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Title: Visibility and vulnerability on Instagram: Negotiating safety in women's online-offline fitness spaces

Abstract

This article investigates how safety is experienced, navigated and cultivated by women on Instagram. Using qualitative interview data, we explore women's understanding and practices of keeping themselves and others safe when sharing information-rich images about their exercising bodies and fitness activities. Drawing on literatures from feminist leisure, sport and media studies, this article advances discussions about exercising women's negotiations of risk and safety by considering digitally-mediated fitness experiences and the uses of "visibility and vulnerability" for creating cultures and communities of physical and emotional safety online and offline. Findings identify that knowledge of Instagram's platform affordances and audiences, along with personal ethics, contribute to exercising women's decision-making when posting self-produced physical activity content. We extend current thinking about the operations of visibility and vulnerability for women online by identifying the significance of spatial and relational elements to generating women's feelings of safety on Instagram.

Introduction

This article investigates how safety is experienced, navigated and cultivated by women on Instagram. Although much is known about women's risk mitigation strategies across a variety of public leisure settings (Green & Singleton, 2006; Valentine, 1989; Whyte & Shaw, 1994) and when dealing with digital harassment in professional and activists contexts (Jane, 2018; Mantilla, 2013; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019), there has been little consideration of social media as leisure spaces where women navigate the sharing of highly personalized images and details of everyday life. Drawing on data from a qualitative study of women's fitness on Instagram, we consider the ways in which women understand and practice keeping themselves and others safe when sharing information-rich images about their exercising bodies and physical activities. In exploring how women experience safety in their online-offline leisure spaces, this paper contributes an understanding of online safety as embodied, relational and implaced. Farhadi (2018, p. 143) uses the term implacement to refer to the "transformation of space into place; it is the process by which one gains a sense of direction, a sense of 'being-in-the-world,' in a particular place." For instance, we can be physically safe, in a place where there is low risk of being attacked, but if we feel insecure, anxious, or threatened in other ways (financially, relationships, our reputation), then this safety may be undermined. Our epistemological orientation derives from feminist physical cultural studies that advocate a relational understanding of the exercising body in digital contexts "to unsettle, reveal, create ways to think otherwise about gender responsive

practices, policies, pedagogies, organizations and forms of knowledge" (Fullagar, Rich, Pavlidis & van Ingen, 2019, p. 3).

Feminist engagements with online "visibility" and "vulnerability" provide conceptual hooks to understand women's experience of safety when sharing information about their fitness activities on Instagram. Duffy and Hund (2019) suggest that the "visibility mandate" is a key structuring logic of social media, whereby social recognition and capital accumulation in digital networks rely on acknowledgement by others of one's online presence. Feminist scholars have suggested that women accrue social recognition within digital networks according to gendered economies of visibility that structure feminine body display (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2019). Women cultivate an "appealing" online subjectivity through demonstrations of work on the self in tandem with forms of affective labor that elicit attention through interactions with followers, likes, comments and shares (Dobson, 2015).

In revealing oneself to others through demonstrations of affective and bodily labor, Duffy and Hund argue that "the cost of increased visibility is oftentimes a heightened degree of vulnerability" (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4995) as a result of intensified public scrutiny. The relational nature of the social media environment "renders visibility and vulnerability inextricable from one another" creating what Duffy and Hund (2019, p. 4997) call an "authenticity bind" for women, whereby sociality and interactivity become contingent on revealing gendered intimacies and personal details in order to appear authentic, therefore legible and credible, to potential online followers. According to Duffy and Hund (2019), social media users navigate these tensions via an array of filtering tactics. Our study extends beyond debates about social capital to consider how women experience

risk and safety in a social media environment where recognition is structured in terms of online visibility and interaction.

Our empirical data and analysis build on existing considerations of visibility and vulnerability for women online by paying attention to the spatial and relational dimensions of women's safety on Instagram. This paper also extends leisure research on women's experience of safety that concentrates on urban environments, and some on rural environments (including the outdoors), by shifting the focus to digital environments as spaces where women mediate feelings of safety in their everyday physical activity experiences. As a central feature of contemporary subjectivity and an important part of social life in the digital age, we suggest that the "visibility mandate" (Duffy & Hund, 2019) can be fruitfully developed to better understand exercising women's everyday digital experiences in relation to risk and safety.

