Social Media and the Politics of Gender, Race and Identity: The case of Serena Williams.

Abstract

This study investigates issues of gender, race and identity, as enacted through social media, focusing on the abuse experienced by tennis player Serena Williams during the 2015 Wimbledon Championships. A netnographic analysis of discriminatory or abusive comments relating to Williams were collected from 24 sites on two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter. These platforms are popular sites commonly used for fan/athlete interaction. Williams identifies as female and African American, therefore intersectionality is adopted to examine the representation of Williams in social media spaces. Several pertinent themes were uncovered relating to Williams including 'Gender questioning', 'Accusations of performance enhancing drugs use' and 'Racism'. Such themes showed a simultaneous overlapping of multiple forms of oppression encountered by Williams, reinforcing the notion of the black female athlete as 'other' in virtual spaces. Such oppression is perpetuated by the online environment.

Keywords: Social Media, Intersectionality, Abuse, Gender, Sport

Introduction

This manuscript focuses on the online abuse of athletes by sports fans and/or followers on Facebook and Twitter during the 2015 Wimbledon Tennis Championships. While this larger study collected data on the top five seeded athletes, it was Serena Williams that stood out as receiving an overwhelming number of abusive posts. This paper focuses on the case of Williams and demonstrates the abuse targeting her physicality, sex, sexuality and race. Findings highlight the intersecting nature of the abuse directed at Williams and the significance of social media as a space for the reproduction and magnification of inequalities that have been present in traditional print media.

Athletes around the world experience criticism regularly. Criticism can be directed at sporting performances, an athlete's personal conduct or the team an athlete might be associated with. Historically, athletes have been critiqued on the sporting field and it has not been uncommon for verbal abuse to occur. This abuse might include overt screaming at an athlete, booing or jeering poor performances and/or throwing items onto the field. Discrimination via such verbal abuse can also occur, most commonly on the basis of gender, sexuality and race.[1] As a direct consequence, spectator behaviour has been monitored and measures have been put in place to offer athletes greater protection on the field of play (for example, within the United Kingdom the *Football Spectators Act,* HMSO, 1989). Arguably, athletes have perhaps been even more protected in the sport of tennis, where the norms of the sport require players to compete in relative silence, observed by an audience who interact only during designated breaks of play.

Social media technologies have had a significant effect on traditional methods of fan-athlete interaction (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Professional sports teams and athletes connect with audiences creating a social media experience (Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Real-time interaction occurs and fans do not need to attend events to experience a sense of connection. Fans take part in a virtual experience, watching games, communicating with other fans and providing a virtual commentary (Kavanagh & Jones, 2017).

Social media remains a largely unregulated space grounded on the notion of free speech and content driven by the masses. Although this has enabled the online world to be a dynamic and interactive space, it has also afforded the presence of unbridled, unexamined and

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[1] Gender and race, as used in this paper, are considerd to be social constructions which are produced within various forms of social interactions.

often unpunished abuse which can reach individuals not only in real time but can further be re-read, re-posted and re-visited. This examination of the abuse directed at Williams shows that these online spaces contain intersectional abuse (racist, sexist, homophobic) and a level of vitriol not now seen in the traditional sports media. In the context of sport, this new form of online fan/spectator or follower behaviour, directed at individual athletes via social media has received limited attention within academic literature. Therefore, the current study examines the broader politics of the language and interaction directed at tennis player Serena Williams on a number of online social media platforms and sites.

Literature Review

Social Media and 'Abuse' of Athletes

Digital technologies have become an essential component in the navigation of everyday tasks and activities (Amichai-Hambuger & Vinitzky, 2010). In the midst of a technological zeitgeist our 'real' lives have become intimately entangled with new media and 'virtual' environments. Technological innovations have transformed the consumption and reporting of sport (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Sanderson, 2011) and the technological revolution has played a key role in sport discourse, enactment and coverage (Sanderson, 2008). One of the most significant changes has been the use of social media platforms and the development of interactive and/or participatory experiences between sports fans, athletes, clubs and events. Platforms such as 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. Teams, athletes, media brands and journalists connect with audiences to create a novel and dynamic experience (Gibbs, O'Reilly & Brunette, 2014), in many ways augmenting traditional fan/sport encounters. However, it is becoming increasingly evident that there is often a darker side to social connectivity. Only recently have the potentially harmful effects of abuse on online platforms been highlighted both in sport (Kavanagh & Jones, 2014) and in society more broadly (Mishna, McLuckie & Saini, 2009). Online abuse of athletes is becoming an increasingly significant social problem (Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks, 2016), yet, to date, this area has received limited scholarly attention.

