# Towards typologies of virtual maltreatment: Sport, digital cultures and dark leisure.

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## Abstract

A changing technological context, specifically that of the growth of social media, is transforming aspects of leisure behaviour, especially in terms of negative interactions between followers of sport and athletes. There is a growing body of research into the maltreatment of adult athletes, exploring issues such as abusive acts or behaviours against the individual, including acts of physical and/or psychological violence to the person. Existing research however, focuses upon face-to-face behaviours, and to date the nature of abuse in online spaces has been overlooked. It is becoming ever more apparent that virtual environments create optimal climates for abuse to occur due to the ability for individuals to communicate in an instantaneous, uncontrolled and often anonymous manner in virtual worlds. Using a netnographic approach, an analysis of a popular social media platform (Twitter) was conducted to examine the types of abuse present in online environments. This paper presents a conceptual typology, identifying four broad types of abuse in this setting; physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory; examples of each form are presented. Findings highlight how online environments can pose a significant risk to individual emotional and psychological safety.

Keywords: Sport, Social Media, Digital Leisure, Maltreatment, Twitter, Bullying.

## Introduction

As Deborah Lupton cogently argues, "we now live in a digital society" (2015, p.2), with social institutions - such as sport and leisure – 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 had a significant impact on the ways that we interact with others. In this paper, we explore a particular type of deviant interaction, that of abuse within digital environments, with a specific focus upon sport. Sport provides an environment within which the exploitation of power and authority may lead to the abuse of performers, and it is now accepted that athletes can be exposed to, or directly experience abuse within the sporting environment. Much of the work on abuse in sport has, to date, focused upon behaviour experienced during face-to-face interactions (Rhind, McDermott, Lambert & Koleva, 2014; Fasting, Brackenridge & Kjølberg, 2013) and has therefore failed to acknowledge the Internet as a space in which individuals can be subjected to, and experience abuse. This paper explores the types of abuse present in virtual spaces using sport as a vehicle to examine one of the darker dimensions of online behaviour and interaction.

The mass publication of vitriol online is becoming increasingly significant as a social problem. Virtual environments provide an outlet for a variety of types of hate to occur and in many ways 'enable' abuse rather than act to prevent or control it (Kavanagh & Jones, 2016), yet to date such spaces have received limited scholarly attention. More importantly these spaces are recognised as an increasingly important site of contemporary leisure activity. The rise of anti-social or morally questionable behaviour in such spaces pose wider questions concerning the acceptance of abuse and what this means for declining or changing societal values, and acceptable leisure behaviour. The ability to appropriately define and classify abuse types is essential for conceptual clarity among researchers, as well as to inform

safeguarding initiatives, however, relatively little is known about the types of abuse that occur in online spaces. The abuse of elite athletes in sport has been used here as a platform to commence critical discourse surrounding deviant behaviour in online spaces. Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to investigate the types of abuse that are present, and subsequently to offer a conceptual typology of abuse in order to increase understanding of this phenomenon and guide future research in the area.

**Virtual Worlds and the Changing Face of Leisure**

The technological revolution has reshaped notions of reality and behaviour. At the centre of such a revolution has been the advent of online spaces and virtual environments. Barlow (1990) created the term cyberspace to refer to the present day nexus of computer and information technology networks to create a non-physical terrain created by computer systems. Such space can be used to simply describe the World Wide Web (WWW), the Internet as a whole and also to include all global media and communication channels (Blakewell, 2012). In June 2014 it was recorded that there are over three billion Internet users currently active (Interlive Stats, 2015) and the number of Internet users worldwide is estimated to have grown by more than 74% since the turn of the century. The Internet is recognised as the essential communication and information medium within our society (Castells, 2010) and around 40% of the world population has an Internet connection (Hutchins & Rowe, 2013).

