VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGIES AS TOOLS OF MALTREATMENT

SAFEGUARDING IN DIGITAL SPACES

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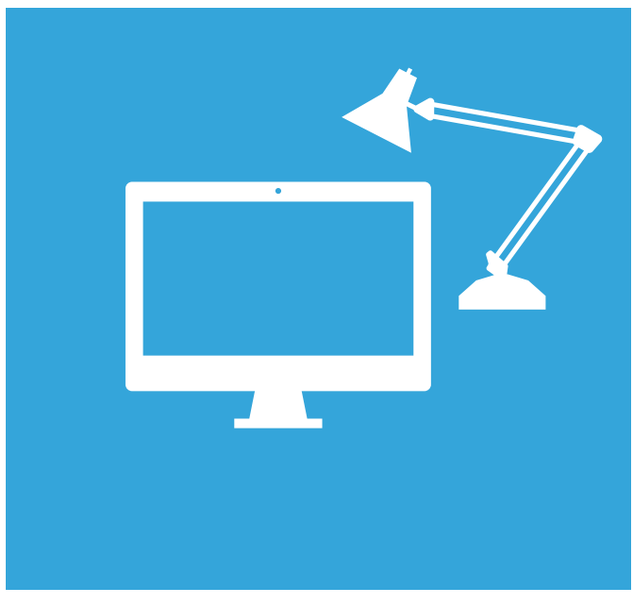


INTRODUCTION

- Uses of Virtual Environments;
- Threats posed by lives spent increasingly connected;
- Exploring abuse online;
- Safeguarding in virtual spaces.
- The future; research embracing virtual space(s)

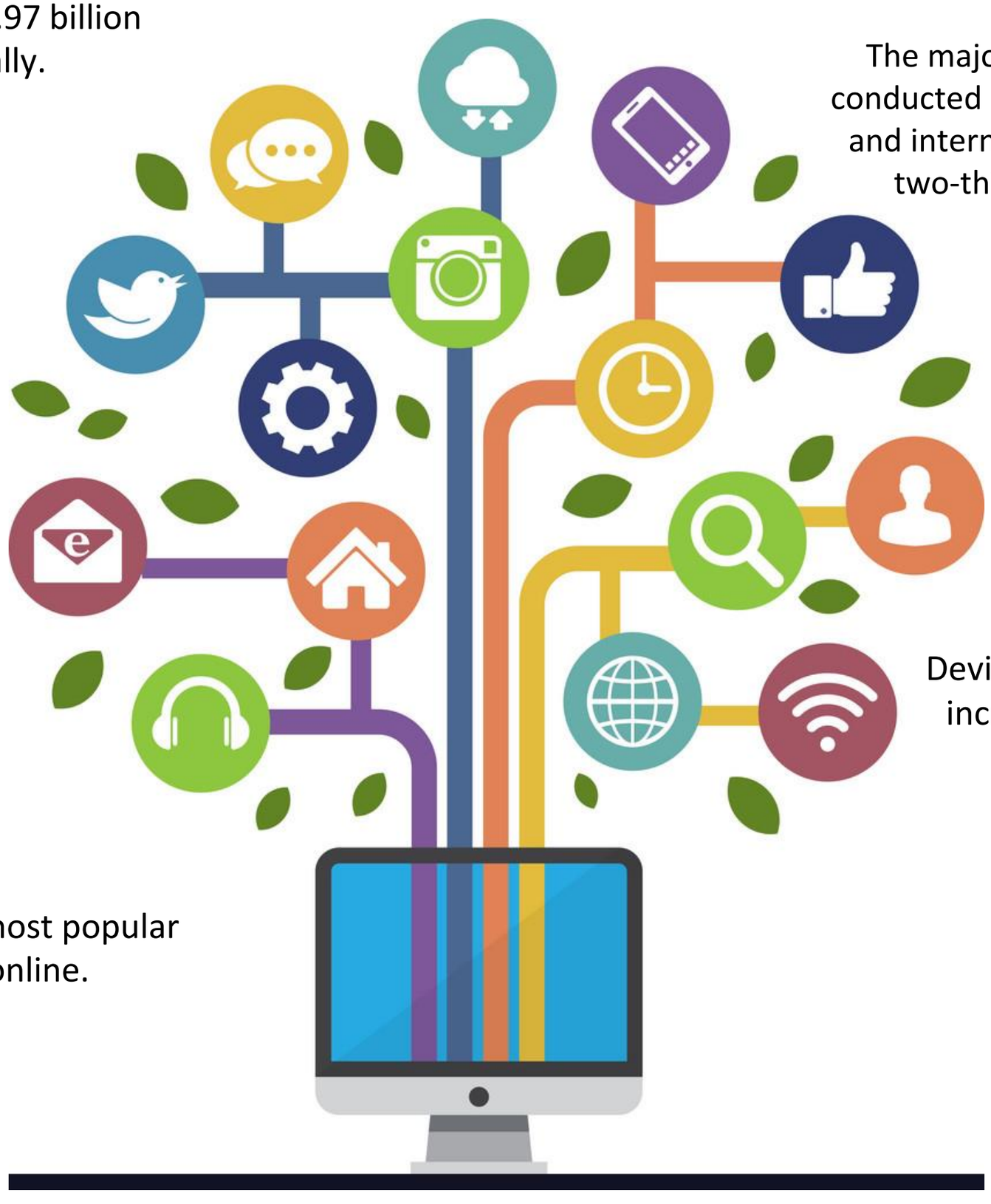
WHAT ONLINE PLATFORMS DO YOU CURRENTLY USE?

