



ONLINE ABUSE IN RUGBY

RUGBY WORLD CUP FRANCE 2023™

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FULL TOURNAMENT ANALYSIS

# RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023™ FULL TOURNAMENT ANALYSIS

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## RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023™ FULL TOURNAMENT ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION & KEY PROJECT STATISTICS

World Rugby partnered with Signify Group and its artificial intelligence Threat Matrix service to identify, investigate and provide ongoing support in relation to online abuse and threats received by Match Officials, Players, Teams, and other Stakeholders during the Rugby World Cup France 2023™.

The data and insights in this document were gathered from 7<sup>th</sup> September through to 29<sup>th</sup> October 2023, incorporating all 48 fixtures of the tournament.

The service was in operation with a focus across X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, and covered:

- Targeted online abuse and threat
- Levels and categorisation of abuse and threat, including gravity of offences, sources and identification of tactics
- Immediate notification to World Rugby of any identified (fixated) threat / inappropriate approaches
- Expediting abusive or threatening content take-down/sanctioning of account holders - where platform community guidelines are evidenced to have been broken
- Unmasking of abusers to enable action by World Rugby and/or prosecution by law enforcement

The Threat Matrix service covered 35 languages with abusive posts identified based on text, with layered word, image, emoji and phrase categorisation / detection. As part of the service Threat Matrix operates a specialist AI-empowered threat detection algorithm that also covered Match Officials and Players.

Signify has also provided support and remediation to a number of Match Officials with regards to abuse and threats they have received via private direct messages.

This public report provides the following analysis:

- Monitoring data + insights
- Issue categorisations
- Timelines of abuse
- Targeted Match Officials
- Targeted national squads
- Targeted Team accounts
- Platform activities
- Targeted Players (country only)

### PROJECT STATS

**1.3m**

Posts + comments analysed

**53.9k**

Posts / flagged by Threat Matrix  
AI & reviewed by humans

**2,065**

Posts / comments verified as  
abusive & reported to platforms

**1.6k**

Unique accounts detected  
sending abusive messages

**224**

Verified identities of  
abusive accounts

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PROJECT STRUCTURE & SCOPE

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### SCOPE + COVERAGE

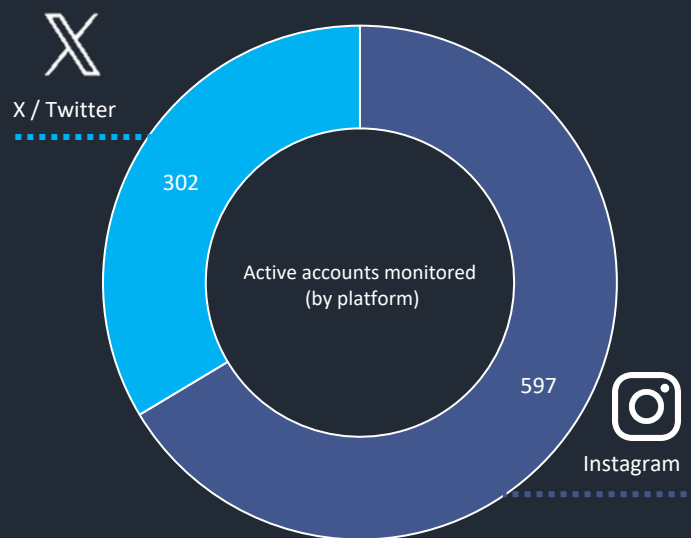
For the duration of the tournament in France the Threat Matrix service focused on:

- **Monitoring** – of public accounts and mentions for abusive, discriminatory or threatening content.
- **Investigation & Action** – where content was detected and verified, it was actioned by World Rugby and Signify. Captured abusive content was shared with platforms, and evidence of content that passes the threshold of criminal activity / hateful communications was shared with law enforcement (via World Rugby) to support real-world action.
- **Wellbeing of individuals** – the central goal of these services was to protect Match Officials and Players from abuse allowing them to focus on the tournament and giving them the assurance that abusers were being held to account. In some instances, the Threat Matrix team also provided support to participants' family members.

### ACCOUNTS MONITORED

Across the Rugby World Cup 2023 protective coverage has been set up to incorporate 899 participants' social media accounts:

- 571 Players/Coaches (819 active accounts).
- 20 Teams (44 active accounts).
- 22 Match Officials and World Rugby officials (32 active accounts).
- 4 active tournament / organisation official accounts.



### A BESPOKE PROCESS: BUILT FOR SPORT



**Build a proactive net around Match Officials and players:** AI scan for abuse of Match Official's / player's accounts across social media platforms.



**Proactively identify accounts used by abusers at scale** - using a combination of AI tech and the nuance of security and intelligence experts.



**Unmask abusers** using specialist Open-Source Intelligence forensic tools to **de-anonymise and identify abusers to an evidential standard.**



**Report abusive accounts** to social media platforms and Law Enforcement, removing the expectation on Match Officials / players to report abuse.

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MONITORING + REPORTING

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### BREAKDOWN OF FINDINGS

The Rugby World Cup France 2023™ saw abusive content targeting 8 Match Officials and 49 Players. Alongside this, 19 national teams received abuse targeting their official team accounts. Two World Rugby officials and the official Rugby World Cup channels also received significant levels of abuse.

Over 2,000 posts from 1,600 separate accounts were identified sending abuse or threat across the tournament. To date, Signify has investigated and verified 224 IDs connected to abuse during the event. In addition, over 40 accounts have been further investigated due to the nature of their posts and shared with World Rugby which has led to law enforcement investigations.

