

Hate Speech in Sport: An Exploration of Homophobic Chants in Football



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About Kaleidoscope Trust

Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK-based international charity fighting for a future where LGBTI+ people everywhere can live free, safe and equal lives. We are building a global movement to create this world for LGBTI+ people everywhere.

We work with political leaders in the UK and beyond to ensure global LGBTI+ issues are a priority. We ensure that activists have the resources, skills, and training they need to learn from one another in order to create an enabling environment and change hearts and minds. We bring together grassroots organisations with those in power to create that change.

Kaleidoscope Trust is a founding member of The Commonwealth Equality Network

(TCEN) and provides the operational and financial base for the network's Secretariat as its host. We have engaged in Commonwealth processes and with Commonwealth institutions, as a priority, for over a decade in support of our shared objectives with TCEN's other members.

We also host the Secretariat to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global LGBT+ Rights, which emerged from the Parliamentary Friends of Kaleidoscope Trust, established in 2013. Kaleidoscope Trust was also a civil society co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition from 2019-2022 and is a founding member and former co-chair of the UK Alliance for Global Equality.



Context

Hate speech, as defined by the United Nations, refers to: “offensive discourse targeting a group or an individual based on inherent characteristics (such as race, religion, sexual orientation or gender) and that may threaten social peace.”¹ Homophobic themed chants at football matches serve as one example of hate speech that plagues athletics globally.

A report that interviewed 30 male football fans of various English clubs found that homophobic chanting has been

witnessed by 70% of British football fans with all but five participants stating that, if the situation arose, they would participate in such chants.² In their 2017 study, Rory Magrath found that there are three broad narratives that drive homophobic chants: firstly, supporting, celebrating, and encouraging one’s team towards success; second, confirming collective identities as fans of a particular club; and lastly, vilifying match officials or opposition personnel for thwarting their team’s success.³ Tom Clark (2006) even goes as far to ar-

gue that the “humorous nature” of chants is as much an attraction to fans attending football as the match itself.⁴

While these chants may be intended to be light-hearted, they perpetuate a homophobic culture within sports and are highly damaging. One footballer stated: “I remember we played an away game once [...] the other team had a young goalkeeper, about 18. We sang that he ‘takes it up the arse’ for quite a long time. It obviously affected him[:] he conceded two soft goals afterwards, and we won the game.”⁵ The use of terms such as ‘gay,’ ‘queer,’ and ‘sausage jockey’ to insult other teams’ fans and players suggest male heterosexuality as the highly prestigious norm and gay men’s sexuality as the trivialised ‘other.’⁶

The cycle of homophobic language in sport reveals the embedded culture of exclusion with children beginning to hear coaches and players using homophobic language at around eight years old. Children observe this language being met with laughter and social praise, thus they conform in order to gain acceptance. This

is where children form the beliefs that their teammates are universally heterosexual and cisgender, and that homophobic language is a harmless part of team bonding. This is also where lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) children either begin to hide their identity or stop participating in sport due to feeling unwelcome and unsafe in the environment.⁷ As a result of this cycle, football and other sports are severely lacking in representation; Blackpool Footballer Jake Daniels was the UK’s first professional male footballer to come out publicly as gay – in 2022 – since Justin Fashanu in 1990.⁸

Homophobic chanting is a global problem; in Mexico, fans were barred from attending their country’s first two home World Cup qualifiers in 2022 after making homophobic chants during two Olympic qualifying games.⁹ Additionally, an Israeli team was investigated by its Football Association after supporters mocked a player whose brother is gay.¹⁰

While the damaging effects of homophobic chanting are indisputable, the intention – as argued by football fans them-

1 United Nations. “What is Hate Speech?”. 2023. <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>.

2 Magrath, Rory. ‘To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team’: Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans.” British Sociological Association. 10 May 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702600>.

3 Ibid.

4 Clark, Tom. “‘I’m Scunthorpe ‘til I die’: Constructing and (re)negotiating identity through the terrace chant”. Soccer and Society. 2006. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248954143_‘I’m_Scunthorpe_‘til_I_die’_Constructing_and_Renegotiating_Identity_through_the_Terrace_Chant

5 Magrath, Rory. ‘To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team’: Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans.” British Sociological Association. 10 May 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702600>.

6 Ibid.

7 Out on the Fields. “Statistics on Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport”. 25 January 2024. <https://outonthefields.com/>

8 Billson, Chantell. “There are just a handful of out, gay professional footballers in the world – here are their stories”. Pink News. 12 July 2024. <https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/07/12/gay-footballers-pro-male-players-premier-league-openly/#page/7>

9 Savage, Rachel. “LGBT+ Fans Tackle Homophobic Chanting in English Football”. Reuters. 26 January 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N2U430L/>

10 Ibid.

selves – is not necessarily discriminatory. Magrath argues that homophobic chanting is so prevalent in football due not to inherent homophobia but rather to the heightened sense of competition. Many football fans perceive that engaging in a variety of chants is a significant way in which they can effectively support or even motivate their team.¹¹ Nathian Shae Ro-

However, this argument proves problematic when we consider that homophobia is an oppressive structure maintained by stereotypes, hateful language, and ‘us versus them’ mentality. Whether or not these chants are intended to reinforce oppression, their language remains damaging, as it serves to marginalise opposing players. The existence of such chants

Despite the substantial evidence demonstrating the prevalence of homophobia in football, there remains a “hierarchy of equality provision” within which LGBTI+ issues are largely ignored.¹⁴ Contributing factors to this include: a significant research gap with limited available participation data, prioritisation of other equality issues within organisations, a failure to