WHY DO YOU USE THEM?

Uses and adoption

Estimated that there are 3.97 billion Internet users globally.

The majority of internet use is not conducted by humans, but by malware and internet bots, which account for two-thirds of internet activity.



The average person in the UK spends more than a day a week online.

Device use has exponentially increased due to Covid-19

Social networking is the most popular activity conducted online.

THE ADVENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- The introduction of web 2.0 we saw the birth of social media;
- Social media is a term used to group Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011);
- Social networking opportunities are vast and ever changing; they help us communicate, share information, learn and access news;
- These sites include applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends, colleagues and unknown individuals to have access to those profiles. People correspond through these mediums by sending emails, posting written or video content and sending instant messages between each other.

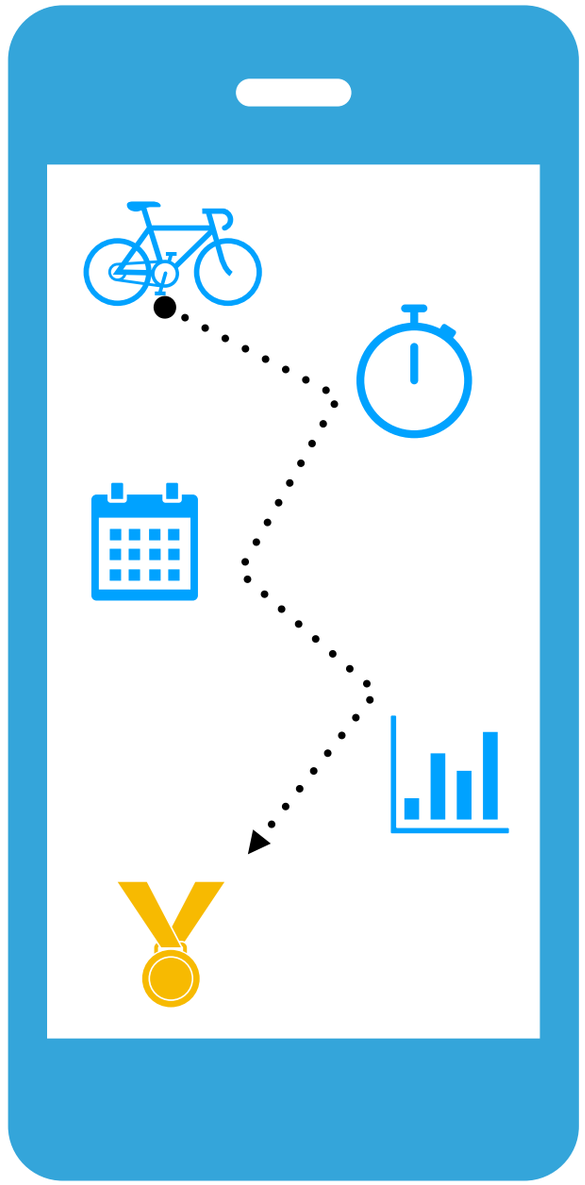
THE MERGING OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE SPACE(S)