In technologically advanced societies people use technology in a habitual, almost automated manner (Chan, 2014). We barely pay attention to the ways in which it has infiltrated our lives, this is especially true for young people (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009). Chan contends that people are living in cyberspace but are not consciously aware of it because material and virtual space have become intertwined and embedded in everyday life,

merging the two 'realities' the virtual and real, disrupting the conceptual and empirical stability of the public/private divide (Berriman & Thomson, 2015). Technology is therefore no longer considered separate but embodied. In many ways it is impossible to separate the person from technology; personal computers or smart phones have become an extension of the self and seamlessly entangled in every day realities and existence. Digital technologies have refashioned the ways in which people communicate and interact and have a significant influence on every aspect of people's lives; social networking websites and technology remain continually accessible through access to smartphones and personal computers. The Internet provides a new and parallel universe, where virtual reality allows entirely new forms of social interaction (Matijasevic, 2014), where it is easier to reach out to others, to exchange information, to learn, to conduct business, to strengthen social relationships and activities, and form whole new personalities and identities (Matijasevic, 2014; Vakhitova and Reynald, 2014). The immense benefits and opportunities afforded by this continually evolving environment are seemingly endless (Hunton, 2012).

One area that has been significantly impacted by the advent of digital technologies is that of the leisure experience, making it more complex and thus changing the boundaries of leisure space (López Sintas, Rojas de Francisco & Álvarez Garcia, 2015). Virtual worlds are increasingly providing novel arenas for experiencing, producing and consuming leisure (Arora, 2011). In contemporary society traditional leisure activities and spaces (television, cinema, socialising and sports) exist alongside those that are technological, in many ways these experiences may be augmented through the use of digital technologies (Bryce, 2001). Traditional notions of leisure can also be reproduced technologically in virtual space; we shop on line, communicate and socialise with others, update our knowledge, plan travel, consume and play sport. The Internet has infiltrated our lives and the digital revolution permeates everyday leisure experiences, so much that we cannot ignore the significant impact

of these spaces on leisure behaviour. As a pervasive site of leisure activity, it offers a variety of opportunities for both social and antisocial leisure behaviours. The Internet is a heterotopic (Foucault, 1998) liminal (Turner, 1992) space, a space of otherness; attractive due to the sense of anonymity and ambiguity it offers (Rojek, 1995; Suler, 2000; Bryce, 2001). Freedom to move and communicate in these spaces may increase the lure of virtual worlds, but can also be the reason why this can be the site of darker, deviant leisure activities (Rojek, 1995; Spracklen, 2013) where norms and values related to leisure behaviour may differ from the 'real' world. As James and James (2008) suggest, this has led to a realignment of broader agendas of young people, specifically in terms of their being in need of protection *from* risk or as naïve victims or potential prey (Chawansky, 2016) towards a greater acknowledgement of protecting young people from being a risk *to* others. This paper examines one type of deviant deregulated online behaviour, which has become apparent since the advent of social media by examining the idea of virtual maltreatment in online sport spaces. Importantly, the paper explores how deviant leisure activities – in the form of invective digital discourses – can contribute to our understandings of contemporary gendered, racialised, and sexual politics and difference. Prior to examining abuse and fan behaviour, it is important to understand social media and its use in modern sport.

**Social Media and Sport**

Social Media is a term used to group Internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (UGC, Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011), with an emphasis upon prosumption rather than consumption (Zajc, 2015). 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 e-mails, posting written or video content and sending instant messages between each other. Currently there are hundreds of social media platforms available online including social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest for example), text messaging, podcasts, wikis, blogs, online forums and discussion groups (Ferrara, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Over three quarters of adults in Great Britain use the Internet every day (76%) and social networking remains one of the primary uses (Office for National Statistics 2015). One area in which social media has had a significant impact is the way in which individuals consume and experience sport. Most professional sports organisations utilise social-media platforms (primarily Facebook and Twitter) to keep fans abreast of news (Sanderson, 2011). Professional sports teams, athletes, journalists, and sport-media outlets connect with audiences creating a social media experience (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011; Sanderson, 2011). Sport is therefore connected, and fans take part in both a physical and virtual experience, watching games, communicating with other fans and providing a virtual commentary as if in the stands of any major event. Real-time interaction occurs across sports and fans do not need to attend events to experience connection to a sport.

