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UNIVERSITY OF  
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**England, Social Media and the Euros: Exploring the Power of Social  
Media in Sports with a Particular Focus on the England National  
Team's European Championship run in 2021.**



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**An Independent Project (Dissertation) submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirement for the degree of BA (Hons) Sports Media.**

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## **Abstract**

Euro 2020, the major football tournament that marked history for England, galvanised the country's spirit but ended in heartbreak for the nation when they fell just short at the final hurdle. The competition was supposed to take place in 2020, but the unprecedented times, due to COVID-19, meant the campaign was postponed to the summer of 2021. The Three Lions reached their first final at a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup victory. Unfortunately, they were beaten on penalties to a strong Italian side and finished runners up in a blockbuster final at Wembley Stadium.

This dissertation explores the power social media possesses concerning England's European Championship run in the summer of 2021. It will explore how the Three Lions employ social media to their advantage and why they choose to use it in the way they do.

I was fortunate to interview Greg Sullivan, the brand marketing manager at the Football Association (FA) who spoke to me about the experiences he and his marketing and communications team faced during the Euro 2020 adventure. He shared how England approached the major tournament from a marketing perspective and what social media strategies they implemented during the tournament.

Chapter one engages with relevant sports marketing material, identifies England's marketing strategy that was put in place months before the event and distinguishes key decisions made by The FA.

Chapter two analyses what the Three Lions did during the Euros on social media to keep supporters entertained and how they made them feel closer to the players through projects such as; Lions' Den and The Official England Podcast.

Chapter three discusses the racial abuse three black England players received after the final, the way in which social media platforms can cause discrimination towards footballers and how the team and players dealt with this type of abuse.

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## Introduction

In a digital age where social media platforms are so important to sports teams and how they use them to market campaigns, share content, provide information and engage fans. Avola (2018) discusses, 'Social media has enabled sports teams to disseminate information into the hands of fans nearly simultaneously as the action unfolds and news breaks' (Avola, 2018: 19). Bringing the connection between sports brands and supporters closer is because of social media and how these teams showcase their online presence. Teams are consistently producing high quality branded content on a day-to-day basis to increase their social media engagement with supporters. Lyberger et al. (2014) note, 'In fact, the media, which is considered an intermediary, may be the most powerful force in sports today and is getting stronger' (Lyberger et al., 2014: 34). Using social media in the right way can be a prestigious tool for sports clubs to increase their exposure and brand awareness. As Newman et al. (2017) express, 'Social media provides many opportunities for businesses to reach people and expose them to their brand, products, services, and content' (Newman et al., 2017: 15). Sports fans follow their favourite team on social media to keep themselves informed with news, entertained with content and engaged with the brand. Supporters consume media and are given the opportunity to like, comment, retweet or share content the team posts, this bridges the gap and keeps the team and its fans connected.

England's social media strategy during the Euros was an area of great interest to me as I was fortunate enough to be a part of this adventure when I was commissioned to create a reactive graphic following the extra-time semi-final win over Denmark. This piece was shared on their official social media platforms the day after the game and received a strong amount of traction, with England players, Declan Rice and Raheem Sterling liking the piece. From this, I wanted to research and find out more about how England was using social

media to market themselves and how they delivered visual and audio content to their fans during the competition.

The first chapter looks at the importance of marketing a sports team in the build-up to a major tournament like the Euros and how it prepares fans to support the team. The chapter will reflect upon the interview with Sullivan, who provides a real insight into how England showcased their brand, promoted themselves and the marketing campaign for the competition. Looking specifically at how the squad announcement set up for a successful tournament and what England's sponsorship partners did as part of their campaign around the time of the Euros.

## **Chapter 1: The use of marketing strategies surrounding the England National Team in the build-up to the 2020 European Championships**

‘The principles of sport marketing is an essential part of the professionalism required of organisations operating in the sports industry today.’

(Blakey, 2011: 1)

Marketing in sports has become an essential weapon when it comes to growing brand promotion and awareness. Chadwick et al. define it as, ‘the application of all marketing related activities, structures and thoughts to the phenomenon of sports’ (Chadwick et al., 2015: 5). Having a strong, structured marketing approach can help fans feel more associated and engaged with their desired sports team, therefore, establishing a steady relationship between the sports brand and its users (Mohammadkazemi, 2015). This chapter will discuss how the build-up to Euro 2020 gave England opportunities to market themselves and help them perform off the pitch. It will also look at the campaign that was implemented in the England camp to encourage more fans around the country to show their support.

Sullivan, the brand marketing manager at the Football Association (The FA), spoke about his experiences and the processes he and his team employed for Euro 2020. He spoke to me about the preparations that take place to execute a marketing strategy for a major football tournament. He noted, ‘Ahead of each major tournament, we sit down as a brand team and effectively decide what our campaign objective is going to be for the competition’ (Sullivan, 2022). Like several other major sports events, the Euros only takes place every four years and bearing this in mind, England’s marketing team must ensure they maintain relationships with fans and that the upcoming major tournament stays at the forefront of people’s minds

(Beech & Chadwick, 2007). Sullivan accentuated their plan to galvanise the fans and get them ready to support the team. Fans are instrumental in assisting a team by interacting with consumer behaviours and supporting them through the highs and lows of the sport (Mastromartino et al., 2018).



*Figure one: England fans enjoying themselves before a Euro 2020 match (Source: Goal.com, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

The objective of Euro 2020 from a marketing point of view was to ‘embrace the Euro 2020 adventure, galvanising the country’s spirit and uniting the nation’ (Sullivan, 2022). The FA’s objective was all about connecting the fans, players and media to bring success on and off the pitch. Kahle and Riley (2004) explore how sports marketing help individuals feel closer to their team. They suggest that ‘when fans identify closely with a sport organization (i.e., a team) “a sense of connectedness ensues” and the fan begins to define him - or herself in relation to the organization’ (Mael & Ashforth in Kahle and Riley, 2004: 259). Individuals and families would often use terms such as, ‘we’ and ‘us’ signifying them feeling a part of the team’s journey, win or lose.