- 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).

- ‘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’ (Possamai-Inesedy and Nixon, 2017 p. 876)

VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS HAVE BEEN A GAME CHANGER IN THE WORLD OF SPORT; WE HAVE WITNESSED INCREASING RELIANCE ON TECHNOLOGY AND THE RISE OF THE @THLETE… SPORT IS AS MUCH ABOUT THE ONLINE EXPERIENCE AS THE OFFLINE.



SPORT & VIRTUAL SPACES

- For those working in sport, it is important to consider how the athletes we work with and the environments we navigate present challenges to our interactions and pose new questions concerning safety and welfare in sport.
- It is clear that technology can influence every aspect of our daily living. Yet many of us navigate digital spaces without thought or consideration both for our interaction in them and the impact of these spaces on the self.

THE INTERNET POSES NUMEROUS THREATS; IN MANY WAYS DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS SERVE TO ENABLE RATHER THAN PREVENT ABUSE

RISKS POSED BY ONLINE SPACES

- Identity theft
- Financial crime
- Cyber-stalking
- Cyber-bullying
- Online grooming or sexual solicitation
- Online coercion
- Addiction - to online spaces or offline behaviour magnified by the ease of digital spaces

CYBER-BULLYING

- A modern form of bullying that involves interpersonal aggression or hostile behaviour that occurs through the use of electronic communication technologies, such as e-mail, instant messaging, social media, online gaming, or through digital messages (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015).

CYBER-BULLYING

- Cyber-bullying shares some common characteristics with traditional face-to-face bullying including the presence of intentionality, repetition of behaviour and the presence of an imbalance of power.
  - Intentionality refers to the motive of the perpetrator to deliberately harm the recipient (Hollá, Fenyvesiová and Hanuliaková, 2017),
  - Repetition of behaviour distinguishes the behaviour from a single aggressive act (Palladino et al., 2017).
  - Abuse of power in a social context involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target leaving the target unable to defend themselves (Palladino et al., 2017).
- Where traditional bullying could be experienced in a particular place or space, there are no boundaries to cyberbullying either in time or space;
- There is a permanence to digital content that can be reviewed, re-read and shared;
- It can co-occur with face-to-face bullying leaving victims feeling like there is no sanctuary from this behaviour.

ONLINE GROOMING

- “the process by which an (adult) through information and communication technologies gains access to and the confidence of a (minor) in order to maintain some sort of sexual interaction with the (minor), either online, offline, or both”

(Gámez-Guadixa, Almendros, Calvete and De Santisteban, 2017, p. 11).

ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL GROOMING

- Technology has evolved in such a way that it can enable perpetrators to more easily access victims in highly unregulated spaces;
- It has further enabled networked activity to occur within the darkest folds of the virtual world;
- Often communication is so subtle that the victim is unaware of the implications of the relationship they are forming online;
- Children are the predominant users of social media and are at significant risk of engaging with sexual predators without being aware they are doing so.