Women's Safety in Leisure Spaces

Feminist geographers have long focused on women's embodied and bodily experiences in social spaces (Johnston & Longhurst, 2010). Much of this work has explored and problematized gendered conceptions of public and private spaces (Armstrong & Squires, 2002; Landes, 1998). An enduring theme within this literature has been women's experiences of risk, fear and safety within different spaces, including the home, outdoors, public parks, workplaces, and urban environments. Making an early, important contribution to understanding geographies of women's fear, Valentine (1989)

identified the relationship between women's fear of male violence and their perception and use of space. Over the past three decades, scholars have taken up these ideas in relation to women's sport and leisure experiences.

Sporting geographers have revealed how power works to shape sporting and leisure spaces and places, privileging some bodies (particularly white, male bodies), while marginalizing others (e.g., women, disabled, persons of color) (Koch, 2017). Focusing on the gendering of sporting geographies, feminist scholars have explained how sporting and leisure spaces in western societies have "long been claimed by white, heterosexual men who have dominated, controlled and excluded other groups" through a range of overt and covert strategies, including policies (e.g., male-only golf clubs) and practices (e.g., male-dominated weights-rooms in gyms) that limit women's access to space via the exertion of an aggressive gaze and the use of both physical and symbolic violence (Green & Singleton, 2007; van Ingen, 2003). Studies have also examined how the maleness of sporting spaces impacts upon women's embodied experiences of sport, sometimes prompting women to challenge, contest and/or create their own sporting spaces that better meet their needs (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2013; Johnston 1996, 1998; Marfell, 2019; McEwan, 2002).

A key focus of the literature has been women's experiences of fear, risk and safety in leisure settings. Investigating women's experiences of solo hiking (Coble, Selin & Erickson, 2003), recreational running (Roper, 2016), exercising alone in the outdoors (Kilgour, 2007; Kilgour & Parker, 2013), and navigating night-time leisure spaces (Held, 2015), feminists have highlighted the varied ways that women perceive and respond to risk, particularly fears of male violence (Whyte & Shaw, 1994). These analyses

centralize gendered relations of power as they are enacted within and through space to construct certain places as “risky” and certain bodies as “at risk.”

The intersections of gender and race are highlighted by Green and Singleton (2007), who write about the leisure experiences of young South Asian women in England, their perceptions of risk and management strategies. Green and Singleton (2007) observe the operations of spatial exclusion and how women construct “safe” spaces for themselves, identifying the ways in which the young women designate places as non-risky, and inhabit them in ways that enable the maintenance of “embodied respectability” whilst also gaining the social pleasures of interaction with their friends. They found that designated “safe spaces” of leisure centered on the family, community and faith are “both material and emotional, offering, amongst other things, belonging, companionship, intimacy and security” (Green & Singleton, 2007, p. 112).

To date, most research on women’s experience of leisure and risk, fear and safety, concentrates on urban environments, with some examining the outdoors and nature-based experiences. Much of this research highlights women’s feelings of vulnerability to violent attacks from men, but typically such fears do not stop women from participating in activities that they enjoy. Rather, research indicates women navigate risks to enable ongoing participation (e.g., exercising with friends, avoiding particular times of heightened risk, carrying whistles or mace, creating women-only spaces and communities of care). However, what has received far less attention within leisure studies has been the ways women experience and navigate risk and safety online.

Women's Safety in Online Spaces

Similar to sport, exercise and leisure spaces, gender mediates the ways safety is experienced online (Jane, 2018). The practice of "gendertrolling," which Mantilla (2013) describes as coordinated and persistent gender-based insults and threats of violence directed towards women who speak out about sexism, has become a commonplace occurrence on social media. Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016, p. 172) suggest that targeted attacks have morphed into a more generalized phenomenon of "anti-female violent expression that circulates to wider audiences on popular media platforms", which they term "networked misogyny." Women subject to online abuse have been found to experience grave fears for their safety, with some having to abandon their social media accounts or jobs, which works to restrict women's online participation (Binns, 2017; Mantilla, 2013). Drawing parallels between offline and online instances of sexual harassment, Mantilla (2013, p. 568) observes that online "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-dominated arenas."

