

# SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND ATHLETE ABUSE

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## ABSTRACT

*Purpose: The purpose of this chapter is to examine the presence of abuse enacted through virtual mediums with a specific focus on how athletes can become the targets of online hate. The chapter introduces social media and explores the role it has played in the increasing reliance on virtual worlds. The impact of digital technology on sport in particular is framed in order to demonstrate how digital technologies are now a vital component in our consumption of sport. The primary focus of the chapter is on how virtual spaces can pose significant risk(s). Freedom of speech, shifting power and the lack of safety and regulation in virtual spaces are all presented. Finally, recommendations are made for future research in the area in order to develop understanding of abuse augmented by virtual environments and to develop the focus on virtual safeguarding in sport and beyond.*

*Design/methodology/approach: This chapter synthesises and discusses existing literature from the disciplines of sport, social media and abuse, with a view to understand and address prominent issues encountered by athletes in the virtual world.*

*Findings: By examining abuse through a sociological lens, this chapter focusses on the factors that promote or enable abuse to occur online (often without regulation). The types of abuse experienced in virtual spaces are legion and this adds to the complexity of policing and/or safeguarding online environments.*

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*Research limitations/implications: The chapter makes recommendations for a number of future areas of study that will extend the current understanding of abuse in virtual environments.*

*Originality/value: The chapter provides a synthesis of the emerging area of virtual abuse and its links to sociology as a discipline. It offers insight into power in virtual spaces as a critical frame of reference for understanding virtual interactions and parasocial relationships.*

**Keywords:** Virtual abuse; integrity; violence; sport; safeguarding; athlete protection

## INTRODUCTION

Digital spaces and virtual worlds were radically transformed through the advent of Web 2.0 and the creation of ‘user-generated content’. The virtual (or online) environment transformed from a space in which users or consumers were onlookers to a space where humans became active participants. Individuals and groups, through user-generated content, were given the capacity to frequently modify and participate in the creation of digital content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). These technological advances have led to the development of social media applications that facilitate users to generate content, create and exchange information and build communities in online spaces (Curran & Lennon, 2011; Rathore, Llavarasan, & Dwivedi, 2016). These social media platforms have also allowed individuals and groups to learn, to attract and conduct business, to strengthen social relationships (PSR) and activities and to create whole new personalities and identities (Matijasevic, 2014). Online spaces provide a parallel universe, where virtual reality allows entirely new forms of social action and interaction (Matijasevic, 2014). As a result of many of these radical changes undergone in the virtual environment over the last two decades, social networking is one of the prevailing reasons as to why people engage with digital platforms.

In the process of consuming and engaging in online environments, our ‘real’ lives have become intimately entangled with new media and ‘virtual’ environments. Digital technologies appear to no longer be an additional feature to our everyday lives, but more of an integral feature in everyday communication and activity (see Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2018). For instance, Ringrose and Harvey (2017) suggested that mobile smartphones are now often entwined with our bodies (rather than being detached), thus creating post-human cyborg bodies that are ever more reliant on a continuous stream of digital information and data.

Similarly, Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon (2017) explain that ‘life in general has now been interpenetrated with digital data. The online world has become an extension and an enhancement of pre-existing social relations and arrangements’ (p. 876). A number of other studies have also commented on the interrelated relationship between online experiences, engagement and relationships with daily

social life or ‘real-world’ experiences, often labelled as ‘digital sociology’ (see [Selwyn \(2018\)](#) and [Waite and Bourke \(2015\)](#) for examples of this research). In particular, [Waite and Bourke \(2015\)](#) used Haraway’s cyborg theory (1991) in their study focussing on young people and Facebook use and observed that

...the cyborg metaphor highlights the fluid melding of various conceptual dualisms altered in the overlap between the virtual environs of Facebook and the material, everyday lives of the young participants.... (p. 537)

## DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND SPORT

With this increased reliance on and attachment to digital technology, it has become progressively difficult for people to disengage from online spaces. In fact, digital technologies have become a vital component in the navigation of everyday tasks and activities and our ‘real’ or ‘physical’ lives have become closely entangled with online environments (see [Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010](#)). These everyday tasks include working, shopping, banking, leisure time and the engagement and consumption of sport and recreation. In particular, as [Lebel and Danylchuk \(2012\)](#) and [Sanderson \(2011\)](#) explain, technological advancements have transformed the consumption and reporting of sport across the world. One of the most significant changes for sport consumers and fans has been the use of social media platforms and, specifically, the development of interactive experiences between sport fans, athletes, clubs and events. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are used to share live streams of sport, sport stories, break news, share live updates during events or reflect on the performances of athletes and teams.