*Figure two: England's starting eleven photo before kick-off in their World Cup Qualifier against San Marino (Source: England on Twitter, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021).*

Preparations for the major football tournament started in March 2021 for Sullivan and his team, the first checkpoint was the World Cup Qualifiers where England faced San Marino and Poland at Wembley (see figure two). The second activation point was the squad announcement at the very beginning of June. Sullivan spoke about the importance of the announcement: he comments, 'we feel it is a moment where the nation's eyes are on us as a team. We have always been trying to do something culturally relevant and it's going to resonate well with the fans' (Sullivan, 2022).



*Figure three: England's 'The Call Up' squad announcement graphic that accompanied the official video that featured Wretch 32 (Source: Reuban Dangoor via England, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021).*

On 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021, the Three Lions announced their 26-man squad for the upcoming tournament campaign. England shared this news on all their social media platforms, including YouTube, with a short video that informed fans of who Gareth Southgate had picked (see figure three). The one-minute 44-second video had lyrics from British rapper Wretch 32 to elevate the piece. Before any major tournament, national teams create a piece that is innovative and showcases who will represent the country in the upcoming competition. This European Championship was no different with England making a cultural video that uses footage of fans playing football on the streets and moments from the previous Euros tournaments. Sullivan states, 'For this squad announcement it felt like an evolution of 2018. We wanted something that distilled our manifesto and captured the idea of community, family, fans across the country and people from diverse backgrounds'

(Sullivan, 2022). This video sets up the tournament campaign well, familiarising fans with who is in the squad, but it also tells a story and appreciates the key values of our communities. England using visual content, like the squad announcement video, can help strengthen 'the long-term emotional, psychological and physical investment a customer has with a brand' (Adestra, 2017 in Chaffey & Chadwick, 2019: 38).



Figure four: The Three Lions squad for Euro 2020 (Source: England on Twitter, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021).

The squad announcement is a significant moment for England fans and represents much more than a list of 26 names (Swarbrick in Tunna, 2021). The video kickstarted people's arrangements for the month ahead, with fans uniting themselves to the Three Lions brand through the consumption of official merchandise, with past and present replica shirts and flags being worn across the country in the hope of the Three Lions winning major silverware

for the first time since 1966 (King, 2002 in Crawford et al., 2021). The video itself was a key moment for both England and its marketing team as they felt the spotlight was on them to deliver such an important piece to the tournament, this is because of the amount of hype and potential the players had. Sullivan notes, 'Anything that we do in our squad announcement from an England point of view needs to be disruptive and cut through a lot of noise. It felt meaningful as well, it was not just a frivolous, viral piece, it felt it had a meaning behind it' (Sullivan, 2022). The announcement video allowed the marketing team to promote England as a brand and advertise important information for the event. Raney and Bryant suggest, 'the internet is a vital tool in promotion (and extension) of media and sports brands' (Raney and Bryant, 2006: 444).



*Figure five: England connotations from the squad announcement video (Source: England via YouTube, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021).*

The squad announcement short film worked well from a marketing standpoint, generating 1.1 million views on Twitter and 219,000 views on YouTube as of 19<sup>th</sup> April 2022. This is important as it consistently promotes the England logo of the lion crows and their red, white

and blue kit colours. Kennedy and Hills (2009) believe that 'a successful logo is dynamically linked in the mind of the consumer with a host of associations, capable of highlighting one facet of the brand image, then another' (Kennedy & Hills, 2009: 163). Furthermore, these Three Lions commodities are linked to semiotics theory, which Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure described as a 'science that studies the life of signs within society' (Saussure in Dyer, 1993: 115). Roland Barthes, a French theorist who also looked at semiotics and developed on the work of Saussure. He wrote many books including *Mythologies* (1957) and *Elements of Semiology* (1967), and he noted it, 'fixes the floating chain of signifieds in such a way to counter the terror of 'floating signs'' (Barthes in Dyer, 1993: 130). The squad announcement video uses, as suggested by Barthes, signifiers and signifieds such as the Three Lions logo, the national flag and Wembley Stadium to provide signifiers and signifieds of the England national team (see figure five) to amplify brand image and awareness.

England has many partners and sponsors that help support them in different ways, such as Nike, Lucozade, BT and Snickers. These companies provide services to the national team and help in different areas. For example, Nike is the official kit sponsor whereas Lucozade is the official sports drink. Cunningham, Cornwall and Coote (2009), who studied the relationships sponsors have with their brands, state that 'A firm's engagement in a sport sponsorship arrangement heightens both brand exposure and access to its products among sports fans' (Cunningham, Cornwell, & Coote, 2009 in Biscaia et al., 2013: 289). The partnerships are crucial to the FA from a revenue point of view, but such a relationship also gets a lot of money behind their campaign, meaning it brings more brand awareness for both parties (Sullivan, 2022).



*Figure six: Bud Light's advertising Boxheads campaign before the Euros featuring some England stars (Source: Bud Light UK on Twitter, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2021).*

Bud Light, made by Budweiser, has been the official beer of the England men's national football team since 2018. On 7<sup>th</sup> May 2021, they introduced their campaign to support the Three Lions for the Euros: the idea of Boxheads, which had England players Jordan Pickford, Kieran Trippier and Kyle Walker's faces printed on the packaging (see figure six). Martina Isella, the senior brand manager at Bud Light, notes, 'Brands often feature the face of their ambassadors on the packaging but Boxheads takes it to another level. There simply isn't anything like it out there. It's a revolutionary step forward in beer packaging, and we can't wait to see football fans across the country wearing Boxheads and supporting the Three Lions in a much fun and immersive way' (Isella in Glenday, 2021).



Figure seven: What 'My England Football' offers the fans when they sign up (Source: England Football.com).

A predominant part of a strong marketing campaign is customer relationship management (CRM) and email marketing. King and Burgess describe CRM as 'one of the most popular tools for enterprise information management, not only for sales and marketing purposes, but also for more effective customer interaction' (King & Burgess, 2007 in Gil-Gomez et al., 2020: 2734). The Three Lions utilised 'My England Football' before the Euros as a tool to increase customer relationships and make fans feel more affiliated with the team. 'My England Football' is a free to join rewards programme that allows members to enjoy perks and take part in giveaways as a reward for being a passionate fan. Figure seven shows some examples of what the sign-up offers, including playing at Wembley, meeting the England players and discounts with The FA and their partners. The FA encouraged people to sign up for this by giving them the chance to predict the England starting lineup on matchdays, winning a signed shirt or the opportunity to win tickets to the Euros. These were promoted on Instagram stories and various other social media platforms to get people to take part.