Although the rapid advancement of computer technology has allowed multiple social networks to proliferate (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010), Twitter appears to be the dominant social-media platform adopted by sports organisations and athletes alike (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Despite the increasing pervasiveness of social media, however, "the literature is sparse, inside and outside of sport, that deals with Twitter" (Clavio & Kian, 2010, p.486), especially in terms of its role in leisure behaviour, and to date, much of the research has focused on the tweeting behaviour of the athlete (e.g. Clavio & Kian, 2010; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010) or social media use by sport managers and organisers (Hambrick, 2012). An area that has yet to be systematically explored is the

growing interaction between fans and athletes (Sanderson, 2016). Twitter allows followers to communicate either directly with, or about high profile athletes, communication can be instantaneous, uncontrolled, and often anonymous (Price, Farrington & Hall, 2013, p.452) in an environment where, according to Hansen, Shneiderman, and Smith (2011) the norms and values related to the ways in which people interact with one another within their social worlds have changed significantly. Crucially, and unlike other forms of mass media such as television (Boehmer, 2015), the nature of Twitter also allows fans the opportunity for parasocial interaction, or the illusion of an actual interpersonal relationship with an athlete, especially where the disclosure of personal information from an athlete (for example regarding their home or family life) may create a sense of artificial intimacy with the follower (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Although parasocial interactions are - in many cases - positive, the nature of social media also makes it a rich environment for less desirable parasocial interaction. It is to this concept, that of 'maladaptive parasocial interaction' (Sanderson & Truax, 2014, p.337) that we turn, specifically through the idea of virtual maltreatment.

**Abuse on Social Media**

Virtual maltreatment in sport is becoming increasingly significant as a social problem (Kavanagh & Jones, 2016). The Internet has created an environment where a whole different set of behaviours is possible, where "old school hate is having a renaissance" (Chen, 2015, p52). An illustration of this can be seen in Twitter reactions to the 2013 Wimbledon tennis tournament. The male winner, Andy Murray, received overwhelmingly supportive and congratulatory tweets (Twitter, 2013), yet the female champion, Marion Bartoli, was the subject of a barrage of hostile and abusive messages, demonstrating a clear example of maltreatment through social media. The International Rugby Union Referee Nigel Owens was subjected to homophobic abuse following the 2015 England-France International (Owens, 2015), and Aston Villa Footballer Jack Grealish received threats following his

decision to turn down an international call to the Irish squad (Bezants, 2015). Unfortunately, instances such as these are becoming more common. In the daily social commentary surrounding major sporting events we are continually witnessing significant negative online interaction and in many cases such abusive and or/threatening discourse.

In line with recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO), Stirling (2009) uses the term maltreatment more broadly to account for a variety of abusive or violent behaviours that can be witnessed or experienced in the sporting environment including physical or psychological acts that occur within the context of a power differential. Maltreatment can therefore incorporate acts of physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well a bullying and neglect of individuals and accounts for the variety of behaviours that can occur independently or co-occur in sport (Kavanagh, 2014). Recent research in sport indicates that athletes are not immune to experiences of physical (Stafford, Alexander & Fry, 2013; Kerr 2010), sexual (Fasting, Chroni, Hervik & Knorre, 2011; Parent 2011; Hartill 2009) and emotional abuse (Stirling 2013; Stirling & Kerr 2013, 2009), along with other forms of maltreatment including neglect (Kavanagh, 2014). Stirling (2009, p. 1091) suggests, "coaches, parents, administrators and athletes all represent both potential victims and perpetrators of maltreatment". We would go further, and suggest that fans and followers of sport should also be added to this list, and that their role as potential perpetrators through the use of online environments, should not be understated. Knowledge and understanding of this form of abuse, however, is lacking, and has yet to be subject to any systematic examination.

Research into the nature and prevalence of virtual maltreatment, commonly referred to as 'cyberbullying', is relatively recent (Kowalski & Limber, 2013), and focuses largely upon abuse by and against young people. There is, however, a growing body of literature that explores the nature of online abuse against adults. The literature is somewhat clouded by the variety of terms used to describe such acts. Jane (2014), for example, notes that researchers

have used descriptions such as ‘hateplay’, ‘rapeglish, ‘signviolence’, ‘flaming’, and ‘trolling’ to explore the phenomenon. In examining the use of online communication to silence women involved in public discourse, Jane further uses the term “e-bile” to describe “the extravagant invective, the sexualized threats of violence, and the recreational nastiness that have come to constitute a dominant tenor of Internet discourse” (p.532). Willard (2007) sought to provide more clarity to the area through the development of a typology for understanding negative online interaction that includes seven types of behaviours that are witnessed online:

1. Flaming: sending angry, rude, or vulgar messages directed at a person or to an online group
2. Harassment: repeatedly sending a person offensive messages
3. Denigration: posting rumours, harmful or untrue information about a person
4. Cyber stalking: harassment that includes threats of harm
5. Impersonation or pretending to be another person
6. Outing or trickery: tricking a person into sending information such as secrets or embarrassing information that can be used to send to others
7. Exclusion: excluding someone purposefully from an online group.

