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## Personality and Attitudinal Predictors of Match Official Abuse: A Survey of Football Players, Spectators and Coaches

**Abstract:** Despite a growing body of research surrounding the prevalence and causes of match official abuse (MOA), past studies have primarily drawn data from interviews and surveys with match officials rather than recruiting players and spectators. The present study addressed this gap by examining the prevalence of MOA and dispositional (attitudinal and personality factors) predictors of its perpetration. An online survey was completed by 358 individuals who had encountered referees through spectating or competing in football matches. The survey aimed to explore the prevalence rates of MOA through the perspective of spectators, players and coaches, as well as examining whether perpetration of MOA was associated with aggression, empathy and normalising attitudes (i.e., acceptance of MOA as a part of football). Findings indicated that self-reported levels of MOA (both perpetrated and observed) were lower than previously reported by match officials. Furthermore, statistical analysis indicated that aggression (anger and hostility) and normalising attitudes predicted the perpetration of verbal abuse. The authors propose the utilisation of targeted awareness campaigns and top-down interventions to address the normalisation of MOA among footballers and fans.

**Keywords:** match official abuse (MOA), verbal aggression, referee abuse, amateur football, fandom, sport hostility.

### INTRODUCTION

Cheating is unwanted yet sometimes inevitable occurrence in competitive sports (Fozard et al., 2023; Lazuras et al., 2024; Petrou et al., 2021; Prince et al., 2019). Like many sports, association football (herby referred to as *football*) employs match officials to ensure that all rules and regulations are adhered to, all disputes are settled fairly and the overall safety of competitors is preserved during competitive matches (Fuller et al., 2004). However, despite the best intentions of match officials, they are frequently subjected to abusive behaviour from players, coaches and spectators when they have been perceived to be unfair or inaccurate (Simmons, 2006; van der Meij et al., 2015). Such behaviours include verbal

abuse (e.g., insulting a match official, or verbal aggression), physical abuse (e.g., pushing or assaulting officials) as well as the threat of violence (see Mojtahedi et al., 2024 for review). Though there is some variance between match officials on *what* they consider to be *abuse*, the present study defines MOA as hostile behaviours that are targeted towards match officials either as retaliation to their decisions or in an attempt to manipulate them. MOA is highly prevalent in the sport of football with 72.9% of football match officials claiming to have received some form of abuse during their careers (Folkesson et al., 2002). The high prevalence of MOA in football has been evidenced repeatedly (e.g., Andersson, 2019; Downward et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2020a), and appears to be most prominent within amateur and grass roots games, espe-



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cially in relation to spectator abuse (Polat et al., 2017; Samuel et al., 2017).

The effects of MOA are detrimental, not only for the officials but also for the wider sporting organisations. Match official retention, most notably at amateur level, is an ongoing issue for most football associations (Brackenridge et al., 2011), and MOA has been identified as one of the contributing factors for the poor retention figures (Andersson, 1983; ASC, 2004; Dell et al., 2016). The Australian Sports Commission (ASC) reported that the abuse of referees was one of the main reasons for the decline in sports officials (ASC, 2004), with Australia's biggest state, New South Wales, having to replace 25% of its referees every year (Oke, 2002). In addition to reducing the availability of match officials, MOA can also have adverse effects on the performance and mental health of match officials (Dell et al., 2016; Dorsch & Paskevich, 2007; Giel & Breuer, 2019). Currently there is a dearth of research examining the mental health of football match officials exposed to abuse, however, Brick et al. (2022) identified a link between encountering verbal abuse and issues with anxiety and depression among Gaelic football match officials.

The severity and prevalence of MOA has become widely recognised as an ongoing problem facing most football associations (Brackenridge et al., 2011; Dell et al., 2016; Nutt, 2006). This has not gone completely unnoticed by football association with past attempts having been made to reduce MOA through public awareness campaigns, such as the ASC's national public education campaign to discourage abuse towards Australian match officials (ASC, 2004) as well as abusive footballer supporter behaviour more generally (Lindsay et al., 2023). Similarly in the UK, the English Football Association's Respect campaign aimed to promote responsible behaviour and social equality across all areas of society through public education (Gaskell, 2008; Lusted, 2014). However, follow up studies indicated that MOA remained as a pervasive issue in both Australia (Lollback, 2015) and the UK (Cleland et al., 2017). A more in-depth understanding of the causes of MOA is needed before effective interventions can be designed and implemented to combat the issue.

