

Virtual Maltreatment: Sexualisation and Social Media Abuse in Sport.

Chelsea Litchfield

School of Exercise Science, Sport and Health, Charles Sturt University

Emma. J. Kavanagh

Bournemouth University, Department of Sport and Physical Activity

Jaquelyn Osborne

School of Exercise Science, Sport and Health, Charles Sturt University

Ian Jones

Bournemouth University, Department of Sport and Physical Activity

Abstract

Virtual maltreatment is a rapidly emerging and highly significant issue within contemporary sport. This study examines such behaviour by exploring the negative social media attention that tennis player Maria Sharapova received during the 2015 Wimbledon tennis championships. Using a netnographic approach, an analysis of two popular social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) was conducted to examine the social commentary surrounding this athlete during the event. Three primary themes emerged from the analysis of data on these platforms: 'admiration of her physical beauty and/or sexualisation'; 'threatening physical and/or sexual contact' and 'emotional ridicule and aggression'. These findings demonstrate how social media provides a space for unregulated physical and sexual abuse of female athletes in a way that traditional sports media does not. Virtual abuse and maltreatment is identified as a significant social problem which requires further consideration in academic literature.

Keywords: Virtual maltreatment; Women, Athletes, Social media; Sexualisation, Abuse

Introduction

Virtual maltreatment can be defined as direct or non-direct online communication that is designed to cause emotional or psychological upset, through hostile, abusive and bullying comments or tweets (Kavanagh and Jones, 2014, p.36). The current manuscript highlights the presence of virtual maltreatment in online spaces. This is done through presenting the case of tennis player Maria Sharapova and the 2015 Wimbledon championships. The examination of social media, itself devoid of the checks and balances of the traditional media, has revealed a barrage of sexually, physically and emotionally abusive themed comments being directed at Sharapova during the data collection period (28th June - 12th July, 2015) and identifies virtual maltreatment as a significant social problem.

Maria Sharapova is one of the most recognisable female athletes on the world stage. Whilst Sharapova's grand slam singles titles and earnings from prize money are impressive in themselves (Badenhausen, 2016), it is often her appearance that draws the most significant media attention. Sharapova's 'traditionally feminine' appearance, coupled with her willingness to discuss and promote 'beauty' and 'glamour tips' (see Chiari, 2015; and Prince, 2015) have positioned Sharapova (at least in the minds of some) as desirable in a sexual way. In the mainstream media, representations of many female athletes in these ways are not uncommon. In fact, there is often pressure on female athletes to look and act in certain ways, reaffirming notions of femininity and (hetero)sexuality to attain sponsorship deals and attract media coverage (Kane, LaVoi and Fink, 2013).

While the representation of female athletes and female sports in the sports media is widely researched and documented (See Messner and Cooky, 2010; Litchfield and Osborne, 2015 for examples of this), very little information is known about how sporting females are represented in social media spaces. Not dissimilar to traditional media (print and television in particular), online sports news sites provide some female focused sports news stories, however, less is known about how fans and sports consumers react to, and engage with sport in online spaces. Social media spaces provide the potential for alternate and diverse representations, discourses and images of women's sport, which are not found in traditional media. The current study examines one such discourse, specifically through an analysis of the social commentary surrounding social media coverage of Sharapova across a number of sites during the 2015 Wimbledon tennis championships.¹

Literature Review of Women, Sport and Media

Despite the current study focusing predominately on social media and virtual maltreatment in online spaces, this review of literature will explore a breadth of research in order to demonstrate the broader gendered culture of sports media, including print media and broadcast media. Over several decades there has been a consistent theme in sports media related research. This theme is that female athletes are rarely focused on in media coverage and when they do feature in the sports media, they are often sexualised and infantilised.

Traditionally, women athletes feature sporadically in the sports media, a fact that has been well documented over the last three decades by a range of researchers (see Messner and Cooky, 2010; Messner, Duncan and Cooky, 2003; Duncan, Messner and Willms, 2005;

¹ The Wimbledon tennis championships may also be referred to as 'Wimbledon'.