The appearance of internet-based social media has transformed the space for media representation in sport. Sport media organisations and sporting teams and organisations have used the opportunity to present news stories and live scores as extensively as possible via such platforms. [Browning and Sanderson \(2012\)](#) explain that social media platforms such as Twitter have presented profound opportunities and changes for sport journalists, who now find themselves competing with athletes and sport teams to break and report up-to-date sporting news stories. The use of social media platforms to disseminate news stories allows for up-to-the-minute reporting on sport, a feat that print (and traditional) media could not achieve.

Social media platforms and technologies have also had a momentous effect on traditional methods of fan-athlete interaction ([Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012](#)). Social media has allowed professional sport teams and athletes to connect with sport fans and consumers in ways that they would not have done through traditional media (see [Sanderson, 2011](#) and [Kassing & Sanderson, 2010](#)). Online (and synchronous) interactions between fans and athletes (or teams) occur regularly, which allow sport fans to experience a sense of connection with their favourite sporting team or athlete. Similarly, [Kavanagh and Jones \(2014\)](#) explain that sport fans can take part in a virtual experience, by watching games, communicating with other fans and/or providing a virtual commentary of sporting matches.

Athletes and other sport personnel use social media platforms in a variety of ways, including promoting their own brand or sharing their private lives. This use of social media inevitably makes athletes more accessible to fans or followers of sport (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). These social platforms allow for athletes and individuals to present their own stories in ways that they would like to be represented (rather than a traditional media report).<sup>1</sup> Athletes more generally are able to take a more active role in their public presentation across a wide variety of social media platforms (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012) and share more information about their identity or personal life that is typically portrayed in mainstream media coverage (Sanderson, 2014).

### ATHLETE SELF-PRESENTATION ONLINE

Online spaces, including social media platforms, provide the potential for professional and elite athletes to mould their own media experiences. These spaces allow athletes to communicate with sport fans, share stories of their own lives, be a brand ambassador and take a more active part in their public presentation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Pegoraro, Comeau, & Frederick, 2017). The concept of 'self-presentation' was forged by Erving Goffman in his work entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman (1959) explained that individuals will naturally attempt to guide the impression that others might have of them by changing a setting or narrative. For instance, this might relate to appearance, characteristics (or manner) or the general impressions that others form. The use of social media applications (and also the use of web sites, blogs and online media) such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter provides such spaces for favourable self-presentation to occur.

Therefore, those who may not normally have had the opportunity to present themselves, such as athletes (particularly female athletes), now have the ability to do so. Specifically, virtual worlds have created platforms that female athletes can use to share content and present themselves to fans or followers of sport in their own way and with relative freedom (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2018). Unlike other forms of traditional media, athletes can create their own stories, own media, and promote products using *their own words*. Having ownership of the narrative to describe oneself is particularly important, considering the usual ways in which professional and elite athletes are reported 'on' in media spaces (which often includes a lack of input by the athletes themselves).

The practice of self-representation is particularly pertinent for women athletes to engage in. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) explained that due to a persistence of hegemonic masculinity being valued in sport, often, male athletes have an advantage in gaining social media followers and interest in online spaces. Fink (2014) suggested that the ideology of hegemonic masculinity embedded in sport could, in fact, be challenged in online spaces by offering both more media coverage to female athletes and a different discourse (p. 335). Similarly, Hardin (2009) explained that social media and the internet have 'eroded the institutional barriers traditionally blamed for putting women on the sidelines' (p. 5).

Furthermore, [Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce \(2017\)](#) suggest that social media ‘provides sportswomen with opportunities to bypass the gatekeepers that control traditional media products, regain some control over how they are represented, and potentially build new audiences’ (p. 361).

Online and social media also provides self-representation to occur for diverse groups of women to self-represent themselves. This self-representation is particularly pertinent for women in marginalised groups who are rarely reported on by mainstream media sources, including women with disabilities, women of colour and lesbian women. In fact, [Toffoletti and Thorpe \(2018\)](#) suggest that social media has the ‘transformative potential’ to both allow and empower women to construct alternative narratives and discourse around the definitions of women. The importance of such potential lies in the ability to challenge patriarchal structures and the organisation of sport. However, in their research, [Toffoletti and Thorpe \(2018\)](#) found little challenge to the hyper-sexualised female sporting bodies that exist in the sport media (p. 16). They suggest that

...[w]hat remains largely invisible and/or illegible are female athletic bodies that do not conform to heterosex norms – bodies that queer, disrupt or outright reject (or are rejected by) the demands of the market whereby dominant modes of femininity are reimagined through narratives of agency and empowerment. ([Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018](#), pp. 27–28; also see [Banet-Weiser, 2012](#), p. 27)

As such, [Toffoletti and Thorpe’s \(2018\)](#) work shows that some women athletes are intentionally employing a neoliberal post-feminist approach to adapt to and align with market interest and are not presenting diverse and alternate images or narratives of their lives.