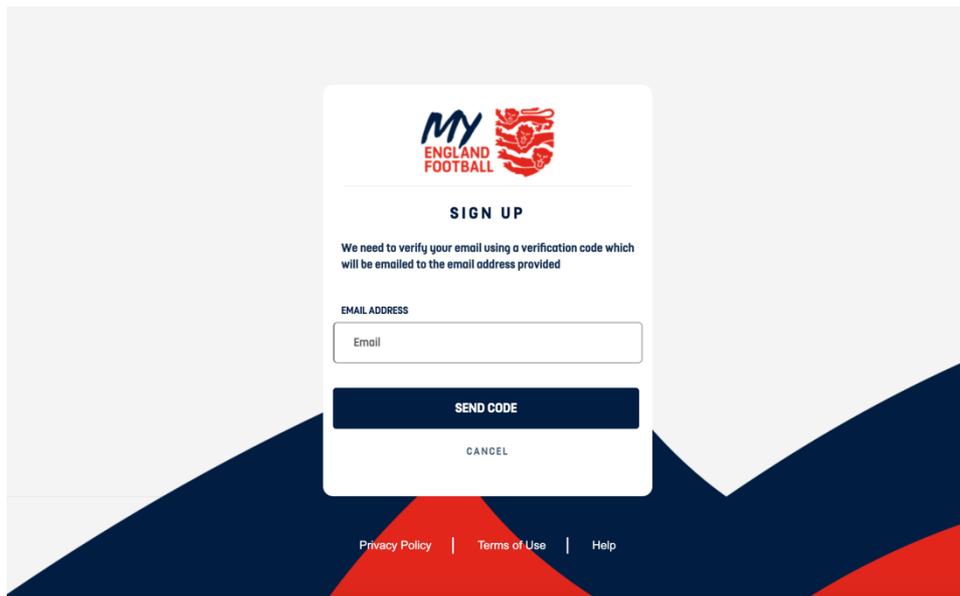


Figure eight: An email address is required when signing up for 'My England Football' (England Football.com).

'My England Football' requires users to provide their email address when they sign up allowing The FA to apply email marketing to their members by drip-feeding information and offers to their inbox (see figure eight). Hudak et al. (2017) defined email marketing 'as a targeted sending of commercial and non-commercial messages to a detailed list of receivers respective email addresses' (Hudak et al., 2017: 342). Hassan et al. (2015) looked at the benefits of having a CRM approach which can increase customer retention, boost sales and raise the number of loyal members. Sullivan (2022) spoke about the FA's approach to acquiring more members and how amplifying the content strengthened the direct engagement with fans.

The build-up to the opening group match against Croatia on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021 at Wembley saw England's official social media platforms post many photographic and video content to ramp up the hype and preparations for the fans. The evening before the game (12<sup>th</sup> June 2021) the Three Lions put up a pre-tournament video that was captioned, 'A message to our fans – We need you. All of us. All of you'. It contained a variety of clips of the team, fans and the

society we live in to bring the country together to show their support. This form of two-way communication is important as it interacts with England fans and is a strategic marketing, advertising and management tool (Byon & Phua, 2021).

Chapter two delves into the use of social media throughout the Euros, looking specifically at how England engaged their fans through visual content on various platforms. It will also consider why national teams like the Three Lions use social media.

## **Chapter 2: How England utilised social media platforms throughout their European Championship campaign**

‘Using social media to increase a team or organization’s online footprint and connect with fans, several sports organizations use social media to get fans more actively engaged with the sport and with each other’.

(Billings & Hardin, 2014: 216)

Billings and Hardin (2014) reflect on the importance of social media and how it improves an organisation's online footprint and engages more with fans. In the current digital age, social media is one of the most powerful forces in sports and is continuing to get stronger as fans are engaging more with their desired sports team (Lyberger et al, 2014). Kuzma et al. (2014) outlines the magnitude of social media in the sporting world: ‘football clubs across the globe are realizing that the use of social media is the future in terms of improving and expanding their business, whether this be for marketing purposes or as a medium for directly communicating with their fans’ (Kuzma et al., 2014: 728). England, as well as many other nations, were active on various social media platforms throughout Euro 2020, using them to allow fans to engage with large information about the Three Lions and as an outlet for audio and visual content (Raney & Bryant, 2006).



Figure nine: A screenshot showcasing England's official Twitter page (Source: England via Twitter).

Web 2.0, a concept popularised by Tim O'Reilly saw the emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook (2004) and YouTube (2005), which allowed users to interact more with each other (O'Reilly, 2009). Pegoraro and Jinnah (2012) studied fan engagement through social networking sites and noted, 'these platforms offer sport fans a place where they can interact with their teams, other fans, and to share and generate content' (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012 in Santos et al., 2018: 4). Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube are all deemed social media channels and England has created official profiles for these platforms (Sanderson, 2011). With over 13 million followers across Instagram and Twitter, 1.86 million subscribers on YouTube, 7.5 million likes on Facebook and more recently 3.2 million followers on TikTok (as of 7<sup>th</sup> March 2022), the Three Lions hold a strong online presence (see figure nine).

Throughout the tournament, three main projects made up England's social media content: the most obvious being the daily social media posts; the second one being the 'Lions' Den' series on YouTube; and the third one was the England podcast (Sullivan, 2022). The daily activity that England had on their social channels was direct to fan content, including player of the match, training videos and graphics celebrating the team's achievements (Sullivan, 2022). Osei-Frimpong and McClean (2018) investigate how sports brands like England use social media to engage with consumers and how it helps create and communicate 'the brand's story, using brand or brand-related language, images and meanings' (Osei-Frimpong & McClean, 2018 in Chadwick et al., 2021: 180).



