason alone, the underpinning philosophy used by some participants for the continuation of the knee can be summarized in the following statement from a male participant in his thirties from Blackburn: ‘Racism is still alive and well, so we need to keep reminding people of this’.

Participants argued that continued public attention is a crucial aspect of protest and this is essential for providing conditions that are conducive to long-term cultural change. In agreement, one participant from Norwich stressed the importance of an enduring protest by explaining: ‘it should continue until equality is gained, because the longer it goes on the more ridiculous racists look’. Whilst some participants insisted that the protest was effective at ‘highlighting the unreasonable behaviour and views of racists’ (32, female, Scarborough), others were more reflective on the personal impact of the protest and on their own individual responsibility to influence the next generation through, for example, parental teachings:

Seeing players kneel before games has prompted me as a parent to have conversations with my two sons about racism (38, male, Cardiff).

Despite the plurality of participant reasoning for the continuation of the protest, all emphasized the value that athletes can bring when they feel empowered to ‘focus attention on injustices with impunity’ (74, male, Wigan) and to ‘open conversations’ (62, male, Birmingham). On this point, the following recurring arguments were made: (1) sports stars are ‘role models in society and have earned their platform to speak on such issues’ (21, male, Southampton); (2) ‘they draw out debate and populist governments will listen to them’ (63, male, Sunderland); (3) sports stars ought to be encouraged to protest on important social issues ‘because they just might be what is needed to influence social change’ (62, female, Ipswich). In the context of this research, it is important to point out that this sentiment was common across the entire sample, including for detractors of ‘the knee’. This curious finding indicates that there is complexity in the binary. For example, on several occasions participants explained: ‘I support this in practice but . . .’ (63, male, Sunderland), ‘Whilst I support the cause I . . .’ (35, male, West Midlands); ‘I welcomed it at first but . . .’ (26, male, Surrey). In what follows, we ask: if so many participants were initially supportive of the protest, why did over 65% of the sample not wish for the protest to continue?

### ***Pointless***

‘It was a good initial protest but now it’s a lost sign’. Those are not our words, but those of a 35-year-old fan from Yorkshire who offered his views on ‘the knee’. Another participant from Wales and in her forties was in agreement: ‘it’s pointless . . . It’s now a futile and degrading gesture that has no



upside whatsoever to anyone of any race'. There were many others who agreed with this thought process too. One Scottish fan coined the action of taking the knee as 'purely a tick box exercise' (aged 42), while another framed 'the knee' as 'a meaningless, empty gesture' that 'people do to make themselves feel good'. He insisted, 'taking the knee won't change them in any way at all!' (44, male, County Durham). Others too challenged the genuineness of 'knee advocates': 'It has lost its meaning', wrote one female fan in her thirties from Newcastle, whilst a male participant in his fifties from Leeds explained that 'seeing governing bodies kneeling but not punishing racism within the sport seems hypocritical'.

Congruent with arguments made by Kevin Hylton in his 2021 paper *Black Lives Matter in sport ... ?* our participants argued that the anti-racism message ought not to be presumed to be inherently good or desirable in all of its forms.<sup>37</sup> At first glance, this may seem like a counterintuitive statement. How can any anti-racism message be conceived of as bad? Well, whilst engagement with anti-racism on the surface leaves many people hopeful for change, it is the reactive, ahistorical politics associated with initiatives like 'the knee' that troubles some fans and scholars such as Hylton, who explain that political re-activism often 'leaves little potential' for organizations 'to combat their own institutional racism'.<sup>38</sup> This is an important point, and its significance was not lost on our participants: 'Let's be honest, what change has it actually made?' wrote one 33-year-old participant from Nottinghamshire. He continued, 'I can't see a difference so far. I'd prefer to see the FA, UEFA, PL, EFL make tangible changes rather than token gesture actions'. Another fan in his twenties from London added 'I do not think kneeling itself will accomplish anything in terms of changing the material conditions within society that sustain and reinforce certain racist views. We've seen it all before!'

The dominant narrative within this sample of fans sits in stark contrast to the popular assumption that all those who criticize the knee hold racist tendencies.<sup>39</sup> Whilst we are not denying that there is an unknown proportion of racist people who support football teams in England,<sup>40</sup> evidence from this sample indicates that the popular narrative is perhaps more complex than some media depictions or sports commentators would suggest. After all, for most of our participants it was possible, and indeed, plausible, to be against 'the knee' because it simply does not go far enough in tackling racism in sport and in society. Some examples include: 'We need action not continuous posturing' (37, male, England); 'There comes a time when raising awareness becomes insufficient and tangible actions need to be taken instead' (24, male, Redcar); 'In the words of the Elvis song, a little less conversation and a little more "meaningful" action is what is needed' (36, male, Leeds).

