



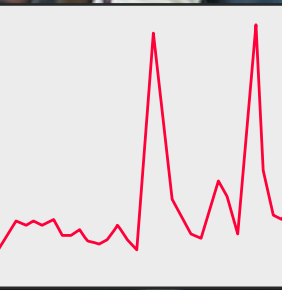













# ***BRAVING THE BACKLASH***

How sports brands can take a stand on social



# CONTENTS

	Section 1 <b>WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THIS REPORT</b>		Section 8 <b>EVOLUTION OF DISCOURSE ON GENDER &amp; SEXUAL IDENTITY IN RECENT YEARS</b>
	Section 2 <b>WHY WE HAVE WRITTEN THIS REPORT AND CHOSEN THESE SUBJECTS</b>		Section 9 <b>WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE CHANGE AT THE PARIS OLYMPICS/ PARALYMPICS</b>
	Section 3 <b>LOOKING AHEAD TO EURO 2024 AND RACISM</b>		Section 10 <b>STRATEGIES TO COMBAT HATE AROUND GENDER &amp; SEXUAL IDENTITY AT THE PARIS GAMES AND BEYOND</b>
	Section 4 <b>HOW HAS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION CHANGED IN THE PAST FEW YEARS</b>		Section 11 <b>ADAPTING THREE-STEP GUIDANCE FOR BRAND COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT ACROSS SENSITIVE ISSUES</b>
	Section 5 <b>WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE CHANGE AT EURO 2024</b>		Section 12 <b>CHEAT SHEET</b>
	Section 6 <b>HOW BRANDS CAN ADDRESS RACIAL ABUSE AT EURO 2024 AND BEYOND</b>		Section 13 <b>WHAT THE PLATFORMS SAY WHEN IT COMES TO CONTENT MODERATION</b>
	Section 7 <b>ANTICIPATING DISCRIMINATION ON GENDER &amp; SEXUAL IDENTITY AT THE PARIS GAMES</b>		Section 14 <b>ABOUT WE ARE SOCIAL SPORT</b>



# WHAT IS INCLUDED IN THIS REPORT?

A focus on how sports brands can tackle online hate when it manifests in the form of racial discrimination, or discrimination around gender & sexual identity

When we created our original [Braving the Backlash report](#) back in 2018, hate on social media was a growing problem.

Since then, it has only grown and mutated further, making it increasingly difficult for brands to stand up to hate online. Marginalised communities often feel attacked and unsupported by brands who are quick to include them in advertising campaigns, but ignore the abuse they receive online. Often, this is because brands don't know how to support affected communities and fear the backlash if they stand up to hate.

But brands are powerful, influential, and can lead change on social media if they choose to help turn the tide of online hate. We are here to help them do exactly that.

In this report, we will cover two key issues that are likely to result in online hate: racial discrimination, and discrimination on the grounds of sexuality or gender identity. These conversations are sadly pervasive in sport and spike on social media during major sporting occasions.

The report examines these topics through the lens of two major sporting events this summer: UEFA Euro 2024 and the Paris Olympics/Paralympics. These issues are not exclusive to these events, but based on previous years, we expect to see a spike in racism at Euro 2024 and in gender discrimination at the Paris Games.



We have broken down how the online discourse around these issues has changed over time, what we expect to see this summer, and what steps brands can take to tackle online hate around these issues – during this year's events and beyond. This report includes takeaways for brands rooted in expert guidance from the leading voices on these issues; we consulted with Troy Townsend MBE, Head of Player Engagement at [Kick It Out](#), [Liz Ward](#), Global Diversity and Inclusion Consultant and former Director of Programmes at [Stonewall](#), and Aby Hawker, CEO of [TransMission PR](#) (a communications consultancy that specialises in trans and non-binary inclusion and awareness).

We know that the hate brands receive on their social pages generally falls into one of three categories.

First, the kind of hateful comments or content that breach platforms' community guidelines and, in the most extreme cases, break the law. These comments will usually be dealt with by the platforms and, where necessary, escalated to law enforcement agencies.

Second, when users voice opinions that are critical of the brand or its rationale for supporting said cause, without using language that's discriminatory, violent or threatening. If your brand encourages freedom of expression, they will most likely neither reply to this type of comment nor remove it.

There's a third category of hate that can be the most challenging for brands to navigate: the grey area between hate speech and free speech. This covers hateful comments on a brand's social pages that offend an individual or community based on their race, gender, sexuality and beyond. These comments may not breach platforms' community guidelines, but we believe more should be done to address them – especially when it comes to sporting events that have the world's attention.

This third area is why we have written this report: to show brands how to offer genuine solidarity to affected communities and athletes, and demonstrate how they can do more to turn the tide of online hate.



# WHY WE HAVE WRITTEN THIS REPORT AND CHOSEN THESE SUBJECTS

Our research and data reveals that these issues will lead to a spike in online hate and discrimination around the two biggest sporting events of the summer: **EURO 2024** and the **Paris Olympics & Paralympics**

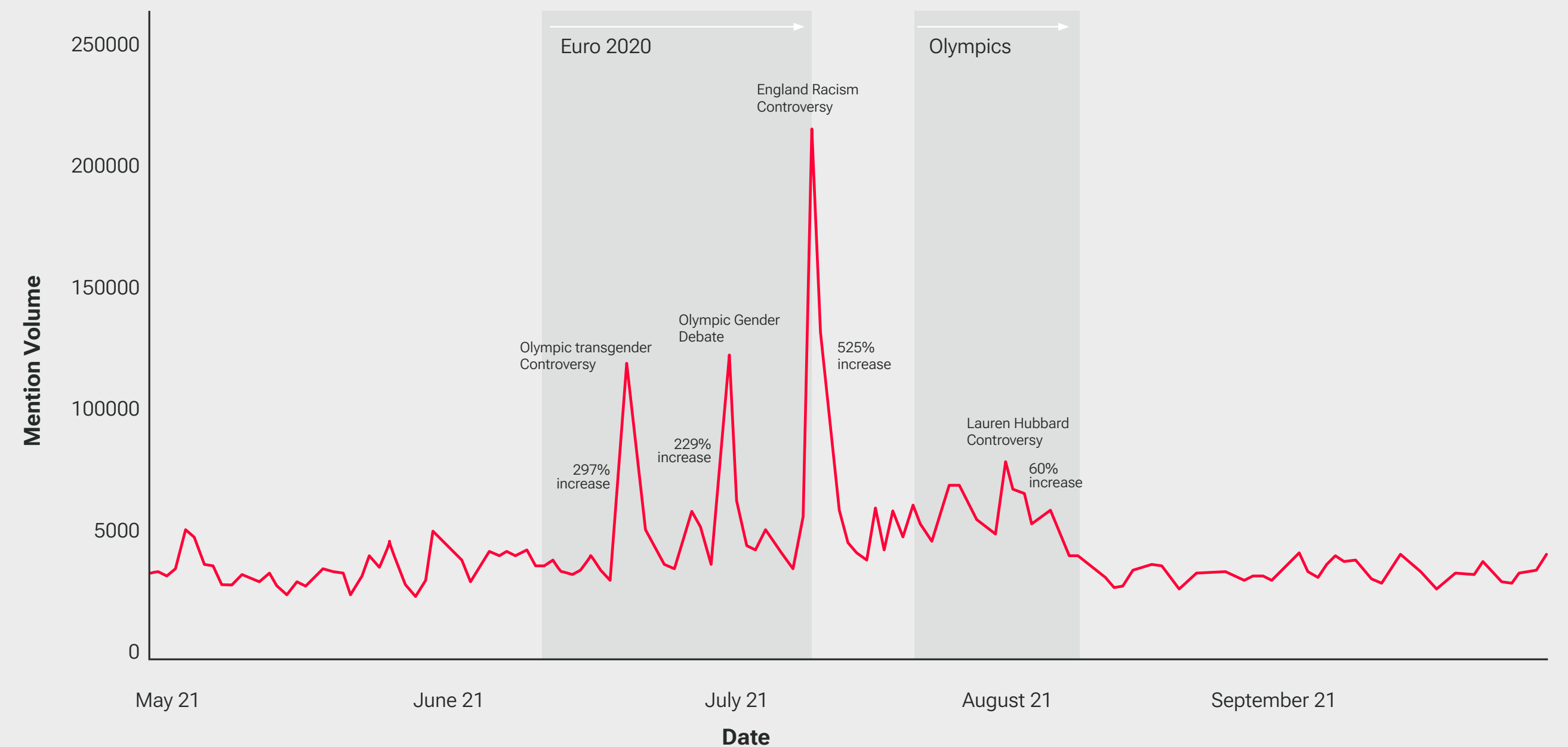
2024 promises to be a banner year for sport, with Euro 2024 and the Paris Olympics headlining. There will be many moments to celebrate and many memories created for athletes and fans to cherish.