There have been several studies related to fans engaging with other fans online, however, these are often limited to a single nation or to a specific team or area (see Kian, Clavio, Vincent

& Shaw, 2011 and Cleland, 2014). Kian et al. (2011) examined the sexist and homophobic nature of online interaction between fans on a sports message board in American football. Cleland (2014), while looking at racism in English football on fan message boards, invited fans to complete a survey on attitudes to racism in the first instance. Following this, he then examined the threads posted by respondents and others regarding the survey. It was discovered that racism was rife but that there were often other 'posters' who challenged the racism (something that Kian et al. (2011) did not find in their study). Both of these articles point to a lack of regulation and veil of anonymity in online spaces, which results in homophobia, sexism and misogyny (Kian et al., 2014) and racism (Cleland, 2014). Kian et al. (2014) point to the fact that mainstream sport media is regularly policed for homophobia and sexism, which is wholly different to the Internet. Cleland (2014) concurs, suggesting that while overt racism has decreased, new forms of online interaction allow racist sentiments to be voiced anonymously online (p. 416). Neither of these studies however focus on the kinds of social media spaces that the athletes are likely to frequent, such as Twitter or Facebook.

Kavanagh et al. (2016) point to the widespread nature of abuse directed at athletes on social media platforms across a variety of sports. Sanderson and Truax (2014) identified an increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media in American collegiate sport. Their study examined tweets directed at a University footballer, finding that behaviour manifested in a variety of ways including; belittling, mocking, sarcasm and threats. Kavanagh and Jones (2014) classify online abuse further and refer to the abuse present in virtual spaces as virtual maltreatment, 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 & Jones, 2014, p. 37). Abuse in virtual environments can be classified into four broad types; physical, sexual, emotional and discriminatory, of which the final type can be further categorised into discrimination based upon gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and/or disability. Individuals can experience abuse directly, through being a direct recipient of it and indirectly through being the subject of abuse or being "talked about" rather than directly targeted. Kavanagh et al. (2016) explain that the virtual environment has the potential to enable abuse rather than act to prevent or control it, making this a significant concern for the safety and wellbeing of people engaging in these spaces. Understanding of the abuse women athletes face in these environments has lacked

attention within current literature. It is at this point that we now turn to the case of one athlete, Serena Williams, to examine how she has become subject to abuse on social media platforms and explore the type of abuse she has received. To do so we adopt the lens of intersectionality.

Intersectionality

There is a growing body of work related to the oppression of black women both in sport and in wider society. Collins (2000) utilises the term 'intersectionality' to refer to the simultaneous overlapping of multiple forms of oppression. According to Nash (2008), intersectionality is a complex tool used for analysis. Categories such as gender and race are often 'too simplistic to capture the complexity of lived experience' (Bandy, 2014, p. 22). Bandy (2014) explains that gender has specific individualised and contextualised meanings and is not something that all women share in the same ways (p. 22).

Crenshaw (1989) discusses intersectionality from a legal and statute perspective suggesting that the experiences of black women could not wholly be understood by examining race and/or gender separately. As Crenshaw points out, 'because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which black women are subordinated' (1989, p. 140). The 'black woman athlete' inevitably includes the experience of being an athlete as an additional intersection to that of race and gender. There can be a differentiation of 'white woman athlete' and 'black woman athlete', which in part rests on the 'persistent historical myths' surrounding both the categories of 'black athlete' and of 'black woman' which 'construct black female athletes as masculine, hypersexualized and sexually undesirable' (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014, p. 170).

According to Adjepong & Carrington (2014), black women participating in sport often face a different set of assumptions than white women athletes about their 'femininity (or lack thereof) and their sporting ability' (pp. 169-170). As part of their research, Adjepong and Carrington (2014) examine how black women in sport are 'disciplined' by predetermined social roles and the use of the concept of 'controlling images' to explore the hypersexual 'Jezebel' stereotype. Collins (2000, p. 81) describes the Jezebel as representative of deviant black female sexuality 'whose function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually-aggressive women'. Such sexually aggressive women are simultaneously seen as

'available' and 'controlling' and (as a black woman) closer to masculinity than white women. This is accompanied by the suggestion that black women's bodies are differently sexualised in comparison to other women (Adjepong & Carrington, 2014). Azzarito and Solomon (2005) note how such dominant cultural discourses around black women allow 'othering' and marginalization to occur:

> the 'other' not only functions as a way to maintain the interlocking systems of race, gender and class, but also as a way to reproduce social moral order, in which people are positioned at the margins; the difference of the marginalized 'other' maintains the mainstreamed centre, the normal. (p. 34)

The importance of understanding intersectionality in the case of black women athletes is crucial. 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).

