"You Belong in the Kitchen": Social Media, Virtual Manhood Acts, and Women Strength Sport Athletes' Experiences of Gender-Based Violence Online

Abstract

The virtual world has transformed sport and leisure spaces, including how we communicate and interact with others globally. Despite the positives of social media, it is also a space which may facilitate hate, abuse, discrimination, and gender-based violence. In this study, women strength sport athletes' experiences and perceptions of gender-based violence through the enactment of Virtual Manhood Acts (VMAs) are explored, using interviews with thirteen competitive women athletes. Findings reveal that VMAs are used to regulate gender norms and ideologies, promote misogyny, and endorse a patriarchal and hierarchical gender order. In addition, women experience appearance-related commentary and gender questioning, which arguably reduces their worth to their appearance, with expectations of conformity to the 'male gaze'. Finally, VMAs are targeted towards women through accusations of steroid use and through criticism of form and technique, reinforcing strength sports as a male-domain and marginalising women's achievements. While previous research has analysed the existence of VMAs online, in this study the importance of considering women's perceptions of VMAs, and the wider impact they can have, is further considered.

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Introduction

The virtual world has transformed leisure, including how we interact with others on a global scale (Ellen MacPherson and Gretchen Kerr 2021). It is a space which is embedded in our everyday lives, with online communities such as social media accessible continuously. Social media may be a tool for self-promotion, both personally and professionally (Chelsea Litchfield, Emma Kavanagh, Jaquelyn Osborne and Ian Jones 2016), and is used by everyday people, brands/organisations, celebrities, and sportspeople. It is also prominent in many people's lives; at the time of writing, Instagram has in the realm of 600 million users (MacPherson and Kerr 2021). Despite these opportunities, these spaces may also amplify inequities, enabling – rather than challenging – hate and discrimination (Litchfield et al. 2016; MacPherson and Kerr 2021). The widespread nature of online hate may be partly due to the perceived anonymity of commentary, whereby individuals hide their identities to express discriminatory attitudes (Stacey Pope, John Williams and Jamie Cleland 2022). In addition, not directly seeing the consequences of online behaviour – a form of detachment – may result in threats and inappropriate language being more prominent (MacPherson and Kerr 2021). This is supported by Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016), who argue norms and values in online spaces may differ from the 'real' world, with abusive online behaviours often transpiring at levels considered unacceptable offline.

Several terms have been used to reflect online hate, including disciplinary rhetoric (Kirsti K. Cole 2015), virtual maltreatment (Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks 2016), e-bile (Emma A. Jane 2014) and online harassment (Dunja Antunovic 2019), amongst others. More specifically to abuse predominantly targeting women, the terms gendered cyberhate

(Emma A. Jane 2018) and gender-trolling (Karla Mantilla 2013) have been used. In line with Emma Kavanagh, Chelsea Litchfield and Jaquelyn Osborne (2019), the term online gender-based violence is utilised in this paper. Acknowledging the gender-based nature of online violence is important, as women are disproportionately the recipients and less likely to be the perpetrators (Jane 2014). Online gender-based violence may reflect wider cultural shifts and misogyny; commentary online often reflects toxic beliefs about women with real-life consequences, including sexually violent messages and threats of bodily harm, contributing to rape culture (Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan 2017; Mairead Eastin Moloney and Tony P. Love 2018). This has also been evident in '*the manosphere*', a collection of online men's interest groups opposing feminism, known for their extreme misogyny and threats of violence towards women (Brigid McCarthy 2021). To explain this, Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018) discusses how expressions of feminism have become more widespread and are often circulated in digital spaces such as social media, a form of *'popular feminism'*. However, there is a networked relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny, with *'the manosphere'* and other anti-feminist sites also able to widen their reach substantially through the digital age.

Research has demonstrated that threats of violent sex acts, death threats, and unwanted sexual advances may be targeted at women as a means of 'disciplinary rhetoric' (Cole 2015; Jane 2014). For example, they may be used as 'silencing strategies' to attempt to exclude women's voices and remove their participation in online spaces (Lumsden and Morgan 2017), particularly those women who speak out about sexism (Moloney and Love 2018). Women are also more likely to be impacted and have an emotional response to online hate, such as feeling distressed or unsafe (Jane 2014). In addition, there is evidence that the impact goes much further than virtual harm and can be mapped to more familiar forms of offline violence. For instance, women in a variety of professions have lost freelance work and missed deadlines and

work opportunities due to shutting down apps where they have been targeted, with others unable to express themselves as they would like online (Jane, 2018).