The engagement with social media platforms can be unavoidable for many professional women athletes, due to the progressively professional nature of women’s sport and competitions. Many women athletes are allocated specific social media accounts and expected to engage and post information, in order to raise the prominence of both themselves and their sport. While self-representation in online spaces provides an opportunity (for some) to engage in self-expression and personally play a part in constructing an identity away from the sporting field, for others, social and online media does not provide a welcoming platform. These online platforms can also provide a space for these women to be susceptible to online abuse, particularly under the guise of ‘free speech’. This abuse and oppression can occur in a number of ways. The following section details a number of types of abuse and how they can manifest in online and social media spaces.

## THE DARK SIDE OF ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Since the advent of Web 2.0, the instances of social media abuse in virtual spaces are increasingly prevalent, toxic and harmful. It is now widely accepted that virtual environments are sites that foster widespread hostility and violence. In many ways, virtual worlds mirror face-to-face environments, therefore abuse

which is present in physical spaces can be replicated in and/or augmented by online environments. Jane (2020) suggests that contrary to claims that violence online is mostly innocuous, there is now a growing number of academic studies that collectively demonstrate how the suffering caused by violence experienced online is real, tangible and embodied (Jane, 2018; Lockyer & Savigny, 2019).

Abusive behaviour directed at athletes via social media has been presented as a function of fandom, an aspect of larger celebrity culture. Developing fandom for a particular public figure or sport team is considered a standard part of human attraction, curiosity and interaction with popular culture (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021; Vinney, Dill-Shackleford, Plante, & Bartsch, 2019). Athletes can become a target of virtual fan violence for a multitude of reasons. For example, fans who tweet hateful comments because they perceive an athlete has not performed well enough to deliver a victory or when an athlete has been seen to underperform (Sanderson, 2016; Sanderson & Truax, 2014), when an athlete outperforms others and is viewed as an outlier, as is the case with Serena Williams and her perceived fit for women's tennis (Litchfield et al., 2018), in order to publicly shame an athlete due to a norm violation (MacPherson & Kerr, 2021) or as a result of speaking out concerning a social or political issue that diverges from how a fan feels about that topic (Frederick, Sanderson, & Schlereth, 2017; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). All of these studies highlight the ease of access to celebrity figures and the unregulated nature of virtual spaces that promote hostile or violent interactions that manifest for a multitude of reasons.

The abuse of athletes as a dimension of fandom has been explored in a number of ways. Much academic scholarship has adopted the framework of parasocial interaction (PSI), whereby individuals engaging with celebrity figures in virtual spaces can form PSR – a one-sided quasi-relationship between a viewer and a media figure (Dibble, Hartmann, & Rosaen, 2016). PSR evolve over time and emerge from PSI. Through virtual interactions, individuals can develop many of the common features present in real or non-virtual relationships including a sense of connection and presumed intimacy, yet there is one important difference; the behaviour is one-sided and unreciprocated. The development of new media has led to the strengthening of PSR that can easily be nurtured through an increased sense of interaction with a celebrity which in the past may not have been possible.

When athletes and sport teams use social media to reach out and connect with fans and followers, this can lead to the creation of virtual bonds through keeping in touch with the lives of their sport heroes, following the narrative of their teams and/or connecting with others in a virtual fan experience. Kassing and Sanderson (2015) refer to bridging functions whereby online interactions can lead to face-to-face contact with sport heroes. This can lead to fans seeking out opportunity to deepen their connection with a celebrity. Kassing and Sanderson (2015) conceptualised the term 'circum-social interaction' (p. 12) to reflect that fan messaging to athletes via social media can be unreciprocated, but also can result in a response from the athlete. Hence, interaction rotates between traditional PSI and actual social interaction; therefore, new media has fostered an environment in which fans can engage and connect with athletes in both virtual and real spaces, creating an artificial intimacy between them. This has resulted in both

positive and negative PSI in online spaces, the latter of which [Kassing and Sanderson \(2015\)](#) refer to as maladaptive PSI.

Maladaptive PSI in sport has been classified further through the work of [Kavanagh, Jones, and Shepard-Marks \(2016\)](#) as a form of virtual violence. They define violent interactions enabled by virtual spaces as

...direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority. (p. 788)

Such violence can be exhibited through the presence of physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory content, the latter of which may include discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and/or disability. As [Kavanagh et al. \(2016\)](#) suggest, the internet poses numerous threats and points to the widespread presence of violence targeted at athletes in virtual spaces. They believe that virtual spaces in many ways serve to enable rather than prevent abuse.