However, based on our research and the data, we predict that there will also be a surge in online hate around two topics: racism and discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender identity. Both topics have seen instances of online hate rise over the past few years, and spike at major events. Therefore, it is important for brands to develop a watertight approach to these subjects.

Using our social listening tool, Brandwatch, We Are Social tracked mentions of both the Olympics and UEFA European Championship during 2021, in conjunction with terms relating to the issues of racism, transphobia, homophobia and hate speech across blogs, forums, online news and social platforms including Reddit, Tumblr and X (Twitter).

This delivered 12.58 million total mentions across the year, 12.5% of which happened during the Euros (Jun 11-Jul 11) – 32% higher than average – and 7.9% during the Olympics (Jul 23-Aug 8) – 34% higher than average.

This data includes both hate speech itself, and public discourse denouncing hate speech. However, our analysis found that overall, sentiment was highly negative – outnumbering positive mentions aimed at **empowering minorities** by 10-1. In particular, key spikes in **anti-trans sentiment** were noted in relation to the Olympics, and **racism** in relation to football. This proves the need for more work to be done when it comes to brands combatting hate on social platforms when such spikes of animosity and discrimination occur.







Three years ago, a grey cloud loomed over football. Following missed penalties in the final of the 2021 European Championship, what should have been a moment of unity instead was defined by a slew of racist comments and emojis that the players received on social media. There have sadly been countless other examples in the past year, from Mike Maignan to Vinicius Jr, that show the changing face of racial discrimination in football. International tournaments are a time for togetherness, but recently they've also become associated with a spike in racist abuse – particularly on social media.







# “LARGEST GENDER-EQUAL SPORTING EVENT IN THE WORLD”

When it comes to the issue of gender and sexual identity, it might seem as though the issue of gender inclusion in sports has finally found a resolution. We've seen a 16% increase in viewership of women's sports between 2022 and 2023. Female sports clubs are thriving; This Woman Runs has reached 250,000 members. There has also been a slew of brand partnerships with female teams, such as Prada x China Women and NYX x WNBA's New York Liberty. Meanwhile, the Tokyo Olympics featured the largest number of LGBTQIA+ athletes ever.

For brands looking ahead to this year's Olympics, there is an opportunity to tell celebratory stories about what has long been touted as the “largest gender-equal sporting event in the world”. Yet, while there will be plenty of barrier-breaking moments, the question of gender and identity at the Olympics is contentious.

Not only do we expect issues around sexism and homophobia, but also the question of transgender, non-binary and intersex athletes. This sporting event is likely to be used by many online as a springboard to sow further division around the trans debate. It is crucial that brands don't just avoid doing the wrong thing, but also show the right level of support to affected communities online when the spotlight is on them.



# LOOKING AHEAD TO EURO 2024 AND RACISM



“People have got bored. Brands, the press, football clubs, federations, government bodies. Everyone has got bored of talking about racism even though it remains the highest form of discrimination in football bar none.”

**TROY TOWNSEND, MBE**





# HOW HAS RACIAL DISCRIMINATION CHANGED ONLINE OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS?

There is a disconnect between the influx of discourse around the BLM movement and tangible change in football.

Three years ago, the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement meant racism was at the forefront of public discourse. Football clubs carried out a host of acts that sought to do good, from social media blackouts to players taking a knee before kicking off Premier League games.

While broadly praised at the time, those actions – particularly taking the knee – became derided by players such as Wilfried Zaha and leaders like Les Ferdinand due to the fact they were not matched by tangible change.

Today, the prevailing sentiment among Black players mirrors this. Following the abuse of Coventry City midfielder Kasey Palmer in January 2024, the Professional Footballers' Association released a statement stating that players don't believe there are "real, consistent and significant" consequences for racial abuse in football. To quote Kick It Out's Troy Townsend, the game has "gone quiet" on the issue.

While there have been signs of solidarity, like the global football community coming together in support of Milan keeper Mike Maignan following racist chants from opposition fans in Italy, support has been lacking in many other moments.

The continued abuse that Vinicius Jr faces from fans, compounded by criticism in the media, illustrates the slow progress made. And sadly, his experience is not an isolated incident. In April 2024, Athletic Club forward Nico Williams asked the referee to stop play due to racist chants in a game against Atletico Madrid. In February, Newport County striker Omar Bogle faced racist abuse at Gillingham, reporting to Sky that he "almost shed a tear" due to what he experienced. As for social media, reports of racist abuse increased three-fold in 2022/23 compared to the previous season.

In the absence of a system that is set up to deal with racism, new voices have appeared that have prioritised speaking on it. Next generation football publishers like Versus are taking on the role of activists, using Instagram carousels to educate the masses and bring attention to discrimination. Podcasts like On The Judy and Stoppage Time TV create a space for Black voices to shine through.

But it's not just on these platforms to raise awareness, fight racism and show solidarity. It's on everyone connected to the game to play an intentional part in bettering it.



# WHAT WE EXPECT TO SEE CHANGE AT EURO 2024

We are expecting to see brands step in to protect players just as much as football associations, and part of this means working in unison with the athletes affected, experts in the space, and other brands

*“For me, whoever is connected to that player brand wise or agency wise... whatever endorsements they get, they should be looking to protect that individual, shouldn't they?”*

– TROY TOWNSEND, MBE

At a time when players feel as though support and action is dwindling, it's crucial for the football community to stand up to racism in unison.

Beyond calling out racism and showing support on social media for footballers who are victims to it (no matter their country or sponsor), organisations connected to those targeted with racist abuse must consider consulting victims when taking further action. When German international Antonio Rüdiger marked the beginning of Ramadan by posting a picture of himself on a prayer mat, with his right index finger pointed to the sky (a Muslim gesture called Tawhid), former Bild Editor-In-Chief Julian Reichelt accused Rüdiger of performing the “ISIS-greeting of Islamists”. The German FA stood side by side with Rüdiger, with both the federation and the player's management team filing separate legal complaints against the journalist, united in their response against religious intolerance. Echoing Troy Townsend's sentiment above that protecting the individual athlete should be top of mind for every federation, institution, or brand who has a connection to that player.