### Motivations and causes of MOA

Causal factors of MOA have been explored in past research primarily through interviews and surveys with match officials. At surface level, MOA will most often occur in response to perceptions of injustice or refereeing incompetence (Simmons, 2006). However, in their systematic review of MOA research, Mojtahedi et al. (2024) explain that the abusive reactions are further facilitated by externalisation of personal frustrations (e.g., a poor performance during the match) (Friman et al., 2004; Simmons, 2006), a lack of understanding of the rules (Deal et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019; Wolfson & Neave, 2007), emotional overinvestment (Avalos, 2020; Friman et al., 2004), as well as purposeful attempts to influence the

match official's decisions in their team's favour (Nevill & Williams, 2002; Friman et al., 2004; Simmons, 2006).

Furthermore, many match officials have commented on the role that footballing culture plays in normalising MOA as an acceptable and somewhat expected behaviour during matches. Drawing on socio-cognitive theories, Mojtahedi et al. (2024) explained the normalisation of MOA as a process of *social compliance*, where players and spectators interpret the abusive actions of other group members as the group norm and resultantly mirror the behaviours in an attempt to gain or preserve approval from their group. This explanation accords with observations by Avalos (2020) who observed a mirroring effect in spectator-initiated MOA. Match officials have also suggested that the normalisation of MOA is facilitated by elite level football athletes who promote MOA through their own in-game actions. Many match officials have attributed the abusive behaviours of younger football players at grassroots level as attempts to imitate elite level football players who are frequently seen aggressively challenging match officials (Cleland et al., 2015; NASO, 2002). Mojtahedi et al. (2024) explained this influential effect as a process of *Identification*, in which an individual's desire to be more like an idolised athlete influences them into emulating their behaviours (Brown et al., 2003). Match officials have also proposed that the normalisation of MOA is compounded further by the lack punishment elite level athletes face after acting aggressively towards match officials, minimising the perceived wrongness of such acts (Cleland et al., 2018) and from a motivational and social learning perspective, increasing the likelihood of future similar conduct (Willmott et al., 2018).

### Individual differences in MOA perpetration

It must be acknowledged that despite the emotional and social motivations of MOA, most players, spectators and coaches refrain from acting aggressively towards match officials, suggesting that wider dispositional factors may further contribute towards explaining why certain individuals engage in such abusive conduct. The general aggression model (GAM; Anderson & Bushman, 2002) posits that personality factors and inherent knowledge structures can dictate how an individual appraises aversive events and that the appraisal of another person's actions can determine whether or not an individual responds with aggression. Moreover, the theory dictates that internal dispositions that promote hostile appraisals are more likely to promote aggressive retaliation in situations where an individual is subjected to frustration at the hands of someone else (Sebalo et al., 2023; Willmott & Ioannou, 2017). Thus, it is theoretically conceivable that spectators, players and coaches with inherently aggressive traits will be more likely to engage in MOA. The causal link between aggression and MOA was highlighted in a study by Friman et al. (2004), where match officials attributed MOA to internalised aggression. However, as these assertions were based on the hypotheses of match officials as opposed to being studied from the perpetrators of MOA (a similar approach to Lindsay et al., 2023 when investigating the

link between football fandom and domestic abuse by interviewing non-abusive fans), further direct evidence among the perpetrators of such MOA would be advantageous.

Another dispositional trait that can influence the way individuals appraise the actions of others is empathy (Debowska et al., 2019; Regan & Totten, 1975). Despite there being limited research examining the role of empathy in MOA, studies among other populations have identified a strong link between a lack of empathy and immoral behaviour. An empathy deficit is a prominent characteristic of psychopathy, a personality disorder that is strongly associated with criminal behaviour (DeBlassio & Mojtahedi, 2023, 2024; Ioannides & Willmott, 2023) and, more relevant to the current study, unsporting behaviour (Fozzard & Mojtahedi, 2023; Williams et al., 2015). Moreover, research on other forms of violence (e.g., sexual violence) suggest that reduced empathy towards victim groups is associated with attitudes that excuse the offence and place blame onto the victims (Grzyb et al., 2024; Mojtahedi, Stevens & Austin 2024; Pisano et al., 2024; Stevens et al., 2024).