Boyle, 2009; Harris and Clayton, 2002; Lumby, Caple and Greenwood, 2009; Phillips, 1997; and Toohey, 1997). Research by Messner et al. (2003) on women in televised sports news revealed that women receive significantly less coverage than men. This study focused on three television stations in the United States and only an average of 8.33% of airtime was afforded to women athletes and women's sports (2003, p. 40). In another study on televised sports news, Duncan et al. (2005) found that 6.3% of coverage focused on women's sport, while around 91.4% focused on men's sports (p. 4). The representation of women athletes in print sports media has exposed a similar story. According to Vincent, Imwold, Masemann and Johnson (2002) 'numerous empirical studies have found female athletes are under-represented in the print media' (p. 320). Harris and Clayton's study of the English tabloid press exposed only 5.9% of the sports reporting focussing on women athletes or women's sports (2002, p. 397).

More recently, very little has changed in terms of the research on women athletes represented in the sports pages and in televised formats. Longitudinal research on televised sports news in the United States found that the coverage of women's sports had in fact decreased over the last two decades (Messner and Cooky, 2010). According to Messner and Cooky (2010), sports news programmes over three television network affiliates awarded men's sports 96% of the sports news coverage, 2.1% to gender neutral topics and only 1.6% of sports coverage was dedicated to women athletes or women's sports (p. 8).

In Australia, an Australian Sports Commission and University of New South Wales report on televised sports found similar results for women's sports and female athletes. Findings showed that 81.1% of sports coverage was dedicated to male athletes and men's sports and 8.7% of sports coverage was dedicated to female athletes or women's sports (Lumby et al., 2009). Litchfield and Osborne's (2015) study examining the gender representation differences between Olympic and non-Olympic years, also found that women were under-represented in the sports pages between 2008-2012 in Australia. While women received more coverage in the print media in Australia than usual during the Olympic Games years in 2008 and 2012 (around 14%), they received significantly less in non-Olympic years in 2009, 2010 and 2011 at around 4.5% (Litchfield and Osborne, 2015).

Of the few sports media pieces that do focus on women's sports, the articles, news reports and broadcasts are often framed in ways where women athletes are subjugated and

devalued.² When sporting pursuits and performances are acknowledged, the sports women are also often framed in feminine and heterosexual discourses and images (see Litchfield, 2015, Litchfield and Osborne, 2015; Lumby et al., 2009). Nearly two decades ago, Duncan and Messner suggested that the media's approach to female athletes and sport demonstrates an example of 'symbolic dominance', a process that 'emphasizes the difference between men and women (in sports reporting), where men represent the standard and women represent the other' (1998, p. 180). More recently, Wensing and Bruce (2003) suggested that the media have traditionally adhered to a set of unwritten old 'rules' to describe women athletes, their sporting performance and their femininity (p. 387). These rules include; 'Gender Marking', 'Heterosexuality', 'Emphasizing Appropriate Femininity', 'Infantilisation' and 'Focussing on Non-Sport-Related Aspects'. According to Wensing and Bruce (2003), such rules 'situate female athletes so they are not a threat to the patriarchal order' (p. 388).

While the culture of women's sports coverage in traditional forms of media is well known, very little empirical research has been conducted focussing on the landscape of women's sports and female athletes' representation in online spaces and Internet-based social media studies remain an emerging field of research. Social media technologies have had a significant impact on sport as a whole and on fan-athlete interaction (Lebel and Danylchuk, 2014). The Internet has become an essential component in the navigation of everyday tasks and central to human interaction. It is evident that all aspects of modern living have become entangled with new media and virtual technologies (Hughes, Rowe, Batey and Lee, 2012). One of the most significant developments in online usage has been the emergence of social networking sites and the advent of social media. These Internet based applications allow individuals to communicate with others, share information, learn and perhaps more pertinent to this study, interact with sports teams and athletes. It is now accepted that most professional sports teams and athletes utilise social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter to keep fans abreast of news and to interact directly with them creating an interactive and virtual sports experience. More specifically, elite performers use social media for purpose of self-promotion, branding and to provide fans or followers an intimate insight into their professional or personal lives (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh and Greenwell, 2010).

In relation to female athletes, online sports reporting and social media 'have brought the concept of gender equity in sports reporting into international focus' (Creedon, 2014, p.

² To see an example of how this works see Litchfield, C. (2015). A media analysis of Ellyse Perry and the rise? of women's sport in Australia. *Journal of Sporting Cultures and Identities*, 6(1), 11-22.