However, it's not only football associations or leagues – commercial partners have a responsibility to protect players too. Learn from mobile network EE, who created Hope United, a multi-year campaign dedicated to tackling online hate in football. Rather than being a one-off stunt, EE's initiative has consistently campaigned for a safer online world. In 2022, it sent an open letter to the government “lobbying for a more stringent Online Safety Bill”, following a campaign to combat online sexist abuse during the UEFA Women's European Championship in 2022. It then followed this up in 2023, with a campaign which lobbied the House of Lords to make the Online Safety Bill safer for women and girls.

Finally, consider working with experts in the space, or those leading the conversation. Look to McDonald's Fun Football collaboration with Kick It Out, which saw the creation of a coaching development platform and bursary fund to make McDonald's grassroots football initiatives more inclusive, particularly when it comes to training coaches. Or on a similar subject, look to Versus' collaboration with the Premier League and its 'Dugout Diaries' content series on Instagram, which sees the platform “highlighting a new cohort of coaches working hard to make elite level football more diverse and inclusive for the next generation, on and off the pitch”.





# WHAT CAN BRANDS DO?

A three step approach to tackling racial discrimination at this year's Euros

Statements will not quell the tide of online hate. One off brand responses seek to show solidarity only at 'high profile' moments. Just as much as the discourse around these subjects has changed online, so has online behaviour. In other words, a more discerning, Gen Z, socially native audience and the impacted communities will see through standalone statements made by brands. As Troy Townsend notes, brands who put out a hollow statement on social media are not doing enough to stop online hate.

Brands need to follow a three step process to tackle racism on social media at Euro 2024 and, crucially, beyond the tournament too.

*“We have got to the point where statements are no longer good enough. Victims see straight through them.”*

TROY TOWNSEND, MBE







**ANTI HATE POLICY:**

Every brand should have their own anti-hate policy that is publicly posted online. Your social channels can link to it either in the bio or via a pinned post. It will show both online trolls and marginalised communities where your brand stands on sensitive issues, but it will also guide your page moderators in their response to hateful comments, and discourage hateful sentiment overall. Then, when you run a campaign that might trigger users to breach your anti-hate rules, we recommend posting a reminder of your anti-hate policies as a pinned comment.

**REMAIN/REPLY/REPORT:**

Plan in advance the benchmarks your brand will set around issues that generate hateful behaviour online. Without having a proper system in place, it's difficult to know how to respond to hate when it occurs in real time. That is why we recommend grouping types of posts into these three buckets, and preparing example contingency responses, as shown in our original [Braving the Backlash report](#).

**REMAIN:** Sometimes, your online community can be negative about campaigns that feature marginalised communities without being discriminatory – we urge brands to let these comments **remain** on their channels. We shouldn't censor opinions.

**REPLY:** Some hateful comments can slip through the net of platform moderation but are not extreme enough to merit reporting to law enforcement. On these occasions, we recommend brands **reply** to the comment in line with their TOV in order to take a stand against hate.

**REPORT:** Sometimes, extremely hateful comments that clearly breach platforms' community guidelines might be missed by platform moderators. We advise **reporting** these comments. The comment should also be screenshotted, as well as the user's profile where possible, in case it needs to be used as evidence at a later stage.

It is critical that brands internally align on what justifies a comment to remain, reply to or report. This way the process will be much more streamlined ahead of sporting events that will see a significant uptick in comments and conversations online.

**OUTPUT :**

Preparation of an anti-hate policy to combat online hate, and scenario planning ahead of major events to align on what comments merit a remain, reply, or report response.





**CO-CREATE EVERY STEP:**

When we spoke with Liz Ward, Diversity & Inclusion Consultant at the FA, to inform this report, she introduced a way of thinking about co-creation that has stuck with us. Often brands run creative campaigns on a sliding scale of 'Informed vs consulted vs responsible vs accountable'. At the very least, athletes involved in sporting campaigns that tackle issues like racism should be consulted, and not just informed – because if things go wrong, it's them who will be accountable. Yet, more often than not, they are only informed – rather than consulted – and this means they are removed from any decision-making process around tackling hate online. To change this, brands should be working with the player on the content as part of the campaign to make sure what is shared is what they are comfortable with. And then, if the campaign triggers hateful responses online, checking the player affected is okay. But also co-creating the responses to those hateful comments alongside them, using collab posts on Instagram for example to show unity in the face of hate. Further, if you are a brand and one of your sponsored athletes takes a strong political stance in the face of adversity (e.g. Colin Kaepernick and Nike) stand by them.