Even though restrictions of homophobic chanting have not been published by football associations themselves, football teams have stood up to hate speech. For instance, in a match between Wolverhampton and Chelsea, three people were arrested in connection to homophobic and discriminatory chants made during the match. Both teams condemned the



driguez (2016) argues that, based on this logic, chants are: “more about distraction than it is about vilification.”¹²

can also negatively impact gay or closeted fans in the stadium, who may interpret them as evidence of homophobia among other attendees.¹³

acknowledge barriers to LGBTI+ participation, and risk-averse positions taken by organisations and individuals due to potential backlash from parents, club members, or spectators.¹⁵

chants, with a Wolves representative stating: “Homophobia, like all other forms of discrimination, has no place in football or society, and anyone engaging in discriminatory behaviour is committing a criminal offence.”¹⁶ A similar case can be seen in a

11 Magrath, Rory. ‘To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team’: Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans.” British Sociological Association. 10 May 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702600>.

12 Rodriguez, Nathian Shae. “#FIFApuntos: A Twitter textual analysis over ‘puto’ at the 2014 World”. Communication and Sport. 26 June 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167479516655429>.

13 Magrath, Rory. ‘To Try and Gain an Advantage for My Team’: Homophobic and Homosexually Themed Chanting among English Football Fans.” British Sociological Association. 10 May 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517702600>.

14 Smith et. al. “Out for Sport Report: Tackling Homophobia and Transphobia in Sport.” Equality Network: LGBT Rights in Scotland. June 2012 <https://www.equality-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Out-for-Sport-Report.pdf>.

15 Ibid.

16 The Indian Express. “Three Arrested over Homophobic Chants at Wolves v Chelsea.” Reuters. 09 April 2023. <https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/football/three-arrested-over-homophobic-chants-at-wolves-v-chelsea-8546451/>.

2021 Premier League match where a football fan, who was overheard yelling homophobic abuse at nearby Brighton and Hove Albion fans by a member of staff, was subsequently arrested and banned from watching live games.¹⁷ Additionally, steps have been taken against players themselves: Three Rapid Vienna football players were not selected for national team duty after the Austrian men’s national team manager Ralf Rangnick and the coaching staff saw videos of them taking part in post-match celebrations shouting homophobic chants.¹⁸

Actions taken by individual football teams have created a precedent for governments to act and formalise restrictions against hate speech in sport. For example, after groups of fans at a match between Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) and Marseille chanted violent and homophobic lines, Olivier Klein, the French government’s top official charged with the fight against racism, antisemitism, and hatred towards LGBTI+ people, said he was “shocked” by what he said were “unbearable homophobic chants” at the match. Klein, whose service is attached to Prime Minister Elis-

abeth Borne’s office, said he was inviting the French professional football league (LFP) as well as PSG itself to ensure that “sanctions are taken,” vowing that the French government will punish football fans who participate in such chants.¹⁹ Guidance on what these sanctions will look like are still being debated in parliament with options including fines or jail time, a ticketing system, suspension of attendance, or disruption in gameplay.²⁰

Additionally, the UK’s Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) updated its guidance on football related offences in 2023.²¹ The guidance, which assists prosecutors when making legal decisions on cases, sets out how lawyers can apply for Football Banning Orders, which not only stop fans attending matches but can also impose other restrictions, such as not being able to travel to certain areas, or be allowed in pubs at game time and travel during tournament times. Tragedy-related abuse, which is also included in the guidance, is characterised as a public order offence occurring when fans sing, chant, or gesture offensive messages about disasters or accidents involving players or fans. The

CPS guidance also includes reference to other hate crimes, such as homophobic or racist chanting or gestures, and pitch incursion.²²

Through this briefing, we can understand why homophobic chanting at football matches remains so prevalent, their damaging effects, and the actions that have been taken. While the intention behind homophobic chanting in football may not always stem from overt malice, the consequences are undeniably harmful.

These chants contribute to a pervasive culture of homophobia that marginalises LGBTI+ individuals within the sport. The normalisation of such behaviour not only alienates fans and players but also reinforces damaging stereotypes that persist beyond the stadium. The commitment to confronting and eradicating hate speech in all its forms is essential to ensuring that sport can be a welcoming space for everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

17 The Crown’s Prosecution Service. “CPS Cracks down on Football Tragedy Abuse.” 07 August 2023. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/cps-cracks-down-football-tragedy-abuse>.

18 Close et. al. “Following Homophobic Chanting, Three Austrian Soccer Players Left off National Team”. CNN. 14 March 2024 <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/03/14/sport/austrian-soccer-rapid-vienna-homophobic-chanting-spt-intl/index.html>.

19 France 24. “France Vows ‘firm Response’ to Homophobic Chants at PSG Football Match:.” 25 September 2023. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230925-france-vows-firm-response-to-homophobic-chants-at-ligue-1-football-match>.

20 Le Monde. “ French interior minister wants football matches to stop when homophobic chants start”. 24 October 2024. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/sports/article/2024/10/24/french-interior-minister-wants-football-matches-to-stop-when-homophobic-chants-start_6730328_9.html

21 The Crown’s Prosecution Service. “CPS Cracks down on Football Tragedy Abuse.” 07 August 2023. <https://www.cps.gov.uk/cps/news/cps-cracks-down-football-tragedy-abuse>.

22 Ibid.

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