Critiquing the Social Media Scholarship in Sport Studies: Social Media and Athlete Welfare

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Abstract

While the topic of athlete welfare has gained significant attention in academic literature, to date there has been a primacy placed on physical settings and their ability to augment or thwart the welfare of athletes. The discourse has therefore neglected the advent of social media spaces and their potential to have a significant impact on athlete welfare. Social media platforms are now a vital component in the lives of athletes who are increasingly reliant on maintain an online presence and following. In this commentary we consider the scope of social media and its potential impact upon the welfare of athletes, particularly female athletes. In doing so, we identify and discuss some of the positive health and wellbeing outcomes associated with increased online communication and self-representation in social media spaces. We examine the scholarship concerning the threats posed by social media spaces, consider power in virtual environments and its impact on welfare and finally suggest some future directions for scholarship in this field.

Keywords: Social Media, Sport, Athlete Welfare, Abuse, Power, Safeguarding Online

Critiquing the Social Media Scholarship in Sport Studies: Social Media and Athlete Welfare

It is often assumed that sport positively contributes to the overall health, wellbeing and welfare of those who participate in it, due to widely documented positive psychological, physical, social and academic outcomes associated with participation (MacPherson et al. 2022). Conversely there is evidence to suggest that sport does not automatically foster such benefits and that there are a wide range of issues that can compromise the welfare of athletes of all ages and across all levels of sport (Willson & Kerr, 2022; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2022; Vertommen et al. 2016). Therefore, while athlete welfare should be linked with positive connotations, in sport it is often associated with negative experiences or threat(s) to individuals or groups (Lang, 2021). For example, athlete disclosures of physical, psychological and sexual violence in sport are well reported in global media and academic research (e.g., Fournier et al. 2021; Rutland et al. 2022). Such violence has been identified to occur across sporting contexts ranging from community level (e.g., Pankowiak et al., 2023) through to high performance sport (e.g., Kavanagh et al. 2017) and is now recognised as a global phenomenon. The subject of mental health in sport has become the topic of much academic research and there has been a rise in the number of high-profile athletes openly speaking about their own mental health and the challenges presented in and by sporting environments.

Issues concerning matters of integrity are also commonplace in critiques of the purpose and place of sport in society. Accounts of overt illegal practices, such as doping, match-fixing, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, alongside deliberately or negligently causing harm, have been clearly documented (Kavanagh et al., 2020). Such topics speak to the breadth of welfare related issues in sport and role of people, organisations and institutions in protecting the welfare of those across its levels. Lang (2021) recommends that a broad definition of athlete welfare is therefore required and suggests that athlete welfare pertains to anything that may affect the physical and/or mental health, happiness/contentment, success, and prosperity of those involved in sport (Lang, 2021, p. 2).

While the topic of athlete welfare has gained significant attention, to date there has been a primacy placed on physical settings and their ability to augment or thwart the welfare of athletes.

Such a focus has neglected the advent of virtual technologies and their impact on athlete welfare, and more importantly for this commentary the impact of social media spaces the welfare of athletes. As Abeza and Sanderson (2022) highlight, over the past two decades, the use of social media has expanded rapidly in the sport industry. In particular, the reach and scope of social media has had a significant impact on both people, structures and organisations with its influence spanning athletes, coaches, governing bodies, and sport fans. Osborne et al. (2021) suggest that as people engage more with new media and information technologies, we are witnessing the rise of the digitised '@thlete', creating emerging topics of research that reflect more closely the lives of the modern performer and exploring their interactions in and with social media environments. With this in mind, virtual settings should feature more prominently in discussions surrounding the topic of athlete welfare.

This commentary examines social media and its links to athlete welfare, particularly the welfare of female athletes and females involved in sport. In doing so, this commentary identifies and discusses some of the positive health and wellbeing outcomes associated with increased online communication in social media spaces. It examines the scholarship concerning the threats posed by social media, considers power in social media environments and its impact on welfare, alongside suggesting future directions for scholarship in this field.