Representations of Serena Williams

Serena Williams was the world number one ranked women's tennis player[2] and has finished as number one for the last three seasons (wtatennis.com 2016). She has won 23 singles grand slams and 72 career singles titles (serenawilliams.com, 2016). Arguably, Williams is the most successful woman tennis player still playing the game and one of the most recognisable athletes in the world. Williams boasts over 10.2 million followers on Twitter which dwarfs the number of people following other athletes inside the current WTA top five rankings (for example, Caroline Wozniacki, 3 Million; Simona Halep, 149,000 and Garbine Muguruza, 396,000;). This demonstrates her reach within social media spaces and highlights the interest she gleans in comparison to other tennis players on virtual platforms.

Serena Williams and her sister Venus (also a highly successful tennis player) have a 'rags to riches' story. They grew up in a low socio-economic area and both became standout performers in the elitist world of women's tennis. Serena Williams is unlike most of the players on the WTA tour. According to Rios (2015):

> …the common mental image of a women's tennis player is white and lithe, in perfect harmony with Western ideals of feminine beauty, while Williams is

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[2] This ranking is correct as at the 10th March, 2017. Please see wtatennis.com.

black and built like a powerlifter. She is an unprecedented affront to our collective notion of the beautiful female athlete.

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). Related to notions of intersectionality, McKay and Johnson (2008) suggest that African American sportswomen have been positioned by a 'racist-sexist matrix'. There is no denying that Serena Williams is often represented in mainstream and sports media as a strong, powerful and foreboding woman on the tennis court. Often opponents of Williams are defined as weak, fragile and not-up-to-scratch in physical performances compared to Williams (Wright, 2004). Not surprisingly, Williams' femininity is questioned regularly in mainstream media (Deering Crosby, 2016; Frisby, 2017; McKay & Johnson, 2008). This is not just a result of her being a strong and powerful female athlete, but certainly relates to her dominance on the tennis court and her self-confidence (a trait not usually admired in women), and such language seeks to contain Williams into categories of unfeminine and rebellious.

McKay and Johnson (2008) suggest that the media often adopt derogatrory racial, sexual and class stereotypes associated with African Americans when depicting Williams, and not with qualities traditionally associated with femininity. Overt and subtle racism and sexism permeate traditional media coverage. According to Schultz, the sports media often constructs Serena Williams in 'oppositional terms' compared to other women in the tennis world (2005, p. 338).

> She is muscular although preferred femininity on the tour is exemplified by slim, lithe figures. Some of her on-court fashions not only accentuate her powerful physique but, according to many descriptions, suggest a deviant sexuality, thereby contrasting her with a compliant sexuality emphasized in journalistic and promotional representations. But, the overarching, yet intermittently voiced distinction between Serena Williams and other women on the professional tennis circuit is that she is black and they are white. (Schultz, 2005, pp. 338-339).

Therefore, Williams' femininity and sexuality are often criticised and questioned based not only on her physique, but more importantly, her skin colour. Douglas (2002) explains that as a result, Serena Williams often faces a cultural boundary that positions her outside dominant definitions of womanhood.

A variety of studies have reflected on the ways in which the sports media represent Serena Williams (and her sister Venus Williams) as different to other women tennis players (See Douglas, 2002; Hobson, 2003; Schultz, 2005; Spencer 2001, 2004). While some of these media

reports focus on Williams' power and strength (deemed as admirable characteristics in sport), others use language that differentiates between her and other women tennis players. Such a focus on skin colour has led to Williams being the target of racism and discrimination. DiManno (2002) has suggested that such responses from spectators are 'expressions of racialized prejudice' (cited in Schultz, 2005, p. 341). Additionally, Smith and Hattery's (2013) examination of the Williams sisters suggests that Serena and Venus do not sit easily amongst the traditional definitions of either American athlete or of female tennis player (p. 88).

