This is a transcript of The Conversation Weekly podcast episode 'Discovery: How footballers can help reduce prejudice against minorities,' published on December 5, 2022.

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Gemma Ware: Hello and welcome. I'm Gemma Ware in London. Today we've got another episode for you as part of our discovery series here at The Conversation Weekly, where we chat with the researcher about a recent study they've done that we want more people to know about. And today, as the World Cup in Qatar enters its closing stages, we've got a story all about football.

This World Cup has been mired in controversy over Qatar's record on human and labor rights. Some of those at the tournament who've been trying to protest have been blocked from doing so. Police have confiscated rainbow armbands and other clothing showing support for LGBT rights from fans before games, and some fans have even been ejected from stadiums.

The global reach of tournaments like the World Cup can help shine a spotlight on issues such as homophobia and racism, but away from these big tournaments, what role can footballers actually play in reducing prejudice and intolerance? That's a question that Salma Mousa has been trying to answer. I came across Salma's work while doing research for a recent episode we did on depolarization.

I was looking for someone who studies what actually works to reduce tensions between different groups of people. Salma is a professor of political science at Yale University in the US, and this is something that she thinks a lot about: how to foster social cohesion. At the same time, Salma is also a huge fan of Mohamed Salah, the Egyptian football superstar who plays his club football in England for the Premier League Club, Liverpool.

Salma Mousa: Well, now you're gonna make me seem not credible with my research, but yes, I am a fan of his. As an Egyptian, I mean, you love to see Egyptians make it in the big leagues in Europe. There's been a few before him, but really nothing and no one on the scale of Mo Salah. So, I mean, I love him on the field, of course, I mean, it's just magic. When he's at his best, when he's in form, it's — there's nothing like it.

Gemma Ware: And were you a fan of Liverpool before he joined it in 2017?

Salma Mousa: You know, I wasn't. I never really committed to any Premier League club. I follow a club in Egypt, that's kind of my home club Zamalek. But now I'm committed. And so everyone asks me when, when he leaves, you know, or he retires or whatever, are you still gonna

be a Liverpool fan? And so, I mean, they haven't had the easiest season so far, and I'm still, I'm sticking it out.

Gemma Ware: There's something else about Mo Salah that actually makes him a very interesting subject for Salma's own research. He's a Muslim.

Salma Mousa: So, it's not just that he's Muslim, and it's something he keeps behind closed doors. He's prostrating in prayer after he scores a goal. His wife wears a head scarf, and you see her on the sidelines. His daughter's name is Mecca, which is Islam's holiest sight. I mean more superficially, his name is Mohamed, he has a beard, he's Arab. You know, all these things that people associate with Islam. So there's really no getting around the fact that this guy is a practicing Muslim. He is a typical Muslim. And so that was really the first time we had seen an athlete or a footballer at that level be so visible about their religiosity.

Gemma Ware: Salah joined Liverpool in 2017 and quickly became their star player. The next season, Liverpool won the European Champions League, followed the year after by the Premier League title in England. Salah was instrumental in their success, and Liverpool fans embraced him.

(chanting)

Salma Mousa: For me and my co-authors when we first saw the videos of Liverpool fans chanting, "If he scores another few, then I'll be Muslim too," I mean, that really just cemented it for us. Like, this guy is special to be making people talk about Muslims this way.

Gemma Ware: UK public opinion surveys at the time showed that more than half of people agreed with the sentiment that there was a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society. So Salma was interested in what effects Salah might be having on Islamophobia In the UK.

Salma Mousa: There's been this classic social psychology theory since the fifties called the contact theory. And the idea is pretty simple, that when two people meet each other from different social backgrounds, if that contact involves them cooperating toward a common goal, and they're sharing an equal power status within that meeting, even though in society they may be unequal, that kind of egalitarian, cooperative contact is something that's gonna reduce prejudice, it's gonna build friendships. And on the whole, this is good for intergroup relations.

That's all well and good, but it's not very scalable, right? It's hard to get people from different groups face to face and have them meet under these conditions, which are, you know, pretty hard to fulfill in a natural way. So when you start asking yourself, well, what, what is the kind of contact that the average person has with members of minority groups? So Muslims in the UK for

example, like, not everyone has a Muslim friend or coworker or someone in on their block who they can have this kind of interaction with, but millions of people are watching Mo Salah, right?