Opportunities Presented by Social Media

Prior to detailing the threats posed by social media platforms and the varied power imbalances that may exist in these spaces, we outline the opportunities presented by social media, particularly for female athletes. Several of these benefits include the opportunity for self-presentation and representation, empowerment, freedom of speech and providing a platform for advocacy on wider social issues; all of which have the potential to support athlete welfare.

Rather than relying on traditional media reporting and representation, social media platforms provide the potential for athletes to mould their own media experiences. Such spaces allow athletes to communicate a variety of messages, including contact with fans/supporters, sharing personal stories, promote brands and messages and be more active with their own public presentation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Pegoraro et al., 2017). This is particularly pertinent for females involved in

sport, a cohort who have traditionally had little control over media narratives. As such, social media provides a space 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).

The opportunity to engage in self-representation is particularly important for professional female athletes as male athletes often have an advantage in gaining social media followers and interest due to highly professionalised global male sporting culture and the persistence of hegemonic masculinity in sport (see Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Despite this, Fink (2014) suggested that hegemonic masculinity 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, Thorpe et al. (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). The ability to engage in self-representation is also important for women in marginalised groups who are rarely reported on by mainstream media sources, including women of colour, lesbian women and women with disabilities. This engagement with social media provides an empowering space, sometimes absent from non-virtual worlds. Additionally, Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) propose that social media has the 'transformative potential' to allow and empower women to construct alternative narratives around the definitions of women.

Another opportunity presented by social media for all involved in sports (but particularly for women athletes), is the ability to engage in free speech and speak out on a range of societal issues. Freedom of speech is among the elements that are seemingly sacred to internet users, particularly social media users. While at times this freedom has led to the publicised voices of extremist groups 'with messages of hate' (see Leets, 2010, p. 287), it has also provided an opportunity for marginalised voices to be heard and backlash against those who engage in discriminatory behaviours. Recently, several female athletes have used social media to speak about the discrimination and injustices aimed at them on social media. For instance, in Australia in 2019, elite Australian rules football player Tayla Harris labelled sexualised social media comments aimed at her as 'sexual abuse', and Australian cricket player Megan Schutt called out homophobic comments directed at her in 2021. Similarly,

several high-profile male and female athletes regularly speak out on a range of social and global

issues, such as the #Metoo movement.

The ability to shape their own narrative, manage their own brand and speak openly about

matters meaningful to them have the potential to be welfare enhancing features of social media

environments for (women) athletes; providing a space for personal autonomy and individual power.

However, the importance of such potential lies in the ability to challenge patriarchal structures and the

organisation of sport more generally. While the freedoms and distribution of power in social media

can foster a positive impact on athlete welfare, conversely, they can pose a malevolent threat to

individuals navigating social media, particularly children, and this threat is no less problematic for

those involved in sport. The following section examines, more fully, the threats posed to athlete

welfare due to lives spent engaging in social media spaces.

Threats to Athlete Welfare

While there are notable benefits associated with lives connected by online mediums there are

significant risks posed by virtual spaces to welfare more broadly and specifically the welfare of

athletes. Online spaces not only provide a 'fertile space for abuse to occur' (Litchfield et al., 2018, p.

166), they can further normalise toxic behaviour. With lives increasingly reliant on technology those

who engage can be simultaneously empowered and oppressed in this space; especially the female

athlete. In particular, social media environments have been described as psychologically threatening,

antagonistic, confrontational, and supportive of harassment (Wheatley & Vatnoey, 2020).