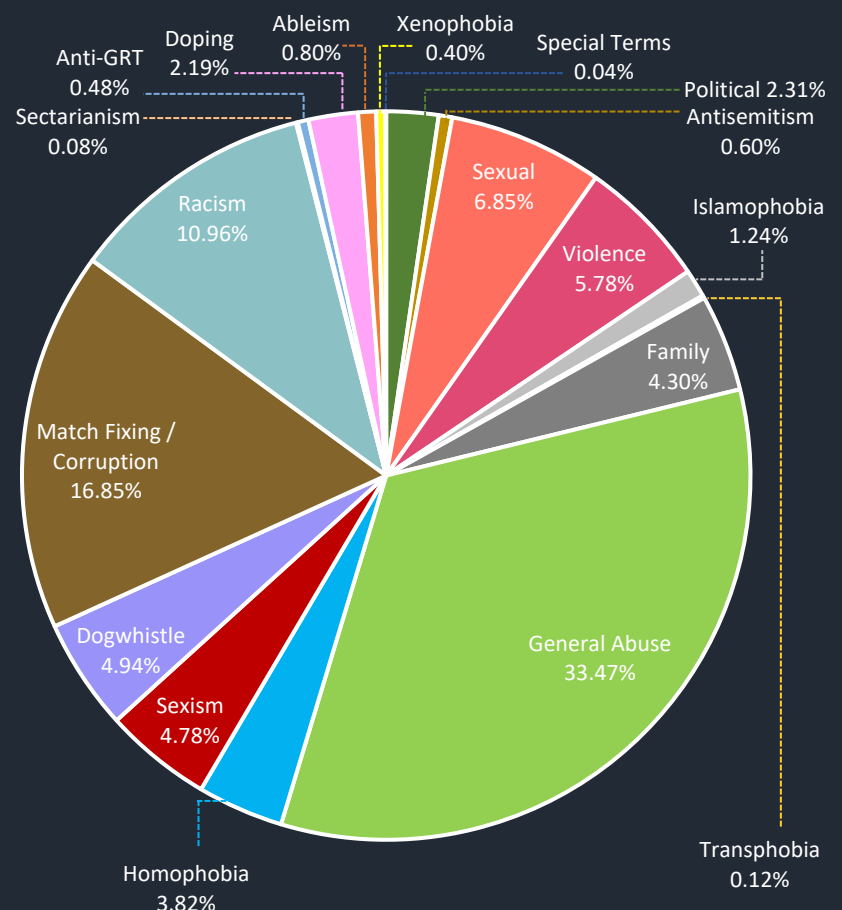
### SUMMARY ISSUES

- Match Officials were targeted directly.**  
3 officials were in the Top 10 most targeted individuals of the tournament.
- Match Officials received 49% of the total volume of directed abuse at the tournament.**
- Match Officials and their families received abuse** over private direct message - Signify is providing investigative support.
- England Team Players were the most targeted** collectively in the tournament.
- Comments (online and offline) from Players and Coaches** led to online and in-ground abuse of match officials.
- Abuse relating to Match Fixing and Corruption** was the most prevalent form (after General Abuse). In the main this was focused on corruption and match rigging allegations, and not linked to betting.
- Abuse relating to Doping allegations** was not a prevalent issue.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- Match Officials** were the fourth most targeted group, surpassing finalists New Zealand.
- Match Official, Wayne Barnes**, was the single most targeted individual throughout the tournament (inclusive of players, match officials and individual stakeholders). He received a third of all abuse targeted directly at individuals.
- The pie chart below shows a breakdown of all detected and verified abuse during the tournament.

### BREAKDOWN OF ABUSE



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### REAL-WORLD ACTION

The Threat Matrix service is intricately linked to real-world actions that start with submission to platforms and follow through to account investigations and detection of the owners of abusive accounts. This can culminate in evidence packs being produced for law enforcement.

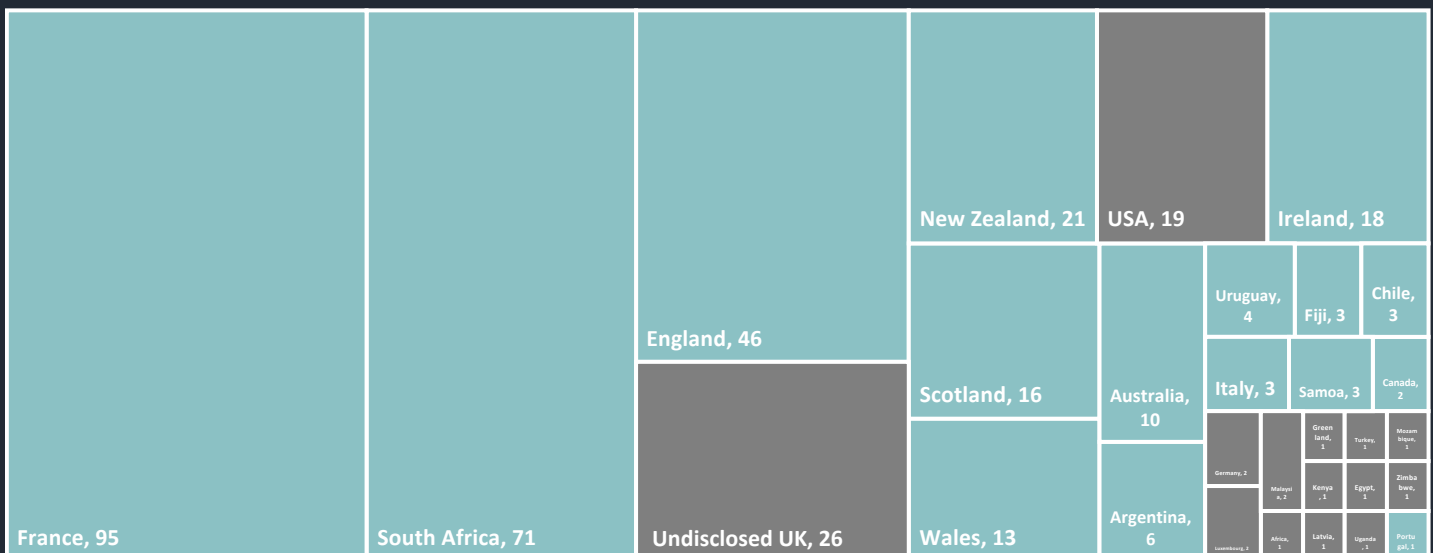
The Threat Matrix Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) team have reviewed and triaged every abusive message, identifying, where possible, the account owners and gathering any available evidence to take action to prevent further targeted online abuse or threat.

The figures (right) relate to the number of identified and verified account owners detected from posts sent = **green**. The **amber** number represents accounts being investigated and where there is a high probability of identifying the account owner. **Red** represents accounts that are likely to require a disproportionate level of resource to fully identify.

**Full analysis and evidence packs have been prepared and presented to World Rugby and jurisdictional law authorities.**

### VERIFIED ACCOUNT OWNERS BY COUNTRY

The chart below shows the number of verified account owners by country. **Blue** boxes represent the number of accounts from countries participating in the tournament. **Grey** boxes are the number of account holders from countries not participating.



Verified identity of  
abusive account  
owners

224

High probability of  
identification of  
account owner

478

Low probability of  
identification of account  
owner or account  
suspended

1,135



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### REAL-WORLD ACTION (cont.)

The Threat Matrix team is focused on real-world action and ensuring consequences for perpetrators of abuse.