Empathy can be conceptualised as an affective trait which facilitates the experience of other individuals' emotions, and also as a cognitive ability reflecting the ability to understand other individuals' emotions (Boduszek et al., 2022; Hogan, 1969; Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972). Both emotional and cognitive mechanisms of empathy can play an inhibitory role in preventing aggressive behaviour towards others. The ability to emotionally resonate with others can allow individuals to anticipate the emotional impact of their actions and resultantly deter them from acting aggressively (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2021) or in a stigmatised manner (Walkden & Turner, 2024). The ability to understand the perspective of others can foster greater understanding and in the context of match officials may allow individuals to understand their decisions, which is of important note given that many match officials have attributed MOA to individuals failing to understand their decision-making and assuming that they acted incorrectly (Deal et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019). It is therefore feasible to anticipate that spectators, players and coaches with low levels of empathy would be more likely to engage in MOA due to a reduced inhibitions and a lack of willingness to consider a match official's perspective. However, as already mentioned, research is yet to directly study to the role of empathy in MOA perpetration.

### The Current Study

Past research examining the frequency and underlying explanations of MOA has relied on interviews and surveys with match officials. Whilst match officials can provide reliable estimations on the prevalence of MOA, research examining the motivations behind MOA from the perspective of the perpetrators is needed to provide a more balanced understanding of MOA. The current study builds on this gap by surveying players, spectators and coaches involved in amateur football about their attitudes towards

MOA. A decision to focus on amateur football was made based on match officials from past studies suggesting that abusive behaviour is more frequently experienced in non-professional competitive games (Polat et al., 2017; Samuel et al., 2017). The first aim of the study is to explore the prevalence of MOA. The second aim of the study is to identify dispositional predictors of MOA. Based on past research on MOA and the GAM, the authors predicted that MOA perpetration would be associated with increased aggression (hypothesis one), low empathy (hypothesis two) and normalisation of MOA (hypothesis three).

## METHODS

### Sample

The study recruited participants who had encountered match official at amateur football games as either spectators, players or coaches. To have 'encountered' a match official, the individual must have been involved in the match as either a spectator, player or coach, and must have been within a range that would have allowed them to communicate with the match official. A survey link was disseminated through various internet-based football-league forums and pages. Participation was incentivised using a prize draw (participants were entered into a prize draw to win a £20 gift voucher). Initially, 413 responses were collected, however, eight responses were removed due to the participants not having encountered a match official during a football match and a further 47 responses were removed due to not responding to the abuse perpetration questions, thus the final data set consisted of 358 participants (330 males, 20 females, 1 non-binary, 7 undisclosed), with a mean age of 31.63 ( $SD = 12.97$ ). Most participants were from the UK ( $n=200$ ), followed by North America ( $n=90$ ) and other European countries ( $n=30$ ). A minority of respondents were also from Australia, Asia, South America and Africa ( $n=22$ ). Participants had encountered match officials from various perspectives: 221 participants had encountered match officials as football players, 117 had encountered match officials as both football players and coaches, 10 participants had encountered match officials as coaches and 67 participants had encountered match officials as spectators.

### Procedure and Materials

Ethical approval was granted from the lead researcher's institutional ethics committee. Participants took part in the study using an online survey platform (*Qualtrics*); after providing informed consent, participants were required to complete a battery of questionnaires (explained below) which took approximately 12 minutes on average to complete.

### Demographics and MOA behaviour

Demographic questions measured participants' age, gender, and country of residence. Following this, participants were asked to indicate whether they had encountered a match official during a competitive football match and



the nature of this interaction (i.e., as a spectator of a live game, as a player or as a coach/manager). Participants were also asked to disclose if they had ever worked as a football match official.

Participants were then asked to report how frequently they had observed and perpetrated various hostile behaviours that were directed towards a match officials.

A list of abusive behaviours were initially compiled based an examination of the existing literature on MOA (e.g., Avalos, 2020; Rayner et al., 2016; Webb et al., 2020a). The list was then discussed in consultation with a former match official who worked for a referee support organisation in England to ensure that a comprehensive range of MOA was captured through the survey. The consultant approved the listed behaviours and provided recommendations on thematic groups, he also advised the research to include additional hostile behaviours which may not be considered as abuse by all individuals, such as aggressive shouting. This suggestions was made to counteract the effects of normalisation and minimisation on MOA acceptance. The final list of hostile behaviours consisted of verbally abusing (i.e., insulting) a match official (*Verbal abuse*), threatening a match official (*Threats*), aggressively shouting at a match official (*Shouting*), pushing or shoving a match official (*Pushing*), hitting a match official (*Hitting*) and intimidating a match official (i.e., without explicitly threatening them; *Intimidation*).