Antunovic (2019) has theorised women are more likely to experience gender-based violence in male-dominated fields, including sport. This may be due to ideas women are taking up space in a 'man's world' or are not meeting 'male standards' (Kavanagh, Litchfield and Osborne 2019). There is also an assumption of male superiority in sport (for instance through dichotomous gender categorisations) exacerbated by the media (evidenced through sports coverage which trivialises women athletes), which may result in misogynistic tendencies towards sportswomen (Kenneth Merrill, Aidan Bryant, Emily Dolan and Siying Chang 2015). This has recently been highlighted by Pope, Williams and Cleland (2022), through a survey which revealed a multiplicity of masculinities were in existence amongst men football fans. Although some men exhibited more progressive masculinities and recognised the importance of tackling gender inequities, overtly misogynistic masculinities dominated. Many men in the study were hostile and resistant to women's sport, making overtly sexist 'jokes' revealing deeply engrained misogyny (Pope, Williams and Cleland 2022).

This study focuses on women's sport, specifically the experiences of women strength sport athletes. Although there is no official definition of what 'strength sports' entail, in this study they are considered sports where the key focus is on muscular development through lifting weights (such as bodybuilding) and/or those which are largely based on objective measurements such as how much weight is lifted (for example powerlifting). As strength sports have traditionally been considered masculine spaces, women may be perceived as violating a social norm through their participation and success, as they may not be considered to meet traditional expectations of femininity. This has been highlighted in previous research; despite ideals of femininity changing over time – and varying based on social and cultural factors (Christian Edwards, Győző Molnár and David Tod, 2022) - studies have found that gaining

muscle is often still coded as 'masculine,' thus having 'too much' muscle may be considered inappropriate for women (Shelly A. McGrath and Ruth A. Chananie-Hill 2009). For women in bodybuilding specifically, they may be labelled gender outlaws, disregarding traditional ideals of white, western femininity (Chris Shilling and Tanya Bunsell 2009). Previous research has also suggested that those who do not conform to expectations aligned with their social group (for example, women exhibiting masculinity) may be the recipient of public shaming to reinforce those norms (Macpherson and Kerr 2021).

Research has demonstrated women in strength sports may also resist these traditional gendered ideas. For instance, there is increasing evidence that many women are eagerly training in the weights areas of gyms and aspiring to muscularity goals, previously considered male domains (Alexis Sossa Rojas 2022). Jan Brace-Govan (2004) also discusses feelings of empowerment and confidence amongst women weightlifters, with greater concern for what their bodies can do as opposed to being appearance-focussed. Studies by Assaf Lev and Esther Hertzog (2017) and Esther Hertzog and Assaf Lev (2019) suggest gym environments promote strong gender dictates, evident though the 'male gaze' and the promotion of traditional ideals of femininity; however, some women gym users cautiously resist gender norms, in turn threatening the gender order. They do this through lifting heavy weights, revealing their muscular bodies, ignoring stares from men, and defacing sexist posters. Thus, women in strength sports may resist traditional gendered ideas; however, they may also be the recipients of public shaming and gender-based violence in offline as well as virtual spaces such as social media.

Virtual Manhood Acts (VMAs)

To further understand gender-based violence online, it is important to study masculinity, and the theory of virtual manhood acts (VMAs) may be useful for this. According

to Moloney and Love (2018), VMAs are valuable to consider the role of men and masculinities in online misogyny, as well as how gender is an action performed by men to promote difference (from women) and inequality (a sense of superiority). They are therefore a tool for men to demonstrate power, through signalling a masculine self and enforcing oppressive gender norms online; these processes of domination are arguably reflective of hegemonic masculinity (Moloney and Love 2018). The concept derives from 'manhood acts', a term originally coined by Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe (2009), who argue boys learn masculinity through upbringing and institutions such as the media, often learning to reject identity codes associated with girls/women. Manhood acts therefore demonstrate how masculine appearances and behaviours can be used by men to claim membership to a group, exert control and privilege, and create a hierarchical gender order. Indeed, gender is a performance to convey a particular identity, often using social scripts and behavioural characteristics. However, unlike many other gender performances, manhood acts take place at the expense of women (Mairead Eastin Moloney and Tony P. Love 2017). These identity codes may be sustained through behaviours such as language use and sexualisation of women to establish a heterosexual identity.

VMAs are argued to be fuelled by the same misogynistic reasons as offline 'manhood acts'; however, VMAs are technology-facilitated (McCarthy 2021) and the body is less visible in these spaces (Moloney and Love 2017). Thus, in virtual spaces, VMAs are performed without an obvious physical marker of manhood (Moloney and Love 2018). Instead, masculine personas and bodies are signalled through textual and visual cues, promoting heterosexist and cisnormative online spaces (McCarthy 2021). VMAs may therefore be evident through sexualisation of women and unwanted sexual attention, with women's social worth reduced to their sexual desirability (Moloney and Love 2017). In addition, humour may be used to oppress women; it is considered a tool to enact power more implicitly, used as a smokescreen for violence which in turn absolves the perpetrator and gives the impression it is socially

acceptable (Cole 2015; Moloney and Love 2017). These acts serve to silence and control women online, as well as placing pressure on men to act in particular ways aligning with hegemonic masculinity (Moloney and Love 2018).