At the time of publication of this report, Signify has supported World Rugby's activities with law enforcement authorities in five countries:

1. Australia
2. France
3. New Zealand
4. South Africa
5. United Kingdom

Due to the nature of these investigations, it would not be appropriate to provide details in this public report but at least one case (which relates to abuse sent to a Match Official and one of their family members) has already resulted in an arrest and charge - currently awaiting the result of a court hearing.

Signify continue to liaise with World Rugby in supporting law enforcement authorities to the conclusion of these investigations.

*"Rugby is a sport for everyone and we take our responsibility very seriously to make the sport as inclusive, accessible and relevant as possible. This includes sending a strong message that online hate simply will not be tolerated, tackling abuse and harmful content with meaningful action."*

Alan Gilpin, Chief Executive  
World Rugby, 6<sup>th</sup> Sept 2023

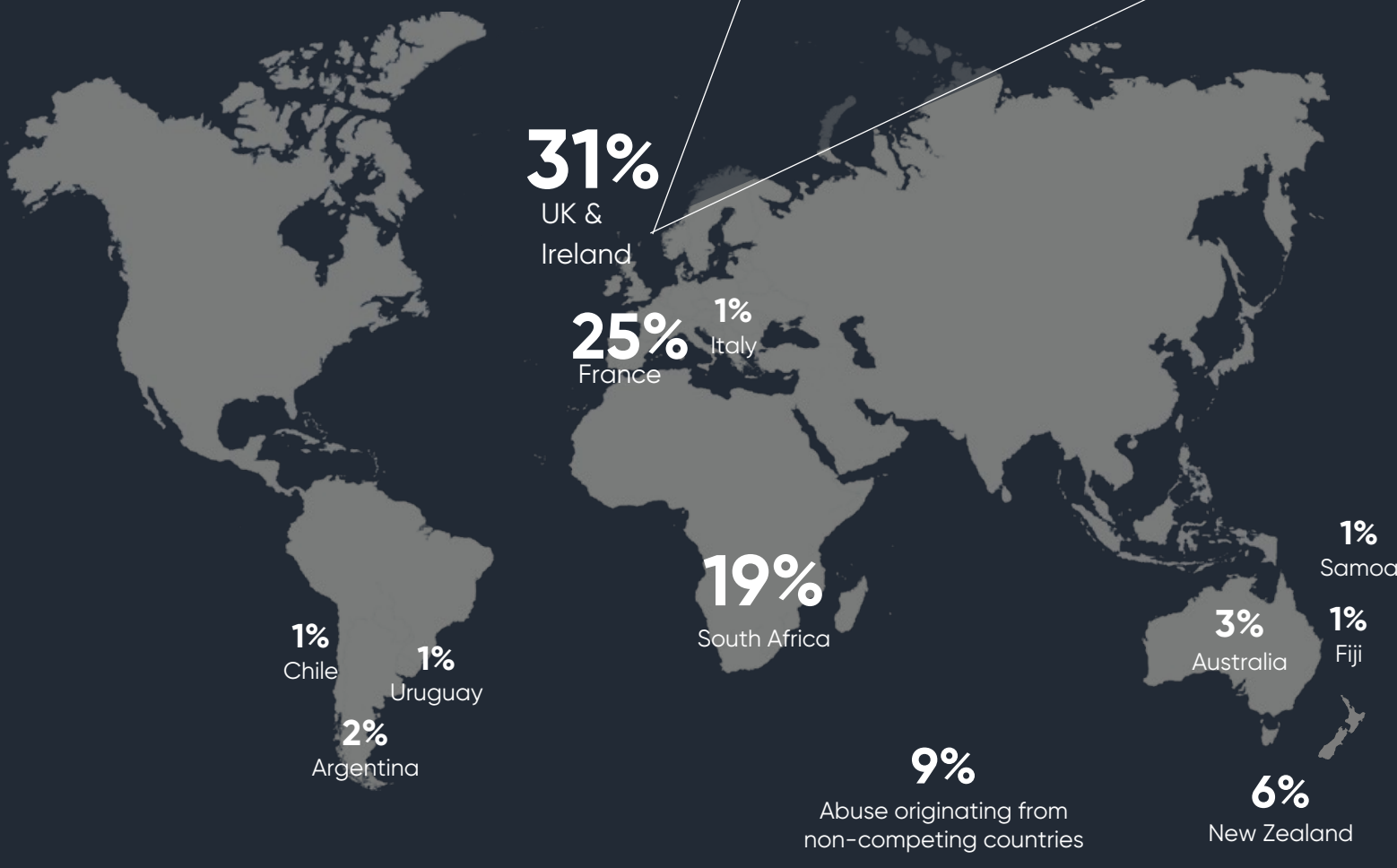
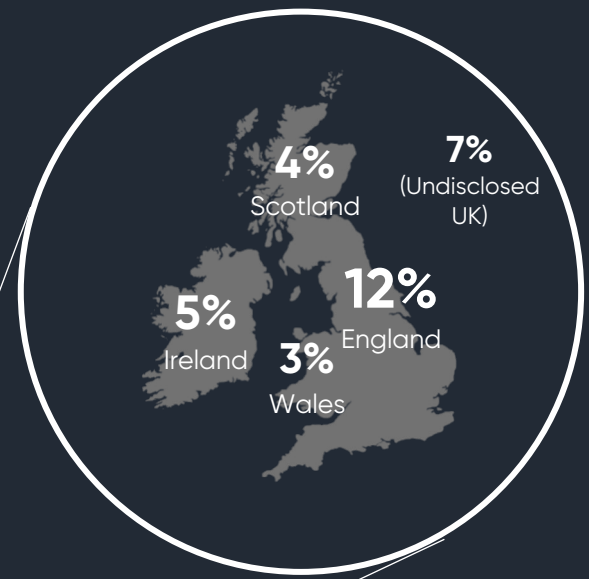
*"That's why I'm keen to see what can be done. There've been changes in the law recently which put more pressure on social media providers, but another step is making people more easily identifiable. World Rugby engaged with a social media forensic team. If they identify the individual, they'll work with prosecution authorities and there's one active case in Australia, with another match official whose wife was abused online. They've identified where that [abuser] lives and they're working out whether they've crossed the criminal threshold. All sports need to protect their coaches, players and refs, and say: 'If you're going to abuse or threaten them, there is a consequence, and it might be a criminal conviction.'"*

Wayne Barnes, Match Official  
[The Guardian, 18<sup>th</sup> Nov 2023](#)

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**GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION**

This chart is a representation of accounts where author location has been verified, across the world, drawn from abuse reported to social media platforms at the Rugby World Cup France 2023™.



\*Based on 365 social media accounts with identified locations.