This variety of online hate is reflected across existing research studies which have sought to examine online environments and the threats they pose ([Browning & Sanderson, 2012](#); [Kavanagh & Jones, 2014](#); [Kavanagh, Litchfield, & Osborne, 2021](#); [Litchfield et al., 2016, 2018](#)). In earlier work, [Kian, Clavio, Vincent, and Shaw \(2011\)](#) examined the sexist and homophobic nature of online interaction between fans on a sport message board in American football. Similarly, [Sanderson and Truax \(2014\)](#) identified an increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media in American collegiate sport. Their study examined tweets directed at a University footballer, in their study online hostility manifested in a variety of ways, including belittling, mocking, sarcasm and threats. More recently, [Litchfield et al. \(2018\)](#) highlighted the presence of sexist, racist and violent interactions towards women athletes in virtual spaces and highlighted the presence of gender-based violence towards female athletes from sport fans ([Kavanagh et al., 2021](#)). As [Litchfield et al. \(2018\)](#) rightly note, 'gendered hostility, sexualised threats of violence and racially charged invective are part of a dark narrative of human behaviour within online spaces' (p. 13).

More broadly, the presence of online toxicity provides a microcosm within which we can observe the enactment of gendered, racialised and sexualised politics, often at an extreme level ([Kavanagh et al., 2016](#)). For example, academic scholars are increasingly raising concern about the disproportionate levels of gender-based violence experienced by women in virtual spaces which has been proven to be a global concern ([Ging & Siapera, 2018](#); [Jane, 2018](#)). Using a third-wave feminist lens, [Kavanagh et al. \(2016\)](#) examined virtual violence targeting women athletes and highlighted that social media provides a space for unregulated gender-based cyberhate targeting high-profile women in their workplace in a way that traditional sport media does not. Women athletes in their study were exposed to vitriol surrounding their job role and performance. The violence directed at them served to marginalise, sexualise and demean the performers and their performances. While all people engaging with online platforms have the potential to experience abuse, women and girls are recognised as primary targets

of violence and oppression online (Moloney & Love, 2018). Virtual spaces provide the opportunity to enact gendered and sexualised politics which serve to reinforce traditional hierarchies of male domination evident in patriarchal cultures.

The potential to experience abuse in virtual spaces can be magnified for a number of reasons. These include, but are not limited to, increasingly high levels of internet use (The Office of Communications [Ofcom] 2018 suggests that one in five people spend more than 40 hours online per week), a lack of regulation or policing in online spaces (Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price, & Saeed, 2014) and the likelihood for users to interact with individuals who are unknown to them and thus establish virtual relationships with users who they may never meet in a physical space (Della Cioppa, O'Neil, & Craig, 2015). Kassing and Sanderson (2015) further noted how a contagion effect can occur in virtual spaces whereby online vitriol spreads, with a corresponding increase in tolerance for such behaviours to be present in online social commentary. Through changing the way in which people communicate and form relationships, we thus increase the pervasiveness and likelihood of experiencing abuse and victimisation online.

Beyond fan-athlete interactions, there are numerous other threats posed by lives spent online. Cyber-mechanisms of abuse are legion and include, but are not limited to, cyberbullying, cyberstalking, online child sexual grooming and online coercion (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Such behaviours have the potential to span both virtual and physical spaces of the targets, so they do not just occur online or in virtual spaces. As an example, Sanderson and Weathers (2020) conducted a case analysis of 99 media reports whereby a coach had been arrested based upon sexual behaviour with a minor *mediated by* digital technology. The cases examined occurred between 2013 and 2018 and examined child sexual grooming and manipulation facilitated through the social media application Snapchat. Sanderson and Weathers (2020) showed how social media platforms act as optimal platforms for the abuse and grooming of children in sport settings. The advent of digital technologies has opened up pathways for coaches to gain the trust of victims in virtual spaces but can further act as a conduit for coach perpetrators to move abuse from the virtual to physical context (Kavanagh et al., 2021). It is clear that the internet has increased the risks associated with child sexual grooming through changing the way in which people communicate and form relationships and, as a direct result, this has created a new medium in which child sexual grooming can occur often without detection (Dombrowski, Gischlar, & Durst, 2007). These abuse types pose a pernicious threat to individuals navigating virtual space and are also, inevitably, a threat to athletes and other key stakeholders in sport.

As Deborah Lupton cogently argues, 'we now live in a digital society' (2015, p. 2), with social institutions – such as sport – now being not just underpinned by, but rather intertwined with, digital technology. As such, our relationships and interactions with others have altered, with changing patterns of participation and power evident within the virtual environment. Such changes continue to have a significant impact on the ways that we interact with others and this will be explored within the following sub-sections.

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND ONLINE SPACES

Worldwide, there has been a movement towards a freer, more liberal view of the individual. This movement has been facilitated (if not predicated) by social media and digital platforms. Freedom of speech and/or expression underlies this empowerment and, indeed, is among the elements that are seemingly sacred to internet users. As [Leets \(2010\)](#) explains, ‘the World Wide Web has allowed marginalized extremist groups with messages of hate to have a more visible and accessible public platform’ (p. 287). Social media has thus become something of a ‘perfect tool’ for those who feel they have not had a voice. In many sectors, including sport, this has opened an ideological battle over what counts as freedom of speech and whether freedom of speech is an endless entity.