Some of the first studies in this area framed abuse that can be experienced in social media

spaces as a form of negative parasocial interaction (PSI) (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Sanderson &

Truax, 2014). This work demonstrates the power of connection in virtual space and the intimate bonds

that can be fostered through online interaction(s). PSI refers to relationships that a media user

establishes with a media or public figure which leads to building intimate bonds with someone who

you might not directly meet or interact with forming a parasocial relationship (PSR). Through virtual

interactions, individuals can develop many of the common features present in *real world* relationships

including a sense of connection and presumed intimacy which in many ways reflect having an actual

social relationship but importantly differ as the behaviour is one-sided and unreciprocated (Sanderson et al., 2020). Kassing and Sanderson (2015) conceptualised maladaptive PSI to capture the negative and vitriolic behaviours directed at athletes via social media platforms. They noted how a contagion effect can occur in virtual spaces whereby online vitriol spreads along with a corresponding increase in tolerance for these behaviours in online social commentary. Such an effect is unfortunately present in many social media conversations around athletes, particularly when an athlete is perceived to have not performed satisfactorily (Mishna et al., 2019).

Extending the work on PSI, Kavanagh et al. (2016) presented a typology of virtual violence in order to help classify the type of violence athletes can experience in social media spaces. 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. Abuse can be experienced directly or indirectly by recipients. Direct refers to incidents that directly target a recipient, through, for example, the use of the '@' symbol to send a message to a specific user or includes a hashtag # as an identifier or link to the subject of the abuse. Non-direct refer to cases, whereby a message is posted about, rather than directly to an individual. It is also possible for individuals to be alerted to non-direct messages, through 'retweeting', and thus non-direct can also become direct. This framework has been adopted by a number of studies to guide the framing of violence experienced online (e.g., Sanderson et al., 2020; McCarthy, 2022)

Abusive behaviour directed at athletes via social media has been presented as a function of fandom as an aspect of larger celebrity culture (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Research examining abuse online has sought to explain why athletes might become targets of such vitriol. Studies suggest a number of reasons for online abuse directed at athletes including but not limited to: a perception of underperformance (e.g., Sanderson, 2016), overperformance (when an athlete outperforms others and

is viewed as an outlier, e.g., Litchfield et al., 2018), in order to publicly shame an athlete due to a norm violation (e.g., MacPherson & Kerr, 2019; 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 (e.g., Frederick et al., 2017; Sanderson et al., 2016).

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 (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Cleland's (2014) study, for example, highlighted racist discourse used by supporters in online discussions boards. According to Cleland's (2014) research, racism, homophobia, disability, and sexism fuelled hate narratives present on online discussion boards between fans or followers. Athletes may further receive abusive interaction based on the intersection of their social identities including gender (Litchfield & Osborne, 2020; Kavanagh et al. 2019; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020) race (Lichfield et al. 2019; Cleland, 2014) and sexual orientation (Kavanagh et al., 2017). For example, Litchfield et al. (2018) show abuse targeting women athletes based on physicality, sex, sexuality, and race in their investigation of Black-American female tennis player Serena Williams' social media abuse during Wimbledon 2015. The authors emphasise the interconnected nature of the abuse directed at professional female athletes such as Williams and others: 'the significance of social media as a space for the reproduction and magnification of inequalities that have been present in traditional print media.' (Litchfield et al., 2018, p.155). Emerging scholarship tells us that online abuse disproportionately affects women and girls (Kavanagh et al. 2019; McCarthy, 2022).

Research has also pointed to the interface of social media applications for their ability to augment abusive behaviour. Existing research into the relationship between social media and the vulnerability of female sports professionals has pointed to the way that hashtags, free form comments, social tagging, and other post interactions such as Likes have created visibility of anti-women narratives (Kavanagh et al., 2016; Kavanagh et al., 2019) Kavanagh et al. (2019) refer to this as gender-based violence (GBV) while McCarthy (2022) and Phipps (2022) refer more specifically to virtual manhood acts (VMA's) as a type of GBV online. These studies underscore the ways in which

fan comments contribute to the creation of a "dangerous" environment for both athletes and for their supporters (Sanderson et al., 2020; Kavanagh et al., 2019).

