

## CHAPTER XX

### VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGIES AS TOOLS OF MALTREATMENT: SAFEGUARDING IN DIGITAL SPACES

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*It was really bad, right after I took about three weeks off of not looking at anything ... when you see the comments they are just extremely cruel. They attacked not only me, but my parents, my family, and my friends ... I struggled with a lot of depression after it because as a 22- year-old you feel like you're not worth anything, you're worthless and no matter what you do it's not good enough ... no one ever talks about it, they don't, and cyberbullying is a huge problem and no-one ever discusses it ... it needs to be talked about (Spiranac, 2016).*

In 2016, American golfer Paige Spiranac broke down during a live interview while talking about the abuse she was subjected to online after her performance at the 2015 Dubai Ladies Masters competition. She described the relentless barrage of vitriol she experienced through social media sites, which became a 24/7 outlet for hate by those who chose to target her online. In the aftermath, the 23-year-old athlete spoke openly of her thoughts of taking her own life and her experience of depression as a result of the abuse she was subjected to. Her story, and those of others who have spoken openly about the dangers of virtual platforms as sites of abuse, highlights the importance of considering these spaces and their impact upon those who engage with them. While virtual platforms and digital technologies have proven to

be valuable to athletes, coaches, and sports fans, it is apparent that with increased connection comes the potential for misuse and abuse within these spaces.

This chapter will provide insight into the nature of virtual spaces and their adoption in sporting environments, while highlighting some of the dangers they pose to individuals engaging within them. The significance of safeguarding interventions in digital environments will be considered. Currently, the literature in the sporting domain concerning digital environments is sparse. Where possible, this chapter draws upon the evidence available, yet it also introduces literature from outside of the sporting environment to highlight the importance of digital safeguarding in sport. It is evident that sporting organisations must increase their awareness of online spaces and the threat they pose to the safety and well-being of individuals in order to prevent these from becoming a significant blind spot in keeping people safe in sport.

### **Virtual worlds and cyberspace**

Cyberspace is the term adopted to describe the digital world, a world created based on traditional physical, social, and thinking spaces. Cyberspace encompasses various infrastructures such as computers, networks, data and information, hardware and software (Ning, Ye, Amine Bouras, Wei & Daneshmand, 2018), the World Wide Web, the Internet as a whole, and all global media and communication channels are a part of this space (Blakemore, 2012). Ning *et al.* (2018) refer to this space as a digital, virtual, abstract, and time-independent metaphorical space, a space that encompasses globally connected networks of computers and all their related infrastructures and elements. This space has become a consistent part of everyday interaction(s).

In 2004, digital spaces were transformed through the advent of Web 2.0 and the creation of User Generated Content. The online environment changed from a space in which

users were merely spectators to them becoming active participants; users were given the capacity to continually modify and participate in the creation of digital content in a collective fashion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Such technological advances led to the development of social media applications – network tools that enable users to generate content, create and exchange information, and build networks or communities in virtual spaces (Curran & Lennon, 2011; Rathore, Vigneswara Llavaran & Dwivedi, 2016). These platforms have made it easier to reach out to others, to learn, to conduct business, to strengthen social relationships and activities, and form whole new personalities and identities (Matijasevic, 2014). As a result, in today's society social networking is one of the dominant reasons why people engage with digital platforms.

With its global span, the infinite possibilities provided by cyberspace can be pursued at any hour of the day or night (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011). The Internet provides a virtual treasure trove of information (Bhuller, Havnes, Leuven & Mogstad, 2013), a parallel universe, where virtual reality allows entirely new forms of social action and interaction (Matijasevic, 2014). Our 'real' lives have become intimately entangled with new media and 'virtual' environments, so much so that digital technologies are no longer an additional feature but an integral feature in everyday communication and activity (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne & Jones, 2018). As Ringrose and Harvey (2017) note, mobile smartphones, rather than being separate to our bodies, are entwined with them, creating post-human cyborg bodies that are ever more reliant on a constant stream of digital information and data. With this upturn of reliance on digital technology, it is increasingly difficult for people to disengage from online spaces. This, of course, can compound their vulnerability, especially as the Internet is widely held as a bastion for free speech and, thus, has less regulation than other media. The numerous mechanisms of potential abuse (mobile phones, computers,

tablets across numerous sites) also means the victim may find it extremely difficult to negotiate or find refuge from abuse (Kowalski & Limber, 2007).