712). While social and online media should in fact increase the amount of coverage women athletes receive due to this self-promoting culture, the reality is that online sports reporting and social media can provide yet another media space to subjugate women (Creedon, 2014).

As Creedon (2014) further explains:

The Internet and web have radically changed the opportunity to increase coverage of women's sports. But—other than the Olympics where nationality rather than gender make the headlines—the coverage of women's sports remains insultingly trivial. Yes, sports—and news—coverage is 24/7, but the full court press for gender equity in sports—and news—reporting has yet to score. For the new(s) media, the values used to cover and construct representation of women athletes and women's sports have not changed. Coverage of women's sports in today's digitized and globalized media remains inequitable, incommensurate, and too often, sexist. (p. 715).

Therefore, despite the rise of online sports media, the state of play for female athletes remains the same in terms of the lack of equitable media coverage.

Discrimination, abuse and online media spaces

The rise of social media has led to a more interactive environment, one where additional discrimination is evident. It is becoming increasingly apparent that this environment can also play host to a number of darker behaviours and provide an outlet for a variety of types of hate to occur (Kavanagh and Jones, 2016). In many ways, interaction in these spaces serve to compound many of the problems that have been present in the reporting of women's sport and can thus serve to reinforce discriminatory behaviours. Jane (2014) refers to the presence of negative commentary in these spaces as 'e-bile' and suggests that in virtual worlds:

Gender stereotypes abound. E-bile targeting women commonly includes charges of unintelligence, hysteria, and ugliness; these are then combined with threats and/or fantasies of violent sex acts which are often framed as "correctives." Constructions along the lines of "what you need is a good [insert graphic sexual act] to put you right" appear with such astounding regularity, they constitute an e-bile meme (p.533).

Research points to the widespread nature of abuse on social media platforms and increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media platforms (Kavanagh and Jones, 2014; Sanderson and Truax, 2014; Sanderson, 2013; Browning and Sanderson, 2012).

This type of behaviour has been described as ‘virtual maltreatment’ and can be defined 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’ (Kavanagh and Jones, 2014, p.36). Virtual maltreatment is suggested to manifest in four primary ways through the presence of physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory content, of which the latter can be broken down into discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and/or disability. Maltreatment on virtual platforms can be experienced directly or indirectly. Direct refers to those incidents where a message is directly sent to a recipient or includes an identifier or link to the subject of the abuse adopting their user name (@Twitteruser). Non-direct refers to cases whereby a message is not sent to the actual subject of the message, but the content would make reference to them perhaps through the use of a hashtag or descriptor (e.g., #Wimbledon). Although further research is required, recent research in sport demonstrates that virtual maltreatment is becoming an increasingly significant social problem (Kavanagh and Jones, 2016; Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price and Saeed, 2015; Parry, Kavanagh and Jones, 2015).

Based on the traditional and contemporary representations of female athletes in the sports media outlined, the current study aims to investigate how the space of social media situates female athletes. The study focuses on tennis player Maria Sharapova and the attention she received on sports social media sites, tennis specific social media sites and her personal Facebook and Twitter sites. In particular, the current study aims to unpack the virtual maltreatment that Sharapova received during the 2015 Wimbledon event.³

Data collection and analysis

Case study

Maria Sharapova is a United States based, Russian born tennis player, who has consistently been ranked in the top ten of the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) rankings. Sharapova has won five grand slam singles titles and is considered one of the great players in the modern era. Sharapova is the highest paid female athlete in the world, earning a total of \$29.2million U.S. in 2015 (including sponsors endorsements) (Chiari, 2015).⁴ Despite her on-court

³ This research was conducted prior to the allegations made against Maria Sharapova relating to doping that have occurred in 2016.

⁴ This is not to say that Sharapova deserves to be the highest paid sportswoman in the world based on her sporting achievements. In fact, dominant players such as world no. 1 ranked tennis player Serena Williams, earns considerably less than Sharapova.

achievements, the sports media often focus on Sharapova’s physical appearance, as a ‘traditionally feminine’ woman, and also as being attractive and desirable for tennis and sports fans. For instance, Sharapaova sports immaculately groomed long blonde hair, blue eyes, and often poses for swimsuit and evening wear. Sharapova is also often interviewed to discuss her ‘style tips’ and ‘fashion’ interests (see Kantor, 2015 for an example of this). Ponterotto (2012) notes that there is a ‘persistent tendency in media language to trivialise the female body by representing sportswomen through traditional stereotypes of femininity and sensuality (p. 16).