Studies of gender-based online abuse have focused on the experiences of women working in professional, public-facing contexts, such as journalism and academia (Binns, 2017; Jane, 2018; Lebel, Pegoraro & Harman, 2019; Toffoletti et al., 2021), as well as feminist politics (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). In assessing the impacts of networked misogyny on women's participation in digital domains, scholarship has highlighted the systemic nature of online abuse as it is

embedded within existing cultures, systems and policies that produce and sustain gender inequality. A focus of this work has been advocating for greater legislative and institutional protections to tackle online threats to women's safety and freedom of speech posed by gendertrolling (VanDerWilk, 2018), with Twitter and other text-based platforms being key sites for studies of gendered online abuse and women's feelings of danger and safety (Binns, 2017). To date, Instagram has received less attention and advocacy regarding women's safety, and only very recently have studies begun to consider women's experiences of online abuse on visually-oriented platforms (Hockin-Boyers, Pope & Jamie, 2020). With research indicating that popular misogyny is becoming a common feature of women's routine social media encounters, and that women and minority groups experience higher rates and severity of online harassment (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Duggan, 2017), it is timely to consider how exercising women experience, navigate and create safety in their everyday interactions on Instagram.

Feminist scholarship has also identified the ways in which social institutions like schools and the media construct women and girls as "at risk" when participating in everyday digital cultures, making them primary targets of cybersafety initiatives addressing gender harms arising from the circulation of sexualized user-produced content (Dobson, 2015; Ringrose, Harvey, Gill & Livingstone, 2013). By paying attention to how gender relations of power are constituted within and through digital spaces, these studies invite a nuanced consideration of the relational and daily negotiations of young women online. Such relational and cultural approaches are echoed in studies of socially vulnerable groups, which indicate that digitally networked technologies can provide safe spaces for

identity expression and social connectivity. For instance, Black, migrant and queer communities are using digital platforms to generate networks of support, solidarity and recognition, and to create opportunities for safe encounters (Farahidi, 2019; Pinckney et al., 2018; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017).

Methods

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 12 women based in Melbourne, Australia, to understand how women navigate issues of safety as part of their social media lives (see Table 1). The interviews are derived from a larger data set, comprising interviews and Instagram content, of a qualitative project examining women's everyday engagements with Instagram for fitness purposes. In this discussion we will not be analyzing the Instagram data but only the interview responses discussing the women's accounts, and their experiences navigating safety in relation to their Instagram use.

Our research is located within feminist epistemologies that foreground a relational understanding of women's ways of knowing and experiencing the "entanglement of digital and physical cultures, the flows and techniques of power, as well as resistant formations of identity and difference" (Fullagar, Rich, Pavlidis & van Ingen, 2019, p. 2). Our epistemological orientation to articulating women's lived experiences as contextual and multiple is informed by feminist conceptualizations of knowledge as always partial and contingent, experiential and embodied (Harding, 1991). Our effort to contribute new

understandings of women's experiences of risk and safety online is therefore guided by a commitment to making visible women's everyday practices in exercising contexts and to provide alternative ways of knowing the social media experience that can account for generative, relational and spatially situated online practices to cultivate women's personal and collective online safety.

Each author is active on social media as part of their ongoing research and everyday lives, although none of the authors are "insiders" to the physical cultural communities represented in this study. Authors 1-4 are researchers of sport and leisure whose approach the study of women's production, consumption and engagement with social media is oriented by feminist theory, ethics and politics (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Author 5 brings valuable knowledge in digital media to the project design, data collection and analysis. As white, cisgender, middle-class women, we occupy a visible and privileged position in academic, leisure and digital cultures. Recognizing this, we are guided by feminist epistemologies that foreground women's lived perspectives and experiences, and engage ethically and culturally-appropriate ways of ensuring we allow space for diverse voices of physically active women (Harding, 1991).

