

AI MONITORING: PROTECTING PROFESSIONAL PLAYERS
 EURO 2020 Final + AFCON 2022 Final Study

SUMMARY SCOPE

This study examined over 406,987 social posts across Twitter and Instagram targeting players and coaches for the EURO 2020 Final (England v Italy) and AFCON 2022 Final (Senegal v Egypt). The study period ran from the end of the semi finals until 3 days after each final.

Figures accurate at end of study period - April 2022.

406,987

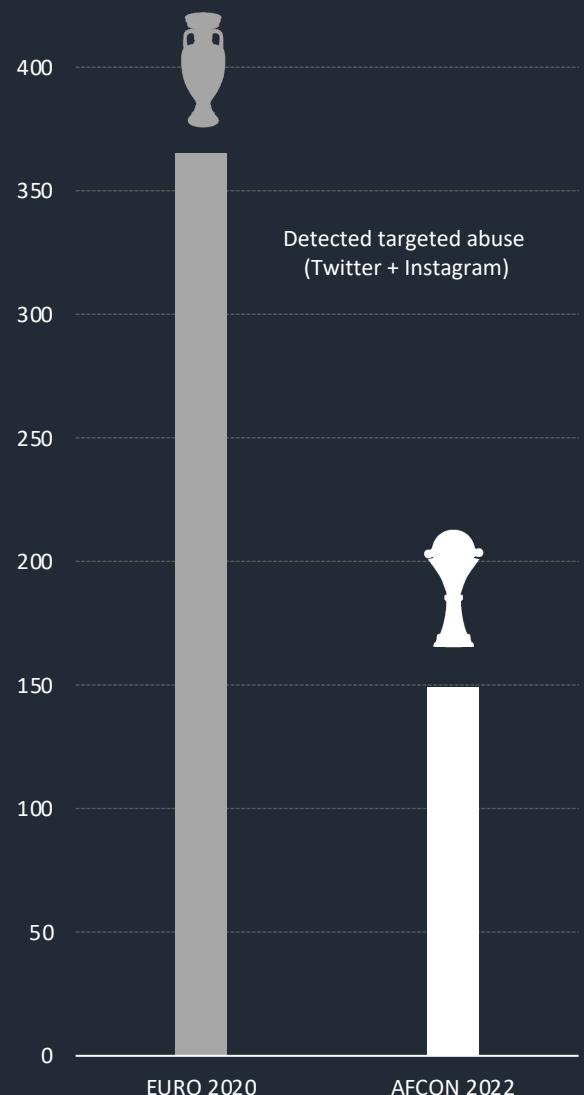
Social media posts analysed
 (Twitter + Instagram)

55%+

of players in both tournament finals
 received some form of online abuse*

EXECUTIVE FINDINGS

- **VOLUME:** Over 55% of players in both EURO 2020 and AFCON 2022 Final's received some form of discriminatory abuse.
- **TYPE:** Homophobic slurs most common form of detected abuse, with racism second.
- **RACE:** Black players who missed penalties (England) were the most abused players in the EURO 2020 Final / a substitute (Egypt) was the most abused player at AFCON 2022 Final's.
- **PLATFORMS:** Abuse on Twitter is constant across the period whilst Instagram abuse is more event driven – i.e. losing final. Tactically, over 75% of Instagram comments and abuse included emojis.
- **GEOGRAPHY:** Majority of abusers come from the players home nation.
- **CLUB AFFILIATION:** Player club identity is a trigger for abuse. i.e. Liverpool players received abuse on Twitter from fans who are supporters of Liverpool's English Premier League rivals.
- **OFFICIALS / MANAGERS:** AFCON coaches received double the abuse of EURO 2020 managers.



* This represents a significantly higher percentage of targeted footballers in comparison to similar studies published by Threat Matrix covering domestic football in the UK and other countries, where targeted abuse has been detected at 25%-44% of selected players (see p.8).

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PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study seeks to examine abuse targeting players and coaches in two high profile international tournament finals; England v Italy in the EURO 2020 Final played in July 2021, and Egypt v Senegal in the AFCON 2022 Final played in February 2022.

Examining content from Twitter and Instagram from the end of the semi-finals through to 3 days after each final this study illuminates levels and types of abuse directed at players competing in international tournaments.

The comparison of the EURO and AFCON final's is designed to determine that players competing in tournaments are being targeted regardless of continent or country.