*Figure ten: England vs Scotland group stages game for the Euros (Source: Sporting Press on Twitter, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021).*

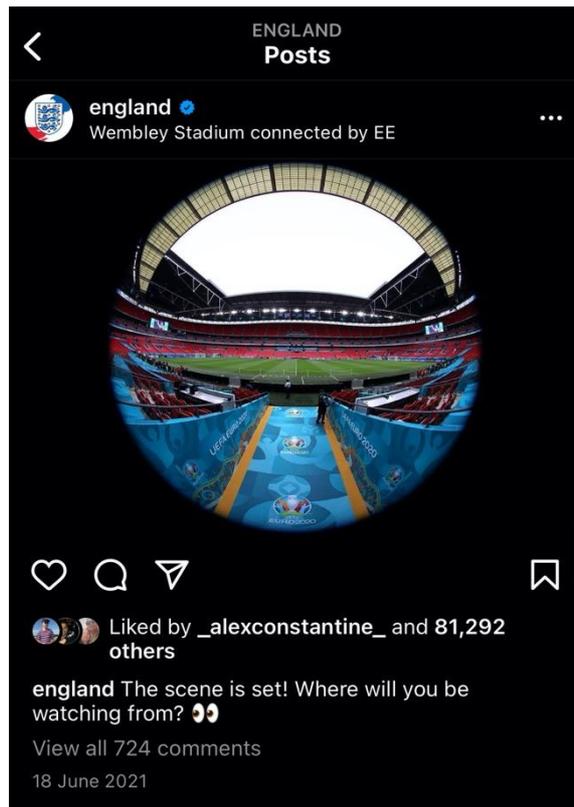
England's social media activity was very consistent throughout the campaign with daily content distributed onto their official platforms. Each matchday involves a sophisticated structure in terms of the way the content is shown. England's second group game of the tournament was against Scotland on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021, the first post that went out on matchday was a graphic asset made by Neil Jamieson (The Sporting Press) that collated images of the players, flags and Wembley (see figure ten). The design informs England's social media followers when and where the game is, as well as developing a two-way communication between the fans and the national team by allowing comments, replies and

retweets on the piece (Menon & Philip, 2018: 1053). Lee et al. (2014) mentioned how the supporters become more engaged on Twitter because of the exchange of opinions between one another (Lee et al., 2014 in Pegoraro et al., 2021: 4).



*Figure eleven: Bukayo Saka sat on a floating unicorn in the pool (Source: England via Twitter, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

The emergence of TikTok in 2016, allows users to create short-form videos on a variety of different topics (Geysler, 2021). England, like many other sports teams and organisations, has a TikTok account where they post short video clip footage of funny moments, training and Q&As from their camp as well as share fan's experiences. TikTok has become a place where football fans can connect, create and be entertained through their own team/country (Bauman, 2021). England used the platform more informally throughout the Euros, whether it was Saka sitting on a floating unicorn in the pool or showing fan reactions to the games (see figure eleven).



*Figure twelve: An example of an England social media post on matchday, showcases that the game against Scotland will be played in Wembley (Source: England on Instagram, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021).*

Twitter is a platform where sports teams, like England, tweet the ‘blow by blow’ live match updates that give fans ‘instantaneous information’ (Williams et al., 2014: 36). Phil McNulty, speaking about the importance Twitter has for sport, notes, ‘I don’t think there is any turning back now. Twitter is here as an important tool reporting live in matches, events and also breaking stories’ (Paul McNulty in Allan & Fowler-Watt, 2013: 303). On matchdays, information and pictures were constantly being shared across all the Three Lions’ official platforms of players arriving at the stadium, the changing room and the stadium where the game was being held (see figure twelve). Whannel (2002) uses the term ‘vortextuality’ when describing how rapid digital information exchanges are. With England having performed well in this tournament, it meant this news dominated the headlines. He notes, ‘various

media constantly feed off each other and, in the electronic and digital information exchange, the speed at which this happens becomes very rapid' (Whannel, 2002: 206).



*Figure thirteen: Dominic Calvert-Lewin takes on a basketball challenge in the first episode of the 'Lions' Den' series as he tries to win prizes for the EE fan wall (Source: England Official YouTube, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2021).*

The 'Lions' Den' connected by EE is a YouTube series that went out on England's official channel, with an episode being released every day. The first episode of the show was broadcasted to fans on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2021, five days before the Three Lions took on Croatia in the opening game of the tournament at Wembley Stadium. The series invites some of the England players to answer questions from the EE fan wall, taking part in different challenges and talking about the upcoming games with show host Josh Denzel. The first episode featured forward Dominic Calvert-Lewin as he showed off his basketball skills to try and win prizes for the fans (see figure thirteen).



*Figure fourteen: Show host, Josh Denzel (left) and England captain, Harry Kane (right) on the Lion's Den set as they have a relaxed chat on the beanbags (Source: England via Twitter, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2022).*

Sullivan (2022) spoke about the advantages of having in-camp video content that can go up on social media platforms. He suggests, 'What we have from an England side over other companies like BBC and Sky Sports is unprecedented access to players, they are all at our fingertips within reason' (Sullivan, 2022). This allows fans to see the genuine side of what the players are like (see figure fourteen). The Lions' Den series allowed England to control the narrative of the show which meant the media couldn't run away with it and create their own stories (Sullivan, 2022).

Burgess and Green (2018) investigated how YouTube can be respected as a media and cultural phenomenon and described the platform as 'a distribution platform that could make the products of commercial media more easily accessible' (Burgess & Green, 2018: 16). England's YouTube channel provides fans with a catalogue of video content that includes interviews, training videos and matchday promotional content. This social media

platform has become a place where fans can watch exclusive visual content from their favourite sports team on and off the pitch, 79% of viewers said YouTube has sports content that can't be found anywhere else (Shiple, 2021).



Figure fifteen: The cover photo of the 'The Official England Podcast' (Source: Acast, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2021).

A new project the FA brought out for the Euros was 'The Official England Podcast', the series had 37 daily episodes, like Lions' Den, but instead of visual content, it was purely audio-driven. Sullivan (2019) reflecting on the emerging podcast industry, states that 'podcasting is expanding rapidly as a popular culture phenomenon, connecting listeners to audio content created by professionals' (Sullivan, 2019: 1). The podcast was available on sites such as Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Acast and went down well throughout the tournament and was in the top 40 iTunes charts on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021 (iTunesCharts.net, 2021). The podcast also topped some charts and had over 100,000 downloads (Sullivan, 2022).

