

TITLE: Sporting women and social media: sexualization, misogyny and gender based violence in online spaces

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Abstract

This study investigated gender based violence targeted at high profile women in virtual environments through presenting the case of women's tennis. Using a netnographic approach and third wave feminist lens, an analysis of two popular social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) was conducted to examine the social commentary and fan interaction surrounding the top five seeded female tennis players during the Wimbledon Tennis Championships. Athletes were exposed to violent interactions in a number of ways. Four themes were identified through analysis of data: threats of physical violence; sexualisation that focussed on the female physical appearance; sexualisation that expressed desire and/or proposed physical or sexual contact; and sexualisation that was vile, explicit and threateningly violent in a sexual or misogynistic manner. Findings demonstrate how social media provides a space for unregulated gender-based cyberhate targeting high profile women while in their workplace in a way that traditional sports media does not.

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

Introduction

Academic scholars are increasingly raising concern about the disproportionate levels of gender-based violence experienced by women in virtual spaces suggesting this to be a global pandemic (Ging & Siapera, 2018). Jane (2018) believes that gendered abuse and threats online cause “embodied” rather than “virtual” harm and that the behaviours present in virtual interactions can map onto more familiar forms of offline violence against women and girls. Negative interactions, broadly described as hate speech, often break various criminal laws, however they frequently go unchallenged and are now accepted as part of virtual interactions. High profile or celebrity women such as politicians, news broadcasters or journalists are recognised to be the primary targets of online vitriol, however, recent reports from the United Nations and Amnesty International highlight gendered-cyberhate as a global issue affecting women and girls of all ages and backgrounds (UNESCO, 2015; Amnesty International, 2017). This study examines the presence of gender-based violence in virtual spaces targeting high profile celebrity women. It does so through presenting the case of women’s tennis and through examining the online abuse women athletes can be subjected to during a major tennis championships.

While the representation of female athletes and female sports in traditional forms of sports media is widely researched and documented (See Cooky, Messner & Musto, 2015; and Litchfield & Osborne, 2015 for examples of this), research examining female athletes represented in online and social media is an emerging area of inquiry. Recent studies have investigated women’s self-representations in social media spaces (see Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2018; Reichart Smith & Sanderson, 2015), representations of women athletes during major events (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2019; Pegoraro, Comeau and Frederick, 2017) and online sports coverage and female Olympic athletes (Litchfield, 2018). In contrast to traditional sports media, social media spaces have allowed female athletes the opportunity to ‘represent’

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and 're-present' themselves. Third wave feminist inquiry suggests that in an ever present online world, women are simultaneously empowered and oppressed in this space (see Bruce, 2016). An example of the scope for empowerment is the opportunity for women to determine the messages that are published, particularly through social media spaces which represent women in ways in which they wish to be perceived or presented. This shows the progressive nature of these spaces. That said, at the same time, persistent and traditional themes relating to the infantilisation and sexualisation of women in media spaces remain ever present (Litchfield & Kavanagh, 2018). More broadly, the virtual environment has been recognised as a space which poses a significant threat to women, with the presence of misogyny and violence against women in online spaces increasingly highlighted in scholarly and lay publications (see Molony & Love, 2018).

The presence of violence against female athletes on digital platforms has received limited attention in academic literature, yet anecdotal accounts suggest that athletes can be exposed to variety of hostile and threatening behaviours in virtual spaces. In 2016, golfer and sports commentator Paige Spiranac broke down while completing a live interview; she spoke of a relentless pattern of abuse she had been subjected to via social media sites. In the aftermath, Spiranac spoke of her thoughts of taking her own life as a result of the depression she experienced as a response to the abuse (Myers, 2016). British tennis player, Heather Watson similarly spoke about the online vitriol she was subjected to within social media environments including receiving personal death threats and posts questioning the safety of her family. Watson openly spoke of the significant impact that such online commentary had upon her sense of self and her performance (Ward, 2015).

Utilising netnography, two popular social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) were analysed in this study focusing on the negative social commentary and fan interaction directed toward female tennis players during the Wimbledon Tennis Championships. In

particular, this study sought to understand online gender-based violence targeted at these female athletes in social media spaces adopting a third-wave feminist and intersectional perspective. The study highlights the presence of vitriol targeted at women athletes surrounding their job-role and performance. The online social commentary surrounding the work of women athletes includes language that serves to marginalise, sexualise and demean the performers and their performances. This paper demonstrates the complexity of the behaviour experienced and calls for greater attention to be paid to the protection of women in virtual spaces.

Literature Review

The World Health Organisation (WHO) refer to violence as a “global preventable health problem” (p. 3) which should be recognised as a broad term due to the visible and invisible harm that can be caused through its various forms. The WHO (2002) defined violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (p. 5).