It also examines the geographic source of abusers as well as motivations, which signifies the impact of domestic league rivalries on the targeting of players in international tournaments.

AI METHODOLOGY

Threat Matrix is a unique, innovative service developed with the specific intent of identifying and tracing online discriminatory abuse and behaviour (including direct threat).

Using machine learning, the service pulls huge data sets from social media, filtering this data to identify instances of targeted and direct abuse.

The ability to leverage this specialised knowledge of context and relevance with both AI and human verification underpins this study and supports a level of nuanced understanding of the game and those seeking to attack its values.

For more details see - Methodology (p.10)

Account coverage includes:

EURO 2020

 **England squad:**
21 active Twitter accounts
22 active Instagram accounts

 **Italy squad:**
16 active Twitter accounts
18 active Instagram accounts

AFCON 2022

 **Egypt squad**
11 active Twitter accounts
19 active Instagram accounts

 **Senegal squad**
11 active Twitter accounts
26 active Instagram accounts

Team coaches, managers & officials also included.

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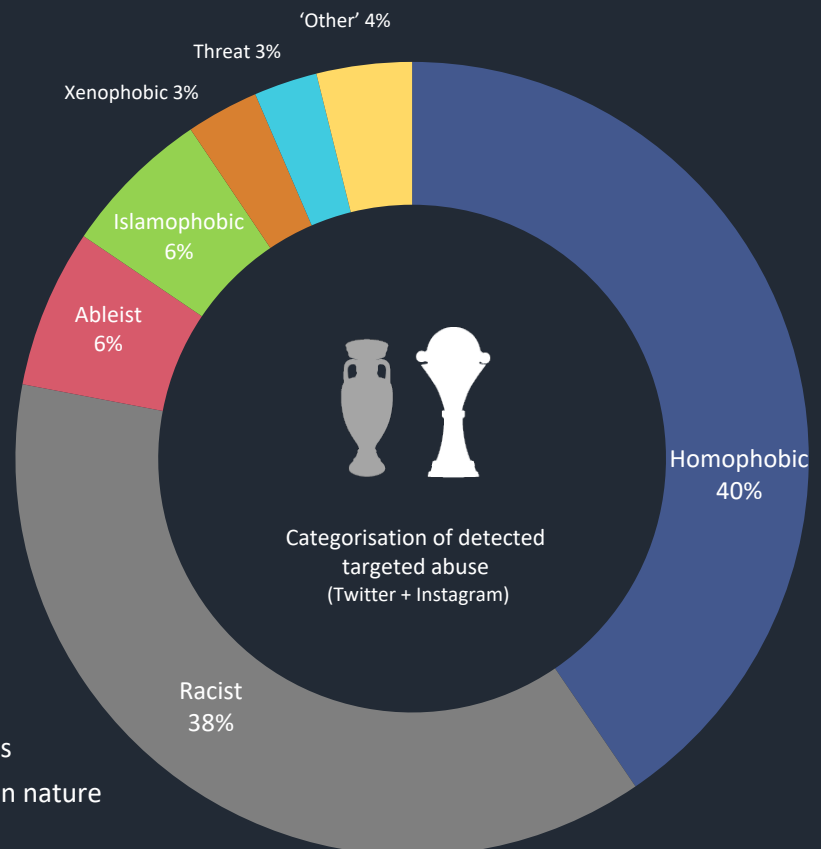


TYPES OF ABUSE

The study revealed 514 abusive posts targeting players.

The EURO 2020 Final accounted for 365 abusive posts, whilst the AFCON Final accounted for 149.

Whilst each tournament exhibited different primary abuse categories, racism and homophobia were the two most prevalent forms of abuse present across the tournaments representing a combined 78% of all detected abuse on Twitter and Instagram.



78% of all detected abuse across was racist or homophobic in nature

EURO 2020

Over 78% of the abuse targeting players around the EURO 2020 Final contained racist abuse. 23% of this was also combined with homophobic abuse. The majority of this abuse was directed at black England players, particularly the trio of England players involved in the decisive penalty shootout.

Racist abuse was also targeted at Italian players. This was primarily directed by fans attacking Italy's victory and included anglicised slurs for Italians.

The study required nuance and knowledge in order to account for peculiarities such as an Italian player whose nickname is "gorilla". This amplified the use of Gorilla emojis, which in another context would have been considered as racial abuse.