Willard’s classification is useful when examining abuse experienced by athletes and other celebrities within online environments as it helps increase understanding of the spectrum of behaviours that can be experienced, yet it doesn’t allow understanding of the content or types of abuse experienced. Thus, there is a clear lack of definitional clarity over the relevant terms. We suggest that, as an umbrella term, ‘maltreatment’ offers an appropriate starting point with which to examine the types of online abuse seen within the follower-athlete relationship.

A recent study by anti-racism in football group 'Kick it Out' examined social media abuse of English Premier League players and revealed that there had been approximately 130,000 discriminatory posts between August 2014 and March 2015. This equates to an average of approximately 17,000 abusive posts per month (Kick it Out, 2015). Parry, Kavanagh and Jones (2015) have identified that virtual maltreatment has a number of negative consequences for the victims including psychological, behavioural and performance impacts. These can range from negative impacts on an athletes self-esteem and/or confidence to sleep disturbances and reduced performance on the field of play. Such behaviour can have a significant effect on all aspects of the victim's life not just their athletic performance.

The existence of virtual maltreatment and its potential to cause harm, is irrefutable, however, the variety of types of behaviour that constitute such abuse have yet to be systematically explored. Literature examining abuse in other setting relies on the ability to appropriately identify and classify abuse in order to promote detection, prevention and safeguarding. Thus, the paper will now outline a conceptual typology of the different types of maltreatment that can be experienced as part of the virtual athlete/fan relationship.

**Methodology**

The research design adopted was that of online ethnography, also referred to as 'netnography' involving participant observational research based in online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010). Due to high growth in Internet forums and the ease of access to rich data sets within online environments, this form of data collection is widely accepted and used in many fields (Janta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014). The study focused on the collection of archival, rather than elicited or field note data (Kozinets, 2010) as it used existing tweets, rather than having any researcher involvement or interaction with the online community. The data screening process took place over a two year period whereby content from the social

media platform Twitter was collected. Two methods were adopted for the collection of data. Brand watch analytics was adopted as a means to screen large data sets. This commercial software package designed to identify twitter posts using key words based on discriminatory and abusive terms. Searches were run through screening both hashtags and variants of spelling to identify as many instances of virtual maltreatment as possible. An illustrative example could be "Serena Williams OR Bartoli AND man OR ugly OR lesbian". In addition to computer aided data collection Twitter was observed by the research team and abusive tweets were stored within an excel spreadsheet along with the date of the tweet, the time, and the target of the comment and their sport. The research team became 'lurkers' within online environments and did not interact within or manipulate the online space

Thousands of posts were read and sifted in the development of the conceptual typology. Typologies—defined as organized systems of types—make crucial contributions to the social sciences and enable the forming and refining concepts, drawing out underlying dimensions, creating categories for classification and measurement, and sorting cases (Collier, LaPorte, & Seawright, 2012). Descriptive names were assigned to tweets, attached to particular behaviours and grouped in relation to descriptive abuse types in order to create the broad classifications presented. Tweets were grouped based on similar attributes in order to keep types within a classification as close as possible in order to create discrete dimensions of the typology. The process of qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000) adopted provided a mechanism through which to analyse and subsequently group tweets based on abuse types.