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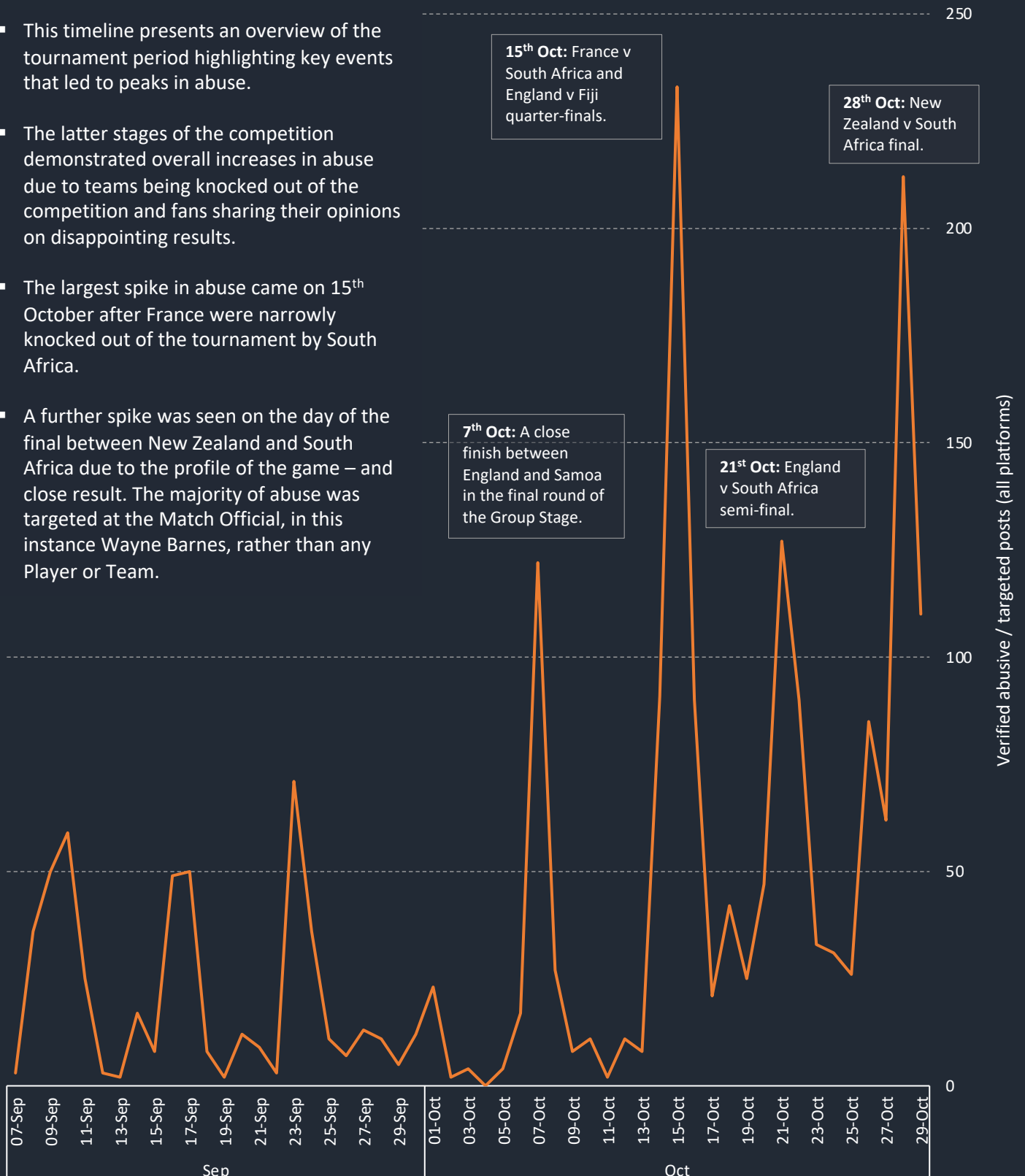
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INSIGHTS + LEARNINGS

## RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023™ FULL TOURNAMENT ANALYSIS

### DETECTED VERIFIED ABUSE TIMELINE: ALL PLATFORMS

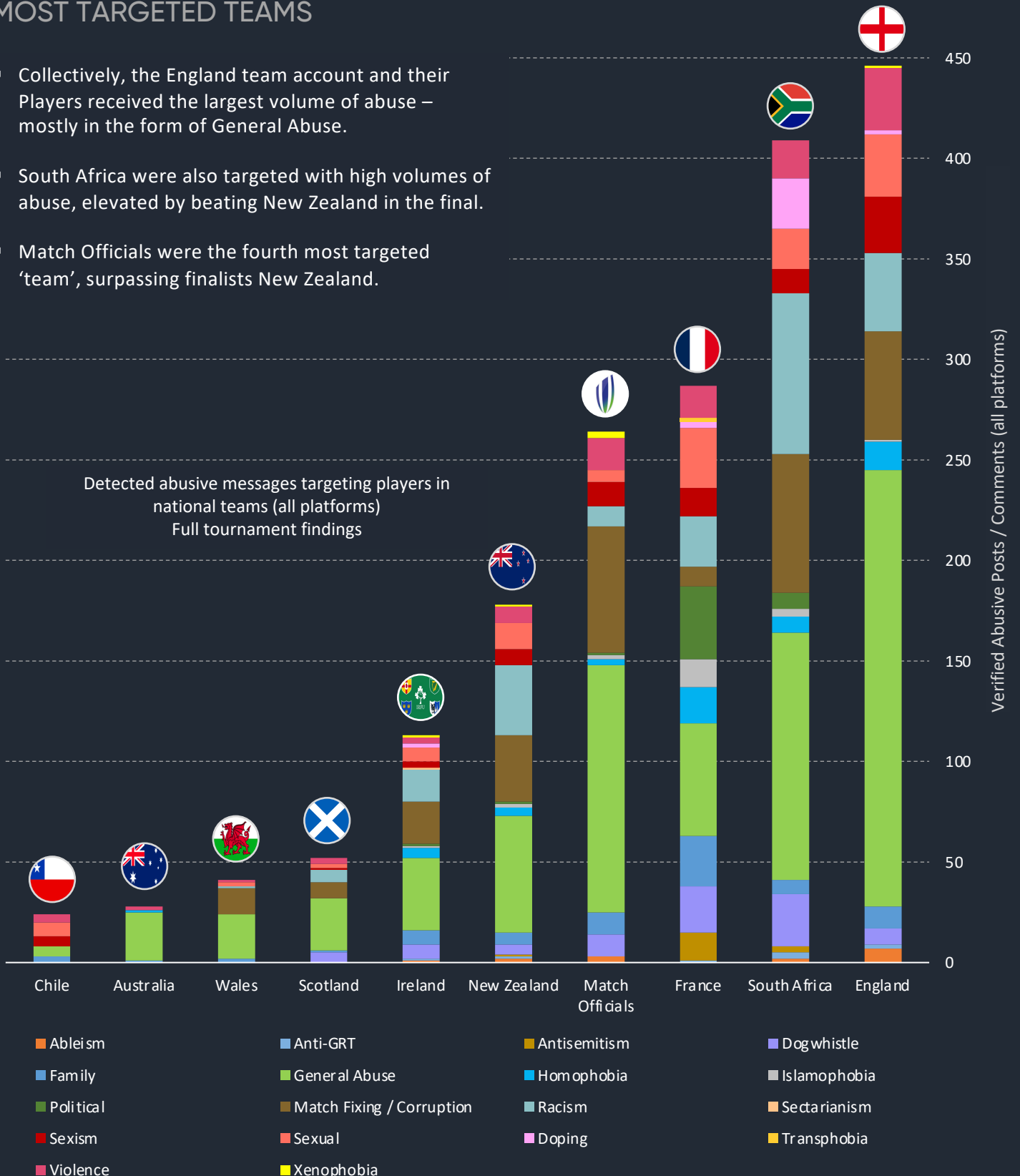
- This timeline presents an overview of the tournament period highlighting key events that led to peaks in abuse.
- The latter stages of the competition demonstrated overall increases in abuse due to teams being knocked out of the competition and fans sharing their opinions on disappointing results.
- The largest spike in abuse came on 15<sup>th</sup> October after France were narrowly knocked out of the tournament by South Africa.
- A further spike was seen on the day of the final between New Zealand and South Africa due to the profile of the game – and close result. The majority of abuse was targeted at the Match Official, in this instance Wayne Barnes, rather than any Player or Team.



