



**SPORT INTEGRITY  
AUSTRALIA**

# **Online abuse and better practice recommendations**

for Australian National Sporting Organisations and  
National Sporting Organisations for People with Disability



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

In the spirit of reconciliation we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community.

We pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We recognise the outstanding contribution Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to sport in Australia and celebrate the power of sport to promote reconciliation and reduce inequality.



Artwork by Chernee Sutton

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## CONTACT US

Enquiries about the licence and any use of this document can be sent to:

Research | Sport Integrity Australia, PO Box 1744 Fyshwick, ACT 2609 AUSTRALIA

Phone 1800 161 361 | Email [research@sportintegrity.gov.au](mailto:research@sportintegrity.gov.au)

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# CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ..... 2
- RESEARCH METHODS..... 5
- RESULTS..... 6
  - Nature and impact of online abuse..... 6
  - Trigger events ..... 7
  - Contributing factors..... 7
  - Barriers and conduits to mitigating strategies..... 8
- MITIGATING STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS..... 9
- REFERENCES ..... 11



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Failure to protect people in a sporting environment from bullying, intimidation, discrimination, or harassment is a recognised threat to the integrity of sport. This can occur both in person and online. Due to the increase in online abuse and less developed interventions, Sport Integrity Australia (SIA) and the University of Canberra collaborated on this project to explore current approaches, experiences and perceptions of those approaches.

**The research was conducted for SIA by Joanna Wall Tweedie, Aaron C.T. Smith and Catherine Ordway from the University of Canberra Research Institute for Sport and Exercise**

This research examined current approaches by major sporting organisations to address online abuse, and also developed recommendations for mitigating strategies. Interviews were conducted with 24 personnel from a sample of 19 International and Australian major sporting organisations.

From the interview data, themes were generated pertaining to the nature of the abuse, trigger events, contributing factors, barriers to intervention, conduits to intervention, and mitigating strategies. The research findings informed recommendations including:

- **Clear policies and reporting mechanisms** that explicitly recognise online abuse.
- **Mitigating strategies need to be context specific**, as online abuse varies across sport and organisations.
- **Mental health surveillance** recognising online abuse.
- **Education of key stakeholders should include athletes, media, and commercial partners** and be designed in response to identified contributing factors and trigger events.
- **Cooperation and coordination** across levels and sports is needed.
- **Provision of online protection** can be incorporated in commercial contracts.
- **Recognise that women and participants with marginalised identities** may disproportionately experience online abuse.
- **It imperative to incorporate the participant experience** in the development and implementation of mitigating practices.

This research was a critical step in examining approaches by a range of sport organisations to address online abuse. Future research should aim to further understand the impacts of online abuse and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies.



# INTRODUCTION

Online abuse is a widespread problem across society. It can be defined as "direct or non-direct online communication that is stated in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulating, threatening or lewd manner and is designed to elicit fear, emotional and psychological upset, distress, alarm, or feelings of inferiority" (Kavanaugh et al., 2016, p. 788).

The problematic behaviours are also recognised as psychological violence (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). One distinguishing feature of online abuse compared to other forms of maltreatment is the extent to which it is evident to a broad audience and may have impact beyond the individual target. Thus, efforts to mitigate online abuse and its associated harms may have benefits beyond the sport participants and positively contribute to perceptions of sport and promoting a safeguarding culture.

Women in sport are subjected to significant levels of online abuse (Burch et al., 2024; Kavanaugh et al., 2019). In Australia, media and public attention have been drawn to the issue when women in sport have received extensive misogynistic and sexualised online

abuse in response to published images and commentary.

Australian athletes have spoken publicly about the harmful impacts online abuse has had on their mental health. The problem of online abuse also extends to officials and into sport at the community-level.

The public nature of online abuse ensures that perceptions of sport can be negatively impacted, and involvement as a spectator or participant discouraged.

In some sport contexts, women receive a higher volume of online abuse compared to men.

Studies for World Athletics suggest that at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, women athletes received **87% of all online abuse** and at the 2022 World Athletic Championships, women received **60% of the online abuse** (World Athletics, 2021; 2022).

In the 2024 NCAA March Madness Championships (basketball), **women received almost three times the abuse** compared to men (Signify Group, 2024).

Irrespective of the volume of abuse, it seems that for women, online abuse tends to be especially sexualised and misogynistic (Akhtar & Morrison, 2019; Signify Group, 2024).

Strategies to mitigate online abuse are important given the detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing (Pascoe et al., 2024). Also, without adequate interventions, online abuse can be normalised, and observers can be discouraged from engaging online themselves.

In elite sport, women athletes are especially dependent on social media promotion to attract interest and commercial support to counterbalance the lower earnings and media coverage compared to men's sport (Guerin, 2017).