What is unknown is the extent to which the discrimination Serena Williams faces in mainstream media carries over into social media spaces. While online and social media provides the potential for diverse representations of women athletes and for a range of voices and 'authors' to be used, the contention of this research is that Williams is discriminated against in social media spaces, and treated in similar ways (and possibly to a greater extent) to how she is treated in mainstream media. The intersectional nature of this study relates to the exploration of overlapping inequalities experienced by Williams as a black, woman athlete in virtual spaces.

Methodological approach

This study examines the relationship between social media and sport, specifically, the potential for abuse of women athletes online. Data was collected and analyzed Facebook and Twitter during the 2015 Wimbledon Championships.[3] The top five ranked male and female tennis players were the subjects of the larger study, however, this paper focuses on Serena Williams only. Facebook and Twitter comments that Williams received during this tournament are employed to highlight the presence of invective digital discourse toward athletes and in particular, women athletes.

Intersectionality is employed as a process by which certain abusive comments directed at Williams can be understood. Such comments do not fit neatly or logically into a simplistic separation of 'gender' and 'race'. Intersectionality, according to Davis (2012)[4]:

> initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world
> around us is more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have

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[3] During this paper, the 2015 Wimbledon Championships may also be referred to as 'Wimbledon'.
[4] Davis (2012) explored the worth and usefulness of the concept/process of intersectionality. While she made several pointed arguments against the use of intersectionality in generalist research, her assessment concludes that intersectionality has the ingredients of a 'good feminist theory' as it encourages complexity and avoids premature closure which encourages new questions and exploration (Davis, 2012, p. 52).

anticipated. It compels [scholars] to grapple with this complexity … It does not provide written-in-stone guidelines for doing feminist inquiry…Rather, it stimulates…creativity in looking for new and often unorthodox ways of doing feminist analysis…[and does not] produce a normative straightjacket for monitoring feminist inquiry in search of the "correct line". (p. 52)

Here, intersectionality refers to 'a "web of crosscutting relationships" taking into account how various forms of oppression interlock with one another (Cooky, Wachs, Messner & Dworkin, 2010, p. 144). Thus, intersectionality is used to examine the plurality of narratives around Williams's identity as athlete, woman and African American. According to Bandy (2014), one of the theoretical purposes of using intersectionality is that it 'enables scholars to understand the legacy of exclusions of marginalized subjects from feminist and critical race theories…' (p. 22). In the case of Williams, both gender and race will be analyzed in relation to comments made about Williams on social media. Sport, social media spaces and users will be examined and studied in terms of how they privilege and/or oppress athletes such as Williams.

The research design adopted was that of online ethnography, ('netnography') involving participant observational research based in online fieldwork (Kozinets, 2010). Netnography adapts ethnographic research techniques to the study of cultures and communities emerging through computer mediated communications and therefore enables the researcher to explore what is publically available on the Internet. This form of data collection is widely accepted and used in a variety of fields (Janta, Lugosi & Brown, 2014). The study focused on the collection of archival data (Kozinets, 2010) as it used existing messages, rather than having any researcher interaction with the online community.

During the 2015 Wimbledon Championships (between the 28th June and the 13th July 2015), discriminatory or abusive posts targeting or relating to Serena Williams were collected from Facebook and Twitter. These sources included the Serena Williams, Wimbledon, British Tennis, Tennis Foundation, Live Tennis, Tennis.com, *Sky Sports* and *Sky News*, *BBC Sport* and *BBC News* Facebook and Twitter sites.

Two methods were utilised for collection of archival data. Brandwatch Analytics (Brandwatch), a leading social intelligence platform was adopted as a means to screen large data sets across the designated time period. This is a rigorous tool to screen the above social media sites and has been adopted in a number of studies (e.g., Rokka & Canniford, 2016). Within

Brandwatch there are search strings called 'queries' used to input terms that the researcher wishes to search for. Queries based on discriminatory and abusive terms enable the wide spread search of key words across social media platforms. During the data collection, the research team entered in a list of over 100 discriminatory terms, the athlete's name (along with all nicknames, hashtags and variations of spelling). For example, "Serena Williams AND man OR ugly OR lesbian OR bitch" were possible search terms. Once the query was set up, Brandwatch collected every online reference where Serena Williams was mentioned within ten words of a discriminatory term over a designated time period.