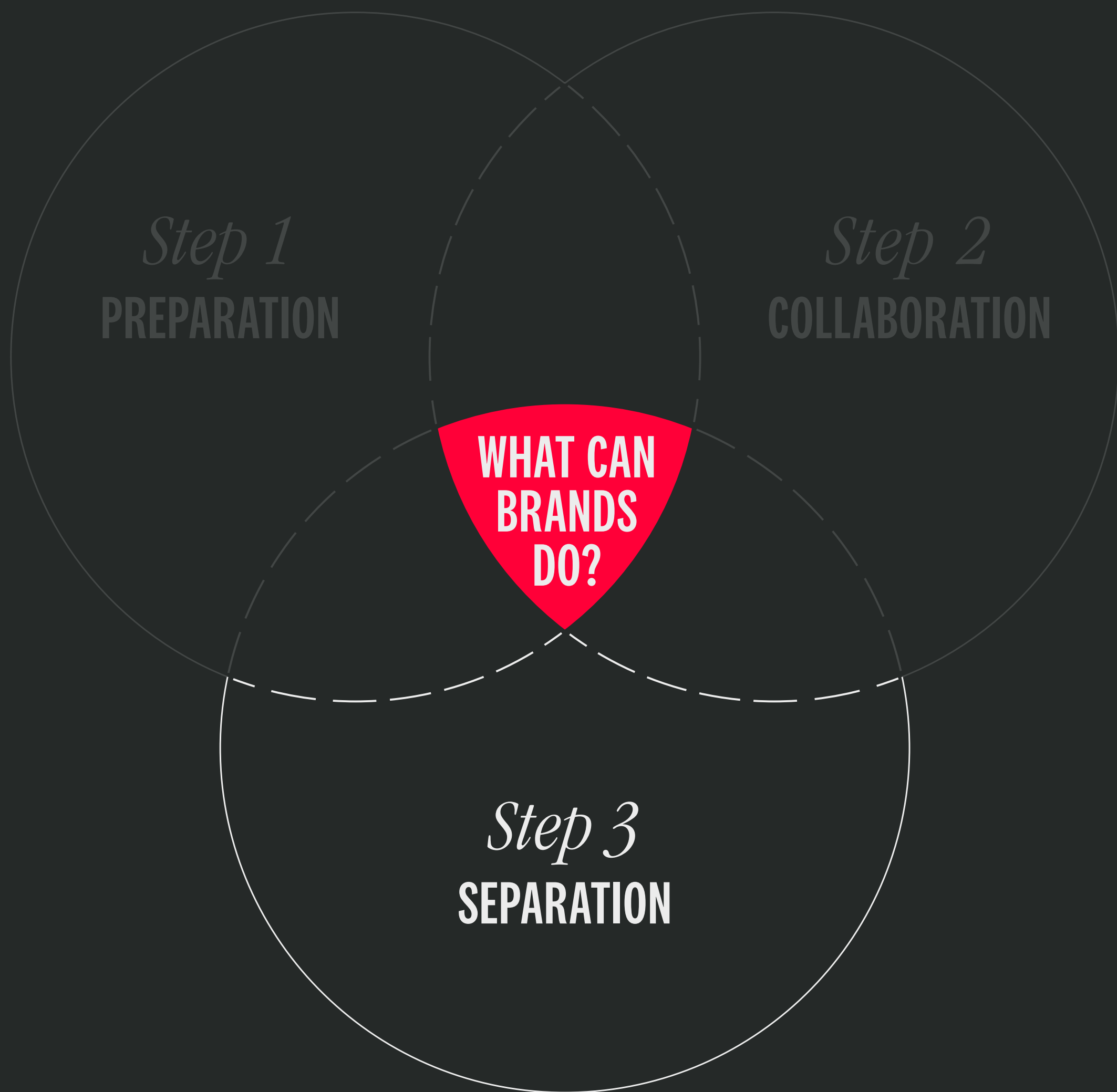
**STAND ALONGSIDE OTHERS:**

There have always been lines of separation when it comes to competitor brands' commercial interests. And that makes sense. However, subjects like racism should never be seen as a reason to maintain boundaries between competing brands. For instance, if a New Balance sponsored athlete suffered racist abuse online after a match at Euro 2024, we would expect brands such as adidas, Nike, and Puma to show solidarity in the comments straight away and stand up to hate together. There should be no delay in deciding if commenting on a competitor brand's page is right or wrong – the affected community will hear your silence and it'll be deafening. Furthermore, the result of being seen as the brand who didn't stand up to hate – online or on the pitch – is far more damaging than adding your comment to another brand's social channel.

**OUTPUT:**

Collaboration with the athletes who will ultimately be accountable online for any backlash received, and an internal policy to stand alongside competitor brands to unite against hate on social media and beyond.





Euro 2024 stands out as it is the first tournament since the BLM ‘take the knee’ movement, and we are expecting institutions, federations, and social platforms to take a much firmer stance on incidents of racial hate at this tournament. Should the action they take not be firm enough, it is up to brands to react fast and react hard.

**REACT FAST:**

In tournament football, you have a limited time to react before the news cycle moves on to the next game. This is even more the case with a tournament like Euro 2024 compared to an event like the Olympics or Paralympics because there are two or three kick offs per day, rather than the coverage being continuous. Therefore, a brand must counter any racial hate online within moments of it occurring in line with the hate policy they created as part of Step One, and in collaboration with an athlete or competitor brand involved, in line with Step Two.

**REACT HARD:**

We have spoken with all the key platforms and include their updated codes of conduct around moderation later in this report. However, there is a change in the tide when it comes to brands pulling spend from platforms to take a stand much more freely than they have in the past. This is particularly the case on X, where major brands have removed ad spend from the platform in light of concerns around moderation of hateful content. Should we see a similar case of monkey emojis being used to racially abuse Black players at Euro 2024 – and a platform such as X refuse to moderate such hateful, racist content – we would expect major brands and sponsors to feel empowered enough to take a financial stand, as well as lead on a community management response in collaboration with athletes and other brands.

**OUTPUT:**

Internally align as a brand that there are moments which will call for taking a stand beyond remain / reply / report. Identify the scenarios that will justify the next step – removal of content and ad spend from platforms that have not done enough to tackle the issue of racism during Euro 2024.





# LOOKING AHEAD TO THE 2024 PARIS GAMES AND GENDER EQUITY, GENDER IDENTITY AND SEXUALITY



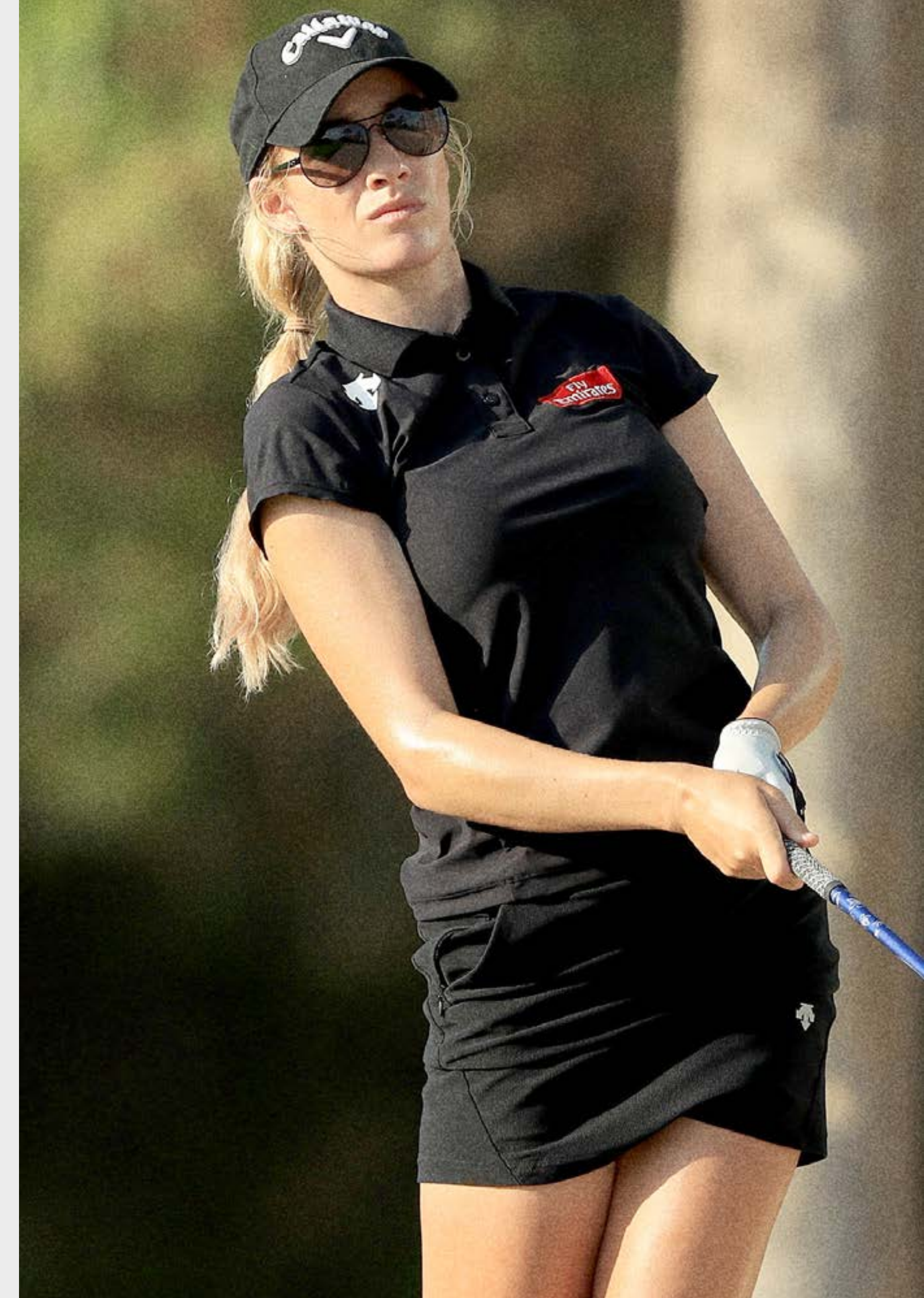
*“The first thing I would say is that even within a community of people that are connected by identity – be it gender or sexuality – you are never going to make everyone within that community happy. But it doesn’t stop you having a duty of care.”*

**LIZ WARD**



# EXPLORING THE CURRENT CONVERSATIONS AROUND GENDER EQUITY & INCLUSION, AS WELL AS SEXUALITY AND GENDER IDENTITY.

Even within this space, there is a sliding scale of progress that has been made, with hate around gender identity in particular becoming a polarising subject online over the past few years







# GENDER EQUITY & INCLUSION

When it comes to the Olympics, the trajectory of gender equity and inclusion – for both female and LGBTQIA+ athletes – has been trending in the right direction. Participation isn't just increasing – athletes are reclaiming their own narratives and celebrating their identities.

