

Freedom for expression or a space of oppression? Social media and the female @thlete.

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Abstract

Social media provides a space for female athletes to create their own media (and advertising) in order to share their lives through stories presented online – a phenomenon, that to date has been ignored in traditional media spaces. Research suggests that athletes more broadly can take a more active role in their public presentation across a wide variety of platforms (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012) and share more aspects of their identity than typically portrayed in mainstream media coverage (Sanderson, 2013; Sanderson, 2014). More specifically, virtual worlds have created platforms through which female athletes can share content and present themselves to fans or followers of sport in their own way and with relative freedom (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2018). While it is acknowledged that social media can empower the female user, simultaneously, these spaces have proven to be hostile and can serve to oppress or marginalise individuals and groups (Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks, 2016; Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne & Jones, 2018). An intersectional, third wave feminist lens will be adopted in this chapter in order to examine such a dichotomy (Bruce, 2016). This approach will analyse the disjunction between the rise of the female ‘@thlete’ and their adoption of contemporary digital sporting spaces and the presence of a darker narrative permeating digital environments through highlighting the presence of online vitriol and intersectional abuse (racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.) that athletes may face while navigating lives online.

Introduction

Digital technologies have become an essential component in the navigation of everyday tasks and activities (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010), and our ‘real’ lives have become intimately entangled with new media and ‘virtual’ environments. This includes day-to-day tasks such as working, shopping, banking, leisure time and the consumption of sports and recreation. In particular, technological innovations have transformed the consumption and reporting of sport (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2011). One of the most influential changes for sports fans has been the use of social media platforms and the development of interactive and/or participatory experiences between sports fans, athletes, clubs and events. Specifically, platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are used to share stories, break news, share live updates during events or reflect on performances and re-live critical moments long after a game is over. Such platforms allow for individuals to present their own stories in ways that they would like to be represented.¹ Technological innovations have also changed how athletes interact with others using online media. Athletes more broadly can take a more active role in their public presentation across a wide variety of platforms (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012) and share more aspects of their identity than typically portrayed in mainstream media coverage (Sanderson, 2013; Sanderson, 2014).

This chapter outlines the culture of online (particularly social media) spaces for women in elite and professional sport. More specifically, we explore the empowerment that women may experience through self-identification, self-determination and self-representations that online spaces afford. In contrast, this chapter also details the oppressive nature of gender-based violence that women may encounter in these virtual environments. Such an analysis is presented via a third-wave feminist and intersectional framework which lends itself to the simultaneous analysis of both empowerment and oppression.

Third wave feminism and intersectionality

Third-wave feminism focuses on post-structural understandings of both gender and sexuality. First discussed and adopted by author and activist Rebecca Walker in the mid-1990s, third-wave feminists have sought to ‘question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, among other things’ (Walker, 2009). In relation to sport, Bruce (2016) suggested

¹ This is not to suggest that athletes are always in control of their own presentation and representation.

that third wave feminism and contemporary media spaces such as social media, provide new opportunities for analysing the presentation of sportswomen. These new opportunities provide the prospect for researchers in sports media to expand their interpretive frameworks in order to analyse the coverage and reporting relating to women. According to Bruce, ‘in sport participation, third-wave feminism recognises, plays with and examines the simultaneously empowering and problematic elements of sport practice ...’ (2016, p. 368). Therefore, the use of third wave feminism allows a framework that explores multiplicity in sport media representations of female athletes, when there is a need to analyse both the (at times, simultaneous) empowerment and oppression of female athletes.

Multiplicity is also a key component in understanding how intersectionality works as a theoretical framework. According to Collins (2000), the term ‘intersectionality’ refers to the simultaneous overlapping of multiple forms of oppression. Nash (2008) explains that intersectionality is a complex tool used for analysis. For instance, categories such as gender and race are often ‘too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience’ (Bandy, 2014, p. 22). Bandy (2014) further explains that gender has specific individualised and contextualised meanings and is not something that all women share in the same ways (p. 22). For example, it is impossible to describe two women in the same way, when diverse factors including age, skin colour, body shape, sexuality and ethnicity can differ greatly between individuals. Both third-wave feminism and intersectionality are valuable frameworks utilised in this chapter and aid in the understanding of the experiences of the female @thlete in online spaces in relation to both empowerment and oppression.