The inclusion of the word “power” in addition to the phrase “the use of physical force” is important in this definition as it broadens understanding of a violent act beyond conventional definitions of violence that result only in physical harm. Through the inclusion of power in the definition, the WHO recognise that violence can include neglect and all types of physical, sexual and psychological abuse and is reflective of the broad scope of violence that can be experienced in today’s societies. Violence can be self-directed, interpersonal or collective as highlighted in figure 1 and can occur in both physical and virtual spaces. Violence experienced in virtual spaces, more specifically violence directed toward women in virtual spaces, will be the focus of this paper.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Over the last decade, it has become evident that most (if not all) aspects of modern living have become intimately entangled with the Internet, new media and virtual technologies (Hughes, Rowe, Batey & Lee, 2012). With its global span, the infinite possibilities provided by cyberspace can be pursued at any hour of the day or night (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011). Virtual environments have become spaces of presumed intimacy, freedom of speech and increasing influence and, as a direct result, virtual spaces have created an optimal climate in which abuse can occur (Kavanagh, Litchfield & Osborne, 2019). As Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016) note, in many ways the internet enables abuse rather than serves to prevent it or protect those individuals navigating its spaces. Further, Citron (2014, p. 3) identifies that, “threats of violence, privacy invasions, reputation harming lies, calls for strangers to physically harm victims, and technological attacks” should be regarded as intentional violent acts with an aim to inflict harm, not merely as harmless comments that occur in virtual spaces.

While all people engaging with online platforms have the potential to experience abuse, women and girls are recognised as primary victims of violence and oppression online (Moloney & Love, 2017). Reid (2016) suggests that women are more than twice as likely to experience severe forms of violence online such as stalking or sexual harassment. Violence targeting women and girls online is experienced as a form of interpersonal violence. Currently, a variety of terms have been adopted in research to describe the phenomenon of violence targeting 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 (Bennett, Guran, Ramos & Margolin, 2011; Ging & Siapera,

2018; Henry & Powell, 2018; Jane, 2016, 2014a, 2014b). More often than not such violence is experienced by women online because of their gender.

Gender-based violence

Findings of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) Violence Against Women Survey revealed that sexual harassment remains pervasive and a common experience for many women in the European Union (FRA, 2014). The report, based on interviews with 42,000 women across 28 member states of the European Union (EU) found that violence against women, and specifically gender-based violence (GBV) is an extensive human rights abuse that cannot be overlooked or underestimated (FRA, 2014). GBV 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, CEDAW, 1992). The United Nations introduced the first definition of violence against women in 1993:

‘Violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. (UN, 1993, Article 1)

Findings from the violence against women survey specifically highlighted the role played by new technologies in increasing the experience of abuse; virtual environments were identified as spaces that pose significant threat to the safety of women and girls.

In 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) launched a report entitled: ‘Cyber violence against women and girls a world-wide wake-up call’. The findings of this report documented that almost three quarters of women online have been exposed to some form of violence. UNESCO stated that:

Millions of women and girls around the world are subjected to deliberate violence because of their gender. Violence against women and girls (VAWG) knows no boundaries, cutting across borders, race, culture and income groups, profoundly harming victims, people around them, and society as a whole. (2015, p. 1)

Two years later, Amnesty International carried out an online quota survey of 4000 women (aged 18-55) across eight countries. Their findings suggest that a quarter of the women surveyed had experienced some form of online abuse or harassment at least once. Alarmingly, of those who had experienced online abuse, 41% stated that the content of the abuse made them fear for their physical safety; such content included threats of physical violence or sexual assault.

The evolution of the Internet has proven to create an outlet for GBV now recognised as a global pandemic directly related to the scale of violence experienced by women and girls in virtual spaces (Ging & Siapera, 2018). There is growing concern about the disproportionate levels of gender-based violence experienced by women in online spaces, proving to be a significant social problem (Rodríguez-Darías & Aguilera-Ávila, 2018). Online communication that is gendered in nature often has content which draws upon sexually degrading language, thus exerting online forms of sexual harassment (Megarry, 2014). What unifies findings is that the content of the abuse targeted at women in digital spaces is overwhelmingly deemed to be misogynistic or sexist in nature.

Misogyny has typically been defined as a hatred or contempt for women (Moloney & Love, 2017, p. 3) and is recognised as an expression of hetero-patriarchy (Rodríguez-Darías & Aguilera-Ávila, 2018). Although the focus in this paper relates to online behaviour, Ging and Siapera (2018) suggest it is essential to understand that there remains a continuum between online and offline violence. Online misogyny should be understood as a techno-social construct, as Manne (2017) states:

Misogyny is primarily a property of social systems or environments as a whole, in which women will tend to face hostility of various kinds *because they are women in a man's world* (i.e. a patriarchy), who are held to be failing to live up to men's standards (i.e. tenets of a patriarchal ideology which have some purchase in this environment). (pp. 33–34)

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Misogyny not only includes the presence of hostility but further functions coercively to reinforce or justify patriarchal norms (Richardson-Self, 2018).