Data Collection

During the 2015 Wimbledon Championships between the 28th June, 2015 and the 12th July, the results on Maria Sharapova in social media spaces were collected from a number of social media outlets (see table 1). A netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010) was adopted through the collection of archival data from Facebook and Twitter.

Table 1– Data collection sources

Event/Source	Facebook page title	Twitter name
Maria Sharapova	Maria Sharapova	@MariaSharapova
Wimbledon	Wimbledon	@Wimbledon
British Tennis (LTA)	British Tennis	@BritishTennis
Tennis Foundation	Tennis Foundation	@TennisFndation
Sky Sports	Sky Sports	@skysports
Sky News	Sky News	@skynews
BBC Sport	BBC Sport	@BBCsport
BBC News (all options)	BBC News	@BBCnews
	BBC Breaking	@BBCBreaking
	BBC World Service	@BBCWorld
Live tennis	LiveTennis	@livetennis
Tennis.com	Tennis.com	@TENNIS.com

Two methods were adopted for data collection. The first involved the collection of a large data set through the use of a social intelligence platform, Brandwatch Analytics (Brandwatch). This tool enables the collection and filtering of data through running an analytical examination of content within social media spaces; thus facilitating access to ‘big data’ sets based on specific parameters. Within Brandwatch, search strings called ‘queries’ are used to input terms that the researcher wishes to search for. Queries based on discriminatory and abusive terms enable the widespread search of key words across social

media platforms. During the data collection, the team searched using a list of over 100 discriminatory terms, the athlete's name (along with all nicknames, hashtags and variations of spelling) and reference to other top seeded players over this period. An example of one such query is "Maria Sharapova AND bitch OR screamer OR sexy OR slag"⁵. Once the query was set up, Brandwatch collects every online reference (across Facebook and Twitter) where Sharapova was mentioned within ten words of a discriminatory term over a designated time period. This was an iterative process as the queries could be refined in relation to the content of abusive comments present in these spaces and thus reflected the nature of the commentary used by 'posters'.

In addition, on each of the social media sites, daily searches were carried out using a variety of search terms, for example 'Maria' or 'Sharapova'. The research team did not interact in these spaces or manipulate the environment but instead were active viewers of it. The results from this search, including a screenshot of the comment, the date, the time, the source of the comment, who the comment was targeted at, what type of abuse the comment related to and any other information, were collected in a database. Adopting both of these data collection methods ensured an exhaustive data collection process where the researchers could immerse themselves into recurring narratives as they occurred.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed by categorising comments into themes and sub-themes that were identified using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (p. 82). Three major themes arose as a result of the analysis: 'Admiration of her physical beauty and/or Sexualisation'; 'Threatening physical and/or sexual contact'; and 'Emotional ridicule and aggression'. The content of these themes are explored in the following section.

Results and Discussion

As outlined in the data collection description, Facebook and Twitter comments that were defined as 'abusive' in nature towards Maria Sharapova were collected over the duration of the 2015 Wimbledon event.⁶ The definition of an abusive comment was guided by the work of Kavanagh and Jones (2014). As mentioned above, the three primary themes that

⁵ The researchers decided on search terms by scanning social media coverage on Sharapova prior to the Wimbledon event.

⁶ Maria Sharapova was eliminated from the tournament during the semi-finals by Serena Williams.

emerged from the data collected were ‘Admiration of her physical beauty and/or sexualisation’; ‘Threatening physical and/or sexual contact’ and ‘Emotional ridicule and aggression’. There were several hundred negative comments and tweets directed at Sharapova on the data collection sites outlined. For the purposes of the current research there were 159 pieces of abuse on twitter and 51 pieces of abuse on Facebook during the two week period over the tournament.⁷