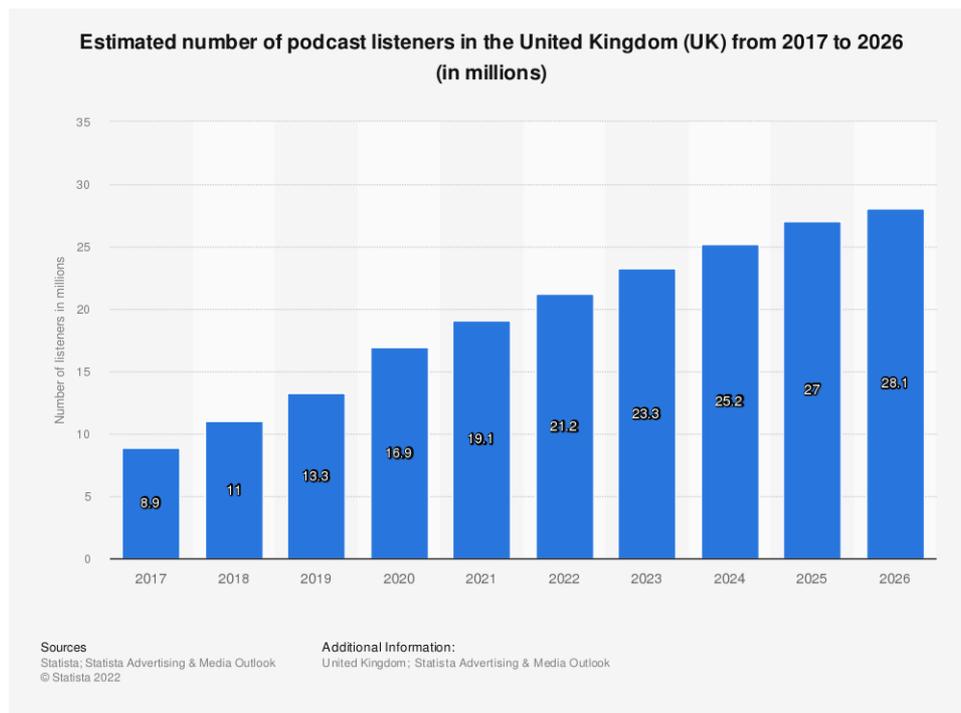


Figure sixteen: The estimated number of podcast listeners in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2017 to 2026 (Source: Statista, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2022)

This type of audio content is on the rise and more people have begun listening to podcasts over the last few years. Since 2017, the estimated number of podcast listeners in the UK has risen by 12.3 million people (Statista, 2022). With the Lions’ Den show being a younger demographic, it allowed England’s social media team to reach an older audience of 25–35-year-olds through the official Three Lions podcast and therefore a wider range of fans engaged with social media content (Sullivan, 2022).

Following the extra time, 2-1 victory over Denmark in the semi-final of the Euros, many England players and key individuals take to social media to express their gratitude to supporters (Davis, 2021). When the national team reached their first final since the World Cup win in 1966, fans came together and celebrated the achievement on social media platforms in admiration of Gareth Southgate and his team (Belam, 2021). McCarthy et al. (2014) and Stavros et al. (2014) spoke about the relationship fans have with their sports

team on social media, they noted, ‘social media offers fans new landscapes of fandom and an additional mean to engage with their favourite teams and clubs, while at the same time allows sports organizations to strengthen fan relationships’ (McCarthy et al., 2014; Stavros et al., 2014 in Vale & Fernandes, 2017: 39).



*Figure seventeen: A screenshot from ‘The Final Word’ by Aitch (Source: England Official YouTube, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

On matchdays a ‘hype film’ would go out on social media platforms in the morning before the game took place, the main idea was to relay the main objective of the tournament to help galvanise the fans (Sullivan, 2022). The pre-match video, named ‘The Final Word’ featuring English rapper Aitch, went out on all official social media platforms including YouTube before England faced Italy at Wembley on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021. The video included many special moments from the tournament: England beating Germany, Harry Kane’s goal against Denmark and many shots of the supporters (see figure seventeen). Aitch’s spoken-word piece helps narrate the journey of the team and the fans by giving a detailed breakdown of the Three Lions’ road to the final (Lavin, 2021). A special lyric from the video was ‘From the

city centre to country roads. The spirits strong, the love is shown. On every road is young and old. Only thing we hope, "It's Coming Home".

Chapter three looks at the events that happened on social media after the penalty defeat to Italy in the Euros final. Individuals used social media to discriminate against players like Saka, Jadon Sancho and Marcus Rashford after missing their spot-kicks in the shootout. This chapter will also look at what social media platforms are doing to tackle racial abuse towards footballers.

### **Chapter Three: The final and the discrimination that came with it**

‘Racism, as well as being an individual act, is also a part of the fabric of society and can be seen in various settings, including the media and sport.’

(Farrington et al., 2012: 18)

On 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021, England faced Italy at Wembley in the Euro 2020 final. The first final for the Three Lions at a major tournament since the 1966 World Cup victory. Due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the stadium could only be filled to a 75% attendance (Ziegler, 2021). Nonetheless, 67,173 passionate England and Italy fans cheered and supported their national team. Following the final whistle, the game finished 1-1 after extra time and saw the two nations go to spot kicks to decide the winner. Unfortunately, England was defeated 3-2 on penalties with Saka, Rashford and Sancho all missing their efforts. Due to this, these three black England players subsequently received racial abuse from trolls on social media.