Self-representation in virtual environments: A space for empowerment

The notion of ‘self-presentation’ was pioneered by Erving Goffman in his work entitled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Goffman (1959) explained that individuals prefer to present self-images to control identity performance and management. The use of web sites, blogs, online media and most recently, social media applications such as Instagram and Twitter, provides spaces for self-presentation to occur. Those who may not normally have had the opportunity to present themselves, such as athletes (particularly female athletes), now have the ability to do so. More specifically, virtual worlds have created platforms through which female athletes can share content and present themselves to fans or followers of sport in their own way and with relative freedom (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2018). Unlike other forms of traditional media, online and social media provides a space for female athletes to create their own stories, own media, and promote products via

advertising *in their own words*. The ability to use ones' own words and having ownership of the narrative to describe oneself is particularly important, considering the usual ways in which professional and elite athletes are reported 'on' in media spaces, which often includes a lack of input by the athletes themselves.

As athletes engage more with new media and information technologies, we are witnessing the rise of the digitised '@thlete'. Such spaces provide potential for professional and elite women athletes to shape their own media, communicate with sports fans, share stories of their own lives, be a brand ambassador and take a more active part in their public-presentation. In virtual spaces the athlete can present their private lives and engage with fans or followers showing themselves in a different way to how they might present in a press conference (see Pegoraro 2010; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch 2016). Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) found that image construction was largely similar between males and females on the social media platform Twitter, however, there were differences with the number of followers male athletes attracted when compared to females and the subsequent influence male athletes can establish in these spaces. Lebel and Danylchuk (2012) suggested that male athletes have an advantage in gaining followers and interest in online media as hegemonic values persist. Despite this, online and social media have the potential to provide many benefits to females involved in professional and elite sport. Hardin (2009) suggested that social media and the internet have 'eroded the institutional barriers traditionally blamed for putting women on the sidelines' (p. 5). Fink (2014) also explained that it is possible that 'the proliferation of online spaces could challenge the ideology of hegemonic masculinity embedded in sport by offering not only more coverage to female athletes, but different discourse as well' (p. 335). Similarly, Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce (2017) suggest that social media 'provides sportswomen with opportunities to bypass the gatekeepers that control traditional media products, regain some control over how they are represented, and potentially build new audiences' (p. 361).

Recently, researchers have specifically explored the representation of women athletes on visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat (Pegoraro, Comeau & Frederick, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016). The results of these studies point to a significant shift in these spaces, whereby women have ownership over their self-presentation and can, at times, present an alternative narrative or image of themselves. Geurin-Eagleman and Burch's (2016) study found that sportswomen post photographs of themselves more often than their male counterparts and the types of photographs posted by female athletes focus on non-sport related activities – some of which could be traditionally described as sexually suggestive.

Alternatively, Reichart Smith and Sanderson (2015) identified that when women were provided the opportunity to present themselves in online media settings, some professional and elite female athletes are taking the opportunity to buck the trend of visual representations and present themselves as athletes first, females second (p. 354).

Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) examined women athlete's self-representations on social media (particularly Facebook and Instagram). Their study focused on how social media is used by five specific sportswomen in the 'promotion of their sport and themselves as feminine sporting subjects' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 12). These women included Ronda Rousey (mixed martial arts), Maria Sharapova (tennis), Serena Williams (tennis), Danica Patrick (motorsport) and Alana Blanchard (surfing). This research found that high profile female athletes utilised social media to promote 'self-love', 'self-disclosure' and 'self-empowerment' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 22). Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) also explained the importance of social media for young women by suggesting that research based on feminist media and cultural studies traditions has:

... identified the importance of online media engagement to young women's individual and collective identity construction. It has been suggested that social media allows young women to express themselves by offering a platform to articulate their identities (particularly marginalised identities), to communicate their own perspectives and experiences, creatively document their life worlds, seek support and validation from peers, and forge relationships. (p. 15)

Online and social media also provides the potential for diverse groups of women (of all ages) to self-represent themselves. This self-representation is particularly important for women in marginalised groups who are seldom covered by mainstream media sources. This includes women of colour, lesbian women and those with disabilities. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018) explain that social media has the 'transformative potential' to allow and empower women to construct alternative narratives and discourse around the definitions of a woman. Such potential allows the advancement of 'feminist agendas by challenging the patriarchal organisation of sport' (Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018, p. 16). However, in their research, they found little challenge to the hyper-sexualised female sporting bodies that exist in the sport media. As such, professional and elite women athletes are intentionally employing a neoliberal post-feminist approach to adapt to and align with market interest. However, not all women are able to broach such markets in this way. As elucidated by Toffoletti and Thorpe,

[w]hat remains largely invisible and/or illegible are female athletic bodies that do not conform to heterosexy norms – bodies that queer, disrupt or outright reject (or are rejected by) the demands of the market whereby dominant modes of femininity

are reimagined through narratives of agency and empowerment. (2018, pp. 27-28; also see Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 27)

As such, further diversity needs to be embraced in online and social media spaces in relation to sporting women.

While providing a space for self-presentation, and for some, the opportunity to engage in self-expression and identity construction, for others, social and online media does not provide a welcoming platform for alternative self-expression. Engagement in social media sites is unavoidable for many professional and elite women athletes due to the increasingly professional nature of women's sports organisations. To fulfil commercial agendas, many professional women athletes are assigned social media accounts and expected to engage in order to raise the visibility of both themselves and their sport. While this visibility provides professional women athletes a platform to represent themselves as they wish to (on the most part), it also can provide an opportunity for these women to be susceptible to online abuse. Third-wave feminist inquiry suggests that in an ever present online world, women can be simultaneously empowered and oppressed in this space (see Bruce, 2016). An example of the scope for empowerment is the opportunity for women to determine at least some of the messages that are published. However, oppression can occur in a number of ways and the following section explores these ways and how they manifest in online spaces.

Violence in virtual environments: A space of oppression

Virtual technologies have proven to be valuable to athletes, coaches and sports fans, yet, with increased connection comes the potential for misuse and abuse within these spaces (Kavanagh et al., 2019). To date, a number of research studies have pointed to the widespread nature of abuse in virtual spaces, documenting an increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media platforms (see Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Kavanagh et al., 2019; Litchfield et al., 2018; MacPherson & Kerr, 2019; Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Online spaces not only provide a 'fertile space for abuse to occur' (Litchfield et al., 2018, p. 166), they can further normalise toxic behaviour. Kavanagh et al. (2016, p. 788) refer to the violence which can be experienced in virtual environments 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 can be exhibited through the presence of physical, sexual, emotional, and discriminatory content. Discriminatory content may include discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexual orientation, religion, and/or disability (Kavanagh & Jones, 2014). Violent virtual communication can often range from one-off hateful comments to far more targeted, systematic and pervasive examples of abuse. In addition, virtual violence can be directed toward an individual or extend to people close to them including family members, teammates and friends; content reaches from the very minor to the extremely violent, lewd or abusive, making this a complex issue to either classify or police. As Kavanagh et al. (2016) suggest, the dynamic nature of the internet increases the numerous threats posed for those who spend time online. In many ways, online environments can enable rather than prevent abuse.