The concept of VMAs has been used in past research, to consider how gender-based violence is perpetuated online. In relation to sport, a recent study by McCarthy (2021) analysed eighteen YouTube videos of women's skateboarding, demonstrating online misogyny and gendered gatekeeping of the sport through VMAs. Commentary served to police gender boundaries through sexist remarks, promoting ideas that men are athletically superior, and women are only included for the purpose of gender equality. In addition, comments regarded women as a collective, for example through statements that *all* women's sport is a joke. It was also found women skateboarders were sexualised through gendered language and aggressive sexual behaviour, a means to assert dominance and heterosexual power (Moloney and Love 2018). Finally, women skateboarders' gender was questioned through transphobic and homophobic commentary; this demonstrates the workings of cisnormativity and heterosexism, where normative gender presentation and behaviour are promoted (McCarthy 2021). Overall, these comments reveal how VMAs delegitimise women as athletes, promote the idea that men are the victims of gender equality, and reinforce the domination of cisnormative men online. Meanwhile, the public nature of this commentary may shape negative perceptions of the sport, dissuading women from participation (McCarthy 2021).

It is clear from the above research that gender-based violence towards women in sport, alongside the existence of VMAs, are emerging areas of inquiry. However, there is still an urgent need to better understand online violence more broadly (Antunovic 2019) and little research to date has focussed on women in strength sports. From a methodological perspective, most research has used netnographic approaches and content analysis thus far (for example Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks 2016; Kavanagh, Litchfield and Osborne 2019;

Litchfield et al. 2016, Chelsea Litchfield, Emma Kavanagh, Jaquelyn Osborne and Ian Jones 2018; MacPherson and Kerr 2021). Therefore, there is a need to further understand the impact these have on women. Based on this, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are women in strength sports' experiences of online gender-based violence?

2. To what extent are gender norms regulated on social media?

3. How do VMAs impact women strength sport athletes' experiences online?

Methodology

Sample

The motivation to focus on women in strength sports partly arose due to perceptions they may be the recipients of public shaming via social media. In addition to this, my own lived experience as a strength sport athlete and my awareness of the problem of gender-based violence on social media informed the direction of the study. As a user of social media, I was aware of accounts and pages aiming to highlight these issues, in particular '@you.look.like.a.man' on Instagram, run by former strongwoman athlete Jessica Fithen. At the time of writing in April 2022, this account has around 126,000 followers and highlights 'things people say to women in athletics.' 1,451 posts have been made on the page; although some of these do not focus on sport and instead address wider issues surrounding sexism and misogyny, many posts do specifically highlight gender-based violence towards women athletes online.

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of the issue. Initially, I posted details about the study on social media pages, alongside contacting strength athletes via social media, to gauge interest in the study. Several women showed interest, and subsequently went on to recommend other potential

interviewees. Originally, the aim of the study was to include only elite women athletes who compete at international level. However, other women showed interest in the study, and it was decided the sample criteria would be expanded. To be eligible, participants were required to identify as women; be competitive in a strength sport at the time of the study; and be active on social media. Due to the change in criteria, the sample varied in terms of their status and social media following, with several 'high-profile' athletes taking part in the research and others relatively unknown. Regardless, most women had careers either unrelated to their sport entirely (for example in marketing or social media management) or closely linked to their sport (including coaching), often due to the precarious income associated with strength sports. On reflection, the decision to expand the criteria was valuable, as research demonstrates the widespread nature of online gender-based violence; although women with high profiles and public visibility are at particularly high risk (Jane, 2018), this is not the only factor determining who can be targeted. In total, thirteen cisgender women aged between 21 and 50 were interviewed through a mixture of criterion and snowball sampling, details of whom can be found in the table below.

Pseudonym	Sport	Status in Sport	Career	Location	Ethnicity
Katie	Strongwoman	Competes at international level	Social media management	USA	White
Louisa	Powerlifting	Competes at international level	Professional athlete/coach	USA	Hispanic
Amy	Bodybuilding	Competes at international level	CEO	USA	White
Chloe	Powerlifting/ Strongwoman	Competes at international level	Project management	USA	White
Tina	Powerlifting	Competes at international level	Police	UK	White
Millie	CrossFit	Competes at national level	Military	USA	Mixed-race
Victoria	Powerlifting	Competes at national level	Gym owner/coach	UK	White

Rachel	Powerlifting	Competes at national level	Hospitality	USA	White
Ellie	Strongwoman	Competes at national level	Graphic design	UK	White
Molly	Bodybuilding	Competes at regional level	Marketing	USA	White
Naomi	Powerlifting	Competes at regional level	Personal trainer/coach	USA	White
Kara	CrossFit	Competes at regional level	Leisure management	USA	White
Jodie	Powerlifting	Competes at regional level	Coach	USA	White