Social media has become a space of presumed intimacy and increased influence, and this results in an optimal climate for abuse to occur. The freedoms of social media pose a pernicious threat to individuals navigating virtual spaces, particularly children, and these are no less problematic if the individual is involved in sport. Sporting organisations are regularly active in the social media space and, given that sporting organisations wish to both broaden and protect their interests, athletes, especially those in the public eye, may be even more at risk ([Kavanagh et al. 2021](#)).

Sometimes, ‘political correctness’ can temper the propensity for individuals to be able to engage in free speech in cases where that speech has anti-liberal leanings. However, there is also the potential for some individuals and groups to feel as if their beliefs are curtailed in the media proper and feel constrained by the liberal narratives which have emerged more broadly. According to [Moller \(2018\)](#), political correctness can be defined as

the attempt to establish norms of speech (or sometimes behaviour) that are thought to be (a) protect vulnerable, marginalized or historically victimized groups, and which (b) function by shaping public discourse, often by inhibiting speech or other forms of social signalling, and that (c) are supposed to avoid insult and outrage, a lowered sense of self-esteem, or otherwise offending the sensibilities of such groups or their allies (p. 1).

In essence, [Moller \(2018\)](#) suggests that political correctness shapes public speech in ways which benefit those in marginalised groups. However, there have been many attempts to halt or reverse the ‘political correctness’ so prevalent in left-wing liberalism and these often take the form of the bolstering of the far- and ultra-right, white-supremacy movements. There seems to be a clear move by some (individuals and groups) to reclaim some of the ‘freedoms’, or indeed power, believed to have been ‘lost’ as a result of what they see as political correctness or for even more devious reasons. Issues which arise in sport and which regularly invoke a ‘charge of political correctness’ response on social media include most progressive and inclusive decisions. There is documented social media backlash (often calling for the end to the political correctness that is assumed to underlie these decisions) when a woman is placed in a high level position in male sport, such as Raelene Castle in Rugby Australia ([Litchfield & Osborne, 2020](#)), when challenge is made to racism in sport, for instance,

Kaepernick and others 'taking the knee' (Schmidt, Frederick, Pegoraro, & Spencer, 2019) and the response to Australian footballer Adam Goodes speaking out about racism (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017), and issues of LGBTIQ+ such as the response to New Zealander Laurel Hubbard as the first trans-woman to be included in a Commonwealth Games team (AAP, 2017).

## LACK OF REGULATION IN DIGITAL SPACES

The regulation of social media is problematic, and while preventing people from using the internet for hate- and hurt speech is not feasible (Solomone, 2018), the consequences of using such speech can, to some degree, be policed by the governments, the legal systems and, in this case, the sporting organisations. Litchfield and Osborne's (2020) research related to online vilification of the former CEO of Rugby Australia, Raelene Castle, and notes that online abuse sport is a significant issue within the context of women in sporting workplaces. They suggest that research should consider the notion of 'free speech' as relational to abusive, critical and violent interactions in digital settings and the line of responsibility runs clearly to digital media outlets to mediate and monitor such interactions (Litchfield & Osborne, 2020). Virtual environments cannot be ignored as spaces where bullying and abuse in and around sport can occur. In addition to providing spaces for people to be targeted by bullies, online spaces can further provide an environment in which to gain access to individuals to control or manipulate their behaviour.

From a perspective of sport law and sport management, Holden, Baker, and Edelman's (2020) research focusses on gendered online abuse in esports. They suggest that there is a prevalence of sex and gender abuse in gaming communities, a realm which is an ever-growing, multimillion-dollar industry with a plethora of investors, where the abuse occurs often in the game environment rather than on other platforms (Holden, Baker, & Edelman, 2020, pp. 6–7). The authors note that, 'despite the potential for a post-gender-classified sporting universe, esports remains constrained by sexism that keeps very few women from reaching the upper echelons of competition' (Holden et al., 2020, p. 3) and suggest that the implementation of aggressive and proactive mechanisms for change, in this case, by game-makers and streaming site providers, will go some way to addressing this issue.

According to Holden et al. (2020), game producers need to change the way the culture of gaming tolerates harassment and abuse, suggesting anonymity for those that report harassment and making those who report feel respected and valued within the gaming community. Despite coming from a law/management perspective, the research by Holden et al. (2020) clearly indicates the necessity of sociological frameworks for addressing the issues surrounding esports and by extension the digital spaces in and around all sport. Sociological research can be utilised not only to draw a clear picture of the concerns and mechanisms for bullying and abuse online but also to understand the effect, if any, on the cultures after implementation of strategies to address the issues. Ultimately, if the

culmination of the process lies in implementation of a strategy (or worse, the writing of a policy), then understanding which elements of the culture have been improved, and which haven't, is impossible. The importance of sociological (particularly qualitative) research and digital sociology in understanding digital spaces in and around sport is undeniable and must be ongoing as the digital media use in enacting or complementing sport at all levels increases.