## Presenting a Typology of Virtual Maltreatment

It is suggested here that there is a need for context-specific typologies; that is for the typology to both accurately reflect the nature of the phenomenon, and also be useful as a tool with which to analyse such behaviour. The use of typologies has been subject to criticism in sport, for example Green and Jones (2006) have noted that it is rare for activities to fall into the ideal-types that are proposed by typologies, they may over-simplify human behaviour, and that such approaches tend not to acknowledge the dynamic nature of activity, instead presenting a static picture of involvement at a particular time. Finally, typologies may be limited in that they can demonstrate a tendency to examine the activity itself, rather than the meanings, norms and values of the individual undertaking the activity. These are all valid criticisms; however it is clear that further research is in this area is essential. With any emerging area, there is a need for conceptual clarity and consistency in how the area is explored. Consistency of terminology with regard to online abuse in sport is important to allow the transferability of data both between studies and over time (Stirling, 2009), and it is with this purpose that the typology is presented. Based on this, we propose a working definition of virtual maltreatment and a conceptual framework for classifying abuse online within sport building upon existing typologies, but adapted in terms of, and informed by the qualitatively different (Slonje & Smith, 2008) nature of online abuse.

The proposed typology is presented in Figure 1. We use the term virtual maltreatment to encompass the variety of cyber-enabled abuses that can manifest in virtual environments and define it as:

> Direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulating, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional and psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority.

Maltreatment online is likely to occur within virtual relationships and is enabled by the instantaneous access and global reach that the Internet affords the perpetrator. Virtual relationships include the follower-to-athlete (coach or official) or athlete-to-athlete relationship, and abuse can be experienced directly or indirectly within such relationships (Kavanagh & Jones, 2016). 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.

**Figure 1: Categorisation of Virtual Maltreatment in Sport – ABOUT HERE**

Four types of abuse can be experienced either directly or in-directly within virtual relationships (see Figure 1). These are physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory, of which the final type can be further categorised into discrimination based upon gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and/or disability. An overview of each virtual maltreatment type is presented below.

**Virtual physical maltreatment**

Virtual physical maltreatment can include threats of physical violence and/or focus toward an individual's physical attributes. Comments can be stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative or threatening manner and can be designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset and distress, alarm and/or inferiority. As Jane (2014) notes, such aggression sometimes manifests as a direct threat, but most commonly appears in the form of hostile wishful thinking. Examples of direct and indirect physical maltreatment can be seen

with messages to the Premiership footballer Wayne Rooney, Olympic gymnast Beth Tweddle and tennis player Andy Murray:

> *@WayneRooney cheers Wayne you fat ugly wanker*
>
> *@SkySportsNews #Sportswomen Beth Tweddle on a scale of 1/10 how pig ugly would you class yourself?*
>
> *I hope Andy Murray loses, breaks an arm and never plays tennis again, cunt.*

The examples show a continuum between abuse concerning physical appearance (for example toward Wayne Rooney) and more serious threats of actual harm (targeted and Andy Murray). New York Jets quarterback Mark Sanchez, for example, received a number of direct physical threats from a fan:

> *@mark_sanchez "kill yo self tonight! or imma do it for you wednesday at practice*

Indirect physical maltreatment also demonstrated a continuum from the relatively trivial, although still unacceptable tweets about athlete appearance:

> *Test Serena Williams. No way is she clean. Looks way too much like a man*

To more threatening behaviour. Such indirect physical abuse focused on the 2013 Wimbledon champion Marion Bartoli was evident: a typical comment was:

> *If Bartoli fist pumps one more time I'm gonna knock her out the slag*

Thus it is clear that despite the 'unreal' nature of online interaction, virtual physical maltreatment still exists, albeit in the form of focusing on physical attributes or through threat of physical violence.

**Virtual sexual maltreatment**

Virtual sexual maltreatment can include threats of rape and sexual assault or sexual acts to which the adult would not consent or comments regarding sexual behavior with or of

an individual. Comments can be stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and can be designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress and alarm. Contrasting tweets regarding the two 2013 Wimbledon women finalists Marion Bartoli and Sabine Lisicki demonstrate the presence of this behaviour:

> *Bartoli wouldn't get raped let alone fucked #wimbledon*
>
> *Sabine Lisicki – I'd definitely let her sit on my face. Not a great face but those legs are amaze, body ain't too shabby either #wimbledon*

It is important to note the use of a 'hashtag' (#wimbledon) within these messages. A hashtag allows messages to be grouped together, and subsequently searched for by other users. Thus, those interested in the Wimbledon tournament can follow tweets using the relevant hashtag, further spreading the message.