There can be ambiguity about responsibility for safeguarding sport participants in online spaces and

sporting organisations at every level may be ill-equipped to adopt appropriate mechanisms (Hayday et al., 2024).

The purpose of the research project was to identify effective practices and policies for reducing the impact of online abuse on women participating in sport. While the focus is on women, many of the issues and recommended strategies are relevant to all sport participants, and the report considers these broader applications where appropriate.

## Research objectives

1. Examine current approaches by sporting organisations to address online abuse.
2. Explore perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders at sporting organisations where strategies to address online abuse have been implemented.
3. Develop best practice recommendations for Australian national sporting organisations to address online abuse.

# RESEARCH METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across a sample of 19 sporting organisations (international and Australian domestic), to include a total of 24 interview participants.

The interviewees were employees directly responsible for the relevant policies and practices. The organisations represent critical cases that have demonstrated online harm mitigation strategies and were selected to ensure a variety of geographic and sport contexts. Organisations of different sizes and governance levels were deliberately chosen to understand the approaches chosen.

The sample comprises 7 international sporting federations, 2 major sporting organisations from North America, 6 Australian national sporting organisations and 2 Australian players' associations. These organisations may have a greater focus on high performance sport. Two smaller Australian state sporting organisations were purposely included, in recognition that online abuse occurs at all levels of sport, and that resourcing can impact the capacity to respond to online abuse.

The sample included organisations specifically focused on women's sport or when the organisation's purview was both men and woman's sport, the interviewees were asked about online abuse impacting participants broadly and specifically about women sport participants.

The interview guide was designed to examine approaches, perceptions and experiences of online abuse, and attenuating strategies. The project was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Canberra. Signed and verbally provided informed consent was obtained from all research participants and participation was completely voluntary. Only the researchers had access to the individual information provided by participants. In any publication the privacy and confidentiality of individuals will be protected.

Video interviews were conducted by a researcher experienced in qualitative research and trained in mental health first aid and trauma informed care. The interviews were recorded and lasted 45–75 minutes. The interview transcripts were coded in NVivo, a computer software program used for managing qualitative data. Thematic analysis was used as an analytic method for identifying patterns within a dataset and for describing and interpreting the meaning of these patterns (Braun & Clark, 2019). From the interview data, themes were generated pertaining to the nature of the abuse, trigger events, contributing factors, barriers to intervention, conduits to intervention and mitigating strategies.

# RESULTS

## NATURE AND IMPACT OF ONLINE ABUSE

Across all the organisations, there was recognition that the problem of online abuse is high and of worsening prevalence. Some of the organisations had measured the prevalence and sentiment of online abuse, including through the use of third-party data science providers. For others in the research sample, their understanding of the problem was based on general observations or internal reporting. **Table 1** summarises the various types of abuse reported by the organisations.

Note that not all types of abuse were reported by all interviewees and there was variation in the manifestation of online abuse in each context. There was also variation across sport contexts as to whether women were disproportionately targeted. This variation can occur between sports and between levels of competition within a sport. For example, for some sports, it was reported that women received less online abuse due to the lower profile compared to the men's sport. However, a consistent observation was that for women targeted, the online abuse readily and rapidly becomes misogynistic and sexualised.

Online abuse may come from members of the same sport, people who are not members of the sport and from anonymous accounts

*Table 1 – Nature of online abuse*

| Nature of online abuse    |
|---------------------------|
| Misogynistic              |
| Racist                    |
| Antisemitic               |
| Sexualised                |
| Homophobic                |
| Transphobic               |
| Nationalistic             |
| Body shaming              |
| Impersonation             |
| Slander                   |
| Blackmail extortion       |
| Threatened violence       |
| Targeting family member/s |

The impact of online abuse is summarised by an interviewee from a players' association who stated, "once you read that...you cannot reverse the harm". The impact that online abuse can have on sport participants is summarised in **Table 2**. Some of the reported impacts will have secondary effects. For example, if an elite athlete responds to online abuse by withdrawing from social media, there may be impact on their sponsorship and promotion opportunities.

The sport organisations reported gaining understanding of these impacts via participant surveys, engaging with player associations, participant representative groups, internal reporting and through consultation with wellbeing managers.

These research findings capture the perceptions of the organisational actors. The individual experiences of those targeted by online abuse is a critical area for future research.

*Table 2 – Impact of online abuse*

| Impact of online abuse              |
|-------------------------------------|
| Reduced mental health and wellbeing |
| Negative body image                 |
| Distraction                         |
| Perception of added pressure        |
| Safety fears                        |
| Normalisation of abuse              |
| Withdrawal from social media        |

## TRIGGER EVENTS

Online abuse can occur without any obvious warning or catalyst. Often online abuse is in response to a specific incident – a trigger event – that prompts a reaction on social media that is driven by emotion and can showcase automatic prejudice and instant stereotyping (Kilvington, 2021). **Table 3** depicts trigger events identified by the sample.

