

CyberAbuse in sport: beware and be aware!

Emma Kavanagh,¹ Margo Mountjoy ^{2,3}

WHAT IS #CYBERABUSE?

As demonstrated in the social media posts of netball athletes Stacey Francis-Bayman and Jo Harten, online abuse of athletes is shockingly violent and unfiltered, and radiates beyond those who experience it directly to those who witness it (figure 1). There are benefits associated with time spent online such as the opportunity for self-presentation and representation, providing a platform for advocacy and amplification of voice on wider social issues, all of which have the potential to support athlete welfare.¹ However, it is now recognised that online environments can be unfriendly, combative and confrontational, and therefore, provide the optimal climate for harassment and abuse.² As a mechanism for enabling abuse, online environments augment harm(s) that can occur in physical spaces and have created new forms of violence unique to these spaces. Currently, the literature in the sporting domain concerning abuse in online environments is sparse and has focused primarily on abuse targeting athletes via social networking sites.³

A variety of terms have been adopted to describe behaviours that can be classed as violent or abusive interactions online including but not limited to online hate, cyber harassment, virtual maltreatment and cyber abuse. Kavanagh *et al* presented a typology for #CyberAbuse defining abusive interactions enabled by social media platforms 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'.⁴ Four types of abuse are common in social media spaces: physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory based on gender, race, sexual orientation,

religion, nationality (xenophobia) and/or disability—abuse which is often experienced in multiplicity and intersectional in nature.

Athletes, sports journalists, coaches, sports fans and officials have all been targets of abuse online linked to their job roles. Kavanagh *et al*, for example, highlight that women athletes can experience ridicule and threats of physical and sexualised violence and become sexualised and racialised subjects in virtual spaces while in their place of work.³ Burch *et al* demonstrate how women sports journalists can be victims of online abuse linked to specific reactive trigger events.⁵ Feminist scholars are now pointing to the fact that online abuse may constitute a worker's-rights issue and is likely to occur more often to women who have public profiles.⁶ A glaring omission in the current body of work is the reality that online mechanisms of abuse are numerous

and include, but are not limited to, cyber-bullying, child sexual grooming, online coercion and coercive control, all of which require greater attention within the sport context.

CYBER-BULLYING

Peer-perpetrated abuse online when persistent in nature is classified as cyber-bullying. Where previously bullying could be experienced in a particular place, space or time, there are no boundaries to cyber-bullying and there is a permanence to digital content that can be reviewed, re-read and shared, increasing the significance of its impact.⁷ Cyber-bullying can co-occur with bullying in physical spaces, and therefore, leaves victims no escape from these behaviours. In sport, peer-to-peer violence is recognised as one of the most prevalent relationships in which abuse can occur yet the role of technology to date has not been captured in research findings. The use of instant messaging sites as spaces where bullying can occur and the role that technology plays in augmenting bullying would be a pertinent future line of enquiry in sport.



Figure 1 Abusive social media post.

¹Sport Psychology and Safe Sport, Bournemouth University, Poole, UK

²Family Medicine, McMaster University Michael G DeGroot School of Medicine, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

³Games Group, International Olympic Committee, Lausanne, Switzerland

Correspondence to Professor Margo Mountjoy, Family Medicine, McMaster University Michael G DeGroot School of Medicine, Waterloo, Canada; mountjm@mcmaster.ca

CHILD SEXUAL GROOMING

The adoption of social media platforms for child sexual grooming is also a pernicious risk that to date has been under-examined in the sporting literature. Sanderson and Weathers conducted a case analysis of media reports whereby a coach had been arrested based on sexual behaviour with a minor mediated by online technology. They highlight the potential for social media platforms to be pathways for coaches to gain the trust of victims online thus acting as a conduit for coach-perpetrators to move abuse into the physical context.⁸

ONLINE COERCION AND COERCIVE CONTROL

Mountjoy *et al* called for a wider understanding of online grooming beyond child sexual abuse towards online coercion.⁹ Such behaviour could target individuals through social media channels and coerce them into taking part in activities that breach sporting integrity rules such as match fixing, spot fixing¹⁰ or doping. Instances of online abuse have been linked to a culture of online betting and revenge seeking.¹¹ Instant messaging platforms increase the level of contact or manipulation an individual has over another. Online coercion could also be present through persistent contact from a coach or authority figure to an athlete as a means of coercive control. Persistent contact through online means could also manifest as cyber-stalking. Perpetrators of abuse commonly seek out opportunities in less supervised environments and conduct coercive or manipulative behaviours beyond the reaches of the sports field.