AFCON 2022

The AFCON Final attracted lower rates of specifically racist abuse (26%). This is likely explained by the make up of the primary audience. However, players experienced much higher levels of homophobic abuse (62%), again playing into cultural stereotypes aligned with the primary audience for the tournament.

Islamophobic abuse was also more prevalent than in the EURO 2020 Final, again this is attributable to a higher presence of Muslim players involved in the squads making religion an issue with which to abuse players.

There was also violent and discriminatory abuse targeted at players from fans of their domestic clubs overseas.

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IDENTIFIABLE ACCOUNTS

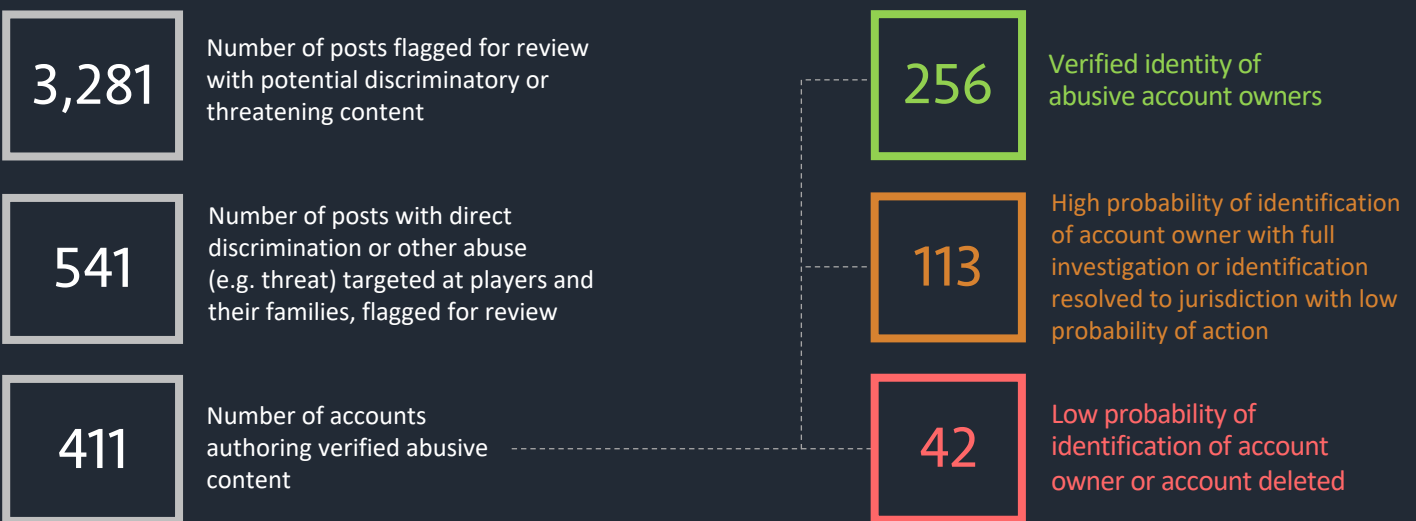
This study focused on the number of abusive accounts that could be identified – showing that more action can be taken by authorities, national football associations and (where there is a clear affiliation) domestic clubs.

90%

of detected accounts sending abuse are identifiable or have a high probability of identification

TOP LINE ANALYSIS

REAL ACTION



This study has been able to verify and categorize targeted abuse with global reach from 411 detected accounts.

By auditing abuse and accounts in this way, FIFA will be better informed on regulation and policy regarding better moderation and action by social media platforms.