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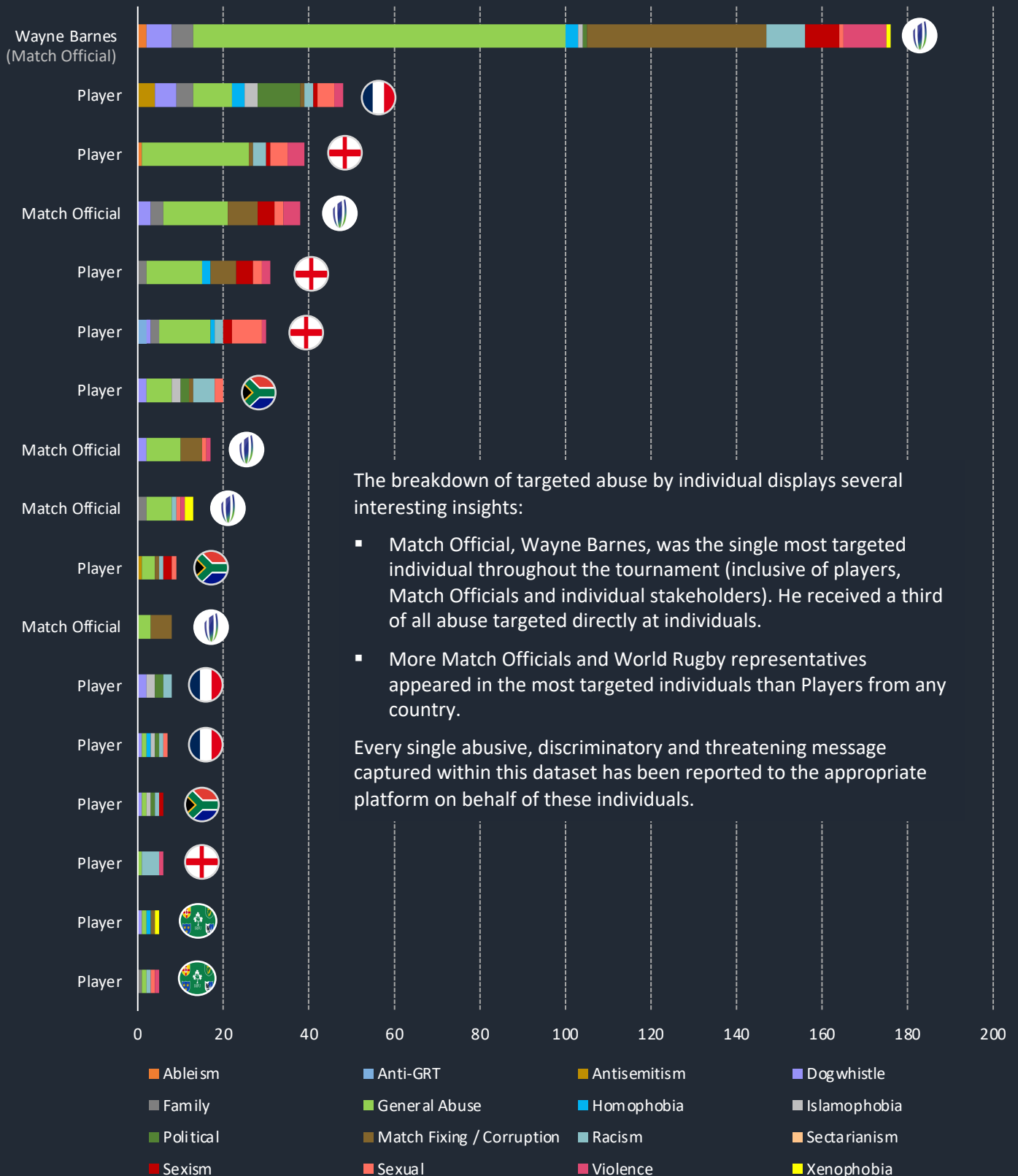
### MOST TARGETED TEAMS

- Collectively, the England team account and their Players received the largest volume of abuse – mostly in the form of General Abuse.
- South Africa were also targeted with high volumes of abuse, elevated by beating New Zealand in the final.
- Match Officials were the fourth most targeted ‘team’, surpassing finalists New Zealand.