Admiration of her physical beauty and/or Sexualisation

Predominant and constant forms of abuse that centred around Maria Sharapova on the social media sites focused on her sexuality. The data collected from Facebook sites in particular constitute much of the data related to this theme. While it is not the intention of this research to imply a hierarchy of abuse, nor to suggest that some forms of abuse are worse than others, there was a difference between some of the abuse that Sharapova received. The data ranges from social media comments on Sharapova’s physicality generally, to comments that focus on her ‘sexual’ body. Some of the Facebook comments that focused on Sharapova’s supposed physical beauty included: ‘Maria is hot’; ‘Pretty lady [love heart]’; ‘you are looking so beautiful’; ‘Your (*sic*) my number 1 babe Maria’; ‘Very nice Maria you are beautiful. I like you’; ‘Beautiful pic golden girl’; ‘Cute girl’; ‘M.S. stunning as ever... rest and good luck’; ‘Nice and beautiful looking’; ‘my lovely dream girl’; ‘beautiful girl’; ‘I like you baby’; Maria Sharapova - The most beautiful girl in sport. You are a MASTERPIECE...’; and ‘Maria Best princesse (*sic*) in the world’. Needless to say, these types of comments were plentiful and the above provides only a sample.

Such comments about female athletes are not uncommon. Wensing and Bruce (2003) explain that the sports media has been responsible for infantilising and emphasising the ‘appropriate’ femininity of women athletes in sport. Studies by Litchfield (2015) and Kane and Maxwell (2011) have also investigated the ways in which media reinforce feminine images and narratives around female athletes. In another study examining the representation of Maria Sharapova in the British sports media, Ponterotto (2012) explains that (white) ‘female athletes are consistently portrayed in traditional feminine roles (passive and docile, sexually desirable and available, fragile and child-like), rather than in pro-active athletic

⁷ There is no doubt that Sharapova would have received significantly more abusive comments and tweets during this time period from other social media sources. Some examples of these sites include Fox Sports, ESPN and various other online sports media sources.

positions, and are especially represented as top models, pin-ups, and sexual partners' (p. 24). Therefore, it is not unexpected for sports fans to use such narratives when discussing female athletes, especially when this is a dominant culture in the sports media.

The difference between earlier comments that focused solely on Sharapova's appearance revolves around the notion of sex. Comments found below situate Sharapova as 'sexually' attractive, as sexually desirable and focus on her sexual body. Within the current study, there were also a number of Facebook comments that clearly sexualised Sharapova. Some of these comments include: 'Sexpova Baby'; 'very sexy body and good looking...'; 'oo my god SEXYPOVA'; 'Nice body and booty'; 'Maria is hot like sun! Sexy!'; 'I want the girl'; 'Maria is so cute she drives me crazy'; and 'Go girl u can [be] my sexy angel !!'. In relation to comments found on Twitter, a more extreme language was used in admiring Sharapova's purported physical attractiveness and indeed the sexualising of Sharapova. Examples of Twitter comments and tweets include: '@MariaSharapova still fine as fuck tho'; 'Maria Sharapova is hot as fuck'; 'I wish to marry Maria Sharapova...sexy russian tennis bitch'; '@mariasharapova hey sexy. Lets win at Wimbledon'; 'Maria Sharpova is hott (*sic*)'; 'Maria sharapova's shriek is fucking hot'; and 'Maria Sharapova is so fucking sexy'.

Comments relating to the sexualisation of Sharapova were distinctly different to earlier comments that focused on her physical appearance. Daniels and Wartena (2011) suggest that the media 'in Western contexts generally portray stereotypical and sexualized representations of women and femininity that transmit the notion that women are sexual objects to be viewed and evaluated by men' (p. 566). In Ponterotto's (2012) study, she found that the British sports media continuously eroticized Maria Sharapova's body. According to Litchfield and Redhead (2015) this sexualisation reinforces the process of hegemonic masculinity in sports generally and the sports media specifically. The comments found above made specifically by tennis fans show that the process of sexualising female athletes exists beyond the sports media.

Threatening physical and/or sexual contact

A second prominent theme that was identified was 'Threatening physical and/or sexual contact'. Incidentally, the data collected within this theme predominantly came from comments and tweets found on Twitter during the 2015 Wimbledon event. Comments that formed part of this theme ranged from enquiring about how loud Sharapova is when she has sex, to the desire to perform sexual acts with Sharapova. The current study does not intend to provide a hierarchy of abuse within this theme, yet it was very obvious that there are a

fundamental differences in the two types of abuse that Sharapova received that related to physical and/or sexual contact.