Social media has spawned new forms of misogyny and made it easier for these behaviours to manifest (Jane, 2017). Vickery and Everbach (2017) believe that online misogyny, which they refer to as mediated misogyny is easier to spread and proliferates across digital platforms. They suggest that digital platforms have become “just one more space where hierarchies of gender, race, class and sexuality and other constructed differences are reproduced” (p.10). Jane (2014b) believes that most violence targeted at women online has similar constructs – they rely on profanity, ad hominin invective and hyperbolic 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). Although men can experience abuse online, evidence suggests that women are more likely to experience more severe, sexualised attacks simply for being a woman on the Internet (Vickery & Everback, 2017). Such violence is increasing in content and number at such a rate as to pose ‘serious and ethical threats’ socially and culturally (Jane, 2014b). The Internet has become a space of hostile interaction; especially linked to hostility and violence against women.

Online violence in sport

According to Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne and Jones (2016), these social media networking sites allow individuals to communicate with others, share information, learn and interact with sports teams and athletes. They further suggest that:

It is now accepted that most professional sports teams and athletes utilise social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter to keep fans abreast of news and to interact directly with them creating an interactive and virtual sports experience. More specifically, elite performers use social media for purpose of self-promotion, branding and to provide fans or followers an intimate insight into their professional or personal lives (Litchfield et al., 2016, p. 38; also see Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010)

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While social media technologies have had a significant impact on sport and on fan-athlete interaction (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014), it is also becoming increasingly apparent that this environment can also play host to a number of darker behaviours and provide an outlet for a variety of types of abuse and discrimination to occur (Kavanagh, Jones & Sheppard-Marks, 2016). A number of research studies have pointed to the widespread nature of abuse on social media platforms and an increasing trend of fans attacking athletes via social media platforms (see Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Kavanagh & Jones, 2014; Litchfield et al., 2018, 2016; Sanderson, 2013; and Sanderson & Truax, 2014).

Kavanagh et al. (2016, p. 788) define violent interactions, enabled by virtual spaces, more broadly as “direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional or psychological upset, distress, alarm or feelings of inferiority”. Such violence 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). Despite discriminatory behaviour occurring in online spaces, there is currently very little regulation to control such abuse. In fact, Kavanagh et al. (2016) explained that the online environment has the potential to enable abuse to occur, but lacks power to prevent it from happening. As such, this culture is a significant concern for the safety and wellbeing of people engaging in these spaces. Litchfield et al. (2018) further highlight:

Gendered hostility, sexualized 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. (p. 13)

Jane (2018) believes that the ramifications of gendered cyber-hate are wide reaching, when this abuse is intimately entangled with the working lives of the victim it becomes “a form of

workplace harassment and/or economic vandalism” (p. 575). The experience of GBV online can cause embodied harm to the recipient and overwhelmingly women in the media, or those with public profiles are the primary victims of such behaviour. Understanding of the abuse women athletes’ face in these environments has lacked attention within current literature (see Litchfield et al., 2018; 2016 as some of the few examples of studies). However, sport is not immune to the poor moral behaviour of fans, commentators and consumers in online spaces. In fact, the virtual maltreatment of athletes is a rapidly emerging and highly significant issue within contemporary sport. Therefore, further enquiry is required relating to how high-profile women, such as athletes, experience gender-based online violence whilst in their place of work is of great importance.

Third wave feminism and social media spaces

Third-wave feminism focuses on post-structural interpretations of gender and sexuality. According to Baumgardner and Richards (2010), prominent third-wave issues include ‘... equal access to the Internet and technology, HIV/AIDS awareness, child sexual abuse, self-mutilation, globalisation, eating disorders, and body image ...’ (p. 21). Popularised 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, amount other things’ (Walker, 2009). Similarly, Heywood (2006) suggests that third-wave goals:

Continue to centre around the creation of an inclusive feminism that respects not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion, and economic standing but also makes allowance for different identities within a single person. Third wave seeks to create a feminism that is not only critical of media and its representations of women but also produces media itself and makes use of that media and its representations to bring about social change.
(p. xx)

As such, third wave feminism offers a post-structural interpretation of gender and sexuality, and focuses on the importance of diverse cultural identities.