For female athletes, stars like Naomi Osaka and Simone Biles have shared their experiences on global platforms; but a new generation, like gymnast [Olivia Dunne](#) and pro golfer [Paige Spiranac](#), are using social media to authentically tell their own stories. At the same time, athletes like [Angel Reese](#) are fearlessly expressing their passion and intensity, where once their behaviour might have been called out as un-feminine and 'aggressive'.

When it comes LGBTQIA+ athletes, stars are also celebrating their sexuality as part of their identity. When Australian rock climber Campbell Harrison announced his Olympic qualification, he [thanked](#) his LGBTQIA+ community for their support. New Zealand's dual-Olympian [Robbie Manson](#), who came out as gay in 2014, announced in 2023 that he had launched his own OnlyFans account 'to promote body positivity, sensuality and self-acceptance'.

However, while representation and celebration is on the rise, significant barriers remain.

Female athletes continue to experience disproportionate

abuse compared to their male counterparts, especially online (at the Tokyo Games, women were the target of [87%](#) of social media abuse). Sporting institutions themselves are also slow to change – organisers of the Paris Olympics have [refused](#) judo Olympian [Clarisse Agbénénou](#)'s request to allow her breast-feeding daughter to stay overnight in the Olympic Village, less than a year after she was applauded for breastfeeding her same child during a world competition.

For LGBTQIA+ athletes, at the last Games, competitors were subjected to homophobic abuse even from [volunteers](#) and [pundits](#). Looking ahead to these Games, the greater ability\* and willingness of LGBTQIA+ athletes to celebrate their identity could, sadly, lead to acute abuse from some quarters – not only from participants, commentators and fans from countries with [anti-gay](#) records, but across markets. For example, only last year, football players in France (this year's host country) [refused](#) to back an anti-homophobia campaign.

\*In 2021, in a positive step, the IOC loosened [rules](#) which allowed athletes to make some political, religious and other statements at the Olympics, including the wearing of rainbow colours.



# SEXUALITY & GENDER IDENTITY

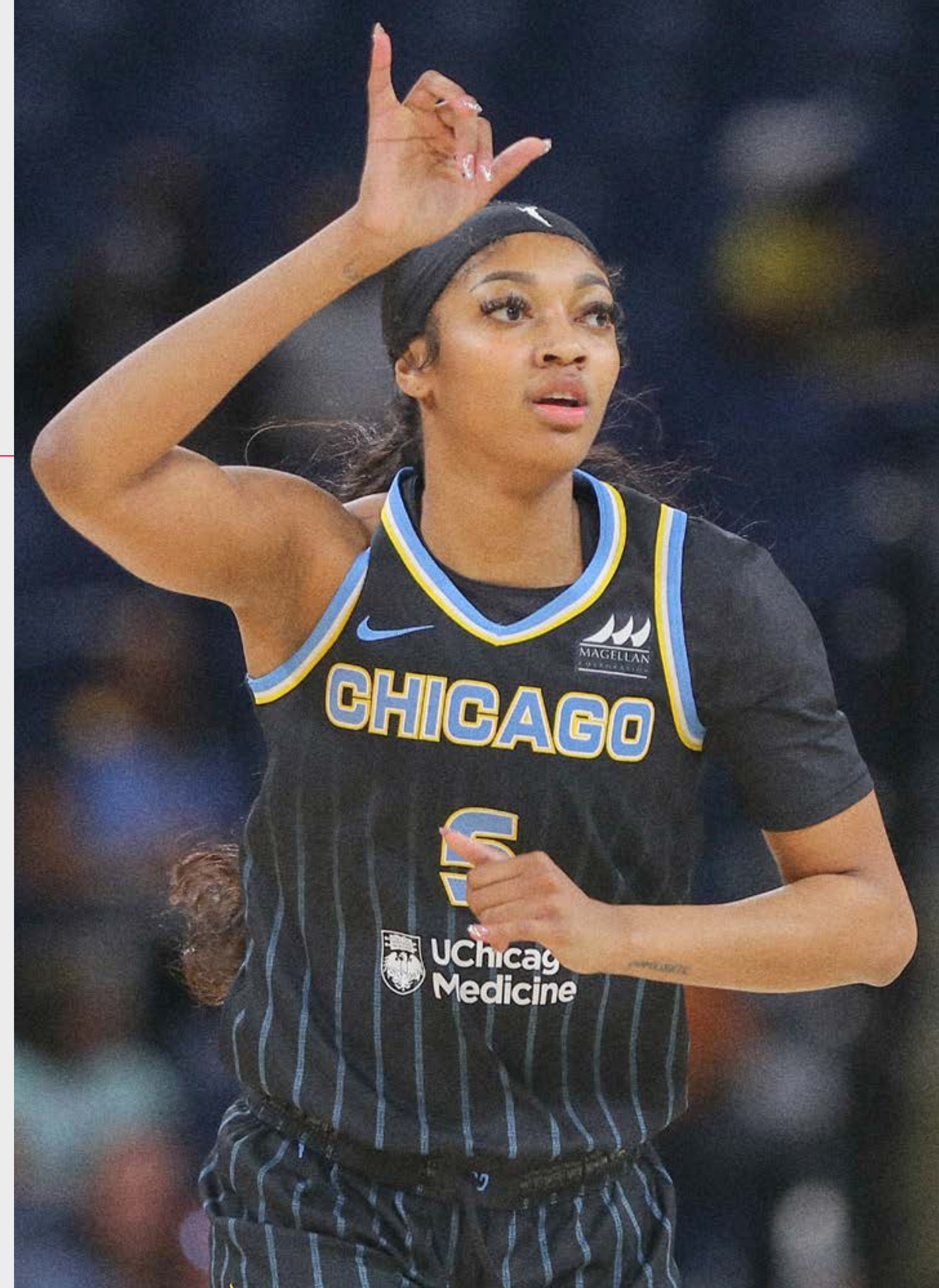
Unlike the issues facing women and openly gay athletes, transgender, non-binary and intersex athletes don't just face issues of discrimination – they face political and institutional exclusion from professional sport.

The International Olympic Committee has tightened recommendations on who can compete at an elite level, but individual **governing bodies** set their own criteria. These have been enacted with varying degrees of severity; looking ahead to Paris, two of the most visible Olympic sports – swimming and track and field – have **effectively barred** transgender female athletes, with rules that also affect some **intersex** athletes. Meanwhile, the **UK Government** wants to ban transgender athletes from all elite women's sporting events.

However, the question of trans inclusion specifically has become a political issue that goes beyond elite sports. For example, in the US, it has become weaponised as part of a **wider debate** around gender ideology. This is manifesting directly in the experience of those athletes – a 2023 study found that **67% of transgender athletes** encounter mockery and slurs during sports participation.

Despite the fact that there will be fewer trans and intersex athletes at this year's games, the issue will remain an inflection point. For brands wanting to promote and celebrate broader LGBTQIA+ participation, this presents a challenge: consumers will also be looking for solidarity to extend to trans and intersex causes and individuals, while brands will be wary of toxicity surrounding transphobic discourse.

It is also a problem for brands who wish to celebrate women in sport, as social media posts in support of women athletes are often used as flashpoints by anti-trans commentators to rile up transphobia. This has the potential of derailing what should be a celebratory moment into one of toxicity as it's hijacked by bad-faith actors, so we urge brands who post such celebratory messages to closely monitor the comments underneath their posts afterwards for this reason.