Sport is one area that has witnessed significant progression as a result of changes in digital technologies and communication. People now watch sport online, communicate with other fans or followers, and consume sport in ways that were once unimaginable. Sports fans can now take part in a virtual experience, providing a virtual commentary surrounding sporting experiences in real time and long after a final whistle has sounded (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). Athletes and other sports personnel can use digital environments to connect with fans – promoting their own brand or sharing their private lives, making them more accessible to fans or followers of sport (Guerin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016) – and sports clubs or sports media organisations can communicate with fans and spectators, presenting news stories and live scores with immediacy and exponential reach.

Overwhelmingly, the digital environment is one that is occupied and navigated by young people. Communication through electronic or computer-based mediums forms the basis of social interactions and is a ubiquitous part of adolescent social life (Della Cioppa, O'Neil & Craig, 2015). 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 immense benefits and opportunities afforded by the continually evolving digital environment are seemingly endless (Hunton, 2011), yet in parallel we have witnessed the detrimental impact of increased connectivity and the potential for online hazards to manifest. In the following section, some of the potential hazards that individuals can face while navigating digital spaces are explored further.

### **Abuse in online environments**

The Internet poses numerous threats; in fact, in many ways digital environments serve to enable rather than prevent abuse (Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks, 2016). Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler and Barab (2002, p. 1) referred to negative online interactions simply as “cyber violence”, defining such activity as “online behaviour that constitutes or leads to assault against the well-being (physical, psychological, emotional) of an individual or group”. Jane (2014, p. 533) referred to “recreational nastiness” which, she believes, is part of everyday human interaction online.

The potential to experience abuse in virtual spaces can be magnified for a number of reasons. These include, but are not limited to: increasingly high levels of Internet use (The Office of Communications [Ofcom] (2018) suggests that one in five people spend more than 40 hours online per week), a lack of regulation or policing in online spaces (Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price & Saeed, 2014), and the likelihood for users to interact with individuals who are unknown to them and thus establish virtual relationships with users who they may never meet in a physical space (Della Cioppa *et al.*, 2015). Through changing the way in which people communicate and form relationships, we thus increase the pervasiveness and likelihood of experiencing abuse and victimisation online.

Social media has become a space of presumed intimacy, freedom of speech and increased influence and, in turn, provides an optimal climate for abuse to occur. Cyber-mechanisms of abuse are legion and include, but are not limited to, cyber-enabled abuse, cyberbullying, online child sexual grooming, and online coercion. These abuse types pose a pernicious threat to individuals navigating virtual space and are also, inevitably, a threat to athletes and other key stakeholders in sport. Each of these behaviours is discussed briefly in the following sections.

**Cyber-enabled abuse:** Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are among some of the most popular spaces for human interaction online. Users create their own content through creating profiles and sharing content by posting pictures, videos, and/or textual information to showcase their lives or ‘stories’ online. Access to these profiles can be open or limited to fans, friends or followers, depending upon the platform and the personal privacy settings a user chooses to enforce. boyd and Ellison (2008) believe that social media sites are unique because they allow the articulation and visibility of social networks, resulting in engagement between people that otherwise would not be made, therefore increasing connection between strangers. However, while social media sites have augmented human interaction, they have also created a space for a darker side of social connectivity to manifest.

Non-accidental violence witnessed in physical or face-to-face interactions is further acknowledged to be present in virtual spaces and is becoming a significant social problem (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017). Kavanagh *et al.* (2016, p. 788) define violent interactions enabled by virtual spaces more broadly 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.

Such violence occurs within virtual relationships, real or perceived (e.g. fan or follower-to-athlete, athlete-to-athlete), and can be experienced directly or indirectly within online relationships. Direct abuse refers to instances whereby a victim becomes the direct recipient of the abuse (such as receiving a message). Indirect abuse occurs through being the subject of abuse or being ‘talked about’ rather than directly targeted (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017).