This sentiment was echoed many times across the sample, with several fans expressing their views in solidarity with BME players who have themselves been outspoken about taking the knee. Crystal Palace's forward Wilfred Zaha has publicly declared his intentions not to take the knee. He explained that 'taking the knee is degrading' and, moreover, 'the meaning behind the whole thing is becoming something that we just do now, and that's not enough'.<sup>41</sup> Many other teams have chosen not to take the knee too. In fact, by September 2021, one in three English Football League clubs chose to abandon taking the knee against racism.<sup>42</sup> Of course, this has not escaped the notice of fans. For example, one Queens Park Rangers (QPR) fan in her thirties expressed: 'I agree with my team that sustained actions are more important in the fight against racism which will never be resolved by taking the knee'. She refers to the decision of QPR who through their director of football, Les Ferdinand, disseminated the following message in September 2020: 'Taking the knee was very powerful but we feel that impact has now been diluted ... Taking the knee will not bring about change in the game – actions will'. Ferdinand's statement continued with one loaded question for the media-driven 'football family' to consider: 'people want a nice soundbite when something happens, but how many of the media who have criticized QPR over the last 48 hours genuinely want change?' He added, 'Don't judge us ... If you want change, judge yourselves'.<sup>43</sup>



This was a sentiment reiterated by participants in the current sample for one additional reason. They argued that fans were being used in the media as scapegoats for racism and this enables many institutions to look outwards at ‘bad racist people’ without looking at their own behaviours, practices and beliefs. The following quotations are worth citing at length:

Football, as usual, is going about the racism message in the wrong way. It is blaming fans who do not support taking the knee for the institutional racism that exists in football organisations from grass roots to the Premier League. Vilifying fans will not help retired BME players who still struggle to find work in football management or BME people who remain underrepresented in high profile jobs within football governing bodies (44, female, Liverpool).

Fans are cast as the metaphorical scapegoats for racism once again. Some fans disapprove for what they consider valid reasons! That’s life. But in the media, they are classified as racists who need to be educated. This is unhelpful because it allows institutions that administrate football to the world to continue to go about their business as normal. They don’t have to check themselves because they kneel at the right moment (42, male, Newcastle).

The point our participants make is simple and yet it effectively captures one of the potential barriers to an effective anti-racism message. Organizations including the media tend to simplify and individualize the concept of racism in football by blaming fans who do not agree with the gesture of the knee, and by casting aspersions of any counterargument as racist. Such findings draw parallels with the ‘rituals of civility’ that Spencer Cahill<sup>44</sup> describes, where shame and humiliation are used as instructive measures to teach children how to behave, or with Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘symbolic violence’, in which dominant ideological rhetoric is maintained through forms of symbolic violence exercised on the social agent with his or her complicity.<sup>45</sup> As scholars, how we choose to theorize is academic. For our participants at least, it is the outcome of this process that is important. That is because it tends to deflect attention away from fundamental institutional issues that contribute towards racial inequality. So, approaching racism as something that only racist people do tends to insinuate that there are ‘some’ racist people in an otherwise just and fair society. But, as Laura Kilby writes in a blog for Sheffield Hallam University’s research archive, surely, the anti-racist message must demand that racial equality ought to be woven into the fabric of our social institutions and beyond.<sup>46</sup> Thus, much like Kilby, our participants agree that finding scapegoats and individualizing racism is inevitably a problematic practice and ultimately a hindrance to meaningful institutional change.

### ***Players or Puppets?***

Those participants who are against players taking the knee tend to suspect that many of those kneeling feel obligated to do so for various reasons. For instance, one participant in his twenties from West Drayton in London argued ‘Ivan Toney is right, players are being used as puppets in the anti-racism movement’. Here, this participant is referring to the words of Brentford striker Ivan Toney, who argued that ‘we’re kind of being used as puppets. We take the knee so that the people at the top can rest for a while now . . . nothing is changing’.<sup>47</sup> Here, Toney is suggesting that the knee is convenient for the maintenance of the status quo and that players are complicit in this, perhaps out of fear or calculated self-preservation. Participants were aware of Tony’s viewpoint, and many agreed with him:

Many football players like Ivan Toney have come out against kneeling and, as brave as he is for doing so, I’m sure there’s plenty of other people secretly against it but feel pressured to continue - who wants to be the odd one out? (23, female, Brentford).