# LOOKING AHEAD TO THE PARIS OLYMPICS & PARALYMPICS

There is much to learn from brands who have approached these subjects sensitively as there is to learn from brands who made missteps around these topics

The question of how and if a brand should speak up on matters relating to trans inclusion can be complex, but for brands looking to engage with these communities and who are keen to take a proactive position by demonstrating their inclusive stance, a deeper understanding of this community and its needs are essential. Support must extend to promote full gender participation – including the full spectrum of queer identities and gender equity, as Liz Ward mentions.

There are three distinct roles brands can play when it comes to the question of gender at the Olympics.

The first is to continue to celebrate the wins of female and LGBTQIA+ athletes, and representation more broadly. The second, as with issues of racism, is to call out abuse.

The third, and crucial role, is to encourage participation from the ground up.

The social, functional and institutional barriers facing women, LGTBQ+, transgender and non-binary sports stars do not just affect athletes themselves, but the future participation of those groups in sport. Indeed, **78%** of people in the LGBTQIA+ community say they would not consider playing grassroots football, because of the presence of homophobia. Promoting this participation could take the form of **allyship campaigns**, or **investment** in equipment and training for underrepresented groups.

*“If you’re a brand and you’re planning on doing an advert with the progressive Pride flag and talking about how great it is to be gay – you need to know there are also trans colours on that flag and that community also needs to be celebrated.”*

LIZ WARD







# DYLAN MULVANEY: BUD LIGHT VS NIKE

Dylan Mulvaney is a trans activist and creator with 10 million TikTok followers. She gained fame for her 365 Days of Girlhood series - documenting her transition journey as a trans woman, and led to two big brand partnerships in 2023. The first was with Bud Light, while the second, a few days later, was with Nike. Both received transphobic comments and hate online as a result.

The abuse was extensive, and extreme – from calls for boycotts to celebrities shooting at cans of the beer. However, what differed was the response of the two brands. Nike pushed for users to be kind, inclusive and encourage each other. They also deleted abusive comments.

Meanwhile, Anheuser-Busch announced it was going to refocus its marketing away from LGBTQ+ issues towards music and sport, in what appeared to be a move to placate those who had reacted negatively. They didn't support Mulvaney during the backlash, instead issuing an apology that satisfied neither side.

In a video she posted on TikTok captioned 'Trans people like beer too', Mulvaney said her post with Bud Light led to more 'bullying and transphobia [sic] than [she] could have imagined', commenting that 'for a company to hire a trans person and then not publically stand by them is worse, in my opinion, than not hiring a trans person at all'.

*"The example that I teach is the Bud Light campaign with Dylan Mulvaney – it was just a catalogue of errors. It didn't boost the brand, and it didn't protect the influencer. When a brand is thinking about a campaign, they need to think about the threats and risks, especially for those they are wanting to platform – and know what your steps would be if you want to deliver inclusion authentically."*

LIZ WARD





# WHAT CAN BRANDS DO?

A three step approach to tackling discrimination around gender and sexual identity at the Paris Games

You will see below that steps one and two are much the same as the steps you saw in the previous section. This is deliberate, and we urge brands to take greater steps to preparing and collaborating around both of these issues in order to lead by example on social media during this busy summer of sport and beyond. It is in step three that we see a step change from the previous section, due to the increased nuance and diversity of viewpoints around gender and sexual identity.

*“Trans inclusion isn’t a one and done activity, it is an ongoing demonstration of support for a marginalised community which is being disproportionately targeted.”*

ABY HAWKER







**ANTI HATE POLICY:**

Every brand should have their own anti-hate policy that is publicly posted online. Your social channels can link to it either in the bio or via a pinned post. It will show both online trolls and marginalised communities where your brand stands on sensitive issues, but it will also guide your page moderators in their response to hateful comments, and discourage hateful sentiment overall. Then, when you run a campaign that might trigger users to breach your anti-hate rules, we recommend posting a reminder of your anti-hate policies as a pinned comment.

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Plan in advance the benchmarks your brand will set around issues that generate hateful behaviour online. Without having a proper system in place, it's difficult to know how to respond to hate when it occurs in real time. That is why we recommend grouping types of posts into these three buckets, and preparing example contingency responses, as shown in our original [Braving the Backlash report](#).

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**REPORT:** Sometimes, extremely hateful comments that clearly breach platforms' community guidelines might be missed by platform moderators. We advise **reporting** these comments. The comment should also be screenshotted, as well as the user's profile where possible, in case it needs to be used as evidence at a later stage.

It is critical that brands internally align on what justifies a comment to remain, reply to or report. This way the process will be much more streamlined ahead of sporting events that will see a significant uptick in comments and conversations online.

**OUTPUT :**

Preparation of an anti-hate policy to combat online hate, and scenario planning ahead of major events to align on what comments merit a remain, reply, or report response.





**CO-CREATE EVERY STEP:**

Once again, we would recommend brands see the scale of co-creation as 'Informed vs consulted vs responsible vs accountable'. At the very least, athletes involved in sporting campaigns that tackle issues like gender or sexual identity should be consulted, and not just informed – because if things go wrong, it's them who will be accountable. See Dylan Mulvaney x Bud Light as an example. Brands should be working with the athletes on the content as part of the campaign to make sure what is shared is what they are comfortable with. And then if the campaign triggers hateful responses online, checking the athlete affected is ok. But also co-creating the responses to those hateful comments alongside them, using collab posts on Instagram for example to show unity in the face of hate. On top of co-creating with athletes, consulting with community experts will also help reduce the backlash an athlete may face as an LGBTQIA+ athlete does not represent each subset of that broad community.

**STAND ALONGSIDE OTHERS:**

In a similar way to competing brands around the Euros, we recommend supporting other brands who take a stand against online hate around gender equity or identity. It doesn't matter if you are sharing the sentiment of a rival brand. There should be no delay in deciding if commenting on a competitor brand's page is right or wrong – the affected community will hear your silence, and it'll be deafening.

**OUTPUT:**

**Collaboration with the athletes who will ultimately be accountable online for any backlash received, and an internal policy to stand alongside competitor brands to unite against hate on social media and beyond.**





One key difference we are seeing in how conversations around the two issues we've spotlighted play out online is the nuance. When it comes to racism, there is racism and there are the voices courageous enough to combat racism. This is often the case when it comes to gender equity, but not always. It certainly isn't the case when it comes to gender and sexual identity, where we have seen multiple viewpoints fervently defended on social media with no ground given.

Rather than reacting hard and fast, as we encouraged for tackling racism at Euro 2024, we urge brands to take their time when responding to politically charged issues like gender identity when it comes up at the Paris Games. The worst thing a brand can do is share an image of the LGBTQIA+ flag and then back down at any discrimination toward any member of that community. Rainbow washing does more harm than good in most instances. Brands can avoid rainbow washing by taking long-term actions to benefit the groups the brand claims to support. This starts by bringing those voices into the room and education. Look for opportunities to do this, not just for the duration of the campaign, but as a move to integrate into the brand and company culture and policies.

**TAKE GRASSROOTS ACTION IF NOT ONLINE:**

If the issue is especially politically charged (e.g. gender identity), we recommend brands align on the action they will take, if a social statement to combat online hate is beyond them. For example, as Liz Ward noted, "as well as online discrimination, one of the biggest obstacles for many marginalised communities is participation." By choosing to empower the next generation of LGBTQIA+ athletes, including the trans community, brands are showing a commitment to tackling hate in the future.