Athletes can become the targets of online violence for a multitude of reasons. For example, violent interaction may occur as a result of fans feeling that an athlete's performance doesn't meet their expectations (Litchfield, et al., 2018; Sanderson & Truax, 2014), or in response to situations where athletes fail to conform to the norms fans expect of them (MacPherson & Kerr, 2019). Kassing and Sanderson (2015) note how a contagion effect can occur in virtual spaces whereby online vitriol spreads, and can escalate in social commentary. Further, it is believed that we are witnessing an increased tolerance for such behaviours in online social commentary, leading to a desensitisation process in our ability to detect violent interactions online. Such an effect is unfortunately present in many social media conversations around athletes, particularly when an athlete is perceived to have not performed satisfactorily. More specific to this chapter, it is now recognised that athletes can experience violence online simply because of their gender, putting them at a greater risk of being exposed to or becoming the victims of violence in virtual spaces (Kavanagh et al., 2019; Litchfield et al., 2018).

Violence against women in virtual spaces

While all people can experience violence online, women and girls are recognised as primary targets (Moloney & Love, 2018) and are twice as likely as males to experience severe forms of violence such as stalking or persistent harassment (Veletsianos, Houlden, Hodson & Gosse, 2018). Findings of the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Violence Against Women Survey revealed that sexual harassment remains a pervasive and common experience for many women in the EU (FRA, 2014). The report, based on

interviews with 42,000 women across 28 member states of the EU, found that violence against women, specifically gender-based violence, is an extensive human-rights abuse that cannot be overlooked or underestimated (FRA, 2014). Gender-based violence is recognised as such because it is ‘violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately’ (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 1992). Findings of the FRA specifically highlighted the role that new media and information technology has to play in the increasing number of women and girls who experience abuse online. In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) released a report entitled ‘Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls: A World-Wide Wake-up Call’. In this report it is documented that almost three quarters of women online have been exposed to some form of violence in virtual spaces.

A variety of terms have been adopted in order to describe the phenomenon of violence against females in virtual environments, including ‘e-bile’, ‘cyberviolence’, ‘gendered cyberhate’, ‘technology-facilitated (sexual) violence’, ‘electronic aggression’, ‘online abuse’, ‘hate speech’, ‘networked harassment’, ‘cyberbullying’, ‘cyberharassment’, ‘online violence against women’ and ‘online misogyny’ (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Online communication that is gendered in nature often has content that draws on sexually degrading language, becoming a form of sexual harassment (Megarry, 2014). Jane (2012) believes that most violence targeted at women online has similar constructs—it relies on profanity, *ad hominem* invective, and imagery of graphic, often sexualised, violence. The abuse and harassment of women online typically involves sexually explicit invective, hyperbolic rape and death threats, and/or persistent, unwanted sexual advances from senders (Jane, 2018). Jane (2020) further states that gendered violence online can be situated along a spectrum of violence and harm ranging from ‘mildly irritating’ at one end to ‘unambiguously criminal’ at the other. What unifies findings is that the content of the violence targeted at women in digital spaces is overwhelmingly deemed to be misogynistic or sexist in nature.

Kavanagh et al. (2019) investigated gender-based violence targeting high-profile women in virtual environments through the case of women’s tennis. They examined the social commentary and fan interaction surrounding the top-5-seeded female tennis players during the Wimbledon Tennis Championships on two popular social media platforms (Twitter and Facebook). During the Wimbledon finals week, female athletes were exposed to violent interactions online in a number of ways. Athletes were threatened with physical violence toward them and much of the interaction could be regarded as hate speech. For example, Serena Williams was the target of overt threats of violence, receiving comments