Participants indicated the prevalence of each behaviour using a five-point scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). These observed hostile behaviours were measured through three domains (observed from other players and coaches, observed from other spectators, perpetrated by the participants). Participants who had encountered match officials through different perspectives (e.g., as a player and as a spectator) were asked to describe their perpetration prevalence rates for the role in which they had the most exposure to match officials through.

### Normalisation of MOA attitudes

The normalisation of MOA attitudes reflects beliefs that MOA is and accepted and somewhat expected behaviour during football matches. To measure normalising attitudes towards MOA, the authors engaged in consultation discussions with three relevant individuals: An amateur football player who had perpetrated MOA against match officials in the past; a football spectator who had perpetrated MOA to match officials in the past; and a former referee who has experienced abuse from players, spectators and coaches. Based on these discussions, four items reflecting normalising attitudes were identified: “It is normal for a referee to receive some abuse during games”, “Players and fans giving referees abuse is a part of football”, “If a referee makes an error, he/she should expect to receive some sort of abuse”, and “There is nothing wrong with criticising a referee if you disagree with their decision”. Participants were required to rate their agreement with each statement using a seven-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree). The scores

were averaged to produce a unidimensional score for abuse normalisation with higher scores reflecting greater normalisation of MOA. The averaged measure demonstrated good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .7$ )

### Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire

The Buss-Perry Aggression Questionnaire (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to measure the respondents’ aggression scores. The questionnaire consists of 29 items, which participants score their levels of agreement with using a five-point scale (1 = extremely uncharacteristic of me, 5 = extremely characteristic of me). The scale items can be used to measure 4 dimensions of aggression (Anger, Hostility, Verbal aggression and Physical aggression) by adding up the respective items. All subscales demonstrated good internal reliability (Aggression  $\alpha = .83$ ; Hostility  $\alpha = .79$ ; Verbal aggression  $\alpha = .73$ ; Physical aggression  $\alpha = .84$ ).

### Interpersonal Reactivity Index

The Interpersonal Reactivity (IRI; Davis, 1980) was used to measure respondents’ empathy scores. The index measures the reactions of individuals towards the observed experiences of others. The scale consists of 28 items answered on a 5-point scale (1 = Does not describe me very well, 5 = Describes me very well) which measure four different subscales: Perspective taking (tendency to adopt the psychological views of others), Fantasy (tendencies to transpose oneself into the feelings of fictional characters within external outputs), Empathic concern (feelings of sympathy and concern for others), and Personal distress (feelings of anxiety and unease in tense interpersonal settings). Due to the present study being concerned with empathy towards other individuals (i.e., match officials), only the Perspective taking ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and Empathetic concern ( $\alpha = .81$ ) subscales were used.

## RESULTS

### Prevalence of MOA and hostile behaviours

One hundred and eight participants had reported having worked as a football match official for at least one football match. A series of Mann-Whitney U tests indicated that there were no significant differences in reported levels of Match official abuse ( $U = 1186$ ,  $Z = -1.68$ ,  $p = .094$ ), Shouting ( $U = 12713$ ,  $Z = -.49$ ,  $p = .628$ ), Threatening ( $U = 13122$ ,  $Z < .001$ ,  $p = 1$ ), Intimidation ( $U = 12654$ ,  $Z = -.74$ ,  $p = .458$ ), Pushing ( $U = 12961$ ,  $Z = -.25$ ,  $p = .806$ ) and Hitting ( $U = 12908.5$ ,  $Z = -.24$ ,  $p = .81$ ). Therefore, the responses for between participants with and without officiating experience were combined; the average prevalence scores for observed and perpetrated hostile behaviour towards match officials are presented in the tables one and two, respectively.