Materials and Procedures

Firstly, ethical approval was gained by the university ethics board in March 2021. Participant information sheets and informed consent forms were then sent to all participants via email, and participants were required to sign the consent forms before the interviews proceeded. Interview questions were created based on the research questions of the study and

these were used to guide the structure of the interviews. Questions included 'can you tell me about your experiences of gender-based commentary on social media?'; 'can you give some examples of the type of commentary you have witnessed or received?'; 'how widespread do you believe the issue is on social media?'; and 'what impact do you think this has had on you as an athlete?'. However, the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that the order of questions and the use of follow-ups varied dependent on the participants' responses. All interviews took place using *Zoom* between March and November 2021; online interviews were considered the most appropriate method for data collection due to the various locations of participants and the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions in various countries. All interviews lasted between 45 and 55 minutes, were recorded using *Zoom*, and were transcribed verbatim using *Otter.ai*.

Analysis

The process of reflexive thematic analysis (Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke 2019) was utilised to evaluate the data collected. This form of analysis is a procedure for encoding qualitative information, allowing themes to be developed through researcher interpretation. Initially, interview transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data. NVIVO was then used to conduct the analysis, with relevant quotations highlighted and coded into themes using an inductive approach. The inductive approach meant that during the analysis, ideas and concepts from the theoretical framework VMAs developed from the data. Themes were then reviewed, with some re-named and others combined or discarded (particularly if there was not considered enough data to constitute a theme), to ensure they were as accurate and relevant as possible. Once themes were created, they were grouped into five general dimensions, three of which have been used to develop the findings section below.

Findings

VMAs, Misogyny, and Restrictive Gender Norms

Participants in the study used social media in a variety of ways; all interviewees were active users of Instagram and commented mainly on their experiences of this platform. However, some also discussed their usage of YouTube and Facebook. All but three participants had public Instagram profiles at the time of the interviews, with most of the high-profile athletes (particularly those who competed internationally, and those who worked in the sport and fitness industry) using social media as a platform to promote their training and that of their clients. Many competing at regional/national level who worked outside of the fitness industry used social media to document their lifting, alongside posts unrelated to their respective sports. Regardless of their status, all women recalled in some capacity instances of gender-based violence online. This was neatly summarised by Katie (strongwoman), who outlined the widespread nature of this problem for women:

> 'Certainly there are a bunch of athletes and women that are more susceptible to this and clearly the more visible you are, usually the higher you are in any sort of sport, you're going to have more attention on your page. But it's been pretty interesting to note how it's been literally every woman in almost every context'

Regardless, the women with a larger online following were more likely to recall instances of online gender-based violence directly targeted towards themselves. While lower-profile athletes (mainly those competing at regional level) had all experienced it, the interviews demonstrated that these athletes were more likely to outline cases they had witnessed on other women's profiles. For instance, Naomi (powerlifting) stated:

'My Instagram is just full of strong, amazing women that I follow because
that's inspirational to me. And just the amount of hate that I've seen on their
pages is infuriating'

Therefore, despite the women's similarities, there were differences in how they used social media as well as the examples they were likely to draw upon. Nevertheless, a common theme across the interviews was the participants' critique of gender norms. Several interviewees discussed traditional gender ideas as key factors influencing public perception of women in masculine areas, such as strength sports. Louisa (powerlifting) stated:

'When I was doing Olympic weightlifting, women in strength sports weren't
common at all, they weren't very often powerlifting and doing Olympic
weightlifting in the public eye at least. And so I was an easy target for
bullying, just because it wasn't the norm'

These perceptions of normative gendered behaviours are engrained in society through childhood. For instance, Naomi (powerlifting) outlined:

'It reminds me that I wanted to play football when I was in middle school, and
I got laughed at by the male coach, because football, that's a male sport. He
thought why would you want to play football as a little girl?'

Gender is therefore learnt from a young age and can entirely restrict – or create limitations to – participation in a multitude of sports due to ideas that certain activities are male or female appropriate. Tina (powerlifting) argued that challenging gender norms early on is an important way to tackle negative public perception of women in masculine fields, creating more gender-inclusive environments:

'It's changing that social perception of what little girls should be wearing, how
they should be dressing. You go in the supermarket, and you look down the

kids' aisles, and you see the toys and the clothes, and it's all very gendered and very specific. And it's like, we need to start changing that from beginning'

While gender may not always be problematic and many women in masculine sports celebrate and enjoy femininity (Alex Channon and Catherine Phipps, 2017), it was evident the interviewees in this study were concerned about restrictive and coercive gender norms, which may be promoted through VMAs. Although all interviewees clarified that they receive support from many men, both on and offline, with Naomi (powerlifting) stating 'I won't say all of the male mentality, there's some solid dudes out there', it was also evident that male dominance can be emphasised through the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. For example, Tina (powerlifting) outlined:

'Just the pure misogyny of you belong in the kitchen. You shouldn't be doing this…They've got a very fixed mindset of what the role of a woman is, and the things we should be doing and how we should be living and behaving'