Demonstrating a critical appraisal of gender and gender-based violence in virtual spaces, Taha-Thomure et al. (2022) examined the discourse of virtual violence around transgender inclusion in sport through the case of power-lifter Mary Gregory. In this study they adopt the term trans∗— asterisk included—in order to represent individuals across a spectrum of identities whose gender is different than that assigned at birth. The word trans∗ is used to describe the broad spectrum of cisgender non-conforming individuals, including non-binary, transgender, and gender non-conforming identities (Killermann, 2019). Taha-Thomure et al. emphasise the presence of significant vitriol across virtual platforms and gender-based violence against trans∗ which the authors refer to as GBV-T∗. In line with a dominant online narrative which is polarising on the topic of gender diversity and sport, this study demonstrated a lack of readiness to accept trans∗ athletes, and concerns for the safety of trans∗ athletes in sporting spaces. It further broadens much needed discussion surrounding gender in sport and an understanding of the breadth of violence (online) which can be gender based.

While further research is required, it is purported that experiencing virtual violence either as the direct recipient of it or being a bystander to it can have significant consequences and implications for the welfare of athletes. In sport it is recognised that online violence can have a significant effect on all aspects of the victim's life – not just their athletic performance. The impact can be extremely broad and includes a range of psychological, behavioural and performance effects (Osborne et al. 2021). These range from a negative impact on the athlete's self-esteem and/or confidence to sleep disturbances and reduced performance on the field of play. Parry et al. (2015) raised concerns about the legacy of virtual abuse which can be long-lasting and wide reaching. Such impacts can occur through one off experiences of violence and/or through long-term exposure to vitriol in social media environments. Posetti and Shabbir (2022, p. 22) launched a report called "The Chilling", a global investigation into online violence against women journalists and in this report referred to the slow-burn effect of constant moderate-low volume abuse and harassment that "burns slowly but can be cumulatively devastating". The same too can be said of the violence targeting athletes and others in

the sporting entourage; such commentary is therefore not merely harmless comments that occur in virtual spaces (Citroen, 2014) it can result in embodied harm to the recipient (Jane, 2018).

Additional risks to lives spent online have been highlighted but lack a significant corpus of research. Areas include a link to mental health challenges which arise as a result of increased adoption or addiction to social media (Gezgin & Mihci, 2020). Young people who are active users and spend more than two hours on social media are purportedly more likely to complain of poor mental health, including psychological disorders (anxiety and depression) (Sampasa-Kanyinga & Rosamund, 2015). When looking at student athletes, Hudimova et al. (2021) found that being an active user of social media can encourage manifestations of depression and the displacement of feelings which can result in a reduction of the psychological well-being of young athletes. Hayes (2022) notes how social media fixation and or addiction is reported anecdotally to have a negative impact on athlete mental health and can result in self-harming behaviour. David et al. (2018) highlighted negative psychological implications of athlete social media use and Encel et al. (2017) reported a link between sport related anxiety and social media use.

Research has primarily focussed on interactions that occur online *in* social media spaces. The interaction between *online* and *real-world* or *physical* spaces has gained far less attention in the sport academic research. What the research does point to is the potential for virtual platforms to increase the risk of abuse occurring in physical settings and how social media platforms can be used to groom and increase access to individuals. For example, Rhind et al. (2014) examined safeguarding cases in sport within the UK and highlighted the presence of abuse in virtual environments in sport. Of 652 cases reported to sport safeguarding officers, 8.4% (n = 55) related to inappropriate behaviour via technology, more specifically the sending of inappropriate messages via social media (Rhind et al., 2014). Sanderson and Weathers (2019) 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. Cases focussed upon child sexual grooming and manipulation through the social media application Snapchat. Sanderson and Weathers (2020) highlight how social media platforms have 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. While the field is rapidly expanding, there remains much work to be done to explore more closely the intersection of social media, health, wellbeing and welfare in sporting spaces. Free speech, combined with a pushback against 'political correctness", is often used as a justification for overtly criticising or discriminating against athletes. The following section explores the extant power structures that both encourage and dissuade individuals from posting vitriol aimed at athletes and examine the regulation powers that can be called into action to protect athletes in social media spaces.

