



THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION

PRESS RELEASE

The Cybersmile Foundation and EE Hope United Launch GayVAR Initiative to Address Homophobic Abuse Online

London, UK, February 24, 2023 - The Cybersmile Foundation and EE have today announced the launch of GayVAR, an initiative that rallies the Hope United squad to tackle the issue of online homophobia within football and raise vital funds for Cybersmile.

Fronted by former England international Joe Cole and comedian Tom Allen, GayVAR will identify online homophobic hate, demonstrating its wide-ranging negative impact, while refuting claims that it is merely ‘banter’.

EE Hope United will be monitoring social media across three Premier League game weeks, with GayVAR content posted in response to specific moments that have been found to generate spikes in online homophobic abuse, such as bad individual player performances, bad goalkeeping, dives and losses.

Inspired by pitch-side VAR (Video Assistant Referee), the content will look to highlight the nonsensical nature of homophobic abuse, encouraging fans to take a stand and call it out when they see it or experience it online. The short videos will highlight the ridiculous and archaic nature of homophobic abuse, and will be shared across EE’s social media channels.

The launch of GayVAR comes as research commissioned by EE revealed almost three quarters (71%) of Brits agree homophobia is a problem in football, which rises to nine in 10 (88%) among LGBTQ+ respondents. Nearly half (40%) believe that social media exacerbates the issue.

A quarter of those surveyed have witnessed online homophobic hate firsthand in the past two years. However, worryingly, despite its prevalence few speak out against it; more than one in

four (27%) witnesses to homophobic abuse took no action. Notably, the wider UK population is less likely to take action than respondents in the LGBTQ+ community if they witnessed hate (27% vs 21%), suggesting the need for more allyship from the wider UK population.

Further members of the EE Hope United squad including Rio Ferdinand, Lucy Bronze and Andy Robertson will feature in a free online video content series, sharing digital skills to educate users on how to challenge and report online homophobic abuse.

A supplementary post-match-analysis-style video with Declan Rice will also be released after key Premier League fixtures, in which the England midfielder confronts abuse directed both at him and his fellow players.

As part of the initiative, Hope United shirts will be available to purchase, with all proceeds going to The Cybersmile Foundation, in support of their mission for a truly inclusive internet where everybody feels free to learn, play, communicate and express themselves without fear. The Hope United shirts can be purchased [here](#).

Scott Freeman, CEO at The Cybersmile Foundation, said, “At Cybersmile we believe wholeheartedly in a world without fear and abuse. We know first-hand from our work that football has the power to unite and we are proud to be part of such an important campaign addressing homophobic abuse in the sport.”

Pete Jeavons, Director Marketing Comms at EE, added: “The fact that Hope United is now on its third iteration demonstrates that the nature of online abuse is as varied as it is abhorrent. As long as online hate exists, Hope United will have a role to play, and EE will continue to use its platform to help create a more inclusive digital society.”

Launched in 2021, ahead of the UEFA European Championships, Hope United aims to tackle all forms of online hate through support for change and educating the nation on how to protect themselves online and be good digital citizens. The Hope United squad returned alongside Cybersmile last year, ahead of the UEFA European Women's Football Championship, to fight online sexist hate.

ABOUT THE CYBERSMILE FOUNDATION

The Cybersmile Foundation is a multi-award-winning nonprofit organization committed to digital wellbeing and tackling all forms of bullying and abuse online. We work to promote kindness, diversity and inclusion by building a safer, more positive digital community. Through education, research, awareness campaigns and the promotion of positive digital citizenship we reduce incidents of cyberbullying and through our professional help and support services we empower those affected and their families to regain control of their lives.

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The Cybersmile Foundation is an international nonprofit organization registered as a 501(c)3 not-for-profit organization in the U.S. and as a registered charity in the U.K. (No. 1147576)