such as ‘Somebody kill Serena Williams. She is a man. @wimbledon2015’ and ‘hope serena williams goes infertile the daft bitch’ (Kavanagh et al., 2019). The authors noted, more broadly, how online interaction demonstrates the presence of violent, threatening, and hostile language, directed at athletes throughout the duration of their performances.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of the online violence targeting female athletes in Kavanagh et al.’s (2019) study was sexualised in nature. For example, female athletes were sexualised in relation to their physical appearance, whereby fans or followers’ comments served to reinforce normative gendered stereotypes of ‘the perfect woman’ adopting terms such as ‘sexy’, ‘most beautiful girl in sport’, ‘goddess,’ and ‘beautiful.’ Alternatively, the athletes were villainised for failing to match such expectations with terms such as ‘heifer’, ‘bulldozer’, ‘flat-chested’, ‘beast’ and ‘she-man’ adopted. The online commentary ranged from comments that one might term ‘longing’ for the athlete, to more hostile interactions, suggestive of physical and sexual threats, escalating in violence via hostile sexual suggestion and the use or overuse of expletives. Kavanagh et al. (2019) present findings of comments relating to vile, sexually explicit, or physical threats including those that make reference to engaging in sexual acts with the athletes, threat of rape and even convey death threats linked to the gender or sexuality of the athlete.

Female athletes are also commonly the victims of virtual attacks of an intersectional nature. As Jane (2020) notes, women from marginalised and/or vulnerable sectors of society (such as members of the LGBTQI+ community, as well as women with physical and mental disabilities) tend to experience more frequent and more toxic virtual violence, not least because, in addition to being targeted by virtue of their identity as ‘female’ (and ‘female athlete’), they may additionally be targeted on account of being a person of colour, a Muslim, a lesbian, and so on (Jane, 2020). Kavanagh et al. (2019) also highlight the convergence of gendered, racialised and sexually oppressive language adopted in virtual spaces surrounding women’s sport and performances. Litchfield et al. (2018) examined the intersection of gender, race and identity through a single case study by exploring the online violence surrounding tennis athlete Serena Williams at the 2015 Wimbledon Championships. Frisby (2017) suggests that Williams maintains a status as an ‘uncommon tennis player: she is black, female and playing in a white dominated sport’ (p. 265). As Adjepong and Carrington point out, ‘because black sportswomen exist at the intersections of racial, gendered, sexual, and classed oppression, they encounter a unique set of circumstances about how their bodies are sexualized on the sports field’ (2014, p. 170). Related to notions of intersectionality, McKay

and Johnson (2008) suggest that African American sportswomen have been positioned by a 'racist-sexist matrix'.

The work by Litchfield et al. (2018) gives several examples of this intersectional abuse. Litchfield et al. (2018) outline that:

... a comment such as "Serena Williams body just hefty like glad bag (*sic*)" is both racist and sexist and given the usual colour of "Glad" bags (a brand of rubbish bags) as black or dark green, this comment would not likely be made to a white female athlete of any size or appearance'. (p. 165)

This study also found that many comments about Williams used racist terms like 'ape' or 'gorilla' alongside sexist language such as in the comment, 'I hope you whoop that male ape in a tutu' (Litchfield et al., 2018, p. 165). Litchfield et al. (2018) highlight the complexity of the online abuse of Williams, as an African American woman who is a successful athlete, stating how the 'attack' on Serena Williams: can only be fully understood in multiplicity. Attempts to analyse the abuse she experiences adopting a single frame, be it 'Williams as female', 'Williams as athlete', or 'Williams as African American' is flawed. The abuse encountered by Williams on social media remains layered and intersectional and sets it apart from others who may encounter abuse, while abhorrent, from a single targeted perspective.

The harm(s) of virtual violence

Online violence may often pass by unnoticed, be played down or simply dismissed as unimportant (Jane, 2012). Such a response can render this type of violence as mostly innocuous (that is, 'just words', 'just the Internet' and so on); a perception which is often compounded by the normalisation of online violence as an 'expected' consequence of engaging in online spaces. In stark contrast to such viewpoints, there is a growing number of academic studies that speak to the widespread suffering caused to victims of online violence whereby the damage is real, tangible, and embodied. As Jane (2020) reports, in offline contexts, reputational attacks, threats of violence, coordinated bullying, and workplace harassment that occur in the context of gendered cyberhate would not be tolerated.