Overall, the hostile behaviours towards match officials were reported as infrequent occurrences. With the exception of shouting (observed), average scores for all other behaviours suggested that the actions occurred

‘sometimes’, ‘rarely’ or ‘never’. Each participant was asked to report how frequently they perpetrated each behaviour towards match officials. The majority of participants encountered match officials primarily as football players ( $n = 228$ ), followed by spectators ( $n = 92$ ), and coaches ( $n = 38$ ). As table 2 elucidates, perpetrated hostile behaviours were reported as being slightly less prevalent than the rates that they had been observed from others. Although average reports of MOA perpetration was low, a considerable minority of participants admitted to verbally abusing match officials either ‘sometimes’ ( $n = 51$ ) or ‘frequently’ ( $n = 10$ ), and one participant claimed to ‘always’ abuse match officials.

In relation to normalisation attitudes, participants varied in the degree to which they normalised MOA, however the results suggest that on average participants were in moderate agreement that MOA was normal and expected behaviour in football (Mean = 3.88, Std Dev = 1.28).

### Dispositional predictors of verbal abuse

Due to a considerable minority of participants admitting to engaging in some verbal abuse, multiple linear regression was used to assess how well measures of aggression (Anger, Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Hostility), empathy (Empathetic Concern, Perspective Taking) and MOA normalisation attitudes predicted verbal abuse perpetration. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violation of the assumptions of linearity, and homoscedasticity. The collinearity statistics (VIF & Tolerance) for all models indicated that multi-

collinearity was unlikely to be a problem (Tolerance  $> .1$  & VIF  $> 10$  for all predictors; see Tabachnick et al., 2013). The model was significant [ $F(7, 341) = 6.99, p < .001$ ], though only explaining 12.5% of variance in abuse perpetration ( $r^2 = .125$ ). Participants who held normalising attitudes towards MOA ( $\beta = .3, p < .001$ ) and reported higher levels of Anger ( $\beta = .18, p = .011$ ) were more likely to perpetrate MOA. Additionally, and unexpectedly, participants reporting higher levels of Hostility ( $\beta = -.15, p = .011$ ) appeared to be less likely to perpetrate MOA.

## DISCUSSION

### MOA Prevalence

The present study surveyed competitors and spectators of competitive amateur football to examine the prevalence of MOA and the dispositional predictors of its perpetration. More specifically, the first aim of the current study examined how frequently abusive and hostile behaviours were perpetrated and observed (i.e. perpetrated by other) by the sample. Overall, abusive and hostile behaviours were reported as being relatively infrequently observed and perpetrated. The only exception was shouting at match officials which was on average *frequently* observed and *sometimes* perpetrated among players, coaches and spectators.

Though the current study separated shouting from verbal abuse (with the latter being conceptualised as verbal insults), it is possible that some participants may have framed their observed and perpetrated verbal abuse as shouting instead of abuse. Moral disengagement theory

**Table 1.** Observed prevalence of hostile behaviour towards match officials

	Players & Coaches ( $n = 357$ )		Spectators ( $n = 355$ )	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Verbal abuse	Sometimes (3)	2	Sometimes (3)	1
Threats	Rarely (2)	1	Rarely (2)	1
Shouting	Frequently (4)	2	Frequently (4)	2
Pushing	Never (1)	1	Never (1)	0
Hitting	Never (1)	0	Never (1)	0
Intimidation	Sometimes (3)	1	Rarely (2)	1

**Table 2.** Perpetrated prevalence of hostile behaviour towards match officials

	Players ( $n = 228$ )		Spectators ( $n = 92$ )		Coaches ( $n = 38$ )	
	Median	IQR	Median	IQR	Median	IQR
Verbal abuse	1 (never)	1	1 (never)	1	1 (never)	1
Threats	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0
Shouting	3 (sometimes)	1	3 (sometimes)	1	3 (sometimes)	2
Pushing	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0
Hitting	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0
Intimidation	1 (never)	1	1 (never)	0	1 (never)	0

**Table 3.** Multiple Linear Regression Model for Abuse Perpetration (N=358)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Anger	.03	.02	.28*	2.56
PA	-.01	.01	-.04	-.58
VA	.01	.01	.05	.87
Hostility	-.02	.01	-.15*	-2.56
EC	.09	.07	.07	1.19
PT	.06	.08	.05	.76
Normalisation	.2	.04	.3***	5.65

**Note:** PA= Physical Aggression, VA = Verbal Aggression, EC = Empathetic Concern, PT = Perspective Taking; \* <.05, \*\* <.001

proposes that individuals will often use minimisation (of harm) and euphemistic labelling (i.e., rewording a immoral action into a less serious term) to justify or reduce the immoral nature of their actions (see Bandura 1981). A similar process may have been used by participants when self-reporting their experiences. Though there is no evidence within the current study to prove that these moral disengagement techniques were being used, studies that have questioned match officials report much higher prevalence rates of verbal abuse (e.g., Walters et al., 2016) suggesting that what spectators, players and coaches perceive to be shouting may be perceived as verbal abuse by the targets.