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According to Bruce (2016), contemporary media spaces such as social media, provide new opportunities for analysing the presentation of sportswomen. These new opportunities also provide the chance for researchers in sports media to expand their interpretive frameworks in order to analyse such coverage. While Bruce (2016) recognises that there are a number of older and/or persistent themes found in the sports media relating to female athletes, there are also a number new themes that can be found in these representations also. In fact, she suggests that representations of women in contemporary media can provide both an oppressive and empowering space. Women in online spaces can be represented as powerful and strong, but are also often defined by their physical appearance, such as 'Pretty and powerful' where women athletes embrace femininity and athleticism as complimentary (rather than dualistic) (Bruce, 2016). One theme is particularly relevant to the current study. A 'persistent' theme defined as 'Sexualization' occurs when women are represented 'through patriarchal discourses of idealized sexual attractiveness, prompting questions about objectification and whether the media focuses on them as athletes or sex objects' (Bruce, 2016, p. 366).

Therefore, online media coverage of sports women can both empower and oppress women. Bruce (2016) suggests that there is a link between third wave feminism and such a culture and explains that third-wave feminism has offered an alternative conceptual framework that challenges feminist thought in relation to sport, gender and masculinity (p. 368; also see Heywood & Dworkin, 2003). Bruce explains that '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 has allowed a space to explain how multiplicity operates in sport media representations of female athletes and provides an analysis tool to explain the simultaneous empowerment and oppression of female athletes. Based on research and narratives

surrounding virtual maltreatment and e-bile of females in social media spaces, the current study aims to investigate how celebrity sports women can experience gender-based violence in online settings. We do so through adopting a third-wave feminist lens to examine the case of women's tennis and exploring fan/follower interactions with the top five seeded female tennis players during the Wimbledon Tennis Championships.

Method

A netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2010) was adopted through the collection of archival data from Facebook and Twitter. Netnography is an online ethnography that is an interpretive research method that adapts the traditional, in-person participant observation techniques into digital environments (Kozinets, 2010). This form of research is an iterative process adopting naturalistic analysis techniques that are immersive in nature (Reid and Duffy 2018). The research steps suggested by Kozinets (2006) including: making entrée; data collection and analysis; trustworthy interpretation of the data and conducting ethical research were adopted for this study.

The study gained ethical clearance prior to the collection of any data. Making entrée refers to the process of asking research questions and identifying spaces to study. Facebook and Twitter were identified as the social media platforms to be monitored during the Wimbledon Championships due to the popularity and the use of these sites by fans or followers (and sports media outlets) to consume and comment on live sport (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010; Frederick, Lim, Clavio & Walsh, 2012; Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Data relating to the top five seeded female players was collected from a number of social media handles outlined in Table 1. The social media handles of the top five seeded women were selected for data collection on both Twitter and Facebook. In addition, as the tournament was located in the United Kingdom, the online platforms of the organising committee (Wimbledon) and the National Governing Bodies of the sport of tennis (Lawn Tennis

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Association and the Tennis Foundation) were monitored due to their live coverage of the event. Where possible Twitter handles were matched with Facebook pages for analysis. A number of news outlets were also monitored over the data collection period including sky news and BBC Sport.

Two methods were adopted for the collection of archival data or online content. Firstly, the social intelligence platform, Brandwatch Analytics (Brandwatch) was adopted to conduct a comprehensive search of the violence targeting the top-five women athletes. Within Brandwatch, search strings called 'queries' are used to input terms that the researcher wanted to search for. Queries based on discriminatory and abusive terms enable the widespread search of keywords across the specified social media platforms. During the data collection, the team searched for a list of over 100 discriminatory terms and the athletes' names (along with all nicknames, hashtags and variations of spelling). An example of one such query is 'Serena Williams AND bitch OR screamer OR sexy OR slag'. Once the query was set up, Brandwatch collected every online reference (across Facebook and Twitter) where the female tennis player was mentioned within ten words of a discriminatory term over a designated time period. This was a deductive, iterative process as the queries could be refined in relation to the content of abusive comments present in these spaces and thus reflected the nature of the commentary used by the 'posters' of such comments. In addition the research team monitored the sites daily to ensure that the data captured was representative of the time and space. Data was collected that was posted during the duration of play. This is important as it enabled an insight into the interactions of fans or followers while the athletes were performing their work. Comments made outside of this temporal window were not included in this study. The focus was to capture the negative social interaction that occurred while athletes were competing as a response to their real-time performance; rather than in the aftermath or surrounding the event.

Insert Table 1 about here

The research team did not interact in these spaces or manipulate the environment but instead were active viewers of it. Reid and Duffy (2018) refer to netnographic sensibility as a process of the researcher(s) listening to the social commentary or interaction occurring in virtual spaces. The results from this search, 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 collected in a database.