In addition to the computer aided data collection, both Twitter and Facebook were monitored daily by the research team to record abusive online traffic. The team adopted the role of "professional lurkers" within the online communities. They did not interact in these spaces or manipulate the environment but instead were active viewers. All tweets or posts, including a screen shot 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 copied into an excel spreadsheet and combined for analysis. Thousands of posts were read and sifted over the two-week data collection period with over 100 hours of researcher time devoted to data collection. Ethical considerations should be of primacy when working in virtual spaces (Rhode, Bowie & Hergenrather, 2002; Kozinets, 2010). All data collected and analysed within this study is in the public domain and is therefore publicly available. However, in order to protect privacy and preserve anonymity, the authors of comments have been de-identified within the results and analysis section.

In total, 119 comments relating to the abuse and discrimination of Serena Williams were found on the nominated Facebook sites during the data collection period. This was however dwarfed by those on Twitter, where 654 negative tweets were recorded (approximately 47 per day).[5] Therefore, in the two weeks of data collection, a total of 773 abusive comments were found. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), 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 themes were identified and are explored in the following section.

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[5] It seems likely that Williams would have received significantly more abusive comments and tweets during this time period from other social media and online sports media sources.

Results and Discussion

In the wider study on the top five ranked women and men tennis players, a total of 283 Facebook comments were collected. Of this 283, 42% were related to Serena Williams. On Twitter 3744 negative tweets were recorded, 654 (17%) of these directly targeted or made reference to Serena Williams. Therefore, Williams provided a large focus for negative attention received from online and social media users during this tournament. During the tennis tournament, Serena Williams was rarely the target for any type of direct abuse on social media. This meant that on her own Facebook page, she seldom received criticism or disapproval from her followers. This is hardly surprising considering most (if not all) of those individuals who follow (or like) her Facebook page, will be fans. A different picture was painted for comments made indirectly to and about Williams. On sports sites such as the Wimbledon, *Sky Sports* and *BBC Sport* Facebook and Twitter sites, Williams was constantly ridiculed. Whilst much of this ridicule focused on the overall theme of her 'Physicality' (which encompassed both physical and emotional abuse), there were three primary sub-themes uncovered through data analysis: 'Gender questioning', 'Accusations of performance enhancing drugs use' and 'Racism'. Each of these are examined separately and are then followed by a discussion of how these converge in terms of intersectionality and online abuse.

Gender Questioning

Although most of the comments or forms of abuse related to Williams focused on how she looked or her physicality, there were a number of comments specifically related to her gender identity. Based on her physical appearance, including her muscular physique, many comments questioned whether she should identify as female. Some of these comments included: 'Is it a he or she??'; 'FUCK OFF SERENA WILLIAMS YOU MAN'; and 'Has Serena Williams ever been tested for being a man? Sure I could see ballbag creeping between those mammoth thighs at one point'. Additionally, several social media users directly accused Williams of being 'transgender'. Some examples of this abuse included: 'Serena Williams a transgender, that bitch a beast (*sic*) #hmm'; and 'If you were forced to fuck 1 transsexual, Bruce Jenner or Serena Williams, which one would it be[?]'.

Many of those who critiqued Williams's physical appearance and questioned her gender identity felt that she should be playing tennis against men, rather than women. She was deemed by many as too strong and powerful to play against the women at Wimbledon. Such comments included: 'It's a dude !!!!! Should play with the men'; 'She should not compete against women. Is like a dinosaur competing against lizards'; and 'Mr Williams should try the ATP circuit'.

The questioning of Serena Williams's gender was further magnified when she played against her sister in the singles draw. Both Serena and Venus Williams had their gender questioned when they played against each other, often being accused of being male and being brothers (rather than sisters). Some of the abuse received by both players included comments such as: 'Has the potential to be the finest men's match of the tournament'; 'Best man won on the day'; and 'Venus lost to her big brother again I see'. According to Schultz (2005), differentiating between the Williams sisters and other tennis players on the tour by the sports media has been common. As mentioned above, several studies have reflected on the ways in which Williams and her sister Venus are positioned as 'other' in media representations of female tennis players (Douglas, 2002; Hobson, 2003; Schultz, 2005; Spencer, 2001, 2004).

This online content referring to Williams' gender aligns with stories represented in traditional print media and has been a common theme throughout her career. For example, the President of the Russian Tennis Federation, Shamil Tarpischev referred to both Serena and Venus Williams as 'the Williams brothers' and 'scary' to look at (The *Guardian,* 2014). Such comments reinforce the idea that unless female sporting bodies conform to traditional standards of beauty and femininity, they are criticised and/or questioned.