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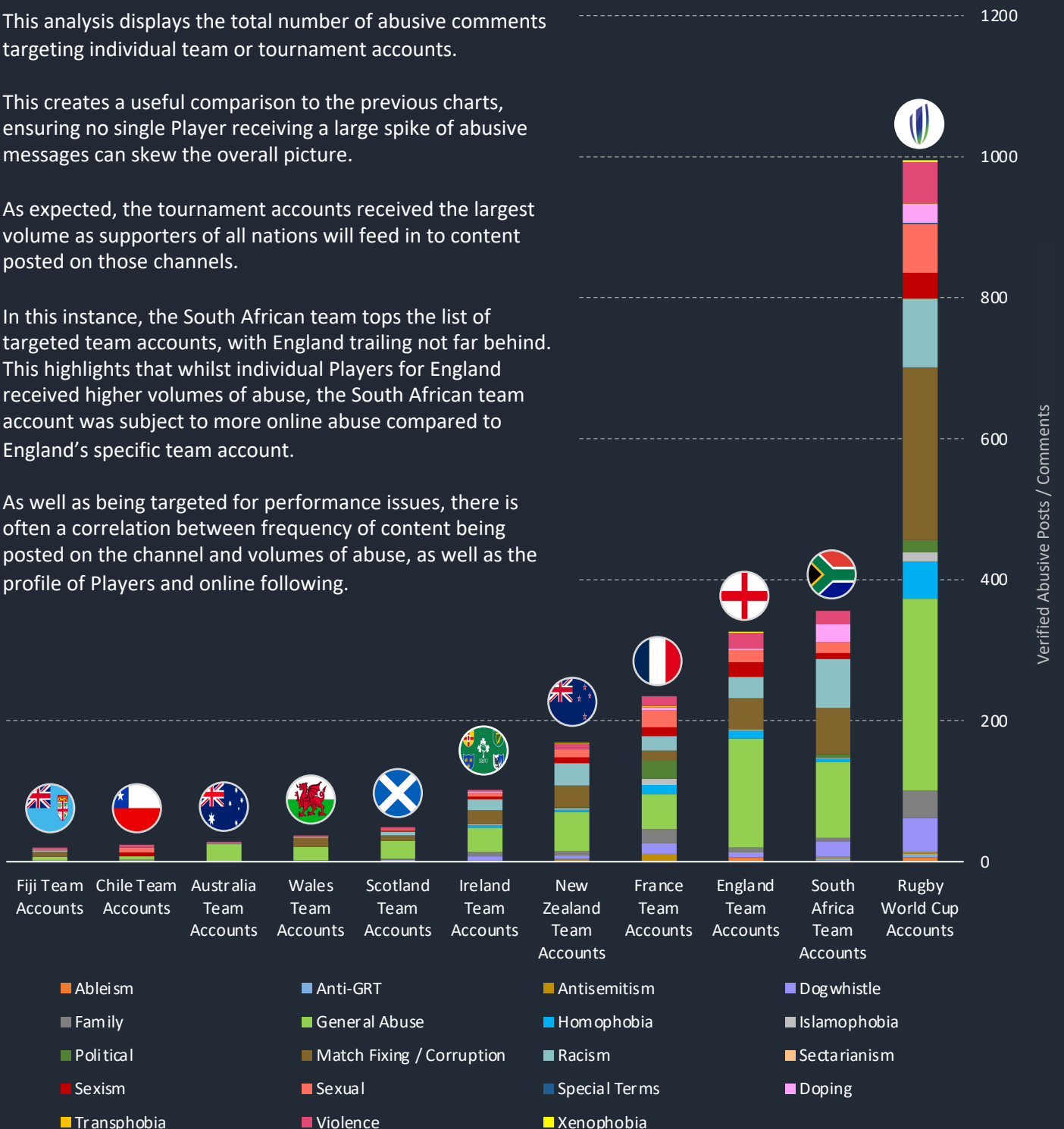
## MOST TARGETED INDIVIDUALS



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### MOST TARGETED TOURNAMENT & TEAM ACCOUNTS

- This analysis displays the total number of abusive comments targeting individual team or tournament accounts.
- This creates a useful comparison to the previous charts, ensuring no single Player receiving a large spike of abusive messages can skew the overall picture.
- As expected, the tournament accounts received the largest volume as supporters of all nations will feed in to content posted on those channels.
- In this instance, the South African team tops the list of targeted team accounts, with England trailing not far behind. This highlights that whilst individual Players for England received higher volumes of abuse, the South African team account was subject to more online abuse compared to England's specific team account.
- As well as being targeted for performance issues, there is often a correlation between frequency of content being posted on the channel and volumes of abuse, as well as the profile of Players and online following.



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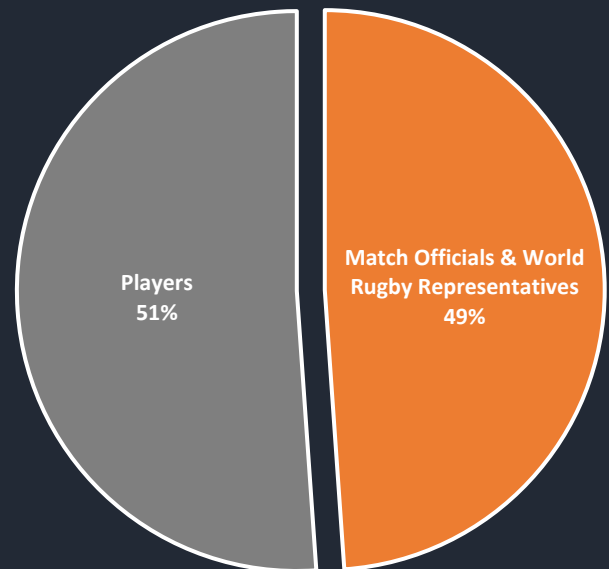
### ABUSE BREAKDOWN: PLAYERS VS MATCH OFFICIALS

A comparison of the volumes of abuse received by Players in contrast to Match Officials and World Rugby representatives revealed that the latter received 49% of abuse.

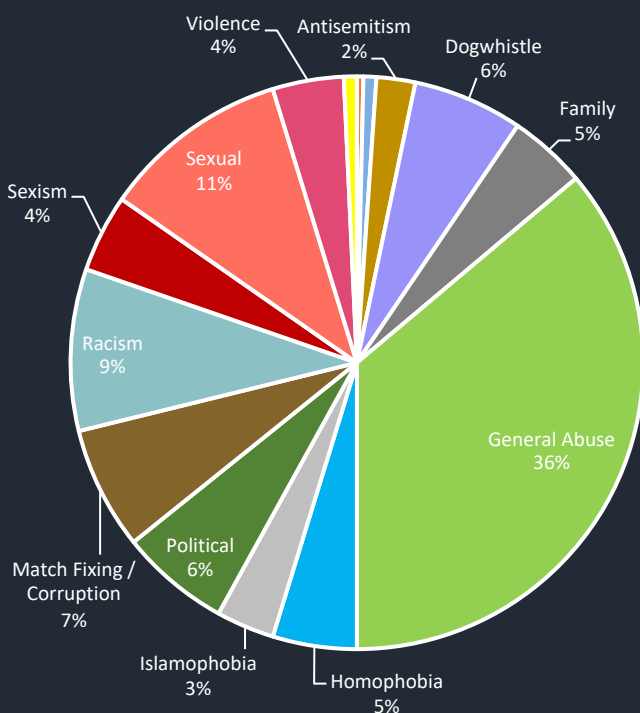
This is inclusive of 571 monitored players compared to only 22 match officials and World Rugby representatives.