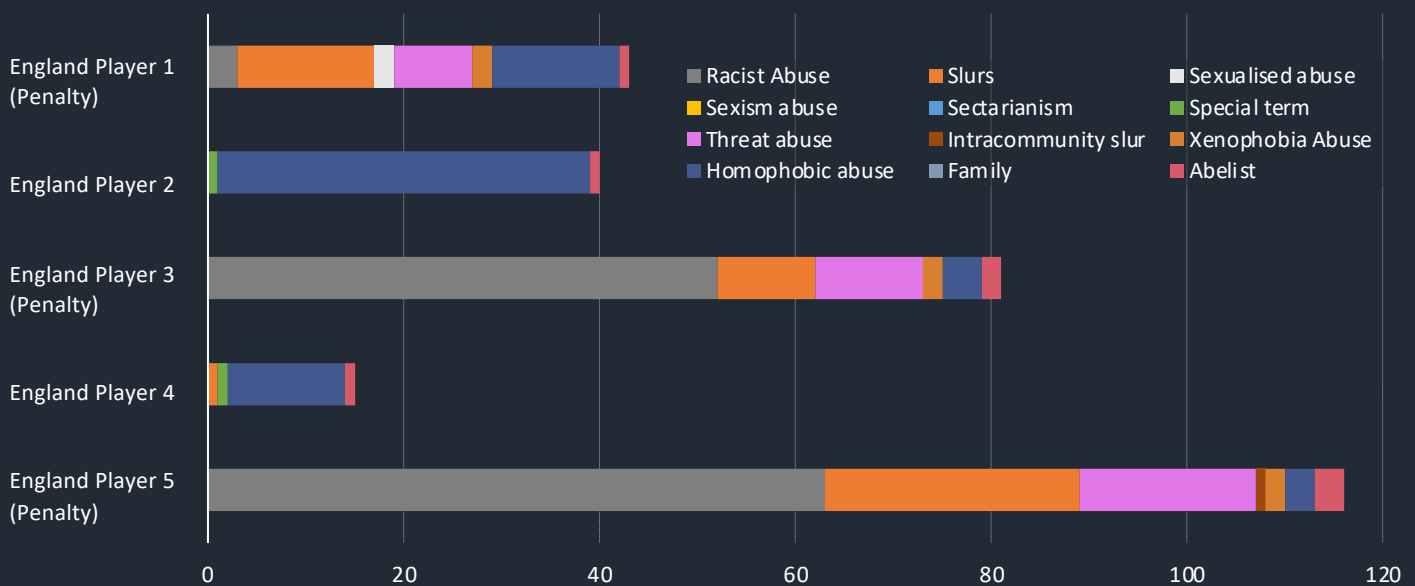
The identification of these authors would allow future studies to support real action by FIFA and their member federations / national associations, providing data that can inform real action. Actionable solutions can range from inviting abusers to education programs, excluding them from purchasing tickets or tournament attendance, through to supporting legal enforcement action in the most serious cases.

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TARGETED PLAYER ANALYSIS: EURO 2020

No. of detected targeted abusive messages
(EURO 2020 final)