Commentary regarding women's 'natural' place, telling women to 'get back in the kitchen' are often used to undermine their athletic performance and may be used as a form of humour to reframe sexism as acceptable. This enables power to work more implicitly, giving the impression the perpetrator should be absolved from any wrongdoing (Cole 2015; Moloney and Love 2017). Nevertheless, this commentary provides evidence of misogynistic tendencies which reinforces men's power over women and promotes traditional, patriarchal gender ideas, which generalise women and consider them a collective (McCarthy 2021). In some interviews, women recalled instances where these types of comments had been more extreme. For instance, Katie (strongwoman) and Chloe (powerlifting/strongwoman) stated:

'Now they're talking about these men's forums that are out there telling women that they expire at the age of 30, that their body has no value left any longer because their fertility is dried up, just awful, really weird things. And they're

starting to show up on the athletic pages too. So, it's *(online commentary)* anything from you know, I don't like the colour of your hair to why aren't you home making babies with your husband, fulfilling your destiny?' (Katie)

'A couple of the things that he's *(Elliott Hulse)* posted have been triggering, like the 21-convention stuff, you know, make sure she's skinny, men need to get their wife young so they don't grow into be whores and they have all these slurs that they could possibly think about. It's going to the impressionable minds, this "you need to get a young wife" thing. And, you know, a 30-year-old man needs to be with an 18-year-old, and she needs to make babies and you know, all these very misogynistic ideals are going to the young men. And this is hate speech' (Chloe)

Elliott Hulse's missions include 'restoring masculinity' and 'reviving patriarchy' (Elliot Hulse, 2022). He is a high-profile coach known for his misogynistic views, with several interviewees mentioning his influence in strength sports. Therefore, although the women stressed that these types of misogynistic ideals were found on social media more broadly, they were also being reinforced through several high-profile male strength athletes and coach's social media profiles. Through the examples noted above, the biological existence of women is emphasised through VMAs, with narrow, restrictive, and extreme gender roles promoted (Ladan Rahbari 2019) in dialogue which reflects '*the manosphere*'.

Policing Gender through VMAs: Appearance and Sexualisation

Unlike traditional media, women hold further control around what they post on virtual spaces, with the potential for empowerment and celebratory media representations (McCarthy 2021). However, findings demonstrate a perceived backlash from social media users towards women who do not conform to the 'male gaze'. Interviewees discussed examples of

commentary from both men and women; however, examples from male users were significantly more common, with Katie (strongwoman) suggesting that out of the negative backlash she had received 'it's a solid 90 percent of men, at least from what I can tell from their bios.' Backlash was often manifested in the form of comments and direct messages, arguably a form of surveillance to trivialise women's achievements and reduce them to only their appearance. This was summarised by Tina (powerlifting), who stated that on social media there is an:

> 'Idealised image of what women should look like, and then you're outside that norm so how dare you look like that'

Tina suggests that women in strength sports often appear outside the standard of traditional feminine appearance, presumably through increased muscularity. According to Mari Kristin Sisjord and Elsa Kristiansen (2009), sports deemed female-appropriate are often associated with perceptions around feminine appearance. In contrast, muscularity in women may be a result of engagement in sports or activities coded as masculine. The idea that women should conform to gendered social norms and maintain a feminine appearance (likely through engagement in 'female-appropriate' activities) was also outlined by other participants, with several women being (negatively) compared to men. For example, Ellie (strongwoman) recalled a time she was told 'you look masculine, do you have a penis?' and Chloe (powerlifting/strongwoman) outlined:

> 'I've always been the target of "oh, look at this dude, she looks so manly, her shoulders are too big. Oh, is that really a girl? Like, get off the steroids." That's ever since I first started posting, I've always been a guy to the mass population'

Women interviewees therefore recalled experiences of VMAs serving to police gender boundaries, questioning their gender and appearance. McCarthy (2021) refers to this as 'cis-hetero-misogyny', where women are perceived to be failing at their gender

performance and therefore should not be classified as women. These comments in turn fuel cisnormativity and heterosexism, by suggesting muscular women must be male-bodied. Despite every woman in this study being cisgender, this demonstrates a form of transphobia, an attitude which is strongly associated with support for traditional gender roles and rigid gender categories (Arti P. Makwana, Kristof Dhont, Jonas De keersmaecker, Parisa Akhlaghi-Ghaffarokh, Marine Masure and Arne Roets, 2018). It also links to the current rhetoric against trans women's participation in sport, with research suggesting that the policing of trans women and the enforcement of traditional standards of femininity in sport are connected (Jamie Cleland, Ellis Cashmore and Kevin Dixon, 2021). The impact of these types of VMAs was also reiterated by Tina (powerlifting):

> 'It could be off putting to women who are just starting…young girls as well, particularly influenced by Facebook and Instagram. They follow fitness people and they're finally seeing somebody in strength sports and we're trying to change their attitudes to their bodies and what they can do. It's not all about being this ridiculous skinny size and you can be proud of yourself, and then they're seeing this kind of hate, it's just going to reinforce the patriarchy'