There were also a number of comments relating to gender identity that were far more overtly violent in nature than others. Many of these comments (found on Twitter sites) even threatened violence towards Williams due to her physical appearance and gender identity. A sample of these comments include: 'Fuck me Serena Williams get your cock out; 'Somebody kill Serena Williams. She is a man. #Wimbledon2015'; and 'I heard Serena Williams is still a virgin at 33. I don't know if that's true but 1 [one] thing she'll never be w/those (*sic*) forearms is a rape victim'. While each of these comments focus on a different type of abuse (i.e., emotional, physical and sexual), underlying many of these comments is a questioning of her gender identity. Directly linked to Williams' physique is the suggestion from some fans that Williams must be

taking performance enhancing drugs, the focus of the second theme that arose from data collection.

Accusations of Performance Enhancing Drug Use

Further to the comments made about Williams's physical appearance and strong muscular body, were comments made about her supposed steroid taking. In fact, an entire Facebook page is devoted to this supposition (See 'Serena Williams Doper Queen of tennis'). In a doubles match during Wimbledon in 2014, speculation was rife around Williams suffering from what was defined as a 'viral illness'. Many speculated that Williams was under the influence of drugs. Former player and now commentator, Chris Evert commented, "Is it a virus? Is it something unintentional or intentional in her system that they may drug test for?" (Corbett, 2014). While there has been a history of speculation around Williams and performance enhancing drug use, there has also been no proof of her taking any such substances.

During the 2015 Wimbledon Championships, several social media followers made comments about Williams and performance enhancing drugs. Such comments included: 'Serena williams is either on roids or a man!'; 'It's amazing what muscle enhancing drugs can do'; and 'Can we do a Drug test on her while doing a Gender Testing?'.

Not only was Williams accused of being strong and powerful due to her supposed steroid taking, she was also positioned against other players as unusual or abnormal. For example, when Williams competed against Maria Sharapova, one Facebook comment included – 'Testosterone 1 fragile [Shara]pova 0'. Such a comment positions Maria Sharapova as weak, feminine and delicate. However, on the contrary, Williams's strength and overall physique is seen as masculine, dominant and overpowering. All of these qualities that define Williams are not admired in the traditional definition of 'woman in sport'. Even other tennis players themselves have alluded to Williams's supposed unmatchable playing abilities on the court. According to Schultz, 'members of the professional tennis community have commented that other players are unable to compete with Williams because of her strength and athleticism' (2005, p. 348).

Racism

Combined with a general criticism of her overall physique, Williams' skin colour is often accentuated in media reports, by commentators and by fans. Williams cannot escape the

references to her skin colour. Within the current study, Williams' skin colour and African American identity are noted several times by Facebook users. While comments on her personal Facebook page often focused on how she brought pride to 'her people', the comments made indirectly via sports news sites were not so flattering. In fact, many of the comments made by Facebook followers are racist in nature. Racist comments relating specifically to Serena Williams included: 'Rise of the planet of the apes'; 'Reminds me of a Gorilla. Lol'; and 'My young nephew thought Serena Williams was a Gorilla when playing that match, lol'. During the match in which Williams played against her sister, comments such as 'MONKEY TENNIS?' were common. In a story posted on Caroline Wozniacki's (another female tennis player) Facebook page, Williams is seen posing for a photograph alongside both Wozniacki and another friend. There were several disparaging and racist comments made on this post about Williams and in comparison, to the other women in the photograph. Such comments included; 'Two beautys (*sic*) with a GORILLA!!!!!'; and 'The "Black Beast" next to you looks tempting!!! Do you think she like's man (*sic*) or prefers women??? With all those muscles you never know!!!'

Common to many of these racially based comments is the comparison of Williams to an ape, monkey or gorilla, comparisons that are built upon a long history of distinction and othering. Bindman (2002), for example, talks about the 'great chain of being' that organized black and white in a hierarchy, with the 'civilised' white person closer to 'God-like' relative to the black individual, seen as lying closer to 'animal-like'. Africans, for example, were thus being seen as 'primitive, simian and savage' (Vertinsky & Captain 1998, p. 547). The use of animalistic tropes such as 'ape', or 'monkey' follows such stereotypes, with the view of the black athlete as physically faster and more powerful, but intellectually inferior, commonplace. Such racial criticism is common for African descended individuals and Indigenous Australians, and the relation of women, as well as men, to 'wild' and transgressive animals has also been evident (McKay & Johnson (2008). In 2005, New Zealand Radio Sport breakfast host, Tony Veitch, suggested 'Do you know where the apes come from? She [Williams] is a reminder' (Marshall 2005). In 2001, sportscaster Sid Rosenberg called the 20-year-old Venus Williams an 'animal'. He also suggested that she and her sister Serena would have a better chance of posing nude for *National Geographic Magazine* than for *Playboy* magazine (McKay & Johnson, 2008).