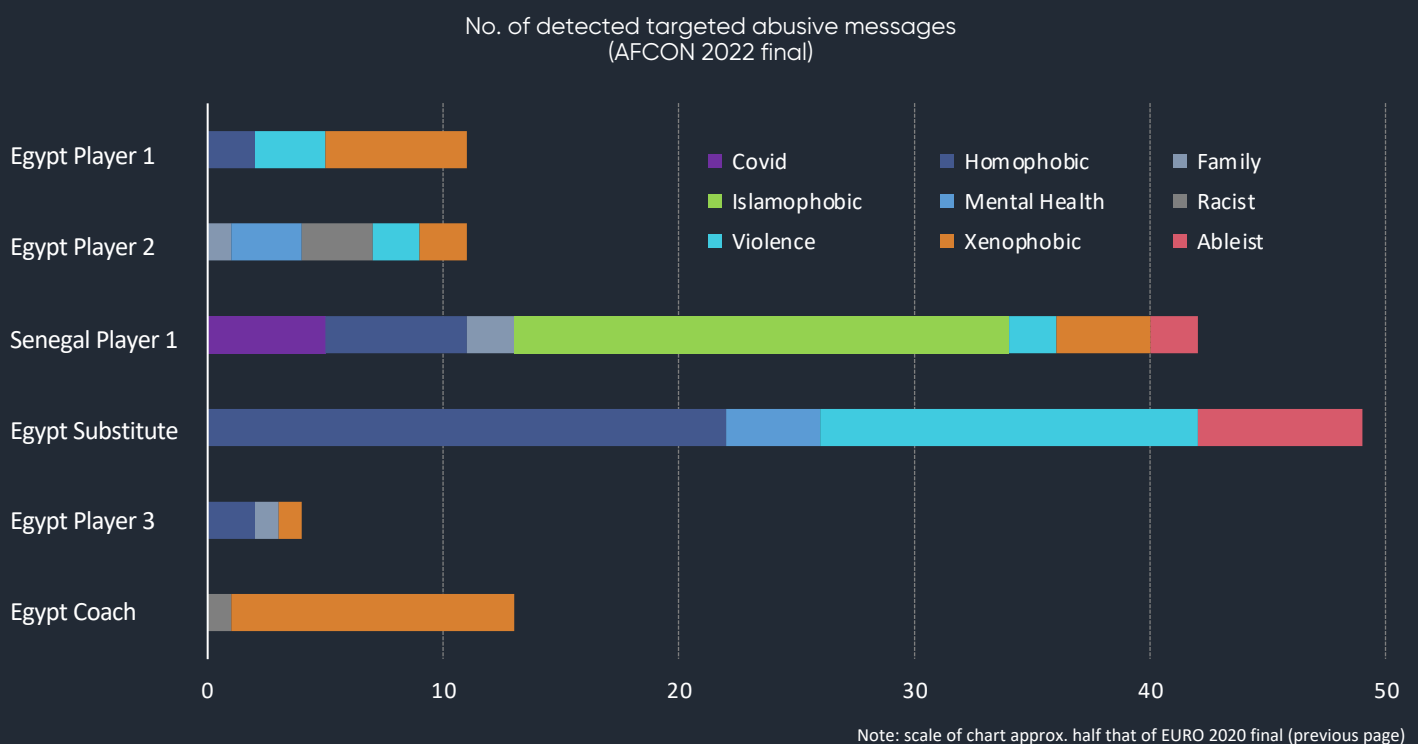
ANALYSIS

- Racism after three black English players missed penalties has been well documented after the EURO 2020 final. However, there was also significant abuse directed at Italian players. Much of this abuse is still live, especially where it involves English slurs for Italians.
- The fact it is still live after 9 months highlights the importance of specialised and tailored monitoring and detection that combines technical elements with knowledge of the sport, fans and terms and tactics used.
- Threat Matrix also detected abuse of England players directed through praise of Italian players with racist terms used to describe players tackled in a particular challenge. For example, the use of racial terms directed at an English player in response to the Italian player tackling / dragging him down by the shirt collar.
- A key point to note is that prior to the penalties, racist abuse had been relatively low. Homophobic terms were more prevalent in the preceding days and first part of the match. This has been observed in other studies across several sports. Racism often picks its moment and is unleashed after a trigger. This means that a tournament or match with relatively low abuse levels can become a flashpoint at any moment.

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TARGETED PLAYER ANALYSIS: AFCON 2022



ANALYSIS

- Egypt's coach featured in the top 5 most abused targets in the AFCON 2022 final (his decision to select a particular substitute led to the majority of this abuse).
- One substitute received the highest number of both homophobic and violent terms. A significant portion of this abuse was on Instagram with over 30% containing emojis.
- This abuse appeared to be event driven – the result of being brought on as a substitute during the final.
- Senegal's primary penalty taker received early abuse having missed a penalty during the standard 90 minutes. However, this reduced as the match progressed.
- One Egyptian player received over 50% of all Islamophobic comments during the study. The majority of these are from accounts based in the UK and seem to have been triggered by domestic football rivalries from fans watching the tournament. Even where accounts are based in Egypt or Africa the accounts show allegiance to rivals of their domestic club.

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PLATFORM MODERATION

Despite the high profile of online abuse over recent years and the campaigns / calls for action in tackling it - platforms have very different approaches.

Of the 541 abusive posts in this study 312, or 58%, are still visible on platform*.

Many of these posts that relate to the EURO 2020 Final have now been visible on platform for over 8 months.

58%

of all abuse still live

ISSUE HIERARCHY

One of the most striking aspects of platform moderation is the manner in which differing types of abuse are treated. Racism is the only universal issue on which platforms can be clearly evidenced to take action.

87% of non-racist abuse remains live on the platform with issues like homophobia or threat not removed from the platform with the same efficiency.