The below pie charts highlight the divide in abuse by category for each group - where Match Officials predominantly received General Abuse and abuse relating to Match Fixing / Corruption.

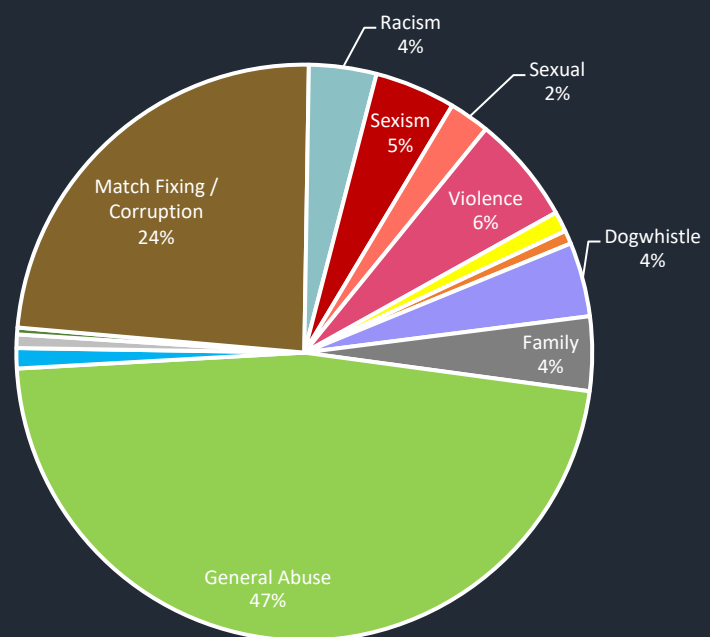
For Players, it was observed that there was a wider split in the types of abuse targeted at individuals, but Sexual and Racist abuse followed General Abuse to form the top 3 targeted categories.



**Split of abuse targeted at Players and Match Officials**  
(571 Players and 22 Match Officials/World Rugby representatives were covered).



**Abuse by Category: Players**



**Abuse by Category: Match Officials / World Rugby Representatives**



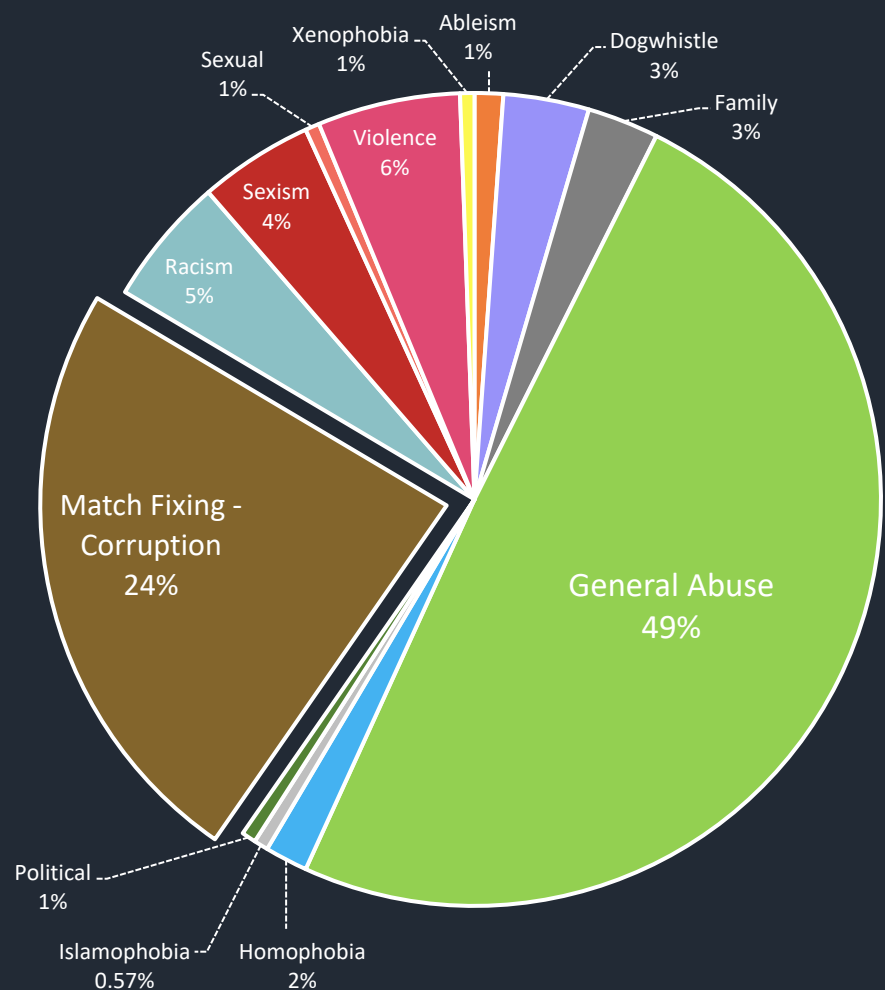
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### CASE STUDY: WAYNE BARNES

Wayne Barnes was the most targeted Match Official in the tournament. He was also the most targeted individual, with his account receiving more abuse than team accounts such as New Zealand's.

Barnes faced a substantial amount of online abuse, particularly during the World Cup Final between New Zealand and South Africa.

The pie chart below provides a breakdown of the types of abuse Wayne Barnes received. Aside from General Abuse, Match Fixing and Corruption driven abuse was by far the main category – he received 4 times the amount of abuse in this category (24%) than the next highest which was Violent abuse (6%).



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DIRECT MESSAGE ABUSE & THREATS

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### DIRECT MESSAGES & MATCH OFFICIALS

Signify provided support to Match Officials abuse or threats they received on X or Instagram via Direct Message. This included in response to abuse and threats towards Match Officials' family members as well.