Williams is no stranger to being racially vilified. Former opponent, Martina Hingis once said (referring to both Serena and Venus):

> Being Black only helps them… (because)… many times they get sponsors because they are Black. And they have had a lot of advantages because they can always say, "It's racism." They can always come back and say, "Because we are this color, things happen." (cited in Stein, 2001, p. 58)

Such a statement from Hingis could and should be described as naïve. In fact, Spencer (2004) suggests that 'this logic obscures the reality that people with color have historically been excluded from tennis and that White racism continues to operate in the new millennium' (p. 128).

Drawing on insights from critical race scholarship, Douglas (2012) notes how there has remained a decidedly ambivalent and at times aggressive reaction toward the accomplishments of Serena Williams throughout her career. She believes such hostility is illustrative of patterns of everyday racism(s) which pervade the atmosphere of white-dominated sporting spaces. Gillborn (2008) has argued that racism more broadly creates subordination through systematically marking and maintaining differences between people on an ethnically hierarchical scale. More specifically, Essed (1991) introduced the concept of everyday racism to include the integration of racism into everyday situations, problematising everyday practices of racism which many take for granted. Essed stated that '…there are two levels at which racism as ideology operates: at the level of daily actions and their interpretation and at another level in the refusal to acknowledge racism or to take responsibility for it' (p. 44).

As Essed noted "the crucial criterion distinguishing *racism* from *everyday racism* is that the latter involves only systematic, recurring, familiar practices… because everyday racism is infused into familiar practices, it involves socialized attitudes and behavior" (p.3). Everyday racism is integrated into daily life as common societal behaviour and extends inequality through everyday exclusion. More broadly, the often exceptional performances of Williams provoke complex narratives peppered with subtle and overt racism (McKay & Johnson, 2008). Findings in the current study provide support for this and further highlight the presence of a racially charged atmosphere present within the online environment. Racist discourse can be seen to permeate interaction in this space, illustrating a form of hostility which cannot be acted out during the real-time spectator experience and is further emblematic of practices of discrimination which can be acted out more freely in virtual rather than physical spaces.

Intersectionality and the online abuse of Serena Williams

In the case of Serena Williams, all of the above, although separated into sections related to gender, drug allegations and elements of racism cannot fully encompass the nature of the online abuse. The complexity of the online abuse of Williams, as an African American woman who is a successful athlete, can more fully be understood by examining these elements together in an intersectional approach as many researchers have indicated (Spencer, 2004; Schultz, 2005; Smith & Hattery, 2013). In the case of Williams, who identifies as a woman, athlete and African American, these identifying factors interlock with one another (Cooky et al., 2010). As such, Cooky et al. (2010) suggests that these interlocking sources of identity are used to understand the oppression or subordination experienced by Williams. In fact, the 'attack' on Serena Williams as found in the current study can only be fully understood in multiplicity. In this sense, any attempt to analyse this abuse that uses 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 was layered and intersectional and sets it apart from others who may encounter abuse, while abhorrent, from a single targeted perspective.

Comments like 'Check that nigga Serena Williams for steroids', can only be understood in relation to Williams' race and sex. The comment employs explicit racist language and the commenter questions the size and strength of Williams on the basis of her being female yet appearing (to the commenter) as male. Similarly, the comment, 'Serena Williams body just hefty like glad bag' 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. Predictably, there were many comments that used racist terms like 'ape' or gorilla' and many also in which these terms are used alongside sexism as in the comment, 'I hope you whoop that male ape in a tutu'. As Adjepong & Carrington (2014, p. 170) suggest, black women do face an alternate understanding of their femininity especially in relation to their athleticism and these examples are based upon this phenomenon.[6] While men and muscularity are seen as desirable, hypermuscularity in women serves to threaten heteronormative gender relations (Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

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[6] Although beyond the scope of the current paper, it is acknowledged that in many professional sports, being black can be perceived as an advantage (e.g., track and field, basketball). However, tennis has not traditionally been one of these sports. Skin colour and success in tennis have rarely been linked. Additionally, there have been very few high profile and successful 'black' tennis players.