Although men are disproportionately the perpetrators and women disproportionately the victims of on-line sexual hostility (Herring, 2002), sexual maltreatment is also evident for male athletes. The diver Tom Daley was the subject of the following tweet:

> *Tom Daley has a face that's all like: I wanna hug you, but then has a body like: I wanna fuck you #true*

As with virtual physical maltreatment, it is again through the focus on physical attributes or the use of threats that creates the key issue here rather than actual physical or face-to-face behaviours.

**Virtual emotional maltreatment**

Virtual emotional maltreatment includes comments designed to elicit a negative emotional and or psychological reaction and can include rumor spreading, ridiculing, terrorising, humiliating, isolating, belittling and scapegoating. Comments can be stated in an

aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, or threatening manner and can be designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress and alarm. At a basic level, tweets may simply be designed to humiliate and belittle athletes, for example:

> *Fuck u @shelveyJ. Do us LFC supporters a favour and just leave LFC. Or do everyone a favour and just stop playing football.*
>
> *Raheem Stirling is a cunt and a waste of space @MCFC enjoy and good riddance*

An example of a tweet designed to elicit emotional distress was that sent to Tom Daley after a disappointing Olympic performance:

> *@TomDaley1994 you let your dad down I hope you know that*

This referred to Daley's father, who had died of cancer before the Games. This type of tweet was echoed by a message regarding football referee Mark Halsey, who had previously suffered from cancer:

> *I hope Mark Halsey gets cancer again and dies*
>
> *Mark Halsey should've died of cancer*

This was an example of a non-direct tweet being received by the recipient, leading to Halsey actually making a complaint to the police about the tweet (BBC Sport, 2012). The level of abuse directed at Halsey and his family was so severe that his wife and daughter were forced to relocate after threats were made on his young daughter's life. This illustrates that tweets about, rather than to an individual still have the potential to cause harm, fear or distress, and should thus be seen as maltreatment.

**Virtual discriminatory maltreatment**

Virtual discriminatory maltreatment can include comments that negatively refer to an individual's membership of a particular social group based on gender, race, religion, nationality, disability and/or sexual orientation. Comments can be stated in an aggressive,

exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and can be designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress and alarm. Gender discrimination was illustrated by a direct tweet to the female American racing driver **Danica** Patrick:

> *@DanicaPatrick you will never win a race they only got you in the sport because you look good now go back to the kitchen*

Similar sentiments were seen towards the England Womens' football coach, Hope Powell and Australian Cricketer Ellyse Perry:

> *Women coaches can't work in mens football just wouldn't work for me imagine Hope Powell managing Utd #neverever*
>
> *She must have a really long chain to reach a cricket pitch, still don't understand why she is out of the kitchen*

Two highly publicised tweets, reported widely in the press demonstrated blatant racial discrimination, both directly sent to the recipient:

> *@anton_ferdinand RT this you fucking black cunt*
>
> *@louissaha08 go back to France ya fuckin nigger*

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is evident in terms of male and female sexuality. Marion Bartoli received a number of high profile tweets about her sexuality that were reported in the national press, such as:

> *I hate Bartoli already fucking dyke come on Lisicki u sexy thing*

The former athlete and athletics presenter on the BBC, Colin Jackson, was subject to a variety of messages regarding his sexual orientation:

> *2 gays involved in tonight's Olympic coverage … Justin Gay… and Colin Jackson #100mfinal*

It is clear that a variety of discriminatory behaviours thus take place within the virtual environment.

## Understanding Virtual Maltreatment

The conceptual typology of virtual maltreatment is presented as a starting point for critical dialogue concerning abuse in online environments and can be used to understand the nature of such behavior in these spaces. This paper, as a position piece, has attempted to provide a framework to guide future research into what may well be one of the most important leisure phenomena to emerge in recent years.