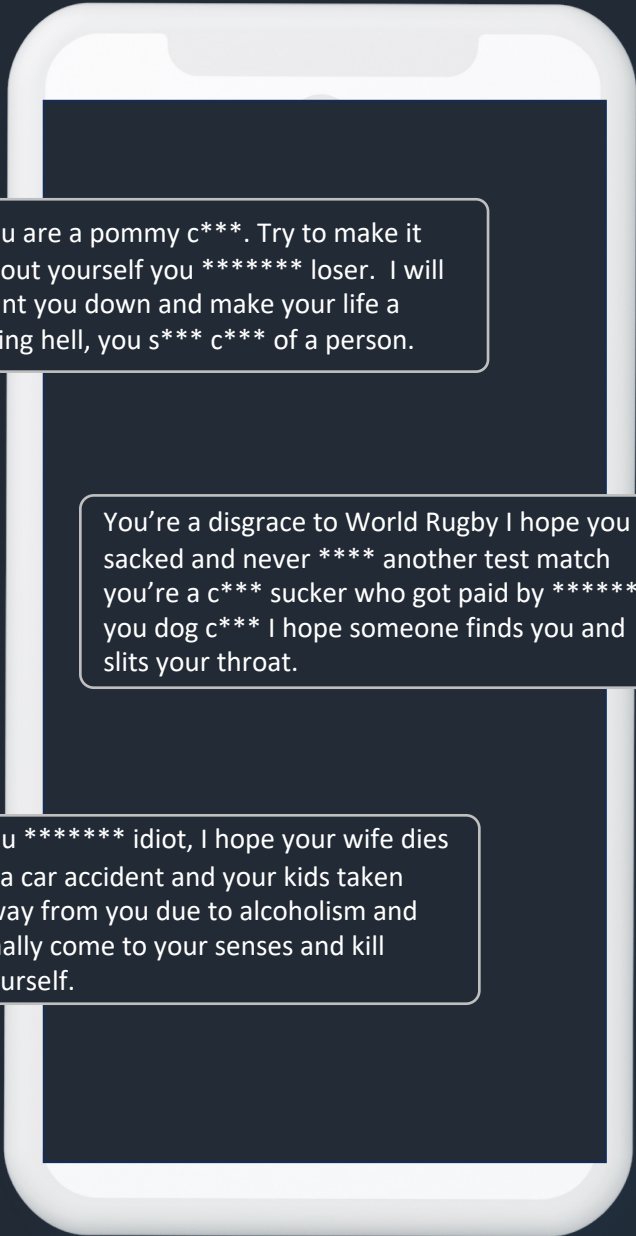
Match Officials received a range of abuse over private Direct Message but as is often the case with this channel of communication (compared to open-source social media posts) much of this was more personal and threatening.

In terms of types of abuse Match Officials and their family members received in Direct Messages it included:

- Match Fixing and Corruption (rigging and cheating accusations)
- General Abuse
- Violent
- Family related
- Targeted Threat

Support is being provided to a number of Match Officials and their family members beyond the event. Signify's investigations are ongoing, and this also includes one instance of threats made over LinkedIn messaging.

It is anticipated that further evidence packs will be sent to relevant law enforcement authorities in due course.



You are a pommy c\*\*\*. Try to make it about yourself you \*\*\*\*\* loser. I will hunt you down and make your life a living hell, you s\*\*\* c\*\*\* of a person.

You're a disgrace to World Rugby I hope you get sacked and never \*\*\*\* another test match you're a c\*\*\* sucker who got paid by \*\*\*\*\* you dog c\*\*\* I hope someone finds you and slits your throat.

You \*\*\*\*\* idiot, I hope your wife dies in a car accident and your kids taken away from you due to alcoholism and finally come to your senses and kill yourself.

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MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING

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### THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLL ON MATCH OFFICIALS & PLAYERS

The risks and mental health challenges associated with being a victim of online abuse or threats are real and have a direct and immediate effect on Match Officials, Players, and their families. This can impact them on both a personal and professional level, and ultimately affect their wellbeing and ability to perform at their best.

By putting the Threat Matrix service in place, World Rugby has been able to demonstrate to Match Officials and Players that they are being protected and that proactive action is being taken on their behalf to hold abusers to account.

Participants in sport are regularly demanding action be taken against those who send them abuse and threats. Threat Matrix provided this proactive support to Match Officials and Players at the Rugby World Cup giving them the assurance that perpetrators were being flagged, investigated, and reported to the appropriate authorities.

### REAL WORLD SYMPTOMS OF ONLINE ABUSE

The abhorrent abuse that Signify monitors across social media and all online platforms exposes Match Officials, Players, and even their families to serious risks.

Being a victim of online abuse and continuous hatred online can lead to a range of real-world consequences and symptoms, including but not limited to: anxiety; depression; loss of confidence; panic attacks; and in extreme cases, death by suicide.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

## RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023™

### FULL TOURNAMENT ANALYSIS

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

World Rugby introduced Signify's Threat Matrix service for the first time at the Rugby World Cup France 2023™.

The following recommendations are made in relation to the Rugby World Cup and also in the interests of the wider Rugby ecosystem:

- **Direct message risk** - although it was not part of the core service it became clear that Match Officials and one World Rugby executive were receiving abuse and threats via private direct message. This was mainly on Instagram although there were examples on X and one via LinkedIn. Direct message support should be offered to all Match Officials (and their immediate family members) as standard for future World Rugby tournaments.
- **Education** - Players and Coaches need to be educated on social media conduct and abuse. This is not just in terms of how they should handle abuse but also in terms of comments they make online regarding Match Officials' and the effect this can have more widely both online and in-ground.
- **Communications** - World Rugby should use the findings from this project to inform stakeholder education and policy on social media and mental health.
- **Match Officials and Players operate outside of World Rugby events** - the option to consult with other Rugby organisations on a wider initiative that would provide protection to Match Officials and Players year-round, and not just at World Rugby's tournaments.
- **World Rugby competitions** - given the levels of abuse targeting Match Officials and Players, World Rugby should consider longer-term implementation of the Threat Matrix service to include all competitions it organises.
- **Culture** - World Rugby should use the findings and real-world actions of this project to educate fans not only on the effects of social media abuse to participants but also on the repercussions for perpetrators.
- **Betting** - while abuse directly linked to betting was not an issue, there was still a significant volume of abuse connected to accusations of match fixing, cheating, and corruption. Should World Rugby expand its relationship with the betting industry then it could be expected to see abuse directly related to betting increase.
- **Stakeholder engagement** - World Rugby and Signify should continue to develop joint relationships with law enforcement bodies and other relevant external stakeholders, including raising awareness of online abuse and threats, and driving the appetite for action.
- **Leadership** - World Rugby and Signify should collaborate on the issue of online abuse and threat in general, not only on future events but also to raise awareness of the problem, co-operate with other interested parties, and help sport in general to tackle it.



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