Power and Welfare in Social Media Spaces

The key to understanding power, and who holds power, in sport and in social media (and crucially at the nexus of these) can be gleaned from an understanding of cultural hegemony. From their inception sports have been places of male domination and privilege due to long held beliefs about medicine and biology and the cultural expectations of males and females. Even when women were "permitted" to play sport, there was the assumption of inferiority to males, resulting in modified forms of the game (shorter playing times, rule modifications), separate events and equipment, and unequal access to grounds, facilities and memberships (see Kitching et al., 2020 and Litchfield, 2022).

The power that comes with such traditions can be categorised as cultural hegemony, which refers to power which has developed over so long a time and reinforced so often that belief in these social and cultural structures has become normalised (Sage, 1990; Kjær & Agergaard, 2022). Male athletes, for example, are advantaged by persistent and gendered values in sport (and society) which may result in a greater ability to gain followers in some social media spaces (Reichart Smith, 2011; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Conversely, an athlete who "transgresses" those expectations may have their capacity to wield power in online spaces altered. The rise of neoliberalism, in concert with cultural hegemony, has resulted in the idea that power and influence is a matter of individual attainment (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Such views, which often include a denial of endemic male privilege, are still dominant. Additionally, social media users may underpin such views by focussing on freedom of speech, with the rhetoric of my opinion, my journey and my experience being highly valued. These

beliefs, coupled with the power of cultural hegemony, enable some individuals and groups to spout vitriol towards individual athletes in the virtually unregulated platforms of social media.

Athlete welfare has been compromised in some sports settings due to the beliefs and practises of sporting sub-cultures and the traditional power structures which exist therein. Certain belief systems are privileged (in number and in visibility) on social media and generally the social structures in online spaces mirror to some degree the social and power structures of society and, in this case, the sporting sub-cultures. For instance, Kitching et al. (2020) found that, for female golfers, digital self-representations can be "shaped by the patriarchal and cultural circumstances" (p.14).

A number of independent reviews and reports have emerged across a range of sports which outlined (often through the use of the athlete voice) the abuse of athletes in sport settings (Osborne et al., in press). Gymnastics provides a salient example of a sub-culture where traditional power lies firmly with the coaches rather than with the athletes. Social media has also been a place where power imbalances can be remedied, through athlete solidarity and mobilisation. This power balance has shifted due to both social media engagement (#MeToo and #gymnastalliance) by individuals resulting in numerous inquiries and reviews, and the emergence of recommendations for gymnastics and other sporting bodies to bring issues of athlete welfare to light (Osborne et al., in press). Where safeguarding has not always worked via official reporting channels (due to the unequal power in sporting sub-cultures) some athletes have turned to collective action on social media instead.

All sporting organisations have a responsibility to ensure that athletes and fans are protected against discrimination. In fact, sporting bodies hold much power and their briefs regularly include athlete welfare and safeguarding, more recently this responsibility has extended to incorporate online spaces. This has resulted in a range of measures being adopted to help safeguard athletes from harm on social media platforms. For example, organisations such as FIFA, The International Tennis Federation (ITF) and World Athletics have adopted artificial intelligence (AI) platforms in order to understand the scope of violence online during major competitions and as a tool for the moderation of online threats to athletes and other members of the sporting entourage (coaches, officials). FIFA moderated the social media of players, referees and coaches during their 2022/23 World Cup