Although research into the nature and prevalence of cyber-enabled abuse is relatively recent, it is one area that has gained increasing attention in sporting literature. For example, Kian, Clavio, Vincent and Shaw (2011) highlighted how fans interact on message boards whereby sexist and homophobic discourse were found to be commonplace in virtual interactions. Cleland (2014) identified the widespread nature of racism voiced anonymously in online forums, and Sanderson and Truax (2014) reported an increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media in American collegiate sport. As Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osbourne and Jones (2018, p. 13) highlight:

Gendered hostility, sexualised threats of violence and racially charged invective are part of a dark narrative of human behaviour within a particular virtual space. Online environments, such as Twitter, can provide a complete abandonment of social restrictions that might otherwise be present in face-to-face interaction, providing a fertile space for abuse to occur, particularly abuse targeted at high-profile individuals such as athletes.

Kavanagh *et al.* (2016) point to widespread abuse across a variety of sports experienced in online environments. Fans, athletes, coaches, officials, and other key stakeholders have all been the target of such behaviour and, in turn, can become the perpetrators of abuse directed at others. Interaction in digital spaces can span one-off hateful comments to far more targeted, systematic and pervasive examples of abuse. When behaviour becomes more pervasive or prolonged it can be understood as cyberbullying.

**Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying is a modern form of bullying whereby an individual or group of individuals adopt online communication technology as the mechanism to inflict wilful and repeated harm upon another (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Like other forms of

virtual abuse, cyberbullying 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). Behaviours experienced can range from being ignored, disrespected, picked on, or targeted in virtual spaces to more severe forms of cyberbullying such as the hacking of personal accounts, persistent harassment, posting embarrassing or denigrating content, or threats of physical violence against victims through electronic communications (Hindjua & Patchin, 2010; Lazuras, Barkoukis & Tsorbatzoudis, 2017).

Cyberbullying 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 & Hanuliaková, 2017), and repetition of behaviour distinguishes the behaviour from a single aggressive act (Palladino *et al.*, 2017). Finally, bullying involves the abuse of power in a social context (Olenik-Shemech, Heiman & Eden, 2012) whereby there is 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. Further as Kofoed and Ringrose (2012) note, in friendship groups, young people can borrow phones or other devices or send collective messages in group environments, which can result in cyberbullying being nameless and faceless. Cyberbullying can also co-occur with bullying in the physical environment (Lazarus *et al.*, 2017), making victims feel that there is no sanctuary from these behaviours (Kowalski, Limber & Agatston, 2007). This, in turn, can increase the negative sequelae associated with cyberbullying, including lowered self-esteem, social withdrawal, depression,

and suicidal thoughts or attempts (Alavi *et al.*, 2017; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). There have been several high-profile cases involving teenagers taking their own lives in part because of being harassed and mistreated over the Internet, leading to the term *cyberbullicide* being coined to refer to suicide indirectly or directly influenced by experiences with online aggression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

Kerr, Jewett, MacPherson and Stirling (2016) believe that sport provides a unique context for bullying behaviours to occur. They believe that some of the characteristics unique to the sporting environment, including the competitive climate in which people participate and a general acceptance of bullying behaviours as part of the culture of sport, can increase the likelihood for bullying to occur (see Miguel Nery and colleagues' chapter within this compilation for more on bullying behaviours in sport). Yet to date, bullying has received limited consideration within sporting contexts (Kentel & McHugh, 2015). Virtual environments cannot be ignored as a space where bullying can occur in and around sport. In addition to providing spaces for people to be targeted by bullies, online spaces can further provide an environment in which to gain access to individuals to control or manipulate their behaviour, known as online child sexual grooming or online coercion.

**Online child sexual grooming:** Grooming can occur in both physical and virtual spaces and involves a person gaining significant trust and authority over another human being before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers to engage in sexual activity with the individual (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2005). Grooming is central to a sexually abusive relationship; the process may take weeks, months or years, with the perpetrator taking care not to risk exposure and to gain control over the victim (Owton & Sparkes, 2017). Gámez-Guadix, Almendros, Calvete and De Santisteban, (2018, p. 11) refer specifically to online child sexual grooming as:

... 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.

Online grooming in sport could refer to any form of sexualised contact with a vulnerable individual in digital environments, including sending inappropriate content, making inappropriate jokes or gestures, making sexual propositions, and exposure to pornographic material. It could be linked to behaviour that aims to groom a person toward sexual activity carried out online and/or in the real world.