This theme is categorised by comments which go beyond the admiration of Sharapova as 'sexy' or 'beautiful' to actually comment on, allude to, or explicitly invite (heterosexual) sex acts with (or because of) Sharapova. Some of the comments which enquired about Sharapova's sexualised body, included: 'Give me some sugar'; 'Bet Maria Sharapova is so loud in bed'; 'You listen to Maria Sharapova....My GOD, it's like soft porn! LOL'; and 'If Maria Sharapova screams like that playing tennis, I wonder how fucking deafening she is when she orgasms'. Social media comments were also made that likened Sharapova's performance on the tennis court to sexual activity. Such comments included: 'Maria Sharapova sounds like a lesbian being fisted by a jackhammer'; and 'Maria Sharapova sounds like she's getting fucked every time she hits the ball'. While such comments may be deemed as 'sexualisation', the difference here is that all comments infer or allude to sexual acts.

There were many more comments that enquired about sexual contact with Sharapova, or threatened physical sexual contact. Those statements that alluded to sexual contact with Sharapova mostly revolved around masturbation or indirect sex acts, including comments such as:

'I've been watching Wimbledon and thinking I could probably manage a semi. Then I did... during the @MariaSharapova match';

'The money people spend on lap dances and shit like that I'd quite happily pay for Maria Sharapova to just stand in a room and shout at me';

'I would love to lick m[M]aria s[S]harapova's armpits after a set #wimbledon';

'I wonder if Maria Sharapova would have as much of an orgasm if I wacked my balls at her instead of a tennis ball'; and

'#ReasonsToMasturbate Maria Sharapova smelling her own armpits'.

This is not uncommon for female athletes to be objectified and sexually admired by fans, spectators and even sometimes, media. As Jane (2014) notes, such aggression sometimes manifests as a direct threat, but most commonly appears in the form of hostile wishful thinking.

Additionally, other comments were more explicit about what they hoped to do with Sharapova. Some of these included:

‘Wimbledon back on the go along with it the wonder woman that is Maria Sharapova! How I'd let her beat my fuzzy balls about! That'd be ace’;

‘Y'know, she wouldn't even have to ask nicely. Maria Sharapova could just throw me down and fuck me and I'd let her’;

‘I would fuck @MariaSharapova’;

‘I'm sorry but I'd actually let @MariaSharapova shit on me #Wimbledon

‘I must be absolutely shit in bed. I shagged Maria Sharapova up the arse and didn't hear so much as a peep out of her’; and

‘Maria Sharapova can sit that white ass directly on my nose’.

Finally, several Twitter users threatened sexual or physical contact with Sharapova. Some of the threats include: ‘I still want a fuck date with Maria Sharapova’; ‘Maria Sharapova. Get in my fucking bed’; ‘Can Serena Williams just win this game so Maria Sharapova can be fucking me sooner lol’; ‘dude Maria sharapova (sp?) would lay the pipe on her any day fuck out my face (*sic*)’; and ‘Maria Sharapova dam she would get it. Rape me please’.

These types of sexual abuse are certainly not applicable only to Maria Sharapova. In fact, many female athletes endure such treatment in online spaces. According to Kavanagh and Jones (2014), ‘virtual sexual maltreatment can include threats of rape and sexual assault or sexual acts to which the adult would not consent. In addition, it can refer to comments made regarding the sexual behaviour of an individual or the sexual desires of the perpetrator in reference to the victim’ (p. 38). Jane (2014) notes how sexualised threats of violence and recreational nastiness have come to constitute the dominant tenor of Internet discourse. Jane (2014) further notes that: ‘Toxic and often markedly misogynistic e-bile no longer oozes only the darkest digestive folds of the cybersphere but circulates freely through the entire body of the Internet’ (p.532). The findings in the current study support this, in this case, there were no shortage of perpetrators threatening sexual contact with Sharapova in social media spaces.

Emotional ridicule and aggression

The final theme which emerged was ‘Emotional ridicule and aggression’. This theme focuses on general criticisms of Sharapova that tended to result in (implied or actual) aggression directed towards her. Emotionally abusive comments were commonplace and

included posts that ridiculed, criticised, threatened or belittled the individual. A number of these abusive comments found on social media were directed towards Sharapova's 'shrieking' or 'grunting'. These comments are referring to a loud audible noise that Sharapova makes as she hits the tennis ball. This noise has been criticised by the media, fellow players and fans alike. Comments included: 'Maria s[S]harapova can u shut the fuck up'; 'Just put tennis on for 5 mins, that fking (*sic*) #MariaSharapova needs slapping. Silly grunting bitch...#loudmouthbitch'; '@MariaSharapova needs to take a time out and calm down the noise of her the cunt'; '@MariaSharapova YOU COUD (*sic*) SHUT YOUR BLOODY GOB WHILST PLAYING TENNIS YOU ANNOYING PRICK!!!! Doing my head in holy shit'; and 'Maria grunts like a freaking whore #Wimbledon'.