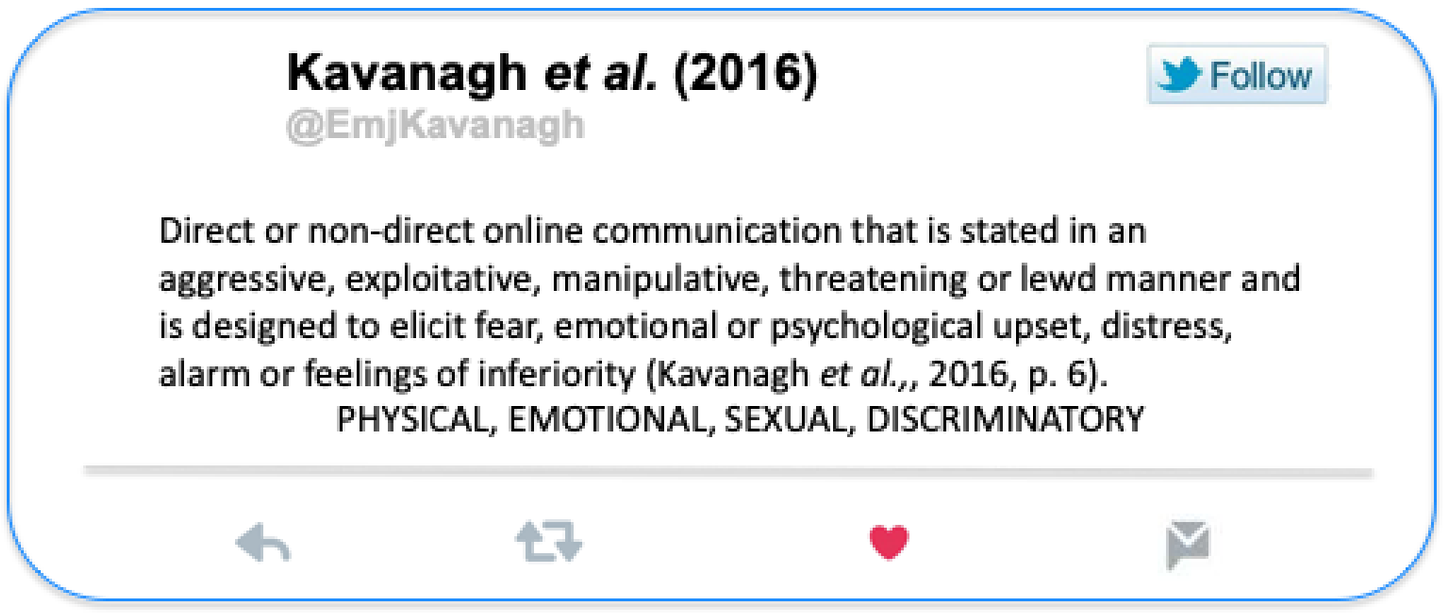
ANALYSIS OF 99 MEDIA REPORTS FROM 2013-2018 FOUND THAT SNAPCHAT PROVIDES MOTIVATION AND ACCESS FOR COACH PERPETRATORS TO SEXUALLY ABUSE ATHLETES. TECHNOLOGY ALLOWED THEM, IN VARIED WAYS, TO OVERCOME INTERNAL INHIBITIONS, EXTERNAL BARRIERS, AND BREAK DOWN VICTIMS RESISTANCE.

(SANDERSON AND WEATHERS 2020).