Finally, there were several comments which supposed that the strength and power of Serena Williams would make her formidable, even dangerous in a sexual encounter. Some comments suggested that this was perhaps a desirable thing, ('Serena Williams is so fucking hot id fuck the shit out of that black ass'), while others were more critical of that perceived power ('Seriously though. Wouldn't Serena Williams just give the most savage fuck ever' and 'Serena Williams brolic as hell. She look like she'll snap a nigga's dick in half while ridin him'). These cases clearly involve the assumptions, outlined by Adjepong & Carrington (2014), as related to the historical myth of the 'masculine' black female who is simultaneously hypersexualised (and, as such, possibly intriguing to some as such) and sexually undesirable.

Williams' high visibility and outspoken nature in relation to all of these elements (woman, athlete and African American) is no doubt a catalyst for online abusers to respond with vile and contemptable posts. For whatever reasons social media users choose to engage in such abuse, the result is the same. Williams is attacked simultaneously, and regularly, for being a female, an athlete and for her African American heritage, all of which have significant bodies of literature surrounding the discrimination which did, and still does, exist. To include this intersectionality of female, athlete and African American under one umbrella (feminism or racism) does an injustice to the breadth and depth of understanding one might glean from examining the Williams case. It can never, for Serena Williams, only be about gender, or race, for example. This barrage of explicit abuse will always be best understood under an intersectional framework. To examine the online abuse of Williams from one perspective is reductionist and not representative of the whole pattern of abuse directed at the athlete.

Concluding Comments

This paper has demonstrated how 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 as illustrated here. Decades of 'traditional' representations such as those based upon the sexualisation and trivialisation of female athletes in the sports media becomes the norm for fans, so it is of little surprise to see this replicated in social media spaces. While it may have been a

possibility that social media might provide a platform for the disruption of some of these still pervasive discourses surrounding sport (masculine, misogynistic, homophobic, and racist), this appears not to be the case. In this study communication via the platform of Twitter demonstrates evidence of entrenched discriminatory commentary.

It is clear that Williams faces abuse which may be experienced by other female athletes. For example, many female athletes who do possess strong, muscular, athletic bodies are criticised and are often restricted by society's perception and representation of a 'typical' female athlete. However, there were also a distinct group of comments directed at Serena Williams which, incorporated several types of abuse which could only be directed at a black female athlete, and can therefore only be understood in multiplicity. As a black woman athlete, the abuse directed toward her demonstrates intersectional oppression, rather than discrimination occurring in a single category.

Discrimination of Williams serves to reinforce her place as 'other' in the tennis world. Williams is positioned as a radical alternative to the accepted norms, lying in contrast to the mainstream representation of female tennis players. As a result, the behaviour she experiences is layered, nuanced and divergent when the multiple layers of discrimination are considered. Crenshaw (1989, p.149) explains this from the perspective of an accident happening at a cross road. Discrimination, like traffic could be as a result of vehicles travelling from any number of directions and sometimes all of them. In the case of Williams, the abuse she faces can be considered from the perspective of gender, race or class or at the intersection of all of these colliding elements. hooks (2000) describes this as an example of double or triple oppressive power relations faced by African American women.

The interaction on social media spaces such as Twitter identifies a space in which the reproduction of such inequalities can be played out, therefore reinforcing their legitimacy through the lack of policing on these platforms. Whatever the motivation for the abuse, such treatment of Williams outside an online environment would attract attention and consequences. Those who allot abuse in online spaces are often safe in the knowledge that their behaviour has no consequence, at least legally. 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 case of Serena Williams highlights the lack of regulation of these spaces and the difficulty in protecting athletes from being the target of online hate, be it sexist,

racist or of an intersectional nature. As a result, these spaces become a fertile ground for toxic behaviours which seek to demean, belittle and attack those who fail to conform to societal norms or ideals. As Kavanagh et al. (2016) state, online interaction of this nature provides a microcosm within which we can observe the enactment of gendered, racialised and sexualised politics, often at an extreme level. More broadly, the presence of such splenetic language and the acceptance of online attacks on individuals presents the possibility of wider harm. The unchecked nature of negative online interaction has the potential to reduce inclusivity and civility of both on-and-off-line cultures. The use of technology and interaction within online spaces are dominant aspects of human behaviour. Therefore, the wider cultural implications of social media and its facilitation of abuse of others cannot be overlooked. As an emergent field in sports research, it is clear that more work is needed to understand the digital sociological environment and human interaction within these spaces.

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