And so this is like a really neat, scalable way to look at the contact theory, a particular strand of it called parasocial contact. So the kind of exposure you have to celebrities, fictional characters, and for most people, that is their main way of learning about people from minority groups, and so it's really worth studying.

Gemma Ware: Salma and some of her colleagues decided to use Mo Salah as a way to test out this theory. They wanted to know whether exposure to Mo Salah reduced prejudice among Liverpool fans towards Muslims in the UK. The study they ended up designing was in three parts: The first focused on hate crimes. They decided to compare the number of hate crimes that happened in Merseyside — that's the area around Liverpool — and other counties in the Uk. In 2018, they sent out Freedom of Information requests to every police force in the country. Their goal was to compare hate crime data for a couple of years before Salah joined Liverpool to what happened afterwards.

Salma Mousa: So we needed to come up with a prediction, like, what is our best guess of what would've happened in Merseyside, had Salah not joined?

Salma Mousa: So to do that, to fill that in, we need to look at counties that had very similar hate crime trends before he joined, and then follow what happened to them after he joined. And so that's what we did, and we just project that into the future. And that's our best guess of what should have happened in Merseyside.

Gemma Ware: And were these hate crimes specifically targeting Muslims or general hate crimes?

Salma Mousa: These were all religious and racial hate crimes.

Gemma Ware: Ok.

Salma Mousa: But not specifically toward Muslims. So we didn't know the identity of the victim, but we know that they're religious or racial hate crimes.

Gemma Ware: But you could assume that a high proportion of them would've been Islamophobic hate crimes?

Salma Mousa: That's right. So, like, based on some digging we did and some Home Office reports, it's a pretty safe bet that a large proportion of those are targeted toward Muslims.

Gemma Ware: So, what did you find when you, you looked at these data before and after he joined and compared it to other similar areas?

Salma Mousa: So what we found was that in counties that were trending very similarly to hate crimes in the pre-Salah period, we find that Merseyside experienced about a 16% drop in the hate crime rate.

Gemma Ware: They compared this to what happened to other types of crime too, such as theft and domestic violence. The only category where there was a drop was hate crime.

Salma Mousa: This wasn't the case of Merseyside residents becoming just happier overall and less likely to commit any kind of crime because Liverpool was doing well. It really was specific to hate crimes.

Gemma Ware: After looking at hate crimes, Salma and her colleagues turned to the second part of their study: Hate speech.

Salma Mousa: Hate crimes is obviously an important outcome, but it's a pretty extreme outcome. Only real bigots, you know, would commit a hate crime, whereas hate speech or just anti-Muslim rhetoric is much more common. So we wanted to capture prejudice in that way.

Gemma Ware: Their approach was to analyze the Twitter accounts of 10,000 randomly selected fans who followed England's top five football clubs at the time. That was Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Manchester City, Manchester United, plus Everton, which is also based in Liverpool. They ended up with a data set of about 15 million tweets, and then they categorized them as either mentioning Muslims or not.

Salma Mousa: About 7% of all those tweets were relevant to rhetoric about Muslims or Islam. From those 7%, we then wanna know what is the percent that are positive or negative or neutral? So we got some research assistance to hand code a sample of those tweets. And then we trained an AI tool to classify all the rest of those thousands of tweets as being pro or anti or neutral toward Islam or Muslims. And what we find is that compared to what we would've expected among Liverpool fans, based on the rates of anti-Muslim tweeting among fans of Arsenal, Chelsea Man City, Man United, and Everton, there's actually a halving, so a 48% drop in the portion of anti-Muslim tweets among Liverpool fans.

Gemma Ware: At this point, Salma was pretty confident that they had found a Salah Effect, that exposure to Mo Salah was reducing Islamophobia in Liverpool. But they wanted to know why this was happening. So in the third and final part of this study, they targeted a survey at Liverpool fans on Facebook.