## SECRECY, ANONYMITY AND THE POWER OF THE ABUSER

As has been well-documented in research, coaches and other sporting staff have traditional and situational power over athletes (Brackenridge, 1994; 1997; Burke, 2001; Everley, 2020). In a culture which values results, the close and trust-bound coach-athlete working relationship in sport can be seen to facilitate the possibility of physical abuse of child athletes and others involved in sport. Digital abuse can be seen to sit upon the ingrained and accepted culture of competitive sport, termed the 'sport ethic', which values those who push beyond the body's limits in the pursuit of athletic superiority and which include the notion of sacrifice and a 'win at all costs' mentality (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Additionally, McMahon, Knight, and McGannon (2018) suggest that the parents of young athletes involved in sport may have an inability to be able to identify improper coaching practices which have been normalised in sport and which further puts young athletes at risk (Kerr, Stirling, & Wilson, 2020). Recent athlete testimonials and reports suggest that this 'sacrifice' for the sake of sport performance is ingrained in sport and often include physical, emotional and even sexual abuse (McMahon et al., 2018). A recent report which documents the results of an independent cultural review of abuse in Australian gymnastics reveals that many former elite gymnasts trained in environments entrenched with many forms of abuse and also suggests that all sport have risk factors in common with what was found in gymnastics (Australian Human Rights Commission, AHRC, 2021, pp. 28–29).

Such abuse has not only been witnessed in Australian gymnastics. In 2017, Larry Nassar, an ex-medical practitioner in various sport (including gymnastics, diving, athletics and swimming), was sentenced to between 40 and 175 years of imprisonment for child sexual abuse. It is estimated that he abused more than 250 victims in a career spanning multiple decades. As Meyers (cited in Novkov, 2019) states, the culture within elite gymnastics, one that emphasises 'winning at all costs', made it possible for coaches and support staff, such as Larry Nassar, to exploit the athletes as they scrambled to keep the severity of any injury secret from their coaches. The nature of this culture, in effect, facilitates such actions. There is evidence that issues of secrecy work similarly in digital spaces served to exacerbate the existing power differential between athlete and coach, particularly as the young athletes may underestimate the dangers given their familiarity with the platform. The 'Change the Routine' report on Australian gymnastics

(AHRC, 2021) highlights the concerns associated with social media contact between coaches (and other staff) and young athletes, noting that this type of contact extended the boundaries of the coach's influence and control beyond the gymnasium floor (AHRC, 2021, p. 38). The review drew attention to the concerns of gymnastics community members in relation to the conduct of coach-athlete relationships that extended to social media, which prompted the Commission to include a specific recommendation for Gymnastics Australia to develop a universal policy regarding social media (to apply to all levels of gymnastics in all Australian states and territories) which 'should stipulate that the minimum age for engagement with any athlete via social media is 18' (AHRC, 2021, p. 45).

Policy of this kind is essential not only to exist as policy but also to be rigorously enforced, particularly in light of recent research such as Sanderson and Weathers (2020), who showed that coaches grooming young athletes for sexual abuse regularly incorporate social media platforms. The study notes that the platform Snapchat, in particular, with its 'privacy' protection promise of posts disappearing after 10 seconds after being opened by the recipient, is thereby a welcome platform for abusers for whom secrecy is paramount (Sanderson & Weathers, 2020, p. 84). Although there are ways around this 'disappearance' of content, this presumed secrecy (along with a location feature which can allow users to track and be tracked by their contacts) adds to the power that online abusers of children, and in this case child athletes, have over their targets.

Online abuse has several characteristics in common with more traditional forms of bullying and abuse. These include the presence of intentionality, repetition of behaviour and, importantly for this chapter, the presence of an imbalance of power. Olenik-Shemech, Heiman, and Eden (2012) note that bullying involves the abuse of power in a social context. Palladino et al. (2017) suggest that this imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target is of a nature whereby the target is unable to defend themselves. In the social media space, an abuser may seek out ways to inflate their own sense of importance or power. This intention to use and increase the power differential serves to silence those who are the recipient of these online attacks. The difficulty in imposing satisfactory regulation in social media spaces tends to facilitate those who have an axe to grind in relation to silencing the female voice and indeed revisits the social divisions which were part of the reason women were disenfranchised from sport in the past (Osborne, Kavanagh & Litchfield, *in press*). For the perpetrator, any response to their vitriolic posts is seen as a victory. As Osborne et al. (*in press*) explain, 'the desire for power via manipulation of others' feelings is consolidated by the escalating responses of those who engage, both those that agree and those that disagree'.