Digitizing people, relationships, and groups has stretched the boundaries of how and when humans interact, creating a space where darker behaviours can manifest and individuals can feel protected by the sense of anonymity the Internet affords. Virtual spaces create an optimal environment for both illegal and harmful activity. The term trolling has been adopted by the media to broadly account for any harassment, via communications systems. Trolling has been collectively referred to as the "sending of provocative messages via a communications platform for the entertainment of oneself, others or both" (Bishop, 2013, p. 302). Bishop (2013) differentiates between types of trolling behaviours that occur online and believe that while some 'troll' to harm others or cause discomfort (flame trolls) others are more interested in the entertainment that comes from trolling and gaining gratification from their actions (kudos trolls). As Bishop (2014) notes, trolls show a darker, sinister and perhaps more transgressive side of cyber-space in the form of abuse and vitriol (p. 7), yet not all abuse is carried out by trolls and not all transgressive behaviour could constitute trolling. This media fuelled moral panic concerning the presence of 'dangerous Internet trolls' leads us to miss an important fact; we all have the potential to be abused or become the perpetrators of maltreatment in online environments, it is not just the 'trolls' who chose to harm or attack others in cyber-space; as demonstrated through negative fan interaction.

Certainly, virtual maltreatment can span one off hateful comments within the running commentary of sports consumption to far more targeted, systematic and pervasive examples of abuse. Virtual maltreatment can sit anywhere on a spectrum from statements thought to be

idol 'banter' or said in jest to those that include threats of physical violence, racist and/or sexually degrading and demeaning content. Threats target the individual or extend to people close to them including family members, team-mates and friends and content spans the very minor to the extremely violent, lewd or abusive, making this a diverse problem to classify and subsequently police. It is therefore important to understand the nature of cyber-space to provide an explanation for the negative behavior present within it if we are to better safeguard individuals in these spaces. The conceptual typology presented in this paper represents a useful and important starting point in this process.

Some of the characteristics that make online spaces most attractive such as the freedom of expression, perceived or actual anonymity, reduction of inhibition and expression of thought also make this environment difficult to regulate and police (Awan & Brakemore, 2012; Farrington et al., 2013). As Suler (2004, p.321) identifies, "people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn't normally say and do in face-to-face interaction", explaining that much of this behaviour, which he describes as "toxic disinhibition" directly affects the way in which we behave and interact in these environments. The anonymity or even perception of anonymity can make people more likely to disclose information and enact different moral codes in online environments (Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013).

The concept of Dissociative Anonymity (the protection afforded by the anonymity of online identities enabling individuals to separate the real and the virtual self) is particularly interesting, leading to a state of 'virtual deindividuation' whereby the personal identity of the perpetrator becomes lost, not within a physical crowd as proposed by traditional notions of deindividuation, but within an environment of safety and anonymity that leads to the social self dominating the personal self. This is augmented by notions of Invisibility (the inability to be seen, or to see others' responses) and Dissociative Imagination (the idea that online

interaction is somehow 'separate' from 'real life'). Social media therefore has the potential to become a safe-space for would be offenders:

> People don't have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message. They don't have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle or not so subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express (Suler 2004, p. 322).

Online behaviour lacks essential cues in human interaction and virtual spaces act as a cloak of invisibility: "text communication offers a built in opportunity to keep one's eyes averted" (ibid). As the individual's physical and virtual worlds become intimately entangled the online persona can become an extension of the individual's mind and personality creating, embodied, temporal and spatial experiences (Suler, 2005). In addition to the perception of cyberspace as a physical space, it can also be regarded as a 'transitional space' – an extension of ones conscious and unconscious mind. It is a space that one may personalise and interact in such a way that it becomes a part of them (ibid) whereby individuals can create hybrid personas. As such, online behaviours have the potential to be significantly different to, and often more extreme and divergent from expected norms of face-to-face behaviour, especially given the broader lack of control of online interaction. Suler refers to these factors as some of the unique psychological features of the Internet that make it most attractive and alarming as a heterotopic space. As a consequence, the virtual environment is a particularly dangerous one in terms of its potential for maltreatment to occur.

Importantly virtual worlds they have shaped modern leisure time, new technologies present endless opportunities for performing leisure and social media has become a common site of leisure activity for many people. As Rojek (2000) notes, the organisation of leisure has often been driven by technology, and given that we are currently in the period of the greatest technological change ever seen, it is logical to argue that leisure organisation and behaviour will reflect this. Some years ago, Bryce (2001, p.7) suggested that "One area that has not

been sufficiently considered in the literature is the influence of technology on the organization and experience of leisure", and to some extent this is an argument that remains valid today.