tournaments (FIFA, 2022). In a report commissioned by FIFA it was found that "78% of the abuse targeting players around the EURO 2020 Final contained racist abuse. 23% of this was also combined with homophobic abuse" (FIFA, 2022). In response to this report, FIFA along with the football players worldwide association (FIFPRO) provided an in-tournament moderation service across the 2022 Men's World Cup and plan the same for the 2023 Women's World Cup in an attempt to curb athlete abuse online (FIFPRO, 2022). Similarly, World Athletics presented their analysis of online violence against athletes at the Tokyo games and the World Athletics Championships Oregon22 (World Athletics, 2023), results of which have directly informed their ongoing safeguarding policies. AI platforms such as Threat Matrix (Signify Group, 2023) certainly offer the potential to shift the balance of power and such measures have gone some way to move the onus for online safety away from the individual athlete toward the clubs and governing bodies. However, many sports bodies are not wealthy enough to employ such measures and thus the experience of athletes in tournament time will be varied. Governments have also responded to the growing issue of social media by expanding eSafety commissions and child protection to encompass the online abuse specifically to athletes and sports. In the UK, for instance, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has a child protection in sport unit (CPSU) and information related to online safety and, in Australia, the eSafety Commission has produced tailored advice for sporting organisations on building a culture of safety online.

Those who hold structural power (social media platform operators and owners as well as online moderators from sporting clubs, bodies and events) and those whose power comes from cultural hegemony (users who gain popularity by "speaking" to the masses) control social media spaces. Athletes, particularly high-profile, popular athletes, can themselves hold significant power in social media also. Cable (2021) studied UK elite footballer Raheem Sterling's pushback combination of social media and selective press interviews to combat racism. Having experienced racism in person and online, Sterling uses his own social media to frame issues of race and racial stereotyping by the press. In this way, Sterling demonstrates how social media can be used to challenge the power of the press and their framing of contentious issues (Cable, 2021).

Ultimately, alternative platforms allow athletes a more direct way to confront issues, issues which have potential to affect athlete welfare. If some athletes can use social media as a vehicle for rejecting (online) abuse, then, by the same token, it can also be used by others to foster exclusion and intolerance. For instance, Osborne & Litchfield (2021) examine how Rugby Union player Israel Folau used the explanation of free speech (specifically related to religion) when he posted anti-gay social media posts in 2018 and 2019. The divisive and dichotomous nature of social media commentary and interaction will continue to pose threats to the welfare of those who engage with these mediums. The following sections explore opportunities for advancements and improvements in the field.

Summary and Future Research Directions

The future direction of research enquiry into welfare in sport needs to be more firmly concerned with understanding the impact of virtual environments and social media on athlete wellbeing. There remains significant scope for future research to advance understanding of the impact of social media and digitised lives on the welfare of athletes and other key interest groups in sport. However, when making recommendations for research in online environments, we recognise how rapidly these spaces are evolving. The types of platforms adopted and the ability to capture data from them rapidly changes alongside trends in social media usage and the popularity of applications. There remains a need for methodological rigour, the adoption of a variety of research methodologies/methods and the opportunity to utilise specific theoretical frameworks to guide future research.

Specific to understanding the harm that can result from abuse in social media spaces a number of pressing directions for future research are recommended. Kavanagh et al's (2016) typology of virtual maltreatment has most commonly been adopted to identify the types of abuse that can be experienced by athletes in social media spaces. This can be used to frame a much-needed prevalence study which would enable a deeper insight into the scope of the issue of violence facilitated by social media. In doing so its impact on athletes (and others in the sporting entourage e.g., coaches, match-officials) could be examined more deeply. An example of such a study is the work of Posetti and Shabbir's (2022) report "The Chilling", an investigation into virtual violence against women journalists, a three-year study which combined the inputs of nearly 1,100 survey participants and

interviewees, two big data case studies examining over 2.5 million social media posts and 15

individual country case studies. A study of this scale could enable a deeper understanding of virtual

violence and its impact on athletic populations from multiple perspectives. Posetti and Shabbir's

report led to a series of essential research informed recommendations to keep women journalists safe

online; such recommendations are currently lacking in relation to virtual abuse and sport.