Across the research sample, one widely recognised trigger event was when attention is drawn to an individual from others including their own organisation, commercial partners or the media. The abuse can follow whether the spotlight cast on the individual is of a positive or negative light and may blindside the targeted individual.

A clear illustration comes from an international sport governing body who identified that press conferences or media segments where a referee was publicly criticised clearly correlated with spikes in online abuse targeting the referee. In response, the governing body introduced targeted internal and media education, as well as regulations for press conferences whilst still ensuring opportunities for referee feedback and evaluation.

*Table 3 – Trigger events to online abuse*

| Trigger events          | Description  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Spotlight on individual | Attention drawn to the individual from another entity which may include the organisation, commentary in the media, sponsors, gambling providers. |
| On-field performance    | Performing either well or poorly.  |
| Political comments      | Individual's comments on politically divisive issues.  |
| Engage with abuse       | Responding to abuse can have an escalating effect.   |
| Reference to sexuality  | Public comments about or demonstration of sexual orientation.  |

## CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

There was wide recognition of the important role that social media plays for sport participants at all competition levels. For elite athletes, social media is essential for endorsements and fan engagement. For grassroots sport, social media is critical for sport promotion and community building. An interviewee from one of the Australian National Sporting Organisations explained, "the social media online world is also a great source of support, encouragement and fostering a brilliant environment within [the sport]. But then we also must make sure that we address the challenges associated with it as well".

Gambling was recognised across several sport contexts as a factor contributing to online abuse with broad recognition that athletes experienced online abuse from angry disgruntled gamblers. The relationship between gambling and online harassment was evident across a variety of sport contexts including, tennis, rugby union, rugby league, basketball, football and US college athletics. One interviewee recognised that gambling companies can promote individual athletes for specific bets; essentially "putting targets on their backs" for online abuse.

Other contributing factors were also identified (**Table 4**).

*Table 4 – Contributing factors to online abuse*

| Contributing factors              | Description   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| Social media needs and pressures  | The essential and increased need for social media engagement for endorsement and sponsorship opportunities, sport promotion and community building. |
| Gambling                          | Sport participants experience online abuse from angry disgruntled gamblers.   |
| High profile                      | The high or growing profile of the sport or specific athlete/s.   |
| Online environment                | Characteristics of virtual spaces that contribute to and exacerbate online abuse including prolonged access, faceless targets and anonymity.        |
| Normalised abuse in sport         | Abuse and harassment may be considered a regular feature of sport and sport fandom.   |
| Gender or marginalised identities | Marginalised characteristics of the specific athlete/ participant.  |

## BARRIERS AND CONDUITS TO MITIGATING STRATEGIES

Research interviewees identified factors that restrain or assist the organisation's capacity to address online abuse (**Table 5 and 6**). Some factors were identified as having the potential to be either a barrier or conduit for mitigating strategies. For example, limited budget and human resources can be perceived to constrain the organisation's ability to respond to, prevent or manage online abuse. Conversely, adequate resource allocation can support the organisation's capacity to implement mitigation strategies.

A key factor highlighted in the interviews was the importance of organisations having buy-in of those

that the interventions are designed to safeguard. If the participants are not on board with the mitigating strategies, the effectiveness is limited.

This factor underscores the necessity of involving the participant in the development of mitigating strategies that would align with a trauma-informed approach (e.g., Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

Interviewees reported efforts to engage sport participants in the implementation of strategies designed to address online abuse and there remained challenges to deploy strategies especially when these were proactive in nature.

*Table 5 – Barriers to mitigating strategies*

| Barriers to mitigating strategies | Description  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Limited knowledge and research    | A lack of understanding and evidence about online abuse and effective remedies.  |
| Budget and resources              | Finite budget or human resources constrain the organisation's ability to respond to, prevent or manage online abuse.   |
| Stigma and acceptance             | Reluctance of participants to report or seek help for online abuse because of perceived stigma and/or an acceptance that the abuse is part of their role or job.   |
| Engagement by participants        | Limited acceptance of and participation in strategies aimed at mitigating online maltreatment and harms by those whom the interventions are aimed at safeguarding. |
| Fragmented sports system          | Challenge to implement and coordinate interventions across different sport organisations and sport levels.   |

*Table 6 – Conduits to mitigating strategies*

| Conduits to mitigating strategies       | Description  |
|---|--|
| Clear policies and reporting processes. | Lucidity and simplicity of reporting procedures when online abuse occurs.  |
| Leadership buy-in                       | Management's recognition of the problem and support of interventions.  |
| Resource allocation                     | Budget or human resources to support the organisation's ability to respond to, prevent or manage online abuse.   |
| Buy-in by targets                       | The acceptance of and participation in strategies aimed at mitigating online maltreatment and harms by those whom the interventions are aimed at safeguarding. |
| Internal advocate/champion              | Person/s within the organisation that promotes awareness of the problem of online abuse and/or advocates for interventions.                                    |

# MITIGATING STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the outset, this study was recognised as a preliminary step to examine better practices and policies aimed at limiting the impact of online harm on sport participants.