There were a number of steps taken to ensure the rigor in the process of analysing the data. Data were analysed by categorising comments into themes and sub-themes that were identified using thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that a theme 'captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set' (p.82). Data were independently scrutinised by each of the researchers and, after independent analysis, discussions concerning emerging interpretations were carried out. All researchers analysed each social media post so that a clear consensus was reached about the theme or category that was relevant. This enabled a shared understanding of the phenomenon to emerge through the process of critiquing one another's interpretations.

The researchers developed four major themes which arose as a result of the analysis of the online content: hate speech and threats of physical violence; sexualisation related to physical appearance; sexual propositions and desire for sexual contact; threats of sexualised violence. All of the data included within the following section 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.

Results

Over the two-week period of data collection, a total of 1095 pieces of abuse directed at these five women while they were performing were collected and analysed (a breakdown

of the number of abusive posts directed at each athlete can be seen in Table 2). There were approximately ten times the volume of abuse directed at these female athletes present on Twitter, compared to Facebook. Serena Williams was overwhelmingly the target of this abuse with 773 comments linked to her. This frequency of negative interaction compared to 210 instances of abuse concerning Sharapova, 54 instances of abuse linked to Wozniacki, 52 instances of abuse linked to Kvitova and six instances of abuse linked to Halep. All instances of abuse discussed in this manuscript appeared to be perpetrated by those who identified as male.¹

Violence targeting the athletes included comments that were direct and indirect in nature. Direct comments targeted the recipient through, for example, the use of the '@' symbol to send a message to a specific user or through the inclusion of a hashtag # as an identifier or link to the subject of the abuse. Non-direct violence included comments whereby a message was posted about, rather than directly to, an individual. Whether these tweets were directly picked up by the athlete or if accounts are remotely managed is unknown. Instead, this paper focusses on the content of the online interaction in order to illuminate the ways in which fans and followers direct vitriol at women athletes while in their place of work and the discourse of such content.

Insert Table 2 about here

Athletes were exposed to gender-based violence that threatened physical violence toward them and included examples of hate speech. Overwhelmingly, most of the abuse targeting female players was 'sexualised' in nature. Female athletes in this study were sexualised in a number of ways including: sexualisation related to physical appearance;

¹ This conclusion was reached based on the name of the individual and information pertaining to the gendered identity of the poster. If there was any doubt a discussion occurred between the research team members. However, we also acknowledge that there are a large number of spam and bot social media accounts that intimate human interaction. Nevertheless these adopted male personas and therefore we state that all posters 'appeared' to be male identified.

sexual propositions and desire for sexual contact; and threats of sexualised violence. Often this abuse is multi-faceted and intersectional, and the results, once grouped into themes, demonstrate an escalation of gendered cyber-violence targeting the female athletes in this study, beginning with gendered, seemingly well-intentioned comments and progressing to sexually explicit comments and the threat of rape. These themes are presented in the following sections followed by a discussion that aims to explore their importance in understanding the contemporary climate in which women athletes compete.

Hate speech and threats of physical violence

Comments made toward the female athletes often included examples of hate speech or e-bile. The online commentary rarely included direct reference to the athlete's performance and instead demonstrated the use of hostile language in interactions:

Serena Williams is a massive bitch and I hate her.

Cunt of the year award goes to @serenawilliams, fucking bitch

Serena Williams is a massive whore

The pejorative language adopted here is of importance. The adoption of terms such as bitch or whore are representative of gendered discourse and representations of masculinity in the interactions. Often such commentary is adopted in order to demean the subject and includes the use of terms recognised to be misogynistic and sexualised in nature that express toxic representations of women.

Comments targeting the athletes also included more threatening interactions, demonstrating examples of explicit and violent rhetoric toward female athletes on virtual platforms. Such comments were made within the running commentary of the game, and also in response to criticisms of the athlete targeted. For example, Sharapova is often criticised for the loud audible noise she makes while hitting the ball. While this

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often became the catalyst for a more sexualised tone to the commentary (highlighted in the later themes), it was also a cause for aggressive or threatening statements to be made:

I want to shove a sock down Maria Sharapova's throat so she can stop howling like an animal on the court.

Just put tennis on for 5 mins, that fking [sic] #MariaSharapova needs slapping. Silly grunting bitch...#loudmouthbitch

Maria grunts like a freaking whore #Wimbledon.