Being the odd one out on ethical grounds is risky for a professional football player. After all, there is much to consider and many stakeholders to please. Players are implicitly connected with the reputation of clubs, managers, teammates and agents. Moreover, financial rewards in terms of endorsement contracts and sponsorships are inevitably based on image, as each part of the sports

industry serves to promote the other.<sup>48</sup> In an era of corporate social responsibility, a term which can be broadly interpreted as an obligation for organizations to be ethical and accountable to the needs of their society as well as their stakeholders,<sup>49</sup> there are very few, if any, companies wishing to sponsor a racist. Naturally, players know this, and whilst they may consider themselves as liberal, free-thinking individuals, they become paralysed by the panoptic gaze of the media and its potentially destructive power. As such, they learn and are encouraged to adhere to, and not to question, dominant ideological perspectives of the moment to ensure that they fall on 'the right side of history'. Fans in our sample have spotted this trend. They understand it but do not like it.

For example, one 59-year-old man from Bolton said: 'I feel many players may now just be following suit to protect their image'. A 24-year-old woman from Bradford also thought that 'athletes are probably pressured into it and frightened to say what they think for fear of being labelled as a racist'. And a 63-year-old man from the West of England explained: 'in my opinion, many players are only taking the knee for fear of vilification on social media, not because they necessarily agree with it'. A Dunfermline woman thought it was 'interesting that fans who are anonymous in crowds are freer to show their disapproval of the actions'. The implication in all the examples above is that, in an industry that is heavily reliant on image, players may feel coerced into taking the knee. For some fans, this has a detrimental effect on the nature of the protest, and as one participant from North Yorkshire explains, 'the knee is virtue signalling and nothing more'.

Virtue signalling is the act of engaging in public moral discourse to enhance or preserve one's moral reputation,<sup>50</sup> and according to Tosi and Warmke suspicion alone can cause onlookers to disengage from moral discourse due to increased cynicism in the movement or protest.<sup>51</sup> In other words, it is thought to be damaging to the cause because the genuineness of the protest protagonists is questionable.<sup>52</sup> Players (factually or otherwise) are suspected to be driven by status seeking goals or self-image presentation. When fans suspect virtue signalling, they fail to see the sincere exchange of moral ideas. And, in keeping with Tosi and Warmke, they argue that when public moral discourse turns into an arena for competitive moralizing, it just stops working.<sup>53</sup>

Of course, there is a counter argument. A 37-year-old man from Liverpool makes the following point: 'who cares if they mean it? The more it is drilled into society that racism is wrong, the better it will be in the long term'. This participant is suggesting that objections to virtue signalling, whilst legitimately felt, tend to miss the bigger picture. He implies that fans are probably right to highlight that there are disingenuous promoters of BLM, but in the passage of time the motive for supporting the cause is irrelevant. That is because even insincere supporters of a protest or social movement may unwittingly play an important role in delivering the anti-racism message to future generations. Writing in *Time Magazine*, Zaki and Cikara summarize this viewpoint as they liken the anti-racism message to radio waves, sending signals which are in turn received by a mass audience: 'as social norms shift, individuals shift with them, adapting popular opinions and behaviors, and dropping ones that fall out of style'.<sup>54</sup> But, whilst this argument may work in theory, our findings suggest that in practice most of our participants fail to be convinced.

## Conclusion

Auditing the conflicting views, opinions, feelings, experiences and miscellaneous thoughts of fans about a subject as contentious as racism and ways of addressing it is a difficult task. The multiplicity of views collected in the data reminded the researchers that there is no plausible way of capturing how fans respond to soccer's initiative in accepting the kneeling gesture as a token of the whole sport's opposition to racism and its commitment to what is amorphously called diversity. Yet some tendencies are possible to discern.

- (1) Contrary to popular opinion, fans do not disapprove of the use of soccer as a platform to promote causes. Whether or not they are defined as 'political' is irrelevant: any matter that appears to fans to be just and worthy of action can be legitimately promoted by athletes with

conviction and seriousness of purpose. That is, in a sense, the problem that participants were expressing in relation to taking the knee: they detect the conviction or firmness of belief that inspired the initiative has ebbed away, leaving what several participants call a ‘hollow’ signal, with athletes merely going through the motions. A related objection is that many fans feel the effectiveness of the kneeling campaign was finite. Some likened it to the weekly applause the British gave the National Health Service key workers during the Covid lockdown in 2020. This ran for 10 weeks, with people emerging from their homes into the streets to clap, cheer and make visible their gratitude. After 10 weeks, it ceased.

