

Online violence and the 2024 Paris Olympic Games

Social media has changed the ways that people can communicate, allowing increased connection and access to information. However, it has also created environments where negative behaviours are present and may even be fostered. The attributes that make online spaces appealing such as freedom of expression, perceived anonymity, reduced inhibitions, and open sharing of thoughts also contribute to the challenges in regulating and policing these environments. As a result, online environments are now recognised as spaces where violence is often an accepted and expected part of interaction and social commentary.

Online violence serves as a reflection of the broader social dynamics, where gendered, racialised, and sexualised power struggles are often played out in extreme forms. Although anyone might encounter violence online, women and girls are disproportionately the targets of online violence and oppression in the form of gender-based violence (GBV). The likelihood of being a target is even greater for high-profile or celebrity women including politicians, journalists, and athletes.

Developments in artificial intelligence have enabled companies not only to remove discriminatory content but also to prevent it from being posted and report offending users, thereby shielding users from harmful material and facilitating investigations. This technology is increasingly used in various sports contexts to protect those competing from online violence. These technologies shift the responsibility for online safety away from individuals, easing the burden of safety work required to navigate online environments.

There has been a growing concern surrounding the relationship between online violence and major sporting events. Recent reports on the frequency of online violence during the 2022 FIFA World Cup support this assertion. The frequency and volume of abusive messages that can target particular figures (such as athletes or officials) or events further enhances the severity of the impact on recipients. It is recognised that a contagion effect can occur in online spaces whereby online vitriol spreads, along with a corresponding increase in tolerance for these behaviours in online social commentary.

In light of such risk, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) enacted protocols, including artificial intelligence (AI), to police online environments during the Paris Games. The need for this was heightened due to the explosion of social media use by athletes, broadcasters, and organisers to an extent that the Paris Games were referred to as the TikTok Games.

The IOC utilised Threat Matrix, an AI surveillance tool from Signify, to police online spaces during the Games as part of a 'package of safeguarding systems'. Other delegations added additional measures to prioritise the safety of their teams online. For example, Team Germany partnered with Sport Radar and Arwen to protect German athletes online. Despite the measures that the IOC

and its partners implemented, online violence at the Paris Olympics was described as "rampant".

The case of Algerian boxer Imane Khelif, who won the Olympic gold medal in the women's 66 kg boxing competition is of note. She was the subject of considerable online GBV during the Games from a range of high-profile individuals. According to Variety, J.K. Rowling and Elon Musk were named in a criminal complaint that Khelif filed with Paris Prosecutor's Office (National Center for the Fight Against Online Hatred). Not just athletes at risk, the head of the IOC's Safe Sport Unit, Kirsty Burrows, became the target of abuse online after speaking about the IOC safe sport services at the games and subsequently coming under scrutiny based on the case of Imane Khelif. Burrows has similarly filed a complaint with the Paris Prosecutor's Office.

The involvement of celebrity figures in online violence is not a new occurrence. Such individuals, acting as celebrity online violence perpetrators, use their platforms to abuse, encourage violence online, and often spread unchecked misinformation.

Abuse can also occur in the aftermath of major events, when athletes may not be protected in the same ways. For example, American gymnast Jordan Chiles said that she was exposed to racial violence on social media, which was linked to the ongoing controversy surrounding the decision to strip her of a bronze medal.

Australian breakdancer Rachael 'Raygun' Gunn received 'devastating' abuse both during and following her participation at Paris 2024. An anonymous online petition was registered that criticised her selection for the Australian team, which according to Australian Olympic officials should be considered "bullying and harassment and is defamatory".

Our initial analysis from the Paris 2024 Summer Olympics has shown that online violence remains a pervasive global issue. It must be recognised as a serious and immediate threat to the safety of those targeted, as well as to individuals who witness violence on online platforms. Although steps have been taken to keep those involved in sport safe in online spaces, it is clear that online violence continued to cut through and thus infiltrate the Games experience. It is likely that the sheer volume of online violence and its evolving nature challenge even the most sophisticated technologies.

Manifestations of online violence contribute to a new kind of anxiety for performers that needs to be specifically addressed as a global public health crisis. Given the complex global nature of online violence — shaped by cultural norms, policies, and legal systems across different regions — it is crucial to focus on safeguarding online spaces as these online environments play an increasingly vital role in society. There is much that can be learned from what did and did not work at these Games, allowing future iterations to be safer.



Dr Emma Kavanagh

Associate Professor of Sport Psychology and Safe Sport and an HCPC-Registered Sport and Exercise Psychologist. With extensive experience in high-performance environments, she has prepared athletes and teams for major global competitions, including the Commonwealth, Olympic, and Paralympic Games.

Email: ekavanagh@bournemouth.ac.uk
Twitter: [@EmjKavanagh](https://twitter.com/EmjKavanagh)



Dr Keith D. Parry

Head of the Department of Sport and Event Management at Bournemouth University and an Adjunct Fellow of Western Sydney University. His recent research has focussed on media coverage and framing of a variety of topics such as LGBT inclusivity, women's football, concussion in association football and rugby, and racism.

Email: kparry@bournemouth.ac.uk
Twitter: [@sportinaus](https://twitter.com/sportinaus)