Examining the grooming process in sport allows for an increased understanding of this process and helps to identify the risk factors specifically associated with abuse in sport. Brackenridge and Kirby (cited in Brackenridge, 2001) highlighted a number of stages to the grooming process adopted by sexually abusive authority figures in sport. They comprise targeting a potential victim, building trust and friendship, developing isolation and control, building loyalty, initiating sexual abuse, and securing secrecy. Grooming behaviour can include a number of elaborate strategies to gain the trust and compliance of not only the victim but also those around them (such as parents or caregivers) (Brackenridge, 2001). The process can create such power and dominance over the individual that it can result in the apparent co-operation of the victim, making the experience and resultant actions feel consensual rather than against their will (Fasting & Brackenridge, 2005).

In earlier studies of abuse in sport there is no mention of digital mechanisms of abuse or grooming, yet it is acknowledged this will be linked to the time studies were completed (earlier work taking place in the 1990s and early 2000s when Internet usage wasn't as prolific as today). In 2008, Brackenridge and colleagues conducted an analysis of the sexual abuse of

athletes described in media reports. The findings made reference to grooming and manipulation by perpetrators, including giving personal telephones to victims to control and/or hide communication (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli & Tapp, 2008). Alexander, Stafford and Lewis (2011) examined the experiences of children participating in organised sport in the United Kingdom (UK) in order to enhance understanding of negative experiences and harm in sport. Over 6,000 young people (age 18-22) completed an online survey about their experiences of sport as children (up to age 16). In their findings, Alexander *et al.* (2011) highlighted virtual spaces as potential sites for child sexual grooming to occur and acknowledged the need for greater attention to be paid to virtual spaces in order to understand the risks they pose as information technologies evolve. More recently, Rhind, McDermott, Lambert and Koleva (2014) examined safeguarding cases in sport within the UK and highlighted the presence of abuse in virtual environments in sport. Of 652 cases reported to sport safeguarding officers, 8.4% (n = 55) related to inappropriate behaviour via technology, more specifically the sending of inappropriate messages via social media (Rhind *et al.*, 2014).

Sanderson and Weathers (2019) conducted a case analysis of 99 media reports whereby a coach had been arrested based upon sexual behaviour with a minor mediated by digital technology. Cases occurred between 2013-2018 and focussed upon child sexual grooming and manipulation through the social media application Snapchat. Findings from this study highlight how social media platforms such as Snapchat have created an optimal platform for the abuse and grooming of children in sports settings. The advent of digital technologies has opened up pathways for coaches to gain the trust of victims in virtual spaces but can further act as a conduit for coach-perpetrators to move abuse from the virtual to physical context. It is clear that the Internet has increased the risks associated with child sexual grooming through changing the way in which people communicate and form

relationships and, as a direct result, this has created a new medium in which child sexual grooming can occur often without detection (Dombrowski, Gischlar & Durst, 2007).

**Online coercion:** In virtual environments people of all ages can be vulnerable to manipulation, grooming, and coercion. Mountjoy *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance of a wider understanding of grooming given the presence of digital environments. With this in mind, online grooming could move beyond behaviour linked to sexual abuse to include behaviours that aim to groom a person toward (i.e. coerce them to engage in) corruption or control that takes place in the digital or real world. In the case of sport, perpetrators may use digital platforms and communication to target individuals and coerce them into taking part in activities that breach sporting integrity rules (i.e. match fixing or doping) and could further constitute criminal offences. In addition, persistent contact from a coach or authority figure could increase the level of control or manipulation an individual has over another. It is not uncommon to see coaches, or those in power, controlling athletes and going through a process of rigid timetabling of their personal lives (Brackenridge, 1997). Coaches can view athletes as possessions and may enact a number of restrictions upon them that can increase their power over the athlete (Burke, 2001). Importantly, Mountjoy *et al.* (2016) suggest that perpetrators of abuse commonly seek out opportunities in less supervised environments and conduct coercive or manipulative behaviours beyond the reaches of the sports field. This would only be magnified with access to digital technologies. As such, safeguarding athletes in cyberspace is paramount, as the following section will discuss.