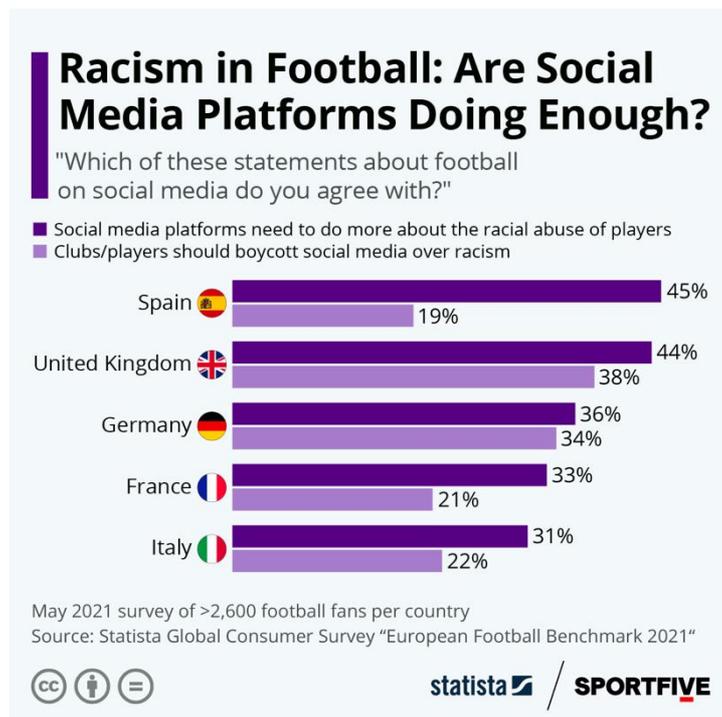
Several disturbing events took place before the final, one of them saw several ticketless fans break into the stadium by forcing their way through barriers and turnstiles (Ames, 2021).

People with booked seats could not access them as supporters without tickets were in their place. The Metropolitan Police described these people as ‘thugs not fans’ (Binding, 2021).

The other saw a high number of streets littered with rubbish after fans were gathering to get ready for the final. 30 tons of rubbish and broken glass had to be removed from roads in Central London and Wembley following the aftermath of the game (Reynolds, 2021).

Sadly, racism in football is something that is still occurring today, and because of this, over the past few years, there has been a rise in football-related racist abuse on social media (Kilvington & Price, 2017). Horne et al. (2012) outline how racism is still part of the world we live in and express, 'we live, many would argue, in a society in which racism is endemic, deep rooted and pervasive' (Horne et al, 2012: 94). In the 2019/20 season, there was a 42% increase in discrimination reports in the professional game from the previous season (Kick It Out, 2020). Cleland's (2014) article 'challenges the assumption by antiracist organisations and the football authorities that racism is being eradicated from football' (Cleland, 2014: 427). However, social activism campaigns such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and Kick it Out aim to tackle racial discrimination in sport by educating people on racism and other forms of inequality.

Social media platforms can cause groups or individuals to discriminate against professional athletes following major sporting events like the European Championships. Arimoro and Elgujja (2019) express, 'Quite often, there are football fans who express dissent on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter in form of hate speeches' (Arimoro & Elgujja, 2019: 2). A surge of racist abuse aimed at the three England players circulated across social media platforms (Lee, 2021). Bateman (2021) found that Twitter removed 1,622 racist and abusive tweets during and 24 hours after the final. Cleland and Cashmore (2013) suggested that '80% of fans feel that social media allows for racist thoughts to be communicated in ways that were not available 20 years ago' (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013 in Cleland, 2014: 417). These numbers are clear indicators that social media can be used negatively by football fans.



*Figure eighteen: A graph that investigates whether people feel social media platforms need to do more about the racial abuse of players and whether clubs/players should boycott social media over racism (Source: Statista, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

Following the Euro 2020 final, social media platforms were questioned about their ability to handle online hate and racist abuse. As seen in figure eighteen, 44% of football fans in the UK believe social media platforms need to do more about the racial abuse of players (Armstrong, 2021). The FA issued a statement asking for these companies to take action against discrimination, commenting ‘Social media companies need to step up and take accountability and action to ban abusers from their platforms, gather evidence that can lead to prosecution and support making the platforms free from this type of abhorrent abuse’ (The FA, 2021). Days after England’s final loss, Saka posted a statement on Instagram. He stated, ‘To the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, I don’t want any child or adult to have to receive the hateful and hurtful messages that me, Marcus and Jadon have received this week. I knew instantly the kind of hate that I was about to receive

and that it is a sad reality that your powerful platforms are not doing enough to stop these messages’.

105 troll accounts were reported to Instagram following the final, however, File on 4 found that 79 of these were still up six weeks on from that night at Wembley (Ahmad & Tucker, 2021). Some accounts that racially abused the three England players only received a 24-hour ban from the platform. 56 abusive Twitter accounts were suspended the day after the Euros final, 30 of those have since been posting on the network under slightly different usernames (MacInnes, 2021). Perrigo (2021) investigated why no one oversaw the comments that were made to Saka, Rashford and Sancho on social media and why these platforms are at fault. Certain individuals or groups use athletes when they have performed badly or have made a mistake as an incentive to discriminate. Social media companies must do more to control the comments being made on their platforms as too many troll accounts are getting away with abuse towards footballers. People have created and signed petitions asking to make verified identification compulsory when opening a social media account to avoid anonymity and make it easier to track down these people (Shaw, 2021). Critically, Twitter UK released a blog post providing an update on the abuse on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2021, one month after the Euro 2020 final. Twitter concluded that 99% of the accounts they suspended were not anonymous. They noted, ‘ID verification would have been unlikely to prevent the abuse from happening – as the accounts we suspended themselves were not anonymous’ (Twitter UK, 2021).

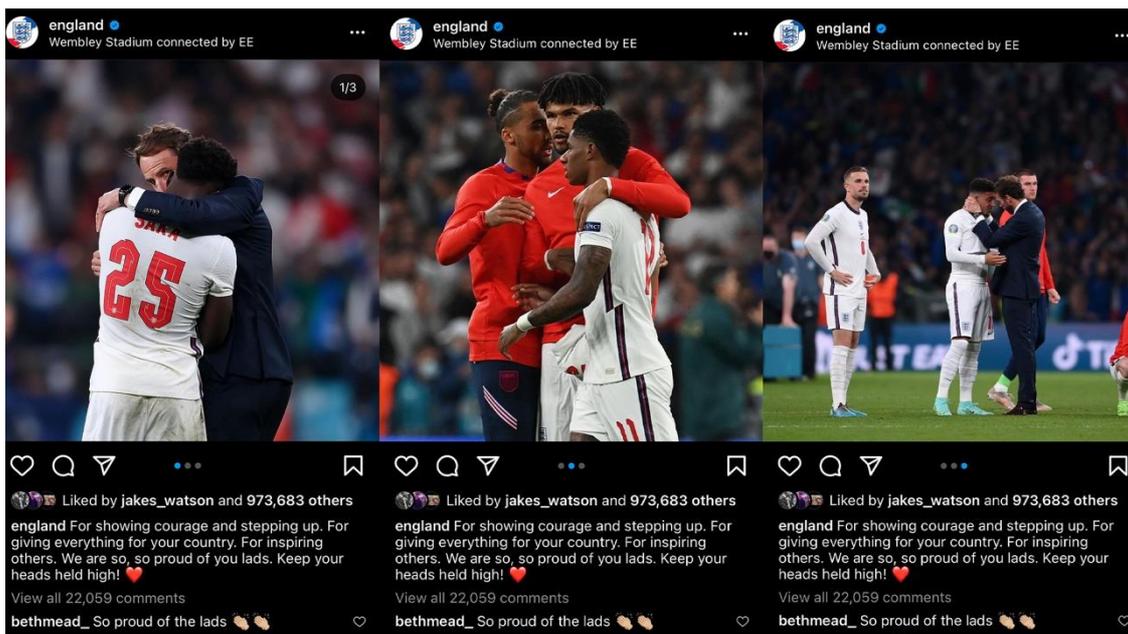
Black Lives Matter is a global campaign that highlights racism, discrimination and inequality experienced by black people (Campbell, 2021). The movement became more apparent following the murder of George Floyd in the US in 2020. During the Euros, England