It is therefore evident that VMAs may be used in ways that promote public shaming, reinforcing and regulating gender norms, with gender-deviance heavily criticised through the male gaze (Worthen and Baker 2016). These comments also reveal what Moloney and Love (2017) regard as 'body-reflexive practices'; they outline how the body is used for social interaction in online spaces, and the ways bodies should move – or look – in relation to gender stereotypes are reinforced. Related to comments associated with their appearance and muscularity, there was a perception that women should also be concerned about their attractiveness. Molly (bodybuilding) recalled a time she was preparing for an upcoming show by cutting weight:

'One guy…he saw one of my posts. Because I'd do two hours of cardio a day. I was like, you know, finished my cardio. And he was like, you need to chill on working out because it's not attractive anymore. And he stopped talking to me until I gained my weight back'

This idea women should remain visually appealing to men – and that women solely train to gain men's approval – was also revealed by Naomi (powerlifting):

'I see men attacking them *(other women)* online saying this is not attractive, I would never date you. And that's kind of comical because we weren't asking if you would date us. We weren't asking if you thought we were attractive. We're just out here working out, working our butts off to do something for us! And I think that's what's so crazy about it, the idea that we're doing it for them'

VMAs are often used to promote a gender order where women's value is perceived to be based on appearance, specifically their sexual appeal to men (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). Their failure to conform to normative standards of feminine beauty and the subsequent scrutiny they receive demonstrates evidence of the critical male gaze through VMAs. It also reveals narrow expectations about how women's bodies should look – a way to exercise dominance and control (Moloney and Love 2017). This was particularly frustrating for Louisa (powerlifting), who had used social media to create educational videos around fitness:

'I was putting up videos that had absolutely nothing to do with my image, it was just me trying to teach a subject that I learned in school, for example, something about physical therapy or fitness. And 90 percent of the comments were about my appearance, she looks like a boy, oh look at her nose or she looks Jewish, or her hair is whatever. And it frustrated me so much'

This commentary reveals that Louisa, a high-profile, internationally-recognised athlete, is reduced solely to her appearance. Theoretically, this may also reveal what Moloney

and Love (2017) have termed compensatory manhood acts. To expand, men who are marginalised (including those who may feel threatened by women's success in a male-dominant field) may use manhood acts – including negative comments surrounding women's appearance – to signal a masculine self and demonstrate power. This may be due to 'a threat to men feeling like their identity is being taken away from them' (Amy, bodybuilding). It was also recognised by Louisa (powerlifting) that this was very much a gendered problem:

> 'Men who were also using social media as a channel to educate the public about fitness topics, they would never get any comments about the way they looked because it had nothing to do with that. It's just them teaching something, and people, yeah, they might judge the content, but they will never judge their physical appearance. And that, for me was a tough pill to swallow'

Entering the traditionally masculine realm of strength sports may lead to women being judged aesthetically, with a risk of receiving stigma, even from others within strength sports communities. Evidently, this includes a critique of women's seemingly 'masculine' bodies alongside their general appearance, with strict, binary understandings of what it means to be masculine or feminine (Rahbari 2019). VMAs therefore promote male-dominance over women through appearance-related commentary. Somewhat conversely, alongside criticisms of how they look, many women also discussed sexualisation they had received from others on social media. This was clearly outlined by Molly (bodybuilding):

> 'They're private in their profile picture, but they were like, oh, what you wore really made your booty bounce. And I was like, who are you? And that's creepy. What makes you think I want to hear that?' (Molly)

Sexualisation of women can be used by men to claim a masculine body in a space where appearance of the body may be less obvious. According to Moloney and Love (2017), objectification serves to subordinate women by considering them an item for sexual use, while

simultaneously endorsing male heterosexuality, with Amy (bodybuilding) outlining that 'turning women's bodies into objects is the first step into dehumanising them.' The prominence of sexualisation was also discussed by Chloe (powerlifting/strongwoman):

> 'I have an album of shame. Its all screenshots from the direct messages and weird comments that I've received, and they're all about buying my underwear, wanting to see me naked, wanting to do very inappropriate things to me showing me multiple angles of their man part which is odd' (Chloe)

These comments demonstrate a sense of power over women and their bodies through gendered language and sexual behaviour, evident in past research (McCarthy 2021; Moloney and Love 2017). It also reveals sexualisation that serves to objectify women through VMAs, where women are reduced to their sexual desirability, summarised by Katie (powerlifting) as 'a sad commentary on some of the entitlements that certain people feel towards women in particular.' Although women are active in how they are represented on social media through their own choices in what they post, VMAs may reinforce women *should* appeal to a male viewership and the expectations of men (Amy Godoy-Pressland, 2016). These comments were also theorised by Molly (bodybuilding) as supportive of rape culture:

> 'A lot of the comments I also noticed are very supportive of rape culture. I kind of mentioned the shaming part, but it definitely supports like pro-rape. It's like, well, you're dressed like this. So why wouldn't I comment on it?'