## **POWER SHIFTING: ATHLETES AND RECLAIMING POWER**

While more often than not power can be located with the abuser in virtual and physical spaces, there is the potential to witness shifting power dynamics

through survivors using social media platforms to elevate voice or rise up against a range of social issues. As an example, the ‘#MeToo’ movement, founded by American activist Tarana Burke in 2006, began to spread virally through social networks in 2017 in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein abuse scandal through the adoption of the #MeToo hashtag linked to disclosures across social media platforms. The movement demonstrated the pervasive presence (and in many cases, acceptance) of violence against women across a variety of settings and thrust this issue into the spotlight by globally powerful women such as actresses, sportswomen and politicians speaking out across social networks (Blake, 2019). While male sexual violence, harassment and abuse towards women is not a new phenomenon (Lockyer & Savigny, 2019), online platforms enabled the amplification of voice against such oppression and more importantly the rise of collective voice.

Virtual platforms have also been adopted to raise awareness of abuse in sport, with athletes collectively speaking out and raising questions about cultures of fear and the acceptance of abuse allowed to proliferate across high-performance sport settings. A *Netflix* documentary covering the gymnastics and Larry Nassar abuse scandal ‘Athlete A’ sparked outrage and led to a cascade on social media. Across the globe, gymnasts worked collectively adopting the hashtag #gymnastalliance to draw attention to the significant cost of abuse in their sport.

Team GB Gymnast Becky Downie tweeted, ‘Athlete A just opened a huge can of worms in the gymnastics world and I’m not sure people are ready for whats next!!.’ Days later, a number of British gymnasts shared their stories of abuse endured in their sport, all ended their statements with the gymnast alliance hashtag. In the United Kingdom, the collective efforts of these athletes raising their voice through social media have resulted in a review of British Gymnastics, the National Governing Body. This review includes an investigation concerning the ability of the governing body to internally manage and suppress allegations of abuse and exploration into the vast number of the allegations made across the network of the sport. Lang (2021) believes that such collective voice has not only raised awareness of abuse more broadly but also highlighted the presence of non-sexual forms of abuse (e.g., psychological and physical abuse) which are by far the most prevalent forms of abuse in sport. The global movement of athletes speaking out against abusive practices, which for many reasons have been normalised in sport, demonstrates the power of social media platforms to connect and amplify voices. Through collective action, these athletes call for long-term change. Lang (2021) indicates that the break from high-performance sport that has been thrust upon many athletes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has created time for athletes to engage in meaningful social issues and to amplify their voices.

For example, a number of studies examined online disclosures of abuse. Alaggia and Wang (2020) explored the use of social media as a platform for disclosing sexual assaults and past childhood sexual abuse online. They believe that social media represents an environmental shift for disclosing sexual violence.

Sexual abuse/assault survivors can find a voice through social media after periods of silence and being silenced, turning to digital platforms when people and systems have failed to validate and support them. Similarly Moors and Webber (2012) believe that often people post online because they have nowhere else to turn or have been unable to make disclosures in physical settings. Viewing other survivor stories can prompt disclosure (Alaggia & Wang, 2020) and in making online disclosures people can find community and support from a network of survivors across the globe (O'Neill, 2018). Collectively, the research suggests that social media has become an option for the disclosure of abuse and offers a 'significant precipitant and avenue for abuse disclosure' (Alaggia & Wang, 2020, p. 7). It is clear that further research is needed in sport concerning power in mediated environments and to understand more deeply the experiences of those who are able to speak out about their experiences in the physical realm or to challenge abuse experienced while online.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An ongoing and increased level of sociological research in online spaces related to sport is imperative if there is to be a complete understanding of the way such technologies allow, and even facilitate, athlete abuse. Platforms are increasingly complex and there are inherent difficulties in both surveillance and prosecution related to online media spaces, which confound the ability of sport organisations to protect themselves and their athletes. While the use of social media and other online engagement is seen as crucial to the marketing and the fiscal viability of sport, this concern for financial advancement cannot override the imperative to protect athletes. As has been noted here, there is a near-universal acceptance of the need for sport and athletes to operate with an online presence.

This chapter has shown that social media spaces can be both part of the problem and form a critical constituent of the solution for the safeguarding of athletes. As always, technologies can be used or abused and, given that the abandonment of all social media for sport is an unlikely occurrence, it is important that our sporting communities are cognisant of the broad range of possible abuses of athletes and the role that social media play. This cannot be addressed effectively without an understanding of the effect online and social media abuse has directly on athletes. It is *imperative* that athlete voices are heard and that these are not lost in a narrative which privileges the financial and managerial benefits of social media. Specifically, one key recommendation is that further research encompasses the mechanisms by which athletes are abused online and the extent to which these are connected to dysfunctional sporting practices. Sport organisations must be alert to the multiple ways in which athletes may be mistreated and respond broadly and comprehensively. This response must necessarily include responding to the athlete abuse mediated by, arguably, one of the most significant changes to social interaction and engagement in human history, the technology related to social media.

## FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

There remain numerous opportunities and challenges associated with the use of social media which reinforce the importance of future research in the area. The need for methodological rigour, the adoption of a variety of research methodologies and the opportunity to utilise specific theoretical frameworks in order to guide research are championed here as central to increasing understanding in this area. For example, qualitative methods could be adopted to understand more deeply the omnipresence of power in virtual spaces. There is a need to look more deeply at these as spaces of disclosure and social support through examining athlete online testimonies of abuse. There has further been a wave of athletes directly confronting abusers online, the implementation of social media ‘black-outs’ and the rise of collective voice in responding to the level of online threat, all of which need further exploration in academic literature.

There is the opportunity to expand the analysis of the data collected in virtual spaces. Giles (2016) refers to the use of conversational analysis (CA) to explore discursive practices. Adopting such methods can allow the structural characteristics of threads (or online social commentary) to be explored in line with a focus on individual voices or focus on the presence of ingroup/outgroup behaviour(s) (see Giles, 2016). In addition, CA could afford greater insight into the experience of targets of abuse and/or behaviour of perpetrators as violence unfolds, critical to understanding the complexity of behaviour and interaction in virtual spaces (see Kavanagh & Brown, 2020).

In making recommendations for research in online environments, we recognise how rapidly these spaces are evolving. Researchers working in these domains need to move with these dynamic environments. For instance, the use of custom scrapers now affords the collection of large data sets based on specific questions or temporal frames of reference with immediacy and accuracy. Innovations in natural language processing (NLP) can augment the analysis process through building programmes with the ability to process large and complex data sets. One application of NLP would be to examine user discourse or offer sentiment analysis of large data sets. Future work should embrace such technological advances and examine their efficacy for exploring online sporting culture more deeply.

## FIVE KEY READINGS

- (1) Jane, E. A. (2020). Online abuse and harassment. In K. Ross, I. Bachman, V. Cardo, S. Moorti, & M. Scarcelli (Eds.), *The International Encyclopaedia of Gender, Media, and Communication* (pp. 1–16). London: John Wiley & Sons. In this chapter, Dr Emma Jane provides an overview of online abuse and harassment with a focus on violence against women in virtual spaces. They shine a light on the prevalence of misogyny and gender inequality perpetuated across virtual environments. This chapter is an excellent reference point for terms, definitions, understanding of harm and impact of violence online.

- (2) Kavanagh, E. J., Jones, I., & Sheppard-Marks, L. (2016). Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment: sport, digital cultures and dark leisure. *Leisure Studies*, 35, 783–796.  
Kavanagh and colleagues provide a synthesis of the types of abuse that can be experienced in online settings. Through a netnographic analysis of violence present in virtual space, they provide a conceptual typology for understanding virtual violence directed at athletes and other key stakeholders in sport. In doing so they explore virtual abuse as an aspect of fandom and virtual leisure activity.
- (3) Litchfield, C., Kavanagh, E., Osborne, J., & Jones, I. (2018). Social media and the politics of gender, race and identity: The case of Serena Williams. *European Journal of Sport and Society*, 15, 154–170.  
This study investigates issues of gender, race and identity, as enacted through social media, focussing on the abuse experienced by tennis player Serena Williams. Litchfield et al. adopt an intersectional lens to demonstrate how Williams as a Black women athlete can experience simultaneous, overlapping, multi-layered oppression in virtual spaces.
- (4) Lupton, D. (2015). *Digital Sociology*. London: Routledge.  
This text introduced a range of social, cultural and political dimensions of digital society and introduces the important debates and scholarship in this area. It adopts the discipline of sociology to investigate the impact of virtual spaces on everyday life. An important resource for proposing digital sociology as a sub-discipline of sociology.
- (5) Sanderson, J., & Truax, C. (2014). “I hate you man!” Exploring maladaptive parasocial interaction expressions to college athletes via Twitter. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 7, 333–351.  
As one of the first papers to examine the presence of hostile sport fan interaction online, Sanderson and Truax introduce the concept of maladaptive parasocial interaction. They investigated tweets directed at University of Alabama placekicker Cade Foster after Alabama lost their rivalry game against Auburn University. In this paper they outline how maladaptive parasocial interaction manifests in virtual environments and call for greater support for athletes in managing hostile interaction(s) online from sport fans.

## NOTE

1. This is not to suggest that athletes are always in control of their own presentation and representation.

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