FLUID BOUNDARIES

It is now recognised that #CyberAbuse does not just occur online; it infiltrates and permeates physical environments. Threats or comments can radiate beyond victims to include families or friends. Online violence, therefore, occurs on a continuum: through interaction between

online and physical environments. While perpetrators may reside outside of the room, their actions are felt within. The example social media incident with Jo Harten's portrays this phenomenon. The initial abusive comments received through direct instant messaging were experienced and reshared by a fellow athlete demonstrating how cyber abuse can radiate and be felt by others beyond the direct recipient. Often online offences are downgraded citing no physical contact, yet victims report felt and embodied harm, often long-lasting. Posetti *et al* refer to the slow burn effect of exposure to constant violent interactions online that directly impacts recipients and observers.¹² Figure 2 depicts the intersections of the online and physical spaces in a sporting context.

WHAT ARE THE IMPACTS OF #CYBERABUSE?

There are numerous risks associated with #CyberAbuse that receive limited attention in the academic literature. The 24/7 nature of online environments makes them difficult—if not impossible—to switch off, which can negatively impact mental health. Social media fixation and/or addiction are commonplace and have been linked to depression and anxiety among other mental health concerns. As such, the possible consequences of #CyberAbuse include a range of psychological, behavioural and performance effects.¹

It is evident that online spaces pose a serious threat to individuals that should not be viewed as separate to the physical world. Violence online is an epidemic—it is a systemic, wide-reaching and global issue, and sport is an environment that magnifies the risk.

#TIME2ACT

We are cognisant of the global complexities of the phenomena of abuse in online environments, which while not bound by geographical borders remain influenced by various cultural differences, policies, as

well as laws and legislation, which cause complexities for regulating this space. However, the online world continues to play a significant, and growing, role in society and as such it is time to address safeguarding in online spaces. To prevent #CyberAbuse, sports organisations should:

- ▶ Engage social media companies to become part of the solution. A focus on social media moderation through artificial intelligent tracking does not always guarantee protection for everyone.
- ▶ Educate athletes and others in the sporting entourage on strategies to safeguard themselves on social media.
- ▶ Engage parents on the topic of online safety to increase the safety of children using online platforms.
- ▶ Demand greater accountability from the press in safeguarding athletes online through responsible reporting and screening of online content.
- ▶ Ensure that sport mental health support personnel understand the nuances of #CyberAbuse and are equipped to support victims.
- ▶ Develop and implement safeguarding approaches to address #CyberAbuse.
- ▶ Share knowledge surrounding abuse online and positive mechanisms for prevention/protection in order to educate the general population on the topic of cyber abuse.

Staying safe from #CyberAbuse is the responsibility of everyone in sport. Safeguarding complexities exist in an ever-changing online world and people are suffering.

Wayne Barnes, a Rugby World Cup (2023) Referee, reflected on abuse that he and his family experienced on social media after he refereed the final match:

When people make threats of violence against you, against your wife, against your kids, you know threats of sexual violence, threats of saying we know where you live. That crosses a line, and that's where people should be held to account and also should be punished.

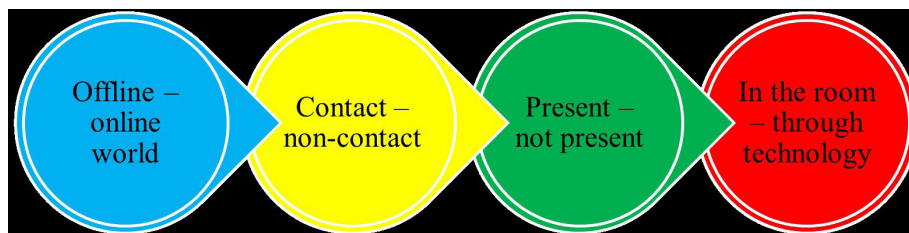


Figure 2 The complexity of the enmeshed reality of online and physical spaces.

Twitter Margo Mountjoy @margo.mountjoy

Contributors Both authors responsible for conception and design and revising the manuscript. EK was responsible for preliminary drafting.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests MM is a member of a Deputy Editor of the British Journal of Sports Medicine and is a member of the Editorial Board of the Injury Prevention+Health Promotion Editions, BJSM.

Patient consent for publication Not applicable.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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To cite Kavanagh E, Mountjoy M. *Br J Sports Med* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2023-107885

Accepted 20 March 2024

Br J Sports Med 2024;0:1–3.

doi:10.1136/bjsports-2023-107885

ORCID iD

Margo Mountjoy <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8604-2014>

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