The current study also observed that MOA was perpetrated at a similar frequency by players, coaches and spectators, contradicting past findings which suggest that spectators perpetrate abuse more frequently than players and coaches (Ackery et al., 2012; Rayner et al., 2016). The disparity in findings could be due to a floor effect in the present study, where the measurable responses were pooled around the lower limit, making it difficult to identify variations in responses between the groups. The conflicting findings could also be due to heterogeneous samples between the studies. That is, past research indicates that increased prevalence of MOA from spectators is more pronounced in junior and lower level grassroots matches (e.g., Cleland et al., 2015; Webb et al., 2019). The current study recruited individuals from amateur football, however, a limitation of the present study was that the authors didn't measure the precise level of amateur football which could mean that the present sample may have primarily consisted of individuals involved in matches featuring older players.

Participants' own admissions of MOA and hostile behaviour appeared to be less frequent compared to what they had observed from others, as well as what has been reported by match officials in other studies (e.g., once every few games, see Cleland et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2020). Disparities between the prevalence of perpetration from the current sample compared to the wider population of football spectators and competitors could be due to a number of factors. On one hand, sampling biases could have impacted the results, such that present study's

opportunity sampling approach may not have captured a representative sample of the population. Alternatively, one must be open to the possibility that the current self-reported perpetration rates may not have been entirely accurate or reliable. As mentioned earlier individuals may not have perceived some of their hostile behaviours to be 'abuse' (see *minimisation* discussed earlier). Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that individuals will not always be aware of all the abusive incidents taking place throughout a match due not being at close proximity with the match official, which could explain why the observations of MOA from others was also relatively infrequent. A third explanation of the low prevalence could simply be that MOA prevalence rates are less common than match officials claim, however, given the large body of evidence and real-world cases demonstrating the pervasive nature of MOA (e.g., Cleland et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019,2020), this alternative explanation is tenuous without further corroborating evidence.

### Personality predictors of verbal abuse

Out of our personality predictors tested, only anger and hostility were associated with verbal abuse perpetration (partially supporting our first hypothesis but failing to support hypothesis two). The relationship between anger and verbal abuse towards match officials can be expected given that emotionally angry individuals are more likely to react to aversively to perceived provocation from others due to heightened emotional reactions (Aldred, 2000). Surprisingly, verbal aggression was not a significant predictor of verbal abuse. This could suggest that verbal abuse (i.e., insults) is more closely linked to an individual's proneness to irritability (i.e., anger) rather than aggressive capabilities, which would make sense if the insults communicated are not aggressive in nature but instead presented humorously. To the authors' surprise hostility had an inverse effect, such that the findings suggested that hostile individuals were less likely to perpetrate verbal abuse. One potential explanation could be that hostile individuals may resort to more harmful forms of retaliation as opposed to verbal abuse, however, this is speculative without further data and analysis. It should be noted that the effect size for this association (and

for the association with anger) was quite small, thus the observed association could also be a result of a statistical artefact.

### Normalisation of MOA

The second aim of the current study was to identify dispositional (attitudinal and personality) predictors of verbal abuse perpetration. Firstly, the findings demonstrated that participants holding attitudes that normalised MOA as expected and justified behaviours in football were more likely to engage in verbal abuse (supporting hypothesis three). Though an association was evidenced, the cross-sectional design of the study prohibits us from reliably establishing the causal relationship between these two variables. Although a logical interpretation of the relationship would be that beliefs that normalise MOA are likely to promote verbal abuse, it could also be the case that normalising attitudes are used by individuals as a post-hoc justification for their actions. This form of justification is presented in Bandura's (1981) moral disengagement theory which proposes that individuals may use the diffusion of responsibility to lessen the moral implications of their actions.