Central to rape culture is the idea that men have no sexual control (Moloney and Love 2017), with the notion that women should *expect* sexual harassment due to the way they dress – and accusations they are craving sexual attention – evident in research by Merrill et al. (2015). This promotes ideas that gender-based violence is something women 'receive', with a key component of rape culture being victim blaming (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). In other words, by posting photos or videos online, women are considered to open themselves up to

public scrutiny and 'slut-shaming', which are perceived to be the direct result of their actions. This may also result in high rates of threats of sexual violence (as well as death threats), which may also have real-life consequences, with Katie (strongwoman) and Victoria (powerlifting) stating:

> 'If I did a poll on my page of the number of women who have received death or rape threats either on their page or in their direct messages, that number would blow your socks off' (Katie)

> 'It's almost verging on, actual unsafe situations where say the person does know where you go to the gym or potentially where you live and they're actually threatening you. That's actually becoming even more severe in terms of the repercussions and you might actually be in a dangerous situation' (Victoria)

Threats of bodily harm and sexually violent messages may be more prominent online and may be a form of intimidation and surveillance intended to discourage women from posting and being active on social media; in other words, these types of threats may be considered a silencing strategy (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). In male-dominated fields such as sport there is also a perception that men should not be blamed for their actions, and therefore it is up to women to adapt their behaviours (Merrill et al. 2015). However, this places fault with the wrong party, providing ideological support for dominant discourses around male-dominance and VMAs online (Lumsden and Morgan 2017).

VMAs, Accusations of Steroid Use, and Unsolicited Lifting Advice

VMAs were finally found to occur through accusations of steroid use to discredit women's success, alongside giving women unsolicited advice to reinforce the idea that men

hold the monopoly of strength sports knowledge. In the interviews, women firstly discussed the presumptions of steroid use:

> 'And then a lot of assumptions about steroids. If a woman's strong, then she must be doing steroids. I don't think that's ever assumed of a man if he has muscles' (Naomi, powerlifting)

> 'They're like "oh, she's on steroids"…she can't be that strong naturally, she has to be on steroids" like that' (Chloe, powerlifting/strongwoman)

As muscles are often associated with masculine characteristics such as power and aggression, there is a common misconception that women are unable to develop muscularity without the use of performance-enhancing drugs (McGrath and Chananie-Hill 2009). As some of the women interviewed were part of drug-tested federations, these comments served as accusations of cheating. Other women competed in non-drug tested federations and were open about their steroid-use; however, the idea that they were strong *only* due to their use of performance-enhancing drugs was similarly frustrating. The gendered nature of this issue is clearly outlined by Naomi; steroid-use is rarely considered the *sole* factor behind men's strength feats. Previous research has suggested that although performance-enhancing drug use is still considered unacceptable for men, stronger criticism is usually reserved for women. This is due to ideas that testosterone is not 'natural' for women (Shilling and Bunsell 2009), and that strength is a male preserve whereby women cannot be strong without assistance, in turn undermining women's ability (Brace-Govan 2004). Thus, VMAs which accuse women of steroid use may be compensatory in nature, promoting a hierarchical gender order where women *should* be weaker than men. Furthermore, this reinforces biological essentialism, the idea men are naturally superior, and that gender differences are unavoidable (Pope, Williams and Cleland 2022).

Many women who post their achievements online also discussed criticisms they faced about their technique, form, and the weights they lift. This was evident despite many of the women being top competitors in their sports, and comments were often perceived to be from men with little experience. Katie (strongwoman) stated:

'Mostly men who come in on like a bench video. And they'll give you some advice, because they used to bench press 50 years ago, and maybe they were good at it once or something. So, there's these guys that give you form advice'

Aligning with research by Jane (2014), Molly (bodybuilding) added that this has resulted in self-censorship for her, stating 'I honestly stopped posting personal bests just because of guys that would be like, that's literally my warm-up', and Rachel (powerlifting) outlined 'I feel like it shrinks our world.' Although male athletes may also receive criticism around their form, technique, and weights they lift, the perceptions from interviewees were that women were more likely to experience this, and comments were predominantly from men. This promotes a hierarchical gender order where men are presumed to have knowledge and capability, a gender performance to promote superiority over women. According to other interviewees, unsolicited advice around technique was often coupled with concerns around women's safety when lifting weights, with Naomi (powerlifting) stating 'they want to give me this giant paragraph on like you're going to hurt yourself'. Jodie (powerlifting) also provided an example of the type of commentary she has received, outlining 'oh my gosh, that's a lot of weight. Are you going to hurt yourself?'. The gendered nature of this was described by Tina (powerlifting):

'Men don't get anywhere near the same abuse. I mean, you look at Thor, Eddy Hall, the Stoltman brothers, and they are big guys. And there's no comments about their health, they're gonna wreck their knees, their back with what they're doing' (Tina)