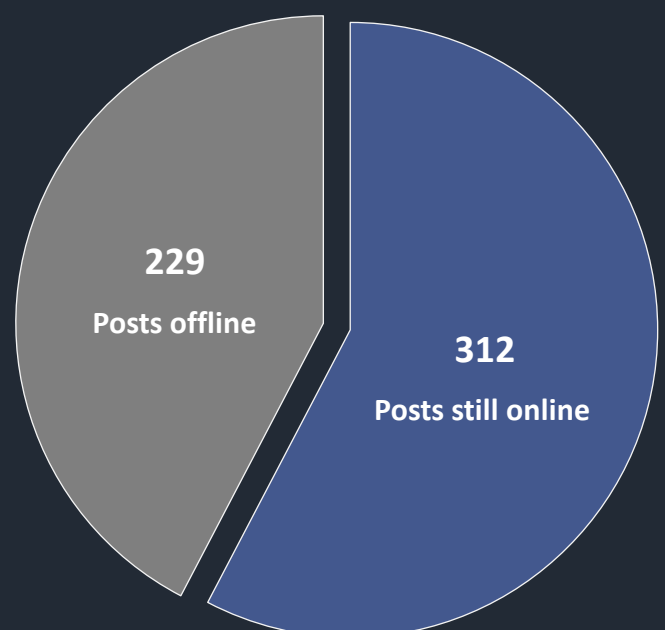
This is clearly evidenced at the EURO 2020 Final where the majority of racist abuse directed at black England players during and in the wake of the final has been removed from platforms (despite some notable exceptions still live at the time of reporting). However, much of the homophobic abuse from the same tournament remains live on platform over 8 months later.

There is also further nuance as the use of racialised anglicised slurs for Italians directed at the Italian players, remain live (see p.5).

87%

non-racist abuse still live

Total detected abusive posts
EURO 2020 Final + AFCON 2022 Final



*Figures accurate as of April 2022



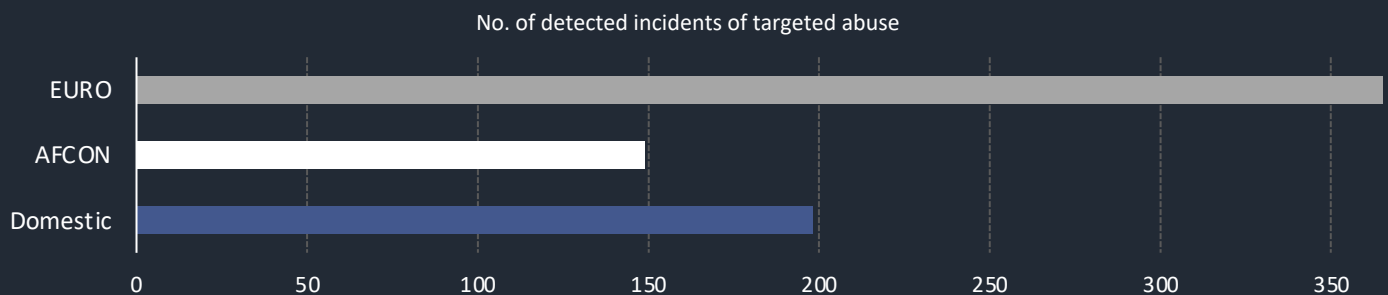
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INTERNATIONAL V DOMESTIC

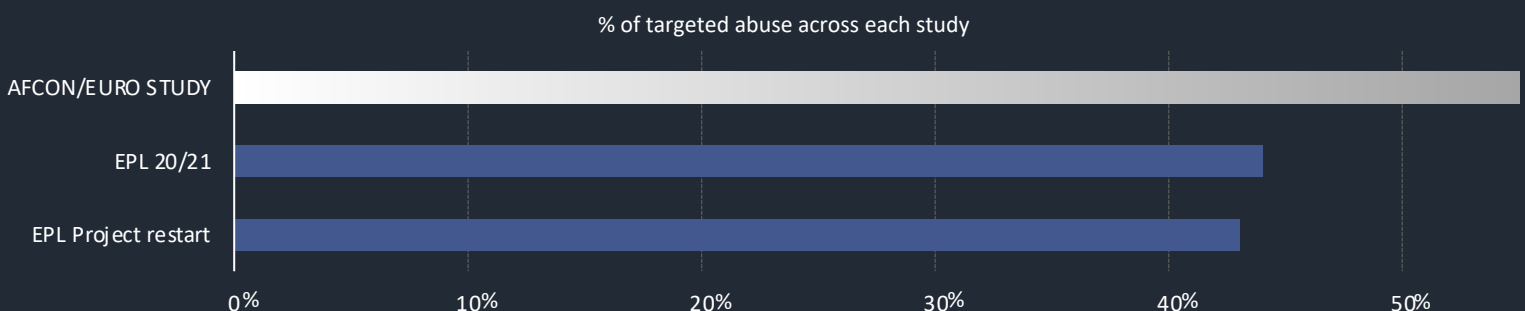
The data from this study was compared to data from previous studies by Signify* covering top-flight domestic leagues in Europe. These included the English Premier League during 'Project Restart' - the six-week conclusion to the 2019/20 season, and a full season study from 2020/21 season.