- (2) The popular response of the media, soccer authorities and Kick it Out to the scattered booing and jeering was to decry it as motivated by racism.<sup>55</sup> The present research suggests this interpretation was based on ignorance and lacked even inferential evidence. But there is a caveat: as we have alluded to earlier in this paper, there is little doubt that a racist element does exist among British fans. Some fans rebut kneeling simply because they oppose Black Lives Matter and align themselves with ‘All Lives Matter’, which has now become code for antiblack racism. It is difficult to distil the thoughts of fans who are avowedly racist in the context of this paper, but it would be naive not to recognize that some people will wilfully reject the fight against racism. This group of undefined proportions will, in all probability, continue to abuse black players on social media.
- (3) Our respondents want the fight against racism to be conducted at the level of practical action, as opposed to a symbolic spar. Soccer has not countenanced a punishment for racism comparable with that of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in 2014. Donald Sterling, then owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, was expelled from the league after racist remarks he made about black players emerged. He was fined \$2.5 million (£1.8 m) and ordered to sell the club. No governing organisation in football has punished a club for the behaviour of its players or fans on this scale. Fans realize that ground closures and fines are mild reprimands that seem to reflect the sport’s tolerance of racism.
- (4) Finally, there is a suspicion among fans that self-interest is driving the kneeling and, more generally, the opposition to racism. This means that the FA, UEFA and the federations that have accepted kneeling are involved in a kind of mutual self-congratulation. By positioning itself as a sport that champions diversity, lauds inclusivity and embraces universality (as exemplified in referring itself to ‘the football family’), soccer appears to be at the forefront of metropolitan liberalism. This has replaced practical action rather than augmented it. In other words, the so-called fight against racism has become window dressing – a showy but superficial or actually misleading presentation of something. Taking the knee is designed to create a favourable impression.

The ledger on research on racism should not be closed until every last remnant of bigotry is removed from society. There are no signs that this will happen imminently. Spuriously assigning blame to various groups without evidence (in this case soccer fans) presents the impression that we know the sources of racism and are addressing them. The present research suggests that the popular, though unsubstantiated, viewpoints (based on hunch, and hear say) that dominate media messages and reverberate through social media channels are only surface deep, at best. In these and other instances, fans are identified as soft targets and charged with attitudes and behaviour many would not recognize. They are convenient scapegoats for problems that have sources elsewhere.

## Notes

1. Doyle, ‘Aston Villa and Sheffield United players take the knee and wear Black Lives Matter shirts for Premier League football’s return at Villa Park’.
2. Bradford Edwards and Harris, *Black Lives Matter (Special Reports)*.