In their study, conducted with 4,000 women (aged 18–55) across eight countries, Amnesty International (2017) found that the psychological impact of online violence can be devastating. Women reported lowered self-esteem, loss of confidence, and the experience of stress, anxiety or panic attacks after being abused online. Alarming, of those who had experienced online abuse, 41% stated that the content of the virtual communication made them fear for their physical safety. Jane (2017a; 2017b) reported how people who are targets

of online violence can develop serious mental health problems including anxiety disorders, depression, panic attacks, agoraphobia, and/or experience psychological breakdown in the aftermath of being attacked online. In the context of professional sport, women athletes such as golfer Paige Spiranac and tennis player Heather Watson have both spoken about the serious effect that online abuse and online threats have had on them (see Myers, 2016 and Ward, 2015). While some victims are able to navigate virtual violence, for others it can result in the experience of debilitating fear and trauma, as well as profound life disruption.

In sport it is recognised that online violence can have a significant effect on all aspects of the victim's life – not just their athletic performance. Based on accounts from professional women athletes in the media (such as Spiranac and Watson), the impact of virtual violence is extremely broad and can include a range of psychological, behavioural and performance effects. These range from negative impacts on the athlete's self-esteem and/or confidence to sleep disturbances and reduced performance on the field of play. Some athletes report that they are left with no choice other than to remove themselves from social media – or, worse, retire from the sport completely.² While disengagement can act as a buffer to or a protection mechanism against further harm. It raises concerns about the legacy of virtual maltreatment long after the athlete withdraws from the sport or social media platforms (Parry et al., 2015).

Feminist scholars are now pointing to the fact that online abuse and harassment may constitute a workers' rights issue and is likely to occur more often to women who have public profiles, such as professional and elite athletes (see Jane, 2018). When abuse is intimately entangled with the working life of the victim it becomes 'a form of workplace harassment and/or economic vandalism' (Jane, 2018, p. 575). Amnesty International UK (2017) supports this assertion and noted how 20% of their participants felt that online abuse directly threatened their job prospects and, further, 58% of women in the countries polled said they had felt apprehension when thinking about using the internet or social media after experiencing abuse or harassment. Moloney and Love (2018) believe that violent rhetoric is adopted primarily to dominate, silence, and control women. Certainly, as this chapter has demonstrated, women athletes can experience and be exposed to ridicule and threats of physical and sexualized violence and become sexualised and racialised subjects in virtual spaces while in their place of work which can have wide reaching implications on their

² For instance, Canadian tennis player Rebecca Marino quit playing tennis at the highest international level after battling depression due to social media abuse (see Bacon, 2013).

careers (Kavanagh et al., 2019). Evidently virtual worlds provide a space wherein women (especially high-profile women) can face exploitation and violence, with significant personal and professional consequences.

The complexity of researching GBV in virtual spaces

Along with the complexities presented by an intersectional analysis, the collection of data itself can be challenging in online spaces. The area of virtual research is ever-evolving and innovations in technology continue to challenge the boundaries of academic research. For instance, the use of custom scrapers³ now affords the collection of large data sets based on specific questions or temporal frames of reference with immediacy and accuracy. Such data sets would once have required a laborious process of immersion in or surveillance of online spaces by a researcher.

Conducting research in online spaces requires academics to embrace the nature of ‘messy data’ (Mahrt & Scharkow, 2013). Additionally, the ethics related to the collection of data on social media sites is a contentious issue, due to the very public nature of social media information. As Mahrt and Scharkow contend ‘it is currently impossible to collect a sample in a way that adheres to the conventions of sample quality established in the social sciences’ (p. 22). The inclusion of human actors for example cannot always be guaranteed or ascertained in a vast changing technological environment. For example, social bots (social media accounts created and controlled completely or in part by computer algorithms) are more common than ever across social media platforms. These ‘bots’ can automatically generate content and further engage with human users, often posing as, or imitating, humans (Yang, Varol, Davis, Ferrara, Flammini & Menczer, 2019). In addition, data may often be asynchronous or quasi-synchronous occurring in threads, social media feeds or in chat rooms, further complicating efforts to collect a data set. As Lugosi and Quinton (2018) suggest, working in online spaces requires researchers to embrace the complexities of researching technology-mediated social practices and sociality that operate across time and space, that involve human and non-human agency.