Following ethical approvals, we recruited participants using purposive sampling techniques. We recruited across various social media platforms, as our previous research has shown that women typically have multiple social media accounts through which they communicate aspects of their fitness identity and connect with others (Toffoletti et al., 2021). Melbourne was selected as the study site because it is the city where the authors (1 and 5) responsible for conducting the interviews, were located. We established research accounts on Instagram and Facebook from which we circulated a

"call for participants." Further recruitment occurred via the researchers' personal and institutional Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts. We identified Facebook pages of women's online fitness communities in Melbourne, contacting account moderators via direct messaging to request they post the study details. Additionally, we located participants by following popular fitness, Melbourne-based hashtags that women were using on social media and identifying women on Instagram with public accounts devoted to fit and active lifestyles, inviting them to the study and to share the call for participants. Details of the participant sample are provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant pseudonym	**Age range**	**Self-defined ethnicity**	**Self-defined gender & sexuality**	**Physical activity**	**Instagram followers**	**Account purpose**	**Sponsorship Y/N**
Ellie	20s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Yoga	2329	Work	Y
Louise	20s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Gym	2954	Leisure and work	Y
Jamie	20s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Running	3483	Leisure	Y
Georgia	20s	Greek	Heterosexual woman	F45 training	6823	Leisure	Y
Fiona	20s	British-Irish	Queer woman	Running	538	Leisure	N
Rika	30s	Vietnamese	Heterosexual woman	Aerial silk	165	Leisure	N
Lee	30s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Running	961	Leisure	N
Laura	30s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Running	3289	Leisure	Y
Caroline	30s	Mauritian	Heterosexual woman	Running	358	Leisure	Y
Elizabeth	30s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Running	1010	Leisure	Y
Emma	40s	French	Heterosexual woman	Running	5592	Leisure	Y

Jane	40s	Caucasian Australian	Heterosexual woman	Running	949	Leisure	N

Data collection for the project involved following participant Instagram accounts (with permission) for a period of three months. This timeframe encompassed the weeks prior to and after the interview. Following accounts enabled detailed observation of participants' Instagram posts and comments, as well as comments made under their posts by followers. These were recorded via screenshots. Researchers did not engage with participants' content or accounts by liking or commenting on posts (see Reade, 2020).

To understand women's experiences of using Instagram for fitness, in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted in a mutually-agreed upon location and lasted approximately one hour. We asked participants about their routines, practices and motivations for sharing their physical activity on Instagram, their decision-making when posting content, how they engaged with other users, what they enjoyed about the platform and aspects that concerned them. Individual participants' Instagram accounts were referred to during interviews to identify posts, interactions, events and resources for discussion. Conducting interviews face-to-face facilitated a process of shared looking, with the interviewer and participant scrolling, selecting and discussing Instagram posts from participant accounts. Shared looking is different to Robards and Lincoln's (2017) scroll back method, in that it does not aim to disrupt the algorithms that reorganize timelines non-chronologically. Instead, shared looking allowed participants to highlight certain content to contextualize information for interviewers. This also allowed

for affective interactions between interviewers, participants and content, which further enriched the interview data. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants assigned pseudonyms.

Author 5 coded interview data using Nvivo software and organized the data under six categories that reflected the questions of the broader project: bodies, community, labour, fitspiration, responsibility, and social media usage. Issues of safety and risk emerged consistently across the coding categories, leading us to focus on them in this paper. The analysis of data involved immersion in the texts through repeated reading/viewing, a coding process nominating key themes, such as recurring images or words, and a more detailed analysis identifying associations across dominant themes and complexities, contradictions and invisibilities in the images/texts (Rose, 2001). For this paper, the visual data drawn from participant Instagram accounts was not formally coded. However, relevant images and comments from their accounts were read alongside the interview transcripts to illustrate events and activities referred to during interviews and provide context through which to interpret participants' perspectives and experiences. Through this process, we developed a set of interrelated themes, which form the basis of the analytical sections that follow.