continued to take a knee before every game to show their full support against racial injustice. However, 'taking the knee' caused some controversy between fans and the UK government. The home secretary, Priti Patel, labelled the anti-racism action as 'gesture politics' and that she did not support people participating in it (Mathers, 2021). Some fans would continuously 'boo' the message when performed before kick-off, but most supporters cheered and applauded the players.

After the final, Patel tweeted how gutted she was to see the England players face 'vile' racial abuse on social media. However, England defender Tyrone Mings responded to the comments from Patel on social media stating, 'You don't get to stoke the fire at the beginning of the tournament by labelling our anti-racism message as 'Gesture Politics' & then pretend to be disgusted when the very thing we're campaigning against, happens' (McGuinness, 2021).

Augustein (2021) notes, 'Athletes become the face of a nation, and many of us pin patriotic hopes, fears and frustrations on them' (Augustein, 2021). The amount of pressure that is put on footballers in specific situations is high and sometimes too much for these players. Taking a penalty with the whole country watching and relying on those three individuals to score can take a blow on their mental health and wellbeing. Bennett and King (2021) identify the need for a transcultural model that recognises 'the interrelated experiences of racist abuse from fans and mental health in sport, particularly for members of the Professional Footballers Association' (Bennett & King, 2021: 861). Mings was a player who openly spoke about his struggle with mental health during the tournament saying, 'When 90-95 per cent of your country are having doubts over you, it's very difficult to stop this intruding on your own thoughts' (Mings in Moore, 2021).

Seven-time Formula 1 driver Lewis Hamilton condemned the prejudice Saka, Rashford and Sancho all received by putting out the following Instagram post, he notes ‘The pressure to deliver is felt by every sportsperson but when you are a minority representing your country this is a layered experience. Success would feel like a double victory, but a miss feels like a two-fold failure when it’s compounded with racist abuse’ (Lalani & Zafar, 2021). Along with Hamilton and many others, England manager Gareth Southgate and Boris Johnson condemned racism by saying the players need to be lauded as heroes and the abuse they received is unforgivable (Morse, 2021).



*Figure nineteen: England showed their gratitude and support towards their Three Lions (Source: England on Instagram, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

England put out many posts on their official social media supporting Rashford, Sancho and Saka. The Three Lions delivered a powerful and motivational caption accompanied by a carousel of photographs of the three footballers on their official Instagram account (figure nineteen). The Three Lions’ official social media accounts ensured positivity was shared on

these platforms throughout the tournament but specifically following the final to cut through any negative noise. There were bound to be unsympathetic comments following the events that occurred, but England almost questioned these supporters' views with their posts, sharing upbeat content to support their players. Encouraging the nation to get behind their team through a tough time.



*Figure twenty: Saka is given a standing ovation by the whole crowd as Arsenal visit Brentford (Source: Eurosport, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021).*

Saka came off the substitution bench for Arsenal, his boyhood club, in their first league game of the 2021/2022 season against Brentford and received a standing ovation and warm reception from the fans of both teams (see figure twenty). This was the first time he had played since he missed his penalty for England.



*Figure twenty-one: The local community placing messages of love and support towards Rashford on his mural (Source: The Guardian, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021).*

Rashford's mural, based in Withington, Manchester, was created in 2020 after what the footballer did to tackle child food poverty during the pandemic. Unfortunately, after he missed his penalty in the final, the mural was vandalised with several swear words (Sidle, 2021). However, as seen in figure twenty-one, the local community gathered at the artwork and put-up letters, posters, poems, flags and flowers on the top of the graffiti to show their full support and oppose racism (Wolfe-Robinson, 2021). England backed the act from the public through a post on their social media network that was captioned 'Loved and admired'. The Manchester United forward disclosed his appreciation on his Instagram page, thanking fans for what they had done for him. Rashford is a clear role model on and off the pitch and it is clear from the messages that it is a small minority of people that feel the need to discriminate against professional athletes.

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 2022, South African entrepreneur Elon Musk agreed to a \$44 billion fee to buy the social media network, Twitter. He has already made suggestions of what he plans to do

with the app. One of those suggestions is to make Twitter a place for the free exchange of ideas and encourage freedom of speech (Martinez, 2022). If this idea becomes true, questions will be asked about how the platform will deal with harmful content and hate speech, something that is already not being monitored well enough by Twitter. It is clear, that this is still happening in the sporting world and could only get worse if the company loosens its content moderation. This is a move that could see more racism and discrimination towards footballers, similar to what happened with the three England players on the same network.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation highlights that social media is a powerful tool and helps bring England, as a nation, together. The postponement of the European Championship in 2020 due to COVID-19 meant supporters had to wait until the summer of 2021 to see the Three Lions play in this prestigious major tournament.