Themes from the interview data were generated pertaining to the nature of the abuse, trigger events, contributing factors, barriers to intervention, conduits to intervention and mitigating strategies. The subsequent recommendations for sporting organisations were informed by the developed themes from the interviews, existent literature, and trauma-informed practice.

Overarching principles for sporting organisations to consider:

1. Mitigating strategies must be adapted for the specific sport and organisational context.
2. Participant voices must be incorporated in the development of contextualised mitigating strategies.

The collated research data informed mapping of the broader patterns in the presentation of online abuse. However, across the research sample, each sporting organisation was reported to have unique characteristics in the presentation of online abuse.


The first consideration for sporting organisation's strategies is what the problem of online abuse looks like for their specific sport context. The identification of contributing factors, trigger events and individuals at risk, allows the organisation to implement targeted interventions.

These factors may vary between different levels of sport as well as between sports.

Several organisations in the research sample utilised third-party data science firms to measure and monitor online abuse. Depending on the size and budget of the organisation, these services can be used for initial measurement of the problem or ongoing detection.

The research findings highlighted it is essential to incorporate a participant voice in developing mitigating strategies and doing so can also facilitate buy-in from other participants. Incorporating participant voices is essential to a trauma-informed approach to safeguarding (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

In addition to the overarching principles, a series of recommendations are made for sporting organisations (**Table 7**). These recommendations should be considered a collection of strategies to choose from, rather than a checklist, in recognition that mitigating strategies should be tailored to the context.



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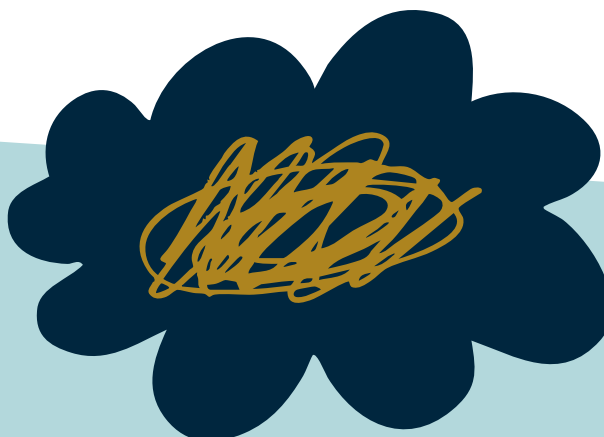


Table 7 – Strategies and recommendations to mitigate online abuse

| Recommendation   | Description  |
|--|--|
| Clear policy recognition of online abuse and reporting mechanisms          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Clarify organisations' role and responsibilities</li> <li>■ Centralised and easy reporting of online abuse</li> <li>■ Code of conduct</li> <li>■ Participant/member protection</li> <li>■ Safeguarding policy</li> <li>■ Mental health policy</li> </ul>  |
| Understand problem for the organisation/sport                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Participant survey</li> <li>■ Quantitative measures (data science firms)</li> <li>■ Identify trigger events</li> <li>■ Assess organisation's contribution</li> <li>■ Pilot intervention</li> <li>■ Report sharing</li> </ul>  |
| Mental health surveillance   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Mental health social media policy</li> <li>■ Online harms recognised by wellbeing support personnel</li> <li>■ Event-specific support</li> </ul>  |
| Education  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Clarification of (member) organisations' role and responsibilities</li> <li>■ For sport participants: marketing/ social media advice</li> <li>■ Online security, awareness of problem, reporting process, interventions and support available</li> <li>■ Incorporate online harms in mental health and safeguarding</li> <li>■ Educate key stakeholders regarding problem and contribution</li> </ul> |
| Provisions for online protection in commercial contracts                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Gambling partners</li> <li>■ Sponsors</li> </ul>  |
| Cooperation across levels and sport  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Shared services</li> <li>■ Peer-to-Peer learning</li> <li>■ Funding shared</li> <li>■ Collaboration with key partners such as e-safety commissioner and wellbeing services</li> </ul>   |
| Research and evidence  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Accurate and longitudinal prevalence data</li> <li>■ Research examining the impacts</li> <li>■ Evaluation of interventions</li> </ul>   |
| Lobbying for regulation and/or response to address or prevent online abuse | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Social Media Platforms</li> <li>■ Gambling Entities</li> <li>■ Legislation</li> </ul>   |

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