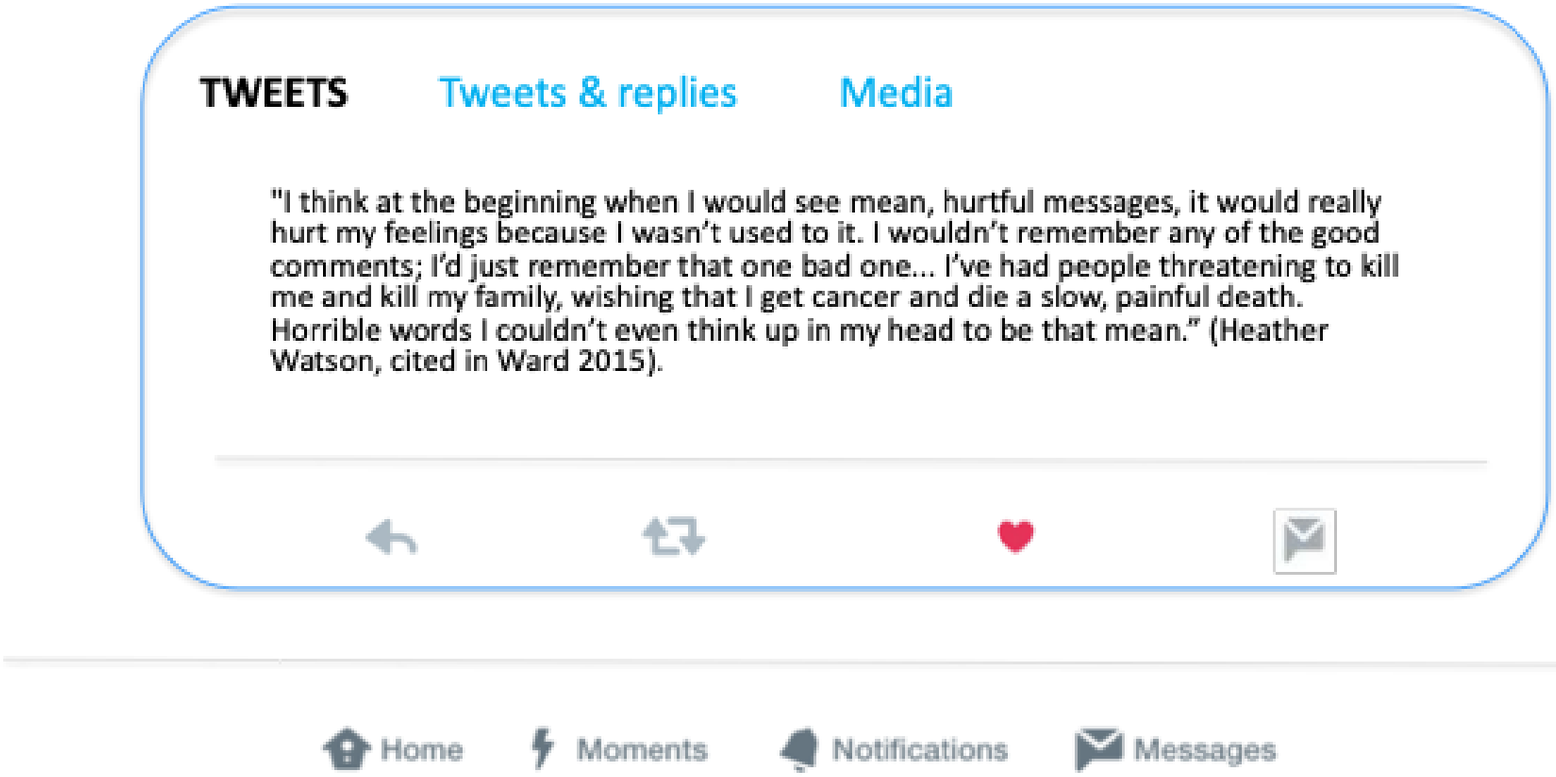
IT'S NOT JUST COACHES, NOW I HAVE TO MANAGE A VIRTUAL AUDIENCE WHO FEEL THAT THEY CAN OPENLY COMMENT ON ALL ASPECTS OF MY LIFE AND PERFORMANCE WITHOUT FILTER.

THE RISE OF THE @THLETE

CYBER-ENABLED ABUSE



Kavanagh, E., Jones, I. and Sheppard-Marks, L. (2016). Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment: Sport, digital cultures and dark leisure. Leisure Studies. DOI:10.1080/02614367.2016.1216581.