Overwhelmingly, Serena Williams was the target of this form of violence linked to her athletic or muscular appearance and her style of play. In relation to the comments below, the dominance of Williams in the women's game has not been celebrated, instead she is considered by fans or followers of the sport to be more masculine or criticised for playing like a male rather than meeting traditional feminine ideals in the style of her play:

Why isn't @serenawilliams playing mens tennis 😂? She's a fucking man 😂

Serena Williams 22nd grand slams today embarrassing just shows standard of woman game she's fucking man beast ugly fucker to! #bbctennis

In addition, Williams was the target of more overt threats of violence receiving comments such as:

Somebody kill Serena Williams. She is a man. @wimbledon2015

hope serena williams goes infertile the daft bitch

The aggressive nature of the commentary being posted while these athletes were performing should be noted. The interactions demonstrate the presence of violent, threatening and hostile interactions throughout the duration of performance. Much of the language adopted reinforces hierarchies of male domination and female subordination and provides evidence of the presence of inequitable gender relations present in virtual space performed by male followers of the sport.

Sexualisation related to physical appearance and sexiness (or lack thereof)

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There were a plethora of comments relating to the female athletes that were characterised by longing, loving, and appreciative terminology. Words such as pretty, beautiful, cute, lovely, appealing, princess, masterpiece, angel, delicious, dream girl, perfect, good looking, wonderful smile, super sexy body were common. Some examples of comments in this category include:

‘Petra, you have a wonderful smile and you are more beautiful when you are not playing! [smiley face]’ [about Kvitova];

‘Maria Sharapova - The most beautiful girl in sport You are a MASTERPIECE**** and A Gorgeous Grand Slam Goddess~Blessed with Beautiful Brilliance,, We Adore and Admire You Miss Maria Sharapova’;

@Wimbledon @Petra_Kvitova, you’re a babe!

‘I love you are the perfect woman so beautiful [sic]’ – [about Sharapova];

‘I wish to marry Maria Sharapova...sexy russian tennis bitch’;

‘Serena Williams.... What a fuckin woman!....I would let her beat the shit outta me !.... Wow!.... Thighs!... What a fuckin woman! #serenaist’; and

‘Maria Sharapova is hot as fuck’.

These statements serve to reinforce normative gendered stereotypes of “the perfect woman” and how male viewers of sport articulate this. It is important to note the familiarity in these statements and how they serve to sexualise the athlete. The comments were made during the time in which the athletes were competing yet focus on the athletes physical appearance and sexual attractiveness, rather than their ability to play tennis or on their on-court performance.

Comments were further made that negatively described the physical characteristics of the tennis players, however, these comments included elements of sexualisation, by focusing on their physical appearance. Athletes were called heifer, bulldozer, flat-chested, beast, she-man and having a giant ‘asset’. Other posts within this theme include:

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‘Simona Halep needs 2 put her big tits back on. It looked like a smart move when she was winning, but if u gunna lose lemme see em bounce hun’²; and

‘Serena Williams is built like a man. She just got a fat ass. She ain't cute to me either’.

Such posts focus on the physical characteristics (perceived or otherwise) of female tennis players. References to female tennis player’s body parts such as mouths, breasts, bottoms and thighs were common. Additionally, an assessment of the player’s physical desirability was also apparent through terms such as ‘sexy’, ‘most beautiful girl in sport’, ‘goddess’, ‘perfect woman’ and ‘beautiful’. Therefore, although a small minority of comments focused on physical capabilities and sports performance, most focused on the physical appearance of the female tennis players and some of this focus related to the sexual desirability of the athlete.

Sexualisation related to a desire for sexual contact or proposes sexual acts

A further theme relating to sexualisation focused on comments and posts that featured a desire for sexual contact or proposed sexual acts with the female tennis player. Generally, comments were categorised in this theme if the social media poster suggested that they ‘would’ like to engage in sex (rather than rape), and/or made suppositions about what the athlete would be like during sex but without notions of violence or excessive expletives.

Examples of comments relating to this theme include:

‘I’d fuck Serena Williams’;

‘I bet Serena Williams would be a fun, long fuck in bed. #Wimbledon’;

‘I just want Serena Williams [*sic*] booty man that's all I want’;

‘If she screams on the tennis court God help her neighbours when's she's getting shafted in bed like’ [about Sharapova];

² Halep underwent breast reduction surgery to improve her tennis game in 2009 as a 17 year old (see Gatto, 2018).

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

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

'can I have u please for one night... indigent [*sic*] proposal' [directed to Sharapova].

All of these comments refer to sexual acts between the tennis players and the poster or comments about the tennis players engaging in sexual acts. Not one of the posts relating to this theme refers to physical competence on the tennis court.

Sexualisation that was vile, sexually explicit or threatening

Sexualisation that was vile, sexually explicit or threatening included comments where suggestions are made that 'someone' should engage in sexual acts with the player.