In relation to gender-based violence as it presents online, the gender of those who post online cannot always be assumed. That said the gendered nature of online interaction in the discourse adopted and the explicit way women are targeted cannot be ignored. GBV and the

³ Scraping tools are web based programs used to automatically extract data from social media platforms. These can be customised to collect specific data related to the topic being researched.

gendered nature of interaction online can be witnessed in the comments that come from real humans and potentially non-human actors. Some researchers resultantly categorise the abuse women experience in terms of it being a men's intrusion, and more broadly connected to patterns of violence against women that occur in real-world settings (Vera-Gray, 2017). As Lewis, Rowe and Wiper (2017) assert:

... the focus on online abuse as a form of communication minimizes its significance as "just" words. The "real" and the virtual are not separate experiential realms; activities that take place in the virtual world are still experienced as reality, with material consequences. (p. 1465)

Regardless of the actor (human or non-human), violence is experienced by the professional and elite women athletes targeted by such posts. The complexities of these environments therefore present many opportunities and challenges in the development of rigorous and meaningful research. Such work provides space for critical, intersectional enquiry central to understanding professional and elite women athletes and the many ways in which they can benefit from online connection and/or simultaneously experience oppression in these spaces.

Concluding comments

In essence, this chapter has argued that online platforms offer much potential for professional and elite female athletes to break away from external representations of themselves and to take control of their image. Professional and elite women athletes, in order to improve their marketability and therefore sponsorship, can produce an identity and persona which is palatable to certain groups and/or which satisfies their own need for self-identification. This indicates the potential for athletes, who may have been previously marginalised, to establish new fan groups and broaden social understanding of what it means to be a female athlete. However, due to the market and gendered expectations in professional sporting contexts, women are still restricted in how they may choose to represent themselves. As a result, professional and elite women athletes do not have complete control over their self-representations. Such spaces can also be used by those who desire to silence women athletes or to increase their own sense of importance and power at the expense of others. The veritable lack of regulation of social media and other online platforms not only facilitates those who would suppress the female voice, but may, in fact, serve to reinforce the social divisions which were partly responsible for the disenfranchisement of women in sport historically.

Online abuse directed at females in general, and female athletes in particular, can be employed to engage and enrage others in the online space. As such, gender based violence serves to maintain women's subordinate positioning in professional and elite sport. Using traditional elements of hate, hurt and attack, online abuse related to race, religion, gender and sexuality (often in combination) reinforces divisions and the hierarchies that accompany them. For those who seek to establish or re-establish power using such hierarchies, the internet provides a multiplicity of platforms. The desire for power via manipulation of others' feelings is consolidated by the escalating responses of those who engage; both those that agree and those that disagree. For whatever reasons social media users choose to engage in such abuse, the result is the same. Female athletes are attacked simultaneously, and regularly, for being female, an athlete, for their heritage, their religion, their appearance and their sexuality.

The principal point of concern of this chapter, however, relates to the abuse suffered by women athletes as victims of gendered (and often intersectional) violence in virtual spaces. Alternatively, for female @thletes, employing social media to build their 'brand', construct an open and engaging online presence and control the narratives around their own identity, the space can also be empowering. Using a third-wave feminist lens, the online space can be a site of both empowerment and oppression for women athletes (sometimes simultaneously). As women's sports organisations become increasingly professional, there is an expectation that athletes become more visible on social media. Such visibility allows professional women athletes to engage in self representation, but also exposes these women to the possibility of online abuse. It is, indeed, a delicate balance and women athletes are obliged to navigate the use of online spaces as vehicles for self-empowerment whilst being acutely aware of the potential for, or even likelihood of, gender-based cyber-hate being directed at them.

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