The study period represents a quarter of the timeframe of a domestic season, so we have adjusted for this by comparing the one-week study windows for each final by volume against the average monthly abuse totals detected in domestic studies. We are also aware of incidents outside of this window (e.g. the Nigerian team received death threats after being knocked out of AFCON 22).

This comparative study of the two (domestic season vs international finals) supports the hypothesis that international tournaments, with raised stakes, attract higher levels of targeted discriminatory abuse. The EURO 2020 Final received nearly double the number of abusive incidents with the AFCON 2022 Final seeing three quarters of this volume.



The second comparison metric highlighted by the study examines the percentage of players targeted with discriminatory abuse. Over 55% of the players in this study received targeted abuse. This is 11% higher than the Domestic English Premier League season 2020/21 and 13% higher than EPL Project Restart. This indicates that players face a higher chance of being targeted with abuse in the final of an international tournament verses domestic competitions. As illustrated in the case studies, international competitions not only trigger their own issues but also inherit those of domestic leagues as well.



*Signify studies commissioned by Kick It Out and the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA).

PFA + Kick It Out 2020 Project Restart Report: <https://www.thepfa.com/news/2020/10/21/pfa-charity-ai-research-study>

PFA Season 2020-21 Report: <https://www.thepfa.com/news/2021/8/4/online-abuse-ai-research-study-season-2020-21>

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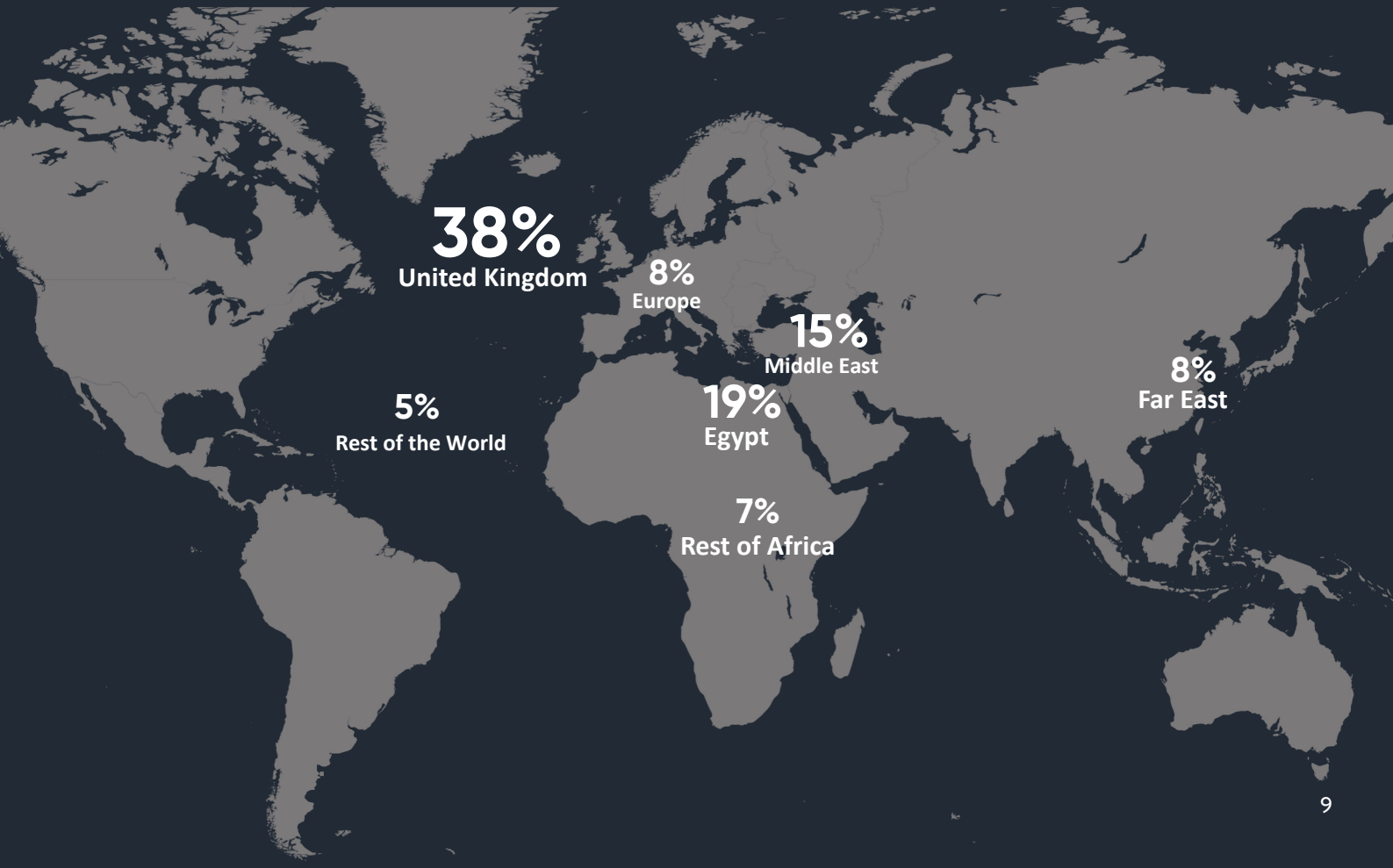
GEOGRAPHY