Additionally, death threats related to gender or sexuality and violent sexual acts are also proposed by posters. Comments categorised in this theme are characterised by violent sexual suggestions and the use or overuse of expletives. Some examples of the comments relating to vile, sexually explicit or physical threats include:

Serena Williams is so fucking hot id [*sic*] fuck the shit out of that black ass;

Seriously though. Wouldn't Serena Williams just give ya [*sic*] the most savage fuck ever;

Maria Sharapova needs to take a time out and calm down the noise of her the cunt'

I'm sorry but I'd actually let Maria Sharapova shit on me #Wimbledon.

Additionally, a further comment categorised within this theme relates to the potential rape of one of the female tennis players, Serena Williams. This comment was:

Find the most racist white man in this world and if no one was looking he'd STILL try and fuck Serena Williams. Don't sleep.

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It would be remiss to not mention that Serena Williams was also the target of much intersectional vitriol, due to her size, strength, dominance of the game and her African-American heritage. All of these factors contributed to racialized, sexualised, sexist and homophobic abuse, often in the same comment or post. Examples of this included:

Serena Williams [*sic*] brolic as hell. She look like she'll snap a nigga's dick in half while ridin [*sic*] him;

We have a beautiful assassin @MariaSharapova playing a greyback gorilla @serenawilliams in the @wimbledon semi-finals today

The "Black Beast" next to you looks tempting!!! Do you think she like's man or prefers women??? With all those mucle[sic] you never know!!! [response to a picture of Wozniacki & Williams together]; and

If Serena Williams is built like a man then color me rainbow cause she's a man I wanna fuck the shit out of.

Similar to the previous theme uncovered in this research, the comments within this theme fail to focus on the ability and playing prowess of the athletes. As is evident from the comments and posts throughout the results section, there is clear escalation in the nature and severity of sexualised social media abuse directed at the female tennis players.

Discussion

This study provides an insight into how women athletes can experience virtual violence, specifically gender-based virtual violence while in their place of work. Gendered cyber-hate is recognised to be a pervasive problem which continues to pose significant challenges to the safety of women engaging in online spaces (Ging & Siapera; 2018; Rodríguez-Darías & Aguilera-Ávila, 2018; Megarry, 2014). Women athletes in this study were the targets of several forms of violent, misogynistic and sexist abuse perpetrated by (primarily male) fans or followers of their sport. The intersecting nature of gendered, racially and sexually oppressing language demonstrates the complexity of the abuse both directed at these women and in the online commentary surrounding their sport and performances. The

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online commentary range from comments that were longing to hostile, suggestive to physically and sexually threatening. The women in this study were either sexualised for living up to the status of the ideal female, or demonised for failing to do so; demonstrating the scope of violence directed at them and surrounding their performances in virtual spaces. While the behaviour these athletes experience is violent in nature it is essential to correctly gender the problem and highlight how much of the violence targeting these women was steeped in gendered-inequalities. As Mahoney and Love (2017) state “online misogyny reveals far more about men and manhood than it does about women and womanhood.” (p.8).

Gendered discourse can be considered to reinforce hierarchies of male domination and female subordination presented through inequitable gender relations. The comments found in our study vary from statements concerning the sexual desires of males, and their representations of the optimal female form (played out in the representations of the tennis players) to more overt violent and threatening comments or interactions. Such interactions are examples of virtual manhood enacted by fans or followers of sport performed in technologically augmented interactions surrounding women’s sport. Feminist scholars such as Jane (2014), Mantilla (2013) and Mahoney and Love (2017) believe that online trolls adopt violent rhetoric primarily in order to dominate, silence, and control women. As Mantilla suggests: “harassment is about patrolling gender boundaries and using insults, hate, and threats of violence and/or rape to ensure that women and girls are either kept out of, or play subservient roles in, male **Football Culture** (2017, p. 568). suggests that violent interactions in virtual spaces can enable (some) males to “weaponize misogyny and racism in a bid to protect these spaces as white male” (p. 517). Moloney and Love (2017) refer to such acts as virtual manhood. Virtual Manhood occurs when males adopt “technologically facilitated textual and visual cues to signal a masculine self in online social spaces, enforce hegemonic sexuality and gender norms, oppress women, and keep men

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‘in the box’” (Moloney & Love, 2017, p.1). Sporting spaces are recognised as one such example of male-dominated environments entrenched in patriarchal masculinities.