      Mixed-method approaches could provide a more holistic understanding of social media and

the role that it plays in the lives of athletes and the way in which they experience abuse. Studies could

combine the scraping of big data to demonstrate the scope of the issue and examine the type of

violence present, this could be combined with athlete voice to understand more deeply the perceived

impact of being a victim of violence from those who are recipients of it or witness to it.

      Future research should also adopt an intersectional lens in order to account for how multiple

social identities intersect in social media spaces and directly influence the welfare of social media

users. This would extend the work of scholars such as Kavanagh et al. (2019) and Litchfield et al.

(2018) who have highlighted the intersectional nature of violence toward women athletes in social

media spaces. Intersectional approaches afford insight into interlocking sources of identity which can

have an impact on who experiences abuse online and how they experience it; more research is needed

to understand abuse that is experienced in multiplicity.

      There is room for a deeper understanding of power and its omnipresence in social media

settings. Social media sites are increasingly understood to be spaces of privilege and oppression; how

power operates, or functions is of interest to social media and athlete welfare scholarship. This is of

great significance where social media has become a space for athletes to reclaim power and speak out

about a range of social injustices. Collective action carried out through online advocacy has meant

circumventing traditional routes currently in place for reporting safeguarding concerns and this

interaction needs to be understood more clearly to inform future safeguarding practice in sport and the

role that social media might play in creating a safe reporting route for victims of abuse.

      To date, much of the research surrounding the welfare of athletes has been conducted using

one time point or a snapshot of the data present in social media threads or platforms. There is the

opportunity to expand the analysis of the data collected in virtual spaces. For example, Giles' (2016) work adopting conversational analysis (CA) could be utilised to explore discursive practices online. 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, there is a need to better understand 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).

Working in online spaces means that researchers need to embrace the nature of more than human interaction(s) which present challenges toward welfare supportive spaces. Common in virtual spaces are the use of "bots", which mimic human actors and cannot always be identified in the virtual environment. This hampers the potential for sporting bodies and individuals to reduce or eliminate negative online behaviour. According to Yang et al. (2019), social bots (social media accounts created and controlled completely or in part by computer algorithms) are more common than ever across social media platforms and these "bots" can automatically generate content and further engage with human users, often posing as, or imitating, humans. Future research must consider the interaction between human and non-human actors more closely or at least be aware of the presence of such interaction. As Lugosi and Quinton (2018) suggest, working in online spaces requires researchers to embrace the complexities of researching technology-mediated social practices and sociality that operate across time and space, that involve human and non-human agency, and that cannot be reduced to clinical accounts of methodological procedure.

As sporting organisations turn to AI to safeguard athletes from harm during major sporting events, the data collected through such platforms presents a vast treasure trove of information concerning the social media abuse. The ability compare findings across sports, competitions and events would vastly extend understanding of the phenomena of social media violence and the use of AI in safeguarding athletes from harm. A collaborative approach from sporting organisations could

provide a much needed in-depth picture of the presence of harm across social media spaces and its risks to athletes (and others).

There is a clear need to protect athletes while in their "workplaces" which extend to social media spaces. When individuals are targeted or exposed to violence online, and these practices result in the harm of victims psychologically and, by extension, physically (such as individuals harming themselves), safeguarding in virtual spaces is a priority concern. There remains a need to understand the impact of current safeguarding initiatives that aim to foster safer online spaces. Studies could examine both safeguarding approaches that aim to educate the athlete (or social media user) on how to increase safety online and/or how to cope with abuse experienced. Further there is the opportunity to examine the efficacy of tools such as AI to understand their influence as a buffer or a filter to the abuse that targets can experience. Future research and policy must consider the policing of online spaces and the targeted and continued education of sports personnel relating to the dangers virtual environments pose. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) highlighted its commitment to safeguarding in sport with an investment of 10 million USD to strengthen the prevention of and response to abuse in sport, in their statement they highlighted the importance of including cyber-environments in that safe sport mission (IOC, 2023). The question of how to protect individuals in online spaces that are ever evolving will remain one of the pressing issues of modern society both in sport and beyond.

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