3. Boren, 'A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's protests against police brutality'.
4. See Schmidt et al., 'An analysis of Colin Kaepernick and Megan Rapinoe and the national anthem protests'; and Martin and McHendry, 'Patriotism, protests, and professional sports'.
5. Edwards, 'The revolt of the black athlete'.
6. Towler et al., 'Shut up and play'.
7. Major sports organizations, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the National Football League (NFL) in the US, initially refused to allow the gesture, recognizing it would compromise the traditional stance on political and partisan actions. The NFL changed its position in 2020 and the IOC prior to the Tokyo Olympics. These and many other sports, including cricket, now approve kneeling before games. See Sherwood, 'NFL decision to permit kneeling protest by players enrages Donald Trump', and BBC, 'What's taking the knee and why is It Important?'.
8. Collective support for athlete activism is a relatively new phenomenon. Across time, athletes were deterred from making pronouncements or becoming engaged in controversial issues, probably because of their ties with commercial sponsors. Global companies were never explicit in their policies but must surely have advised their well-rewarded 'brand ambassadors' that political controversy was never welcome. See Powell, 'Souled out?'; Cunningham and Regan, 'Political activism, racial identity and the commercial endorsement of athletes'.
9. Mercer, 'Millwall fans boo as players take the knee'.
10. Doyle, 'England fans boo players taking the knee'.
11. Walker, 'Praise for Gareth Southgate after he explains why players take the knee'.
12. For example, see the BBC factsheet here.
13. Cleland, 'Racism'.
14. Hylton, 'Race, Racism and football'.
15. See Conway, '...Hidden resistance to hiring black managers'; Burdsey, 'Race, ethnicity, and football'; and Hylton, 'Race and Sport'.
16. MacDonald, 'Dialogues on whiteness' (p. 9).
17. See Reuters, 'FIFA introduces harsher punishment'.
18. See Burdsey, 'Racism and English Football: For Club and Country'.
19. Cleland and Cashmore, 'Fans, Racism and British Football'.
20. Ranhawa, 'Marrying passion and professionalism: Examining the future of British Asian Football'.
21. Cleland and Cashmore, 'Fans, Racism and British Football'.
22. Cleland et al., 'Online Research Methods in Sports Studies'.
23. Salmons, 'Doing Qualitative Research Online'.
24. University approval number: 26,731.
25. Fernandez et al., 'More comprehensive and inclusive approaches to demographic data collection'.
26. Through personal communication, the authors were sent figures from the English Premier League's (EPL) annual consumers research for the 2018/19 season, demonstrating that 15% of those attending EPL games were from the BAME adult population. Also see Conway and Anka 'Why are football crowds so white?'.
27. For example, Clavio's population analysis into the social demographics of sports form members in the US revealed that 88% were male, 91% were white, 77% were at least 30 years old, with 25% aged 50 or over. Gibbons and Dixon 'Surfs Up!', also point out that being a soccer forum attender increases the likelihood of match attendance.
28. Miles and Hubermann, 'Qualitative Data Analysis'.
29. Geertz, 'Thick Description: Towards an Interpretive theory of culture'.
30. McDonald, 'Dialogues on Whiteness'.
31. Crawford, 'Consuming Sport'.
32. Dixon 'Consuming Football in Late modern Life'.
33. Bob Hoskins (1942–2014) was a British film actor who also starred in an award-winning advertising campaign for British Telecom in the 1990s. His catchphrase, 'It's good to talk'. <https://www.marketingweek.com/inside-story-bt-its-good-to-talk/>.
34. Parnell et al., 'The pursuit of lifelong participation'; Parnell and Pringle, 'Football and Health Improvement'; Dixon et al., 'Using football cultures as a vehicle for Improving mental health in men'; Curran et al., 'Tackling mental health: the role of professional football clubs'.
35. See Dixon, 'Show Racism the Red Card'.
36. See Cashmore and Dixon, 'Studying Football', p.2.
37. Hylton, 'Black Lives Matter In Sport?'.
38. Ibid (p.42).
39. Mokbel, 'England "fans" that heckled their own team taking the knee are a DISGRACE'.
40. For example, a 2021 YouGov report (featuring a quantitative survey of 320 ethnic minority adults) found that 33% had personally experienced racial abuse and 38% had witnessed someone else receiving racial abuse at a football stadium – See, YouGov 'A third of ethnic minority football fans have experienced racism at stadiums'. Qualitative research has also explored the match-day experience from a BAME perspective. See

Lawrence and Davis, 'Fans for diversity? A Critical Race Theory analysis of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) supporters' experiences of football fandom'. Recent Incidents have been reported in the media too. In February 2015 Chelsea Football Club suspended three people from Stamford Bridge after footage emerged of Chelsea fans preventing a black man from boarding a train on the Paris Metro – See Royle and Harlow 'Football and racism: How are ethnic minority fans treated?' In November 2021, footage emerged of West Ham United fans chanting racial abuse on an airplane prior to a European match in Belgium – See Dean, 'West Ham vow to ban fans caught singing anti-Semitic songs'.

41. Ingle, 'Wilfried Zaha declares he will stop taking the knee'.
42. O'Brien, 'One In three English Football League clubs abandon taking the knee against racism'.
43. QPR, 'Club statement: Taking the knee'.
44. Cahill, 'Children and civility'.
45. Bourdieu, 'Outline of a Theory of Practice'.
46. Kilby, 'Individualism, Ideology and talking about lives that matter'.
47. Rosser, 'Ivan Tony: players being used as puppets'.
48. Whitson, 'Circuits of promotion: media, marketing, and the globalisation of sport'.
49. Bradish & Cronin, 'Corporate social responsibility in sport'.
50. Westra, 'Virtue signalling and moral progress' p.158.
51. Tosi and Warmke, 'Moral Grandstanding'.
52. Virtue signalling was an unspoken issue during cricket's T20 World Cup in 2021: South Africa's Quinton de Kock was mysteriously missing after he refused to take the knee. Cricket South Africa, the governing organization, explained it had insisted all players made the gesture 'to align and unify' the stance against racism. De Kock opposed racism, but apparently, objected to the overall mandate, regardless of individuals' consciences and personal convictions. Cricket South Africa, it seems, were eager to signal its high moral standards – its virtuousness – and made its players exhibit this. See Holmes, 'Quinton de Kock has broken his silence and may have changed how the world sees him'.
53. Tosi and Warmke, 'Grandstanding: The use and abuse of moral talk'.
54. Zaki and Cikara, 'Viewpoint: In defence of virtue signalling'.
55. Welton, 'England players being booed for taking the knee considered "a racist act" by officials'.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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