The observed association does corroborate past reports from match officials which identified the culture within football which normalises MOA as a contributor to the issue (e.g., Cleland et al., 2018). Match officials have attributed this cultural reinforcement in part to the actions of professional footballers who perpetuate hostile behaviours towards match officials and signify its place in elite level football (Cleland et al., 2015). The normalisation of MOA is further cemented by the apparent leniency shown towards such professional players (Cleland et al., 2018), which will only serve to lessen to moral wrongness of these actions to observers. Based on these findings there would appear to be two avenues for combating the promotion of MOA acceptance in football culture. Firstly, greater punitive response towards MOA at elite level could serve to deter players and spectators from engaging in such behaviours. Secondly, the current authors propose the use of awareness campaigns to address these normalising attitudes, as previously attempted through the Respect Campaign. Moreover, the authors reinstate previously made recommendations (e.g., Mojtahedi et al., 2024) to feature elite athletes in such campaigns for the endorsement and promotion of prosocial behaviour towards match officials at all levels of the sport.

It should also be acknowledged that the overall regression model only explained a small proportion of variance in verbal abuse perpetration, which would suggest that other unstudied factors unstudied factors will play a greater role in influencing verbal MOA. Based on the observed association between normalisation and perpetration, the authors propose that future studies examining the predictors of MOA focus more on examining attitudinal factors relating to knowledge and biases surrounding football, MOA and match officials. A multidimensional attitudinal measure of MOA has the potential to explain a greater degree of variance in MOA perpetration. Studies

examining more serious forms of abuse and violence (e.g., rape and sexual exploitation) demonstrate that inaccurate and stereotypical attitudes towards criminal behaviours (e.g., *rape myths*) can predict the acceptance, reinforcement and perpetration the crimes (Lilley et al., 2023; Parsons & Mojtahedi., 2022)

### Limitations and directions for future research

The present study was one of the first to explore the attitudes of MOA through the perspective of players, spectators and coaches. However, there are still some limitations that require acknowledgement. Firstly, the use of a self-report measures could have impacted the reliability and accuracy of the findings. Participants could have downplayed the seriousness of their behaviours and as a result, underestimated the frequency of observed and perpetrated abuse. Furthermore, participants estimated the frequency of perpetrated and observed MOA retrospectively through memory reports. Given that memory traces can diminish over time or be contaminated by post-event information (Mojtahedi et al., 2018a, 2018b, 2019), the accuracy of the reported levels may not be entirely precise. More reliable evidence on MOA prevalence could be drawn from official reports of MOA, though these figures may also be an underestimation given that many match officials have admitted to not reporting MOA due to a lack of faith in the disciplinary procedures in place (Deal et al., 2018; Webb et al., 2019). Thus, as an alternative and novel approach to examine MOA prevalence, the current authors propose the use of naturalistic observations in football matches to examine the true nature of MOA.

Although the items measuring MOA normalisation were derived from careful consideration of the literature and consultation from individuals involved in MOA, the normalisation variable was not psychometrically validated through confirmatory factor analysis. The present study did produce some support for the reliability of the scale (i.e., Cronbach alpha score), however, further validation of the measure would have been beneficial. Finally, due to a floor effect observed for most forms of explicit MOA (e.g., Hitting, pushing, threats), only a predictive model for verbal abuse was tested. Attempting to predict behaviours of the other forms of MOA with very few cases exceeding the higher end of perpetration prevalence would have resulted in a model with questionable reliability. Future research recruiting a larger sample (and through that, a larger proportion of individuals engaging in other forms of MOA more frequently), using psychometrically robust tools (Sherretts & Willmott, 2016) should seek to examine the predictors of all forms of MOA.

### CONCLUSION

The present study suggests that MOA may be less frequent in amateur football than previously suggested, with shouting at match officials being a notable exception. These observations could, however, be an indication of disparities between how hostile behaviour is framed from



the perspective of match officials and players/spectators/coaches. The study also identified attitudes that normalize MOA as potential precursors of verbal abuse, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions, such as stricter penalties and awareness campaigns, to address these behaviours in footballing culture. The authors invite future researchers to continue also consider recruiting competitors and spectators of sports when studying MOA. Utilisation of such samples can prove to be challenging in relation to recruitment and reliability assessment, however, doing so will allow scholars to study the causes and potential interventions for MOA through a more balanced and comprehensive lens.

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