Salma Mousa: And the ad said, “Help researchers understand Liverpool fans,” which is the truth. “Take our two minute survey.” And so a lot of people clicked it and it’s really amazing when people are passionate about a topic, they really want to share their views. And so we had over 10,000 completed responses to this survey, which is just incredible.

Gemma Ware: Everyone who clicked on the survey was shown a small bit of text reminding them of a few basic facts about Mo Salah. Half of them were then shown an additional text emphasizing his religiosity, so, that he’s a practicing Muslim, and the other half weren’t.

Salma Mousa: And what we find is that priming people to think about his Muslim-ness made them more likely to say that Islam is compatible with British values — about 5 percentage points more likely, and also slightly more likely to say that they share a lot in common with British Muslims, compared to the control group that didn’t get that text. So for us, this is really telling us what the, the micro-foundations, like, the psychological foundations of this effect. It’s that when you’re exposed to one person from a minority group, when their minority identity is really salient, when it’s clear in your head that that person belongs to the minority group, it’s much easier to generalize your positive feelings about one person to the entire group.

Gemma Ware: So yes, they had found what they called a Mo Salah Effect. But remember, this study was done during a period when Liverpool was doing really well. Salah was their star player, and he was getting a lot of good media attention at the time, too. Salma says he’s also a very apolitical person, and it’s possible that this could have influenced how fans perceived him.

Salma Mousa: And this is kind of unusual. You see a lot of players stand up for social justice issues, for Black Lives Matter. They’re really outspoken. And so potentially there’s a trade off between your goals as an activist and your goals in just getting the largest group of people out there to like you. And so just by definition, taking a polarizing stance might not lead to these general prejudice-reduction effects. So we don’t really know, but we think it probably helped that he was apolitical.

Gemma Ware: Salma also started thinking about how long lasting the Salah Effect really was — and how resilient.

Salma Mousa: The most important one for us is really what happens when the player stops performing well, or when they have a bad day, or the team is not doing well. How fickle our fans when it comes to this prejudice reduction?

Gemma Ware: To test this, she’s begun work on a follow up study that’s using data from a fantasy football app for the Premier League.

Salma Mousa: People choose players each week, and they select them based on who they think is gonna perform the best, and the better players are more expensive to buy on the app.

Gemma Ware: Ahead of each match, the fantasy app predicts how many points a player is expected to score. The researchers take that prediction and benchmark it against how the player actually performs on the day.

Salma Mousa: So if you're predicted to score 15 points, and you actually score five points, so you had a bad day, what is the fan reaction to that? So we look at social media posts, so Reddit, Twitter. We scrape again randomly selected timelines of these football fans, and we see whether they're more likely to speak negatively about the player if they are a minority, as opposed to a non-minority if they have a bad day. And we look at the opposite. So when you have a good day, when you over-perform, do people reward minorities more for that, for example? And then, finally, we actually look at the fantasy app itself. So we see among users whose sole purpose, you know, their sole goal is really to maximize points on this app, is there some bias creeping in where people are more likely to bench or to sell a minority player? You know, they sell them faster if they have a bad day, as opposed to players from ethnic or national majority groups?

Gemma Ware: Oh, I'd love to know what you find in all that.

Salma Mousa: Me, too, we're working on it.

Gemma Ware: Alongside this kind of work looking at celebrity footballers like Salah, Salma has also done research on what happens when different religious groups come into face-to-face contact during grassroots football leagues. She's looking at whether this kind of contact could help increase integration.

Salma Mousa: I've been testing this in pretty extreme settings. So post-ISIS Iraq, among Christians and Muslims who have been displaced by ISIS, where there's very recent violence, the security situation's very precarious.

Gemma Ware: In the Iraqi city of Mosul, Salma studied what happened when a few Muslim players were placed in an otherwise majority-Christian football team.

Salma Mousa: I also looked at this in Lebanon with Syrian refugee children and very marginalized Lebanese children. So these are extremely vulnerable groups who are, you know, these leagues that I had set up, where we're working against the backdrop of this continuing political and economic crisis in Lebanon and pretty extreme stigmatization of Syrians.

Gemma Ware: In both post-ISIS Iraq and Lebanon, Salma found that playing on the same football team did help reduce levels of prejudice between religious groups.