TWEETS
Tweets & replies
Media
"I think at the beginning when I would see mean, hurtful messages, it would really hurt my feelings because I wasn't used to it. I wouldn't remember any of the good comments; I'd just remember that one bad one... I've had people threatening to kill me and kill my family, wishing that I get cancer and die a slow, painful death. Horrible words I couldn't even think up in my head to be that mean." (Heather Watson, cited in Ward 2015).
Home
Moments
Notifications
Messages

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

- It is recognised that there are disproportionate levels of gender-based violence experienced by women in virtual spaces
- Abuse toward women in virtual space manifests in a number of ways including
  - Threats of physical violence;
  - Placing a focus on the female physical appearance;
  - Sexualisation of women through suggestion of desired and/or proposed physical or sexual contact;
  - Sexualisation that is vile, explicit and threateningly violent (Osborne, Litchfield and Kavanagh, 2020).
- Social media provides a space for unregulated gender-based violence targeting high-profile women in their workplace in a way that traditional sport media does not .

IMPACT

- Too easy say switch off or sign out;
- Violence in online spaces have a number of negative consequences which can have a lasting impact on all aspects of the victims life;
- Based on anecdotal accounts from athletes in the media, the impact is extremely broad and can include a range of psychological, behavioural and performance effects;
- Similar to the impact of abuse within face-to-face environments, abuse on social media can negatively affect an individual's self- esteem, lead to performance anxiety, sleep disturbances and depressed mood states;
- While some people can navigate or cope with this treatment for others disengaging from these spaces or alarmingly their sport altogether is deemed the only option.

ENHANCED RISK IN ONLINE SPACES

- High levels of Internet use;
- Lack of regulation in these spaces;
- The likelihood of interacting with strangers or people whom you have not met in physical space;
- A space of presumed intimacy heralded as a bastion of freedom of speech;
- The development of para-social relationships
- Truth, the nature of truth and fake news
- Difficulty in policing virtual spaces; what is criminal behaviour?

"PEOPLE SAY AND DO THINGS IN CYBERSPACE THAT THEY WOULDN'T NORMALLY SAY AND DO IN FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTION"

POWER AND VIRTUAL SPACES

- Power is critical to the experience of violence in virtual settings.
- Online spaces can afford secrecy, anonymity, increased potential for contact all of which need to be considered in future research.
- In the independent cultural review of abuse in Australian gymnastics, The 'Change the Routine' report (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).
- Sanderson and Weathers (2020), who showed that coaches grooming young athletes for sexual abuse regularly incorporates social media platforms.

POWER SHIFTING: 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
- Online platforms have enabled the amplification of voice against such oppression and more importantly the rise of collective voice.
- Athletes collectively speaking out and raising questions about cultures of fear and the acceptance off abuse across high performance sport settings
- 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.
- A number of studies examined online disclosures of abuse - this is an area which requires greater attention in sport

HOW DO WE GO ABOUT MAKING VIRTUAL SPACES SAFER?

SAFEGUARDING VIRTUAL SPACES

- Guidance in place for many organisations (e.g., CPSU offers guide policies for sports clubs in the UK).
- Care for over 18’s?
- Education for parents, athletes, coaching staff?
- Responsibility on social media companies, with sporting bodies or the athletes themselves?
- Still plenty of questions to be asked.

SETTING A RESEARCH AGENDA

- Understanding of risks posed and vulnerabilities created through the use of and our immersion in virtual spaces;
- Use of innovative methodologies and methods (data collection, analysis, presentation of findings);
- Profiling of perpetrators and greater understanding of the impact of virtual violence;
- Understanding the experience of violence in virtual settings in sport (e.g., athlete, coach, official perspective);
- Greater understanding of the impact of virtual violence on health and wellbeing of individuals;
- Consideration of safeguarding, intervention and education concerning virtual spaces to prevent online environments remaining a blindspot in our research and applied practice.

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ANY QUESTIONS?

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