The online commentary targeting the women athletes while violent in nature was often coupled with statements that aimed to present these interactions as jokes or include attempts at humour. Laughing emoticons or the use of text language such as LOL (laugh out loud) were present, perhaps to diffuse the impact of the comment made. Cole (2015) suggests that such actions are implemented in order to neutralise a sense of threat. For example, she states how the unambiguously violent and threatening comment “You should be raped!” will often be followed by “LOL,” a laughing emoticon, or a joke (Cole, 2015, p.357). The inclusion of such can diffuse the impact of content and as a result act as a mask to the severity of the interaction. Sexist humour is recognised as a tool which is adopted in order to normalise and/or trivialise gender-based discrimination (Lockyer & Savigny, 2019). Often the violence targeting the women athletes online was subtle and hidden through humour, therefore reducing its likelihood to be recognised as violent content. As a result, these interactions often go unreported and therefore lack regulation or policing in virtual spaces.

In discussing the findings, it is important to note that while these comments can be viewed through examining the content of each tweet or post individually, they should also be considered and examined in multiplicity. When combined, the interactions demonstrate the presence of misogyny in the online commentary directed at this group of high profile women. Online misogyny is both steeped in, and immensely entangled with racism, homophobia and transphobia in ways that require intersectional feminist analyses (Sunden & Paasonen, 2018). As Jane (2017) suggested, the hopes of digital technology in reducing barriers of race, gender or economic status have failed to be held true; instead these spaces reflect and in some cases amplify social, economic and cultural inequalities in terms of markers such as race, gender and class. Alongside workplace harassment that occurs in face to face settings (such as being

leered at, propositioned or experiencing other inappropriate behaviours at work), new variations of this form of abuse are occurring with the advent of digital communications and the reach they present. Feminist scholars are now pointing to the fact that online abuse and harassment may constitute a workers right issue and is likely to occur more often to women who have public profiles (such as athletes) (see Jane, 2018). As an emerging area of research, findings here support and extend the work of Jane (2018). Women athletes can experience and be exposed to ridicule, threats of physical and sexualised violence and become sexualised and racialised subjects in virtual spaces while in their place of work. Virtual worlds provide a space whereby women (especially high profile women), can face exploitation and violence, often without consequence.

Limitations and Direction for Future Research

As with any study, there are a number of limitations that should be highlighted. Firstly, by design this study did not seek to examine the prevalence of gender-based violence experienced by this group therefore conclusions cannot be made in relation to how much or often women athletes will be exposed to online vitriol. The data-set utilised in this study is reliable but cannot be considered complete and therefore provides a snapshot of the experience of violence these athletes were exposed to. That said, this study does provide the first systematic investigation of how a group of women athletes can be exposed to gender based violence and establishes the groundwork for future research in this area. The sample of athletes and data collection sites were limited as was the capacity to examine the abuse over a greater period of time or number of sites. Future research could adopt more intuitive scraping tools to truly examine the prevalence of abuse across a far wider variety of platforms and temporal frames of reference. This paper only examined the negative interactions directed at these athletes online. While illuminating the presence of violence and exploring how such violence can present in virtual spaces, a focus on the negative perhaps misses the complexity

of interactions in virtual spaces. Future studies should consider questions and methodologies that enable exploration of interaction online that capture the whole commentary surrounding women's sporting events in order to demonstrate a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity and depth of online interaction.

Conclusion

In line with the sentiments of Jane (2014a), to not speak the unspeakable and perpetuate the tyranny of silence about the sexually explicit nature of the material would be to not challenge it. The reality of this kind of abuse is not upheld if offensive words are hidden or edited. As Jane (2014a) notes, women who read such posts about themselves and others do not get a warning. As researchers, these are not our words, but they are a true representation of the vile and violent abuse that the women athletes in this study and their fans can be subjected to. As such, it was pertinent to provide an accurate depiction of these posts and comments to show this culture in action.

Regardless of the intentions of those who post abuse online, such abuse certainly affects the way that athletes think about themselves and sometimes how they act and engage in public and private spaces. In particular, further research and discussion in arenas of law and government about the notion of free speech vs the right to post abusive, vile and violent comments is necessary. Thus far, much resistance to any regulation or litigation has been encountered due to a powerful lobby of 'free speech' and perhaps again we must re-engage in discussions about whether free speech that threatens and frightens simply for the sake of threatening or frightening is permissible. As demonstrated through the work of Amnesty International (2017) women who experience abuse in online settings often experience fear

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and anxiety concerning their physical safety in real world settings; the impact of such abuse on female athletes and their capacity to feel safe when performing is worthy of exploration and should be of importance.

This research adds to the understanding of the types of abuse experienced by women in online spaces. However, this study provides just a snapshot of the culture of online abuse experienced by female athletes as an example of one group of high profile women. Further research of different sports or athletes is required to more fully understand the depth and breadth of the nature and effect of virtual violence, particularly as it relates to the notion of workplace harassment and abuse. The safety of women athletes and the need to educate individuals concerning the threats posed by virtual spaces should be on the agenda for sporting organisations.

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