*N.B. We still urge brands to take a stand on this issue wherever possible. We also urge brands to consult with grassroots representatives from the community you're speaking to/on behalf of, before taking a stance or supporting grassroots initiatives.*

**ADOPT A CRISIS AND ISSUES MINDSET:**

after speaking with Aby Hawker, CEO of TransMission PR, when it comes to trans+ inclusion in sport, brands need to change their mindset. They must carry out a risk mitigation ahead of every campaign and every sports event, and apply a crisis and issues mindset. This includes training the marketing and PR teams that operate a brand's social media channels, to help them understand why what they're doing matters to the affected online communities, and how it links back to their brand values.

**OUTPUT:**

**Work with charity partners on the ground to aid participation if you can neither post a statement that you will stand by if questioned nor post a statement in the first place due to the nature of the issue. Change the mindset of your brand ahead of the moments and events in which you can predict there will be backlash.**



*“If you can’t do a statement for political reasons, or post a reply on social media, then impact the grassroots communities in that space. Don’t see politics as a blocker for bringing about real change.”*

LIZ WARD



by any means  
necessary



HOW SHOULD BRANDS  
TAKE THIS GUIDANCE  
AND APPLY IT TO OTHER  
SENSITIVE ISSUES?





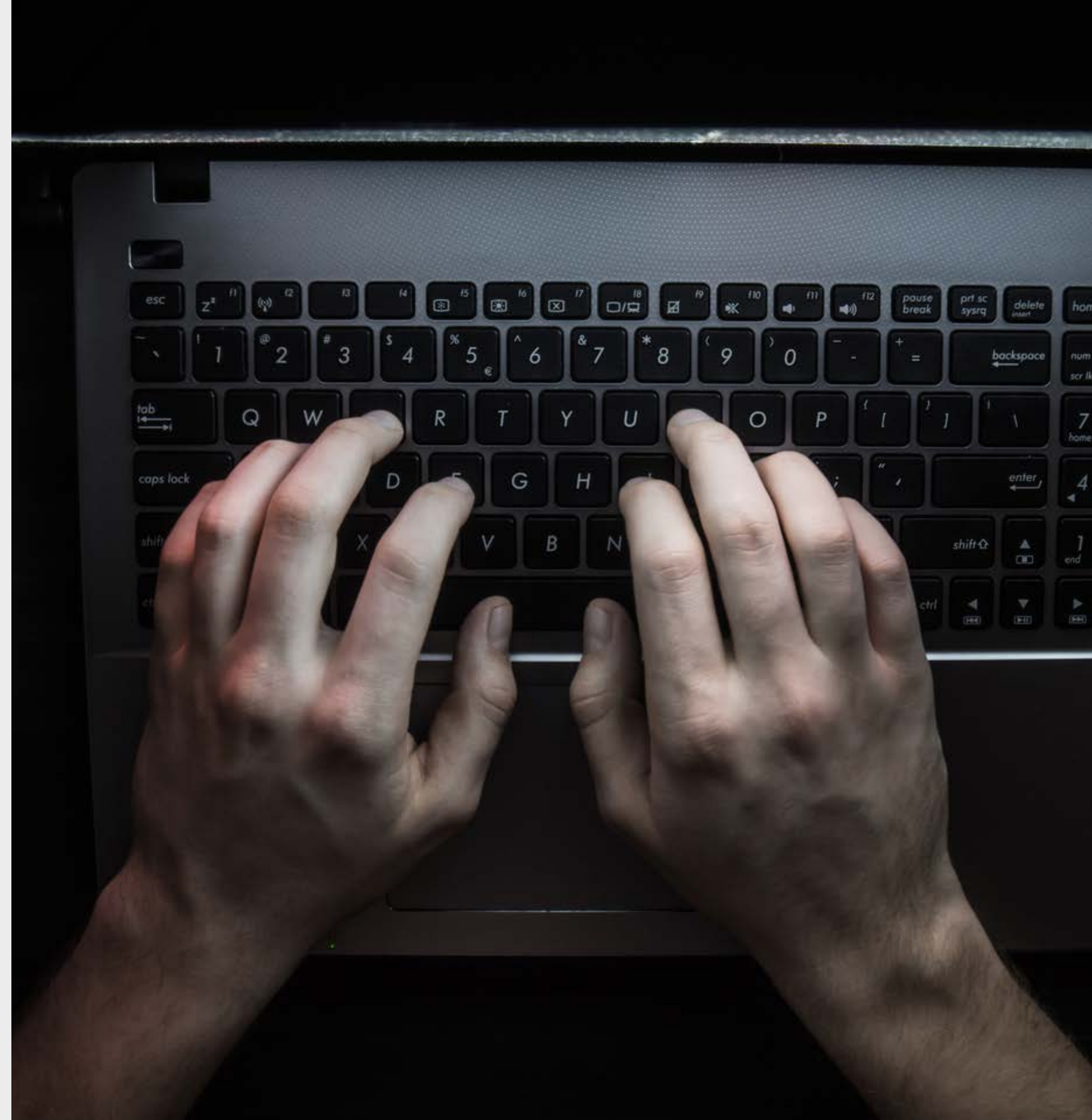
We know that racism does not exclusively present itself during major football tournaments, nor are the questions around gender identity limited to conversations around the Olympics. There are many other subjects that sports brands should prepare for, and our guidance can be transferred to help stem the tide of all online hate.

We know this report doesn't cover all the issues that will become hotbeds of online hate in the world of sport in 2024. It can't. However, we wanted to spotlight the two subjects that we know will sadly produce the largest spikes of division on social media, with a clear focus on the two key sporting events that will attract the most brand sponsorship and conversation online.

Most of the guidelines and takeaways we have produced for brands around these specific issues can be transferred to help navigate other sensitive issues. For instance, we know that ongoing world conflicts such as Israel/Palestine will continue to be talking points around major cultural moments. We have seen this issue divide online communities this past month at Eurovision 2024, and this will surely transfer to other major events involving international competition, such as the Paris Games.

You will have noted that steps one and two of our guidelines to combat racism at Euro 2024 and discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender identity at the Paris Olympics & Paralympics are much the same. These two steps should be mandatory steps for every brand who wishes to be courageous, and stand up and change the tide of online hate. These steps can be applied to issues like Israel/Palestine, and used as a foundational approach to braving the backlash on social media.

On the next slide, we have created a one slide cheat sheet that will help any courageous brand who wishes to stem the tide of online hate and lead the change on social media. The crucial thing to note is this cheat sheet tackles online hate around two key sporting events that have the world's attention in 2024. However, from our conversations with the leading voices in these subjects and focus groups with affected communities, we believe it is equally important that brands apply these steps to their communities away from the bright lights of the tournaments as well.