These quotes reveal an assumption that men are the experts in strength sports, whereas women are inferior and in need of protection, drawing on notions of female fragility. As Tina notes, the safety of male strength sport athletes is perceived to be rarely discussed. Ellie (strongwoman) summarised unsolicited advice given to women as 'accepted as just normal discourse to have.' Women's social media experiences are therefore influenced by a set of discourses underpinned by an assumption of male superiority through VMAs, where women are expected to be the passive recipients of commentary and 'advice.' It must also be noted that this was not solely considered an online issue, and several women revealed subjective experiences and observations in face-to-face settings. As an example, Ellie (strongwoman) stated:

> 'If I travel to another gym, if they don't know who I am, because I'm small, there've been either quite sexist ideas, or I've had a lot more comments on what I'm doing. Even if the person commenting quite clearly doesn't know what they're talking about. It's almost like because I'm female and I'm lifting weights, I'm like, a spectacle, like it's sort of confuses people, mainly men'

This demonstrates that sexism, manhood acts, and surveillance through the male gaze are apparent in physical spaces, although it was a consensus from participants this was less direct compared to the virtual world. Hence, deep-rooted misogynistic ideas about male expertise and female inferiority are widespread and not limited to social media; nevertheless, social media is a platform where these ideas may be more explicit. As Kavanagh, Jones and Sheppard-Marks (2016) note, there are different moral codes in online spaces. Social media gives power to perpetuators of gender-based violence through user anonymity, and therefore people may demonstrate more confidence in displaying their views (Lumsden and Morgan 2017). However, research suggests there are wider consequences to this, and the acceptance of negative online interaction 'has the potential to reduce inclusivity and civility of both on-

and-off-line cultures' (Litchfield et al. 2018, 167), normalising problematic discourses (Jane 2014).

Conclusion

In this study, it has been revealed that women strength sport athletes experience gender-based violence on social media through the enactment of VMAs. Although there may be similarities to other sports, and women's experiences on social media more broadly, there are also findings unique to this specific group. As strength sports have historically been coded as masculine – and are still largely male-dominated arenas – women's participation and success may be less normalised, resulting in these athletes being greater targets for online hate. This is exacerbated through the building of muscularity for women, traditionally considered the antithesis of femininity, with many women interviewees recalling instances of gender-based violence linked to their appearance, alongside accusations of steroid use due to their muscularity. VMAs are therefore used to promote an idealised image of women's bodies, with cisnormative and heterosexist environments promoted, where women strength sport athletes' gender and bodies are questioned. Macpherson and Kerr (2021) have previously argued that public shaming may be used towards those who do not meet societal expectations of how they 'should' act, look and behave, as a means to re-emphasise social norms; in this instance, women strength sport athletes may fail to meet expectations of the 'male gaze' and the appeal of male viewership on social media.

Another finding unique to this group derives from many participants' use of social media to showcase their lifting and training. This leads to women's achievements being trivialised through unsolicited advice and concerns around their safety, with commentary often perceived to be from men using predominantly compensatory VMAs. These are examples of one-way, top-down social media surveillance, promoting dominant discourses

which underpin assumptions of male superiority, and are a means for men to promote a masculine persona. Finally, many of the participants mentioned strength sport coaches such as Elliott Hulse who have large followings, and who publicly express anti-feminist and misogynistic attitudes. This type of commentary is influential more broadly, but particularly within strength sports communities where they arguably have a greater reach, a higher profile, and are able to reinforce gendered notions of female inferiority. Overall, despite women's increased participation and success in strength sports, it is evident social media may be used as a platform to regulate women and to endorse narrow, traditional gender norms, with examples of extreme gender-based violence and misogyny through VMAs.

Limitations to the study include the relatively small number of women interviewed for the research alongside the dominance of white women, and future studies may aim to expand the sample size to gather further perspectives from a more diverse sample, possibly using survey data. In addition, competitive women in a variety of strength sports were interviewed and future research may aim to further consider difference in experience of VMAs and online gender-based violence between women in various sports and with differing profiles. This may be particularly important for bodybuilders, to better consider the contradictions around being judged aesthetically on social media and other virtual spaces, versus being judged in this way during competitions. With only two bodybuilders in the sample, these ideas and themes were not sufficiently developed in the current study.

Despite these limitations, the study has helped increase our awareness of gender-based violence online, women's experiences on social media, and the impact of VMAs. Due to the negative consequences associated with gender-based violence, including self-censorship and surveillance, withdrawal from social media spaces, and the creation of further barriers to women's participation in male-dominant fields, a long-term, multi-faceted approach may be needed to challenge these gendered ideologies and to further consider

men's enactment of VMAs. In addition, social media platforms should not be exempt from acting, and future research may also aim to expand our understanding of policy, and the extent to which this is effective in tackling gender-based violence and VMAs successfully.

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