This multi-phased process of analysis was our attempt at "empirically grappling" with the "messiness of the digital mediation of everyday lives" (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018, p. 631). As feminists interested in moving bodies, sporting cultures and digital technologies, we recognize that such empirical tensions are "precisely where the real hard work lies" (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018, p. 640). We practiced "staying with the trouble" of feminist digital and physical cultural studies, which required

> attending to and unpacking how women make sense and meaning of data and technologies in the spaces and places of their everyday lives, how they grapple with the effects and consequences of a digital society, and how these effects and consequences manifest differently across spaces and subject/ivities (Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018, p. 640).

Our paper makes an original contribution to the broader field of feminist digital and physical cultural studies by grappling with the empirical complexities of women's perceptions and negotiations of safety on Instagram, with such experiences intersecting with physical spaces of sport and fitness practices, and across personal and professional lives.

Analysis

We structure our analysis in three parts, with each showing different considerations of visibility and vulnerability as they relate to: i) how the women used various filtering tactics to navigate online risks; ii) the women's main concerns when sharing information about their exercise habits and the strategies they use to negotiate issues of online and offline safety; iii) the ethical practices by the women in seeking to make Instagram a safe space for self-presentation and interaction about women's physical activities.

Personal safety online: filtering tactics

Instagram was embedded in participants' regular physical activity practices, with most participants using it daily, and often multiple times a day, for sharing and socializing. Our interviewees typically characterized Instagram as a "fun" and "happy" space where negativity was unwelcome. Using Instagram was a pleasure for them, in which they could express themselves, access other content they liked and connect with other people in their physical activity. For the exercising women we spoke with, the pleasures of Instagram were worth navigating the negatives. They did this by using a variety of filtering strategies to monitor and control their accounts, to minimize bad feelings, and to reduce possible risk. These included limiting the amount of personal information they shared (e.g. relationship status, where they work and live, pictures of children), following people known to them, deleting unwanted comments, restricting and blocking "creeps," reporting accounts and ignoring unsavory interactions. These actions were used to manage sexually-based comments and images received via the direct messaging (DM) or comments functions of their Instagram accounts. Online gender-based harassment ranged from explicit (runner Emma described receiving "lots of dick pics" and persistent messaging of "I'm in love, I want to marry you") to ambivalent ("people ask me for photos of feet," explains yoga instructor Ellie). Ellie's observations reflected the general sentiment of the interviewees:

> every girl on public Instagram has had her fair share of random guys messaging asking for all kinds of things. There's occasionally some old guy who will comment on every single one of your posts. It's not like nasty things that they're saying but it just feels uncomfortable.

Participants did not consider themselves to be at risk of inciting male hostility, along the lines of gendertrolling (Mantilla, 2013) or networked misogyny (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Although participants discussed experiencing sexually-based harassment, and were aware of potential risks such as non-consensual image sharing and threatening messaging, these risks were not framed as major concerns when using Instagram. Jane's assertion that "she has never felt threatened or unsafe" when receiving unwanted messages is indicative of how interviewee's conceptualized these encounters. While indicating that these encounters were a source of unease, they were not typically perceived as threatening respondents' physical safety. Instead, women felt some degree of personal power to manage instances of online gendered harassment through filtering tactics, including i) navigating sharing practices, and ii) dealing with unwanted comments.

Navigating sharing practices

Interview responses demonstrated the tensions women experience when disclosing personal information and imagery as a means of communicating authenticity and relatability online, and the unwanted consequences of doing so. One strategy participants used to manage this tension was to give careful consideration to what and how they shared in stories and feeds. Instagram offers users increasing options for managing what content is publically available to *any* viewer, and what is "private" to followers, or self-selected "close friends." The women navigated the affordances of Instagram differently depending on their reasons for using the platform, and their

perception of risk. In their delicate acts of self-protection (Duffy & Hund, 2019), respondents were highly selective about what and when to make aspects of their lives visible. For example, Jane found Instagram's multi-account function helpful for controlling who has access to different aspects of her life, establishing a private account for family and friends and a public one to post about her fitness activities:

> … my private life is private, and people would have no indication of my personal life, per se, because I guard my real personal life. I don't think it's for the world– that's my business. So it's more just family and friends. So basically on social media people would not get a gauge of whether I was in a relationship or not, married, kids.