Salma Mousa: So in both of those settings, I do see these positive effects of contact, but they're limited to the people you come into contact with. They don't necessarily extend to everyone from that group. And I think the reason is that the backdrop of this is a precarious security situation, like these economic crises. It doesn't necessarily make sense for people to now start trusting strangers from the out-group based on their experiences with a handful of individuals who they've personally gotten to know and gotten to trust and kind of vetted.

So, although face-to-face contact should be stronger in its effects on social cohesion, my particular body of work finds that it's a little less strong than the Salah Effect, but I think that this is really driven by the fact that I'm working in these extreme settings when it comes to political and economic tensions, and the structural roots of intergroup conflict are much deeper than what you would find with Muslims in the UK, for example, where the stakes are just a bit lower, and it's a little bit easier to nudge people to be a little bit nicer toward Muslims. There's no existential threat around making that leap in trust.

Gemma Ware: So Egypt sadly are not in the World Cup in Qatar, which is a travesty.

Salma Mousa: Honestly, I'm not that sad. I'm not that sad.

Gemma Ware: Are you not that sad? Why not?

Salma Mousa: I was at the 2018 World Cup, I saw Egypt play and it was, you know, with all due respect to the players who I think are doing their best, it was a very depressing experience. I'd rather that if they weren't at their best, that they just don't compete at all.

Gemma Ware: Okay. A fair point. But I guess, you, as someone who kind of studies this, you know, there are plenty of other minority players from teams around the world, whether that's European or elsewhere. So what are you gonna be watching out for? You must watch the World Cup with a slightly different frame of mind than some people.

Salma Mousa: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, there are some teams that are just, you know, the symbol of diversity and integration. Like, the French national team for a long time. You know, since the '98 World Cup has really been seen as this flagship team that includes people from all sorts of different backgrounds. So that's always one to watch. I think what's more interesting for me in looking at the Qatar World Cup is really the world's reaction to Qatar. So this is also really a kind of exposure that people are getting to Arabs and Muslims that they hadn't previously gotten. And one of Qatar's, you know, self-proclaimed goals was to bring the game to the Middle East, like, have it be set in a Muslim country for the first time, break down barriers, reduce prejudice toward Muslims and toward Arabs. And I'm not sure if that's working right now, because the media backlash has been very intense, and so far it's been quite critical. So I'm interested to see, you know, if people are now gonna have a more negative opinion, actually, of

Muslims and Arabs as a result of Qatar hosting the World Cup, which would, you know, be I think a, it would be sad, it'd be really a disappointing use of this opportunity.

Gemma Ware: Hmm. So you could have a situation where you've got minority players doing really well in it, actually helping in some individual country contexts, but, like, more globally it's a worse story for Islamophobia.

Salma Mousa: Right. I mean, one pretty well-documented effect in the social sciences is that it's much easier to like individuals than groups. So even something as simple as telling people, you know, the Republican Party versus Republicans, there's like a big difference just in that framing on how people describe their attitudes. So I think with Qatar hosting the World Cup, there's not that many individuals that you can put a face to. It's like this big murky group of, you know, oil billionaires who are, you know, slave drivers and they're this and that, and some of that's really well taken criticisms, but there's not really like a likable face to the World Cup. And even the Qatari national team, you know, gets a lot of criticism because a lot of the players are foreign-born or who were nationalized. So that's also kind of how you respond, whether someone's representative or not is also a function of your own prejudice.

Gemma Ware: Yeah. Thank you so much for your time, Salma. It's been really fascinating talking with you. Appreciate it.

Salma Mousa: Thank you, Gemma.

Gemma Ware: You've been listening to an episode of Discovery from The Conversation Weekly podcast. It was produced and written by me, Gemma Ware, and Mend Mariwany and Katie Flood. Sound design is by Eloise Stevens, and our theme music is by Neeta Sarl. Our global executive editor is Steven Khan, and Alice Mason does our social media. You can find us on Twitter at TC_audio on Instagram @theconversationdotcom, or email us on podcast@theconversation.com. And you can also sign up for our free daily email by clicking the link in the show notes. If you like what we do, please support our podcast and The Conversation by going to donate.theconversation.com. Thanks for listening.