Other examples of emotionally abusive posts included criticisms, rumour mongering and ridiculing content: 'i fucking hate @MariaSharapova'; 'Maria Sharapova is a spoilt, skinny bitch'; 'How fucking unlikable is Maria Sharapova?'; 'Tennis would be a better sport without @MariaSharapova. Fucking annoying slut'; 'Maria Sharapova annoys the fuck out of me; and '@MariaSharapova is a fucking cheating slag, fuck you Sharapova'. Kavanagh and Jones (2014) define this type of ridicule as 'virtual emotional maltreatment'. They suggest that such comments are designed to 'elicit a negative emotional and/or psychological reaction and can include rumour spreading, ridiculing, terrorising, humiliating, isolating, belittling and scapegoating' (Kavanagh and Jones 2014, pp. 38-39).

Like other forms of virtual maltreatment, these examples demonstrate inflammatory or upsetting content either directly targeting the individual (through the inclusion of her Twitter handle (@Maria Sharapova)) or indirectly (as a result of comments made either about or in relation to her). The presence of emotionally abusive content is perhaps implicit in all of the examples within this paper and demonstrates the complexity of online communication. Such behaviour is compounded due to the ease with which individuals can communicate, removing necessary filters and in many cases normalising virtual hostility (Sanderson, 2013). Clearly the comments included in this paper move beyond those which could be accepted as social commentary surrounding the athlete's performance to those that become emotionally targeted, offensive and threatening.

Concluding comments

Decades of sexualising female athletes has made its mark on sports fans and the general public. The comments which sexualise and trivialise Sharapova on social media mirror the results of studies of sports media at large on female athletes. While there is certainly more public scrutiny of print and broadcast sports reporting, the same is not afforded in the far more open forum of social media sites (particularly Facebook and Twitter).

The problem of virtual maltreatment is of course a diverse one and the nature of the comments presented in these spaces represent a spectrum of behaviours. The data outlined here spans single instances of hateful comments within the running commentary of sports to far more vitriolic and targeted attacks on the individual. Comments were made directly to the athlete and or in relation to them using hash tags as descriptors (e.g., #Wimbledon). The sheer diversity of this behaviour in online spaces makes this a particularly worrying phenomenon.

In terms of the broader implications of the research, it is clear that the online environment provides a context whereby individuals are potentially empowered in new ways to act out a variety of antisocial behaviours towards those previously 'out of reach', in this case elite athletes. 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 (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". The anonymity or even perception of anonymity can make people more likely to disclose information and enact different moral codes in online environments (Hollenbaugh and Everett, 2013).

The opportunity to abuse individuals within cyberspace remains a very attractive prospect for the 'would be offender' as in most cases their comments will go completely unpunished. Social networks such as Twitter encourage interaction and open communication; essentially opening the doors to motivated offenders, leaving 'would be' victims vulnerable without any guardianship. Even abuse which could be classed as threatening, grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or menacing is largely irreprehensible. Specifically, those who abuse women in social media spaces and/or post misogynistic comments have rarely been rebuked. Social media platforms are rarely monitored for abusive or discriminatory comments or language and this has resulted in the growing presence of hateful content on such sites. The virtual environment thus *enables* such behaviours and this creates an optimal climate within which to exploit and abuse individuals.

While social media should provide a potential for diversity in the representations of female athletes,⁸ the current study tells a very different story. The abuse received by Sharapova is now on public record and like other media pieces is available for all to view. Moreover, this information provides yet another and perhaps a more interactive media space where women athletes can be subjected to emotional, physical and sexual abuse. All of this occurs within a space that lacks regulation and patrol and therefore, opens up a new platform for subjugation and disrespect. Therefore, social media spaces accentuate the pervasiveness and problem for women athletes and the representations of them.

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⁸ The authors would like to acknowledge that social media platforms can also provide positive, nurturing and inclusive spaces for women and women athletes. However, this was not the focus of the current study.

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