- In both tournaments the origin of abusive accounts followed the same pattern with a majority of abuse coming from the home nation of the players being targeted.
- Abuse has a global profile with significant percentages detected as coming from Middle Eastern, Asian and African countries.
- Abuse from outside the home nations of the players being targeted seems to be linked to interest in domestic football leagues, particularly those in the UK and Europe which enjoy global followings.
 - Homophobic terms were more prolific targeting AFCON players than abuse detected in the EURO 2020 Final
 - Islamophobia was more prevalent surrounding the AFCON Final with 33 instances where none were detected in relation to the EURO 2020 Final
 - Anti-black racism made up 76% of abuse in the EURO Final and where it did appear targeting players in the AFCON Final over 50% was from accounts based in the UK and Europe targeting players from the domestic leagues in those countries.

Abuse detected
from more than

21

countries





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METHODOLOGY

Core to the Threat Matrix service is a proactive monitoring and analysis capability. Our game-changing technology protects players and athletes from vile online racist and discriminatory abuse and has been deployed globally across a range of sports including football, athletics, tennis and basketball. Our focus is on moving the current reactive reporting process (requiring a player to receive and report abuse) to a proactive response with earlier interventions to protect players.

Threat Matrix provides real-time monitoring and analysis of millions of open source social media posts across multiple platforms. With a lead focus on Twitter and Instagram (historically the most problematic platforms for online abuse), the service has developed capabilities that include recognition of images, emojis, as well as keywords, phrases and a long list of abusive words, terms and profanities.

The service flags the vilest social media posts and provides evidence for removal to social platforms, building compelling evidential cases to take to relevant authorities.

Our work across football and other sports has allowed us to develop the service around an evolving dataset of abusive and discriminatory categories and key terms. This includes a specialist focus on club and network affiliations that allows us to provide valuable member / season ticket holder connections, allowing clubs to play their part in education, sanctioning and where necessary, banning fans who we can prove to have committed an offence.

BENEFITS OF AN AI-DRIVEN APPROACH

- Machine learning detection of abusive, discriminatory and threatening language captured at scale
- Multilingual capabilities
- Image and emoji recognition
- Facilitates real action: posts reported to platform, club affiliated accounts identified, criminal evidence captured and submitted for action
- Nuanced understanding of football allows detection of changing keywords and tactics
- Experience gathered from across sports including athletics, basketball, tennis and football



HOW DOES IT WORK?



1. source data

Open source data
Sources: social media (**multiplatform** can include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), the dark web and provided data.



2. process data

Clean all data (removing bots) before applying **AI Natural Language Understanding**. Filtering of abuse or threat to identify problematic messages.



3. human review

Deliver a meanings-based assessment based on Augmented Intelligence. The **speed of AI** + the nuance of **human interpretation**.



4. actionable output

Evidence based reports and recommendations covering **high-level network reporting** with **detailed verification**. Cross-referencing **digital + real world intelligence**.