For some respondents, setting their account to private was not a viable strategy to avoid unwanted attention or protect their privacy because visibility is a necessary component of business and sponsorship opportunities. Caroline "had to make my profile public" when she acquired a sponsor who required it as part of the contract. Others, like gym instructor Georgia, expressed ambivalence about the "visibility mandate" to make all aspects of one's life public (Duffy & Hund, 2019). She understood that Instagram offered a platform to "share parts of yourself," yet lamented that "in an ideal world I would prefer not to have to share that stuff, but feel like you have to be open and build those connections with people because they want to know everything."

Some women expressed a blurring of the public and private with their everyday practices, routines and risk-management strategies. As Emma put it, some of her strategies for navigating risk in her offline life were applied to Instagram: "The thing is,

Instagram, it's like your everyday place. What you would do normally in public, you would not necessarily tell where you live to a stranger in the street, that's the same thing on Instagram." Yet, as the following quote suggests, when Instagram becomes the "everyday place" for routine activity, withholding personal details is not always desirable or possible, especially when information can be accessed from linked apps:

> My fear is because I am also on things like dating apps. If you share with someone on your dating app "this is my Instagram," it is essentially a DIY stalker kit right there. You have got people I hang out with, you have got my schedule, you have got where I work and where I live (Elizabeth).

Elizabeth's insight into the workings of social media is typical among its users, who view its function as a forum for sharing their personal life (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015). She also demonstrates awareness of the risks of "context collapse" when personal content considered appropriate for one platform may be accessed by audiences in another (Marwick & boyd, 2011). In this instance, the interlinking of social media apps presents a challenge in deciding what to make public and what to keep private, even though respondents have a clear understanding of e-safety messaging around personal information disclosure, avoiding naming their workplaces and where they live. Such examples illustrate women's considered decision-making in relation to their visibilities (and the associated vulnerabilities) in the constantly shifting, blurred and overlapping spaces of social media. The women in our study are consciously making meaning of and navigating the highly intimate boundaries of Instagram as "both personal and professional, private and public" (Richardson, 2018, p. 255).

Dealing with unwanted comments

According to Duffy and Hund (2019, p. 4997), the double bind of visibility and vulnerability raises important questions as to “where to draw the boundaries between harassment and hate and between commenting and criticism.” Similarly, for women in our study, online critical comments and/or forms of harassment were viewed as an “inevitable side effect of digital modes of expression” (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4997), and participants accepted they would be subject to some degree of online harassment. While women were aware of avenues to report harassers, they had come to understand that measures to block hostile accounts would not necessarily resolve the issue:

> you just report to Instagram and Instagram closed the account. And I’ve never felt traumatized, but I feel very sorry for women who may be affected by it. If a man says, “oh, my God, what is it, you’ve got some mental health issue,” you block, you report and you move on. But I felt really sorry for women who could not do that or felt vulnerable (Emma).

Interviewees’ commitment to taking control of negative encounters did not include responding to them through hashtag activist strategies that call-out experiences of online and offline harassment (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019). During interviews, the women did not speak about sharing their experiences of harassment via Instagram, or efforts to speak up collectively about the issue, which may be symptomatic of Instagram’s reputation as a “positive” place (Duffy & Hund, 2019). By using the features of the platform to avoid negative interactions and feelings, like the “block,” “delete

comments" and "restrict" functions, participants' online strategies echo those employed by women navigating high-risk urban environments, who took care to avoid dangerous areas and inhabit spaces that felt safe (Green & Singleton, 2007). There are also parallels with Hockin-Boyers, Pope and Jamie's (2020) research on women weightlifters' use of social media and "digital pruning" strategies of unfollowing triggering content to protect their mental health and wellbeing. There is knowledge and agency in such small acts of self-preservation and protection, with our respondents viewing the filtering of their Instagram accounts as part of the process of managing their daily routines, which is consistent with the broader literature (Duggan, 2017). Despite filtering tactics granting women some control over their Instagram account, we observed considerable vigilance among exercising women when making decisions about what and when to post.