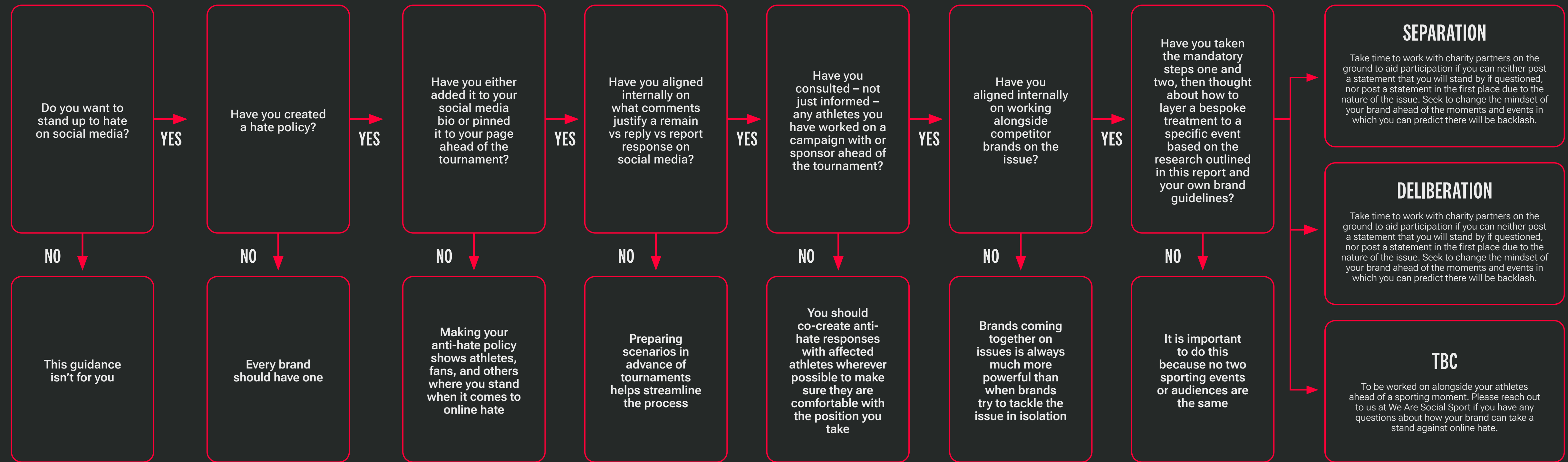


# A CHEAT SHEET FOR SPORTS BRANDS NAVIGATING ONLINE HATE

A step-by-step guide to help sports brands brave the backlash and stand up against hateful speech ahead of a busy summer of sport.

## Step 1 PREPERATION

## Step 2 COLLABORATION





# WHAT STANCE DO THE SOCIAL PLATFORMS TAKE WHEN IT COMES TO CONTENT MODERATION.

The platforms vary when it comes to how they define hate speech as well as how they seek to combat it. We urge brands to apply nuance to the anti-hate policy they create, so that it is tailored to each social platform. Brands also need to think beyond the social platforms when it comes to PR mitigation because anti-trans commentary can jump quickly to mainstream media outlets with very little social media engagement. PR teams need to be briefed and have prepared responses to potential questions and clear about the brand's stance.







### HOW DOES FACEBOOK DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

For Facebook, hate speech is a direct attack against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what it calls protected characteristics: race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity and serious disease. Facebook says it will remove this kind of content.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

Facebook limits content that goes against its four Community Standards, which include ‘respecting the dignity of others’, and uses both AI and human reviewers to assess content. It asks its users to help by reporting content that goes against its Community Standards, and if the report is upheld, content will be removed from Facebook. If it’s inappropriate, disrespectful, or offensive, it may see reduced distribution.

[Read more](#)



### HOW DOES INSTAGRAM DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

Like Facebook, Instagram doesn’t tolerate attacks on people based on their protected characteristics. It has banned more implicit forms of hate speech, like content depicting Blackface and common antisemitic tropes. It says a lot of abuse happens in people’s DMs, which is harder to address, but it has brought in new measures – like removing the accounts of people who send abusive messages – to prevent online bullying.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

Instagram has introduced comment filters to help people manage what they see, and it uses AI to warn people when they’re about to post something that might be hurtful. It says it takes action on hate speech both before and after it’s reported. Business and creator accounts can switch off DMs from people they don’t follow, and more controls are being rolled out to personal accounts.

[Read more](#)



### HOW DOES REDDIT DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

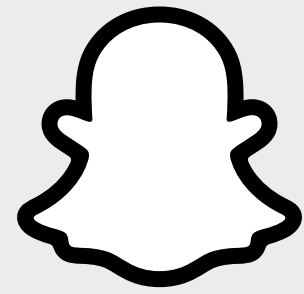
Reddit’s content policy consists of a set of rules, and rule number 1 is that everyone has a right to use Reddit free of harassment, bullying, and threats of violence. It says that communities and users that incite violence or that promote hate based on identity or vulnerability will be banned. Marginalised or vulnerable groups **include** those based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and more, and include victims of a major violent event and their families.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

Reddit’s set of enforcement methods vary from ‘Asking you nicely to knock it off’ to ‘Temporary or permanent suspension of accounts’, ‘Removal of content’ and ‘Banning of Reddit communities’. Moderators have a lot of control on Reddit, and they are able to enforce the rules of the platform. The culture of each community is also shaped by the upvotes, downvotes, and discussions of its community members.

[Read more](#)





### HOW DOES SNAPCHAT DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

Snapchat's Community Guidelines prohibit hateful content, terrorism and violent extremism anywhere on the platform. Hate speech or content that defames on the basis of a number of factors, including race, colour, caste, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status, age, or weight, is prohibited. It consults with civil rights organisations, human rights experts, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, and safety advocates to ensure its policies are enforced responsibly.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

Snapchat says it does not offer an open news feed where publishers or individuals have an opportunity to broadcast hate, misinformation, or violent content. On its "high-reach surfaces", like Spotlight and Discover, it takes a proactive approach to moderating any content that may violate its rules, using a combination of automated tools and human review. It also encourages users to report content that violates its Community Guidelines, and says that it responds to user reports quickly, and uses feedback to improve the content experience for all Snapchatters.

[Read more](#)



### HOW DOES YOUTUBE DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

YouTube doesn't allow content that promotes violence or hatred against individuals or 'protected groups' under its policies, which includes age, caste, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, veteran status and more. YouTube asks that its users refrain from posting content that encourages violence or incites hatred against individuals or groups based on their protected group status. This applies to both content in YouTube, and external links shared. For educational, documentary, scientific or artistic content that includes hate speech, this context must appear in the images or audio of the video itself.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

YouTube employs 'review teams' who are expert in nuanced understanding of local languages and contexts. It uses machine learning to proactively detect potentially hateful content, and sends it for human review. Users can also report channels with videos or comments that offend, as well as reporting comments themselves – and creators can stop comments showing up on their channel. If a channel is found to repeatedly go against the rules, YouTube can remove it from its Partner Programme (meaning it can't monetize), remove content itself, or terminate the channel.

[Read more](#)



### HOW DOES TIKTOK DEFINE HATE SPEECH?

TikTok says it does not allow any hateful behaviour, hate speech, or promotion of hateful ideologies. This includes content that attacks a person or group because of protected attributes, including race, religion, gender, tribe, disease and more. It doesn't allow violent and hateful organisations or individuals on the platform, or anyone who supports these. It does add that if referencing a quote from a hateful organisation, the user must make clear that there is no intent to promote it.

### HOW DOES IT MODERATE IT?

TikTok uses a combination of technology, safety experts and security professionals alongside threat-detection partners to moderate content. It uses a variety of tech and AI tools, claiming the use of technology enables its human reviewers to focus more on content that requires a greater understanding of context and nuance. As with other platforms, online reporting tools allow the community to flag content that goes against Community Guidelines.

[Read more](#)



# ABOUT US

We Are Social is a global socially-led creative agency. We make ideas worth talking about for some of the world's biggest brands.

This report was compiled by We Are Social Sport's Editorial team, alongside We Are Social's Cultural Insights team. Our aim is to continually connect brands to communities and culture and, when it comes to Braving the Backlash, we do this by helping our clients work out both when to take a stand and how to engage with their audience.

From community management guidelines to long-term editorial content strategy, it is crucial that all sports brands have a clearly defined approach to tackling issues on social. Without it, they will never be seen as an authentic voice in their community.

Find out how we can help your brand take a stand now: [sport@wearesocial.net](mailto:sport@wearesocial.net)