The sheer nature of cyberspace, together with the formation of ideographic online communities, provides an opportunity for deviant leisure activity. As this discussion demonstrates cyberspace is a deregulated space and can therefore play host a variety of activities varying from legal to illegal providing opportunity for the pursuit of invasive and mephitic leisure (Rojek, 2000). As Bryce (2001, p.12-13) suggested:

> "The wild zones of the Internet with their relative freedom from regulation and censorship are able to support deviant leisure ideologies…Legitimization and support of such ideologies in cyberspace may increase deviant behaviour in society as a whole. This suggests that utopian claims concerning empowerment and freedom in cyberspace must be tempered by the acceptance of the use of the medium for deviance, and an examination of mechanisms of regulation to protect the rights of individuals using the Internet for leisure".

It is clear that the Internet, and social media in particular provide an environment where people are afforded the power and opportunity to enact 'dark leisure' through abusive behaviours towards other, often high profile and high status individuals.

Suler and Phillips (1998) believe that two factors help shape deviance demonstrated in online environments, one technical (people will negotiate technical features to exploit environments) and one social (people will follow the sub-cultures of an environment or act against them). The social element is perhaps most interesting in terms of leisure behaviour spending time abusing others. It could be argued that online environments have a greater acceptance of abusive language and thus this desensitises individuals to the negative nature of such content. Conversely, this activity is carried out as a transgressive act, masked by the cover the virtual world affords allowing individuals a space through which they can break normative face-to-face rules and subvert norms. As Suler (1998, p. 276) stated:

> "The community and all that is happening there is entertainment in the form of recapitulation of the real world".

The significance of social media as a leisure activity now means that scholars can no longer afford to ignore this aspect of leisure behaviour. The sheer pervasiveness of social media as a leisure activity, when taken alongside the changing power and opportunity provided to young people especially, suggests that this is a growing area of significance within contemporary society. Deviant behaviour such as virtual maltreatment may be upsetting or abusive for some, yet for others it is all a part of the leisure experience and a draw to engage in these social worlds. What is clear from the typology, and data presented here, is that the issue of virtual maltreatment is a serious one and will - in all likelihood - remain so. Further examination is needed to explore online environments as contemporary sites of leisure activity but more importantly places where deviant or morally questionable leisure pursuits are enacted. As well as understanding such behaviours from the perspective of the individual, the phenomenon of virtual maltreatment allows us to examine a changing landscape in terms of broader deviant leisure practices. As we noted earlier, virtual worlds are providing new arenas for the production and consumption of leisure. Within such arenas, online, less inhibited interaction may lead to a change in 'traditional' power relations, whereby power increasingly lies with the (often younger) perpetrator, protected from the norms and values associated with face to face interaction. Thus, such deviant leisure behaviour becomes, in many ways, easier to enact. From a pragmatic perspective, it becomes easier to target those who are 'different', and from a psychological perspective it becomes safer to do so. Hence, as a leisure activity, online interaction of this nature provides a microcosm within which we can observe the enactment of gendered, racialized and sexualised politics, often at an extreme level, allowing a potentially illuminating insight into

these issues, providing a rich environment with which to further our understanding of such politics, as well as the broader social landscape itself.

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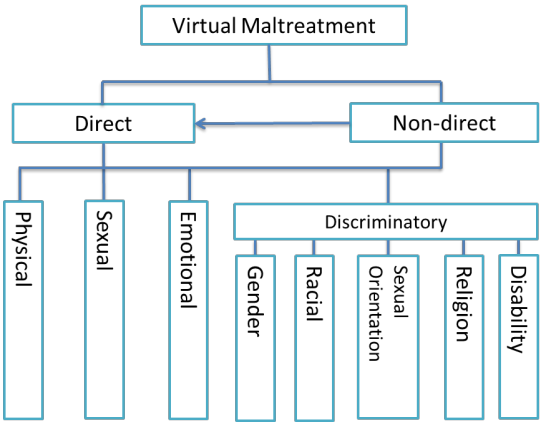


Figure 1: Categorisation of Virtual Maltreatment in Sport