### **Safeguarding in virtual spaces**

Increasing understanding of virtual spaces would account for the multi-layered approach to safeguarding suggested by Brackenridge and Rhind (2014) that includes safeguarding people in, around, and through sport. To date, safeguarding in sport has placed significant emphasis

on managing offline harm. However, digital safeguarding has received limited attention. Mountjoy, Rhind, Tiivas and Leglise (2015) identified eight safeguards that would apply to digital spaces: 1) developing policy; 2) procedures for responding to safety concerns; 3) advice and support; 4) minimising risk (to children); 5) guidelines for behaviour; 6) recruiting, training and communicating; 7) working with partners; and 8) monitoring and evaluating. Although this work refers to child athletes, such safeguards could and should be championed more broadly and encompass all involved in sport.

As athletes engage more with digital technologies, it is essential to be aware of how they maintain not only their individual safety in physical and virtual spaces, but also how the athlete may be the instigator of risk in this space. Interaction in virtual spaces calls for the realignment of agendas for safeguarding, with a focus not only on protection *from* harm but further education concerning the risk we pose *to* others in digital spaces. Safeguarding can both encompass the implementation of policy and procedures linked to digital safety more broadly but further include education concerning how to protect the self and others in virtual spaces.

Education is a powerful tool in the prevention and detection of abuse, and intervention in virtual spaces has the potential to target numerous stakeholders in sport. For example, educational sessions offer an important area of development for practitioners engaging in sports to mitigate risk factors and capitalise on the benefits afforded by digital technologies. For coaches, this may relate to how they communicate with athletes (including communication tools adopted, language choices and time of contact), the way in which information is utilised and stored, and the messages promoted concerning safety in online spaces. For athletes, the introduction of educational sessions that focus on safeguarding across all life dimensions (including the online space) could have a significant positive effect on participants. These sessions could promote pro-social behaviour in digital spaces,

increased understanding of one's vulnerability when using the Internet, and timely discussions concerning the dangers of online use and how to mitigate and responsibly engage with these. Additionally, these sessions would have the potential to arm people with the tools to report and/or negotiate abuse in physical and virtual spaces, fostering help-seeking behaviour.

Grey-Thompson (2017) suggests that the sport sector is arguably under more scrutiny than ever before. As such, it is timely for the sport sector to consider 'duty of care' in its fullest sense. The responsibility for addressing safeguarding issues lies with all stakeholders. Adhering to statutory requirements (in those countries where such requirements exist) is certainly a start, as is implementing non-statutory policies and procedures associated with reporting and investigating issues of safeguarding. However, these more formal protections should ideally be built upon and exist within a culture that values the importance of safeguarding and works towards promoting the welfare of all participants as a priority.

### **Conclusion: An agenda for research in online safety in sport**

While the Internet has revolutionised so many areas of society, it has also exposed users to considerable risk, and has created an optimum environment for abuse to occur. The use of technology and interaction within online spaces have become dominant aspects of human behaviour. Therefore, the wider cultural implications of online environments and their facilitation of abuse cannot be overlooked. As Litchfield *et al.* (2018) have noted, the unchecked nature of negative online interaction has the potential to reduce inclusivity and civility of both online and offline cultures. As an emergent field in sports research, it is clear that more work is needed to understand the digital socio-cultural environment and human interaction within these spaces.

Given the lack of research conducted in this space to date, the opportunity to increase understanding of virtual spaces as they relate to sport are seemingly endless and could include focus on a number of key stakeholders including athlete-athlete, coach-athlete, and fan-athlete interactions. Cyber-enabled online child sexual grooming and coercion relating to sport remain areas that require academic attention in order to understand the risks posed to individuals and how virtual mechanisms may increase such risks. Further research is also required to understand the extent to which abuse online is experienced, the impact of this abuse, and to gauge how much of this abuse remains unreported. In addition, reliance on technology, addiction to digital technology, and the impact of increased connection on mental health and well-being require far greater attention in academic literature.

It must be understood, however, that safeguarding in online spaces exists within the broader context of the Internet as an entity for free speech. As such, regulation of this space as it relates to adults may be problematic. However, when individuals are targeted or exposed to violence online, and these practices result in the harm of victims psychologically and, by extension, physically (such as individuals harming themselves), safeguarding in virtual spaces is certainly of importance. In this regard, research and policy could and should relate to both monitoring and policing of online spaces and the targeted and continued education of sports personnel relating to the dangers virtual environments pose as outlined in this chapter.

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