England's brand team implemented a successful marketing campaign that brought fans from all over the nation together. The main objective was to galvanise fans and the country's spirit and this is something they achieved. Delving into the importance of how marketing helps fans feel closer to their team and the key activation points before the tournament that helped them prepare for the month ahead. The squad announcement proved a success, with supporters engaging with the content meant the video hit over one million views on Twitter and 219,000 views on YouTube. Campaigns like Boxheads by Bud Light and The FA's 'My England Football' were strong incentives to encourage fans to engage with the brand and get involved with the major tournament spirit. It is clear that the internet is a vital promotional tool in the current digital age and for sports brands like England, it is an opportunity to market themselves. It is only something that will continue to evolve moving forwards and in future tournaments.

England's social media presence throughout the competition was special. The consistency and quality of content during the four weeks were significant and had a lot of meaning behind it. The Lions' Den and the 'Inside Training' videos gained a lot of traction on the official YouTube channel. Their social media accounts created a positive place that allowed both fans and the team to connect, from this, supporters could voice their opinions and debate specific topics.

Unfortunately, it is clear discrimination and racial abuse is an apparent issue that still needs to be resolved in the modern day. The abuse Rashford, Sancho and Saka received was unacceptable and social media platforms must do more to punish these groups and individuals. The research shows that ID verification would not have stopped the racial abuse from happening and that the consequences and prosecution are not strong enough. Black Lives Matter and Kick it Out have been influential campaigns to remove this abuse from the game. Rashford's mural shows that love always wins and that the positive comments and support outweigh the negativity online.

With the news of Musk buying Twitter, there could be a lot of changes to the platform meaning there could be an opportunity for more freedom of speech. However, this may cause an increase in hate speech like racism and discrimination towards athletes.

Overall, social media does have its positive and negative impacts, but it is powerful when it comes to promoting content and maintaining the bond between fans and their sports team. England notably focuses on bringing fans closer to camp and gaining a better insight into the personalities of their favourite footballers. The Three Lions did unite the nation through direct to fan social media content and celebrating key moments of success. The future is bright for England and their social media strategy, the next major tournament is at the end of this year with the 2022 Qatar World Cup and it will be another opportunity for the national team to market their brand and potentially connect with fans in different ways on their platforms.

(7059 words)

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## Illustrations

**Figure 1:** England fans enjoying themselves before a Euro 2020 match.

Source: Goal.com, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021: <https://www.goal.com/en/news/england-receive-multiple-uefa-charges-after-wembley-fan/1g1v3pqu4vvqr176klqk8x0vp2>

**Figure 2:** England's starting eleven photo before kick-off in their World Cup Qualifier against San Marino.

Source: England on Twitter, 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021:  
<https://twitter.com/england/status/1375173489548726283>

**Figure 3:** England's 'The Call Up' squad announcement graphic that accompanied the official video that featured Wretch 32.

Source: England on Instagram, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021:  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/CPlgTVyoHqh/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CPlgTVyoHqh/?utm_medium=copy_link)

**Figure 4:** The Three Lions squad for Euro 2020.

Source: England on Twitter, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021:  
<https://twitter.com/england/status/1399758152384589826>

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Source: England on YouTube, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ygo4uRWlqxU>

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Source: Bud Light UK, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2021:  
<https://twitter.com/BudLightUK/status/1409888917902573571/photo/1>

**Figure 7:** What 'My England Football' offers the fans when they sign up.

Source: England Football.com

<https://www.Englandfootball.com/members>

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Source: England Football.com Sign Up

<https://www.Englandfootball.com/members>

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Source: England via Twitter, 12<sup>th</sup> March 2022:

<https://twitter.com/England>

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Source: Sporting Press via Twitter, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021:

<https://twitter.com/sportingpress1/status/1405914465372155909>

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Source: England on Twitter, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021:

<https://twitter.com/england/status/1411757626745102337>

**Figure 12:** An example of an England social media post on matchday, showcases that the game against Scotland will be played in Wembley.

Source: England on Instagram, 18<sup>th</sup> June 2021:

[https://www.instagram.com/p/CQRlqMNFzU/?utm\\_medium=copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CQRlqMNFzU/?utm_medium=copy_link)

**Figure 13:** Dominic Calvert-Lewin takes on a basketball challenge in the first episode of the ‘Lions’ Den’ series as he tries to win prizes for the EE fan wall.

Source: England Official YouTube, 8<sup>th</sup> June 2021:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwYZ9mMFxbU&t=1574s>

**Figure 14:** Show host, Josh Denzel (left) and England captain, Harry Kane (right) on the Lion’s Den set as they have a relaxed chat on the beanbags.

Source: England on Twitter, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2021:

<https://twitter.com/england/status/1411685092976701442>

**Figure 15:** The cover photo of the ‘The Official England Podcast’.

Source: Acast, 9<sup>th</sup> July 2021: <https://play.acast.com/s/the-official-england-podcast/-34philfodenonhowthethreelionsarepreparingforthefinalandkylewalkerrevealshetriedtoscoreagainstdenmark>

**Figure 16:** The estimated number of podcast listeners in the United Kingdom (UK) from 2017 to 2026.

Source: Statista, 7<sup>th</sup> February 2022: <https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1147560/podcast-reach-uk>

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Source: England Official YouTube, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2021:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vkMMXlgPol>

**Figure 18:** A graph that investigates whether people feel social media platforms need to do more about the racial abuse of players and whether clubs/players should boycott social media over racism.

Source: Statista, 15<sup>th</sup> July 2021:

<https://www.statista.com/chart/25333/gcs-football-benchmark-racism-and-social-media/>.

**Figure 19:** England showed their gratitude and support towards their Three Lions.

Source: England on Instagram: 12<sup>th</sup> July 2021

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CROsV6eFtVK/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>

**Figure 20:** Saka is given a standing ovation by the whole crowd as Arsenal visit Brentford

Source: Eurosport, 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021:

[https://www.eurosport.com/football/premier-league/2021-2022/football-news-bukayo-saka-given-standing-ovation-by-whole-crowd-as-arsenal-visit-brentford\\_sto8490035/story.shtml](https://www.eurosport.com/football/premier-league/2021-2022/football-news-bukayo-saka-given-standing-ovation-by-whole-crowd-as-arsenal-visit-brentford_sto8490035/story.shtml)

**Figure 21:** The local community placing messages of love and support towards Rashford on his mural.

Source: The Guardian, 13<sup>th</sup> July 2021:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jul/13/manchester-shows-support-for-marcus-rashford-its-evolved-into-something-special>.