Physical safety: Avoiding unwanted offline encounters

Sport and leisure researchers have identified the risks women perceive and experience when exercising in public spaces, and particularly isolated, natural environments such as running and hiking trails (Coble, Selin & Erickson, 2003; Kilgour & Parker, 2013; Roper, 2016). Eight of the study participants are competitive or recreational runners, and they discussed the co-implications of their social media usage for their experience of risk and safety when exercising outdoors. The most commonly perceived risk of using Instagram among respondents was physical attack while exercising. These fears emerged in conversations around posting images and data that disclosed where and

when they ran, indicating that physically-active women's conceptualization of safety traverse online and offline domains.

Women were conscious of disclosing details of where and when they exercised on Instagram, including recognizable visual landmarks in images, geo-location tags attached to posts, and sharing tracking data and running routes. As Elizabeth noted, "I do not keep to the same running route and that is often a reflection of how much I share on social media. That is being really paranoid but it is something I am aware of." Participants described employing a range of strategies to mitigate against being attacked offline while exercising in public spaces, while also maintaining visibility online. The majority did not disclose information or photos on Instagram about places and times they were exercising alone, or share regular running routes. Participants took into consideration the context of the image before posting, thinking about whether they were part of a large public gathering, where they were unlikely to be located. They would also post images after an event had occurred:

> If I'm in a race, I would [post] because it's got, like, another 300 people, 200 people or 5,000 people...when I did [the] Melbourne Marathon, there were more than 20,000. So if I'm in a public place that large, yes, I would, especially my Stories. But otherwise no. ... every now and then, I put places I was for dinner or café, but I would always have left that place by that time (Emma).

Respondents' comments highlight the temporal and spatial character of safety in the digital context. Emma and others mobilized the capabilities of the platform to assist in negotiating constraints around posting in real time, in particular, the Stories feature,

which allows women to maintain digital visibility and sociability without leaving a permanent record of place-based movements.

Notions of Instagram as a safe or risky space for exercising women are contextual and inextricably connected to the physical spaces they inhabit. As Farhadi (2018, p. 142) notes in her study of Instagram selfies, they "are not just data practices but are also embodied practices that visually produce a sense of place." This is also true of digital fitness apps that record location-based data (Barrie et al., 2019; Fullagar et al., 2019), which Lee raised as a concern:

> More worrying is Strava because my runs are at ridiculous times in the morning and by myself and always in the same spot. I don't feel safe at all sharing those. My Strava account looks like I barely run–you basically can see the ones when I'm out with friends, because there are two of us, I am probably not going to go on the same spot at the same time next time. I don't feel bad about sharing those, but Strava makes me feel very unsafe.

Lee stopped sharing her solo Strava run routes on her Instagram account as she gained more followers (almost 1000 at time of interview) and "ran past people that, at those times in the morning, give me the creeps." Lee is simultaneously invoking fear of physical attack while running alone ("I don't feel safe at all sharing those") in tandem with the fear of online invisibility as a sign of inadequacy ("it looks like I never run"). She manages her fear of judgement for being perceived as an irregular (aka not-serious) runner within her community by posting her social run routes. For Lee, reduced digital

visibility is a compromise she is willing to make to limit risk, fear and vulnerabilities while running.

While Instagram is typically understood to be a photo-sharing app, participants reported using Instagram for other purposes to support connectivity and safety. Laura's running friends used the group message function to make sure no-one was left alone on early morning runs:

> if I know that I'm meeting my runner friends at 5am, I will check the Instagram group message just to make sure someone's not sick, or if someone's running late, or anything like that.

Similarly, Lee relies on the geo-locative affordances of running apps to coordinate offline encounters within her community. She describes finding running apps useful for gauging the proximity of friends participating in the same race: "I will be able to finish my race and then literally just turn on the tracker and see where everyone else is. So hopefully go get some food afterwards, celebrate, commiserate, whatever." Here Lee describes using the tracking instrument as more than a device for visually showcasing movement, monitoring the competition and measuring individual success (Barrie et al., 2019). Instead, it is repurposed as a social technology for facilitating real-life encounters "in-place" among a community of support.

The visibility mandate provides a framework for understanding women's desire to be "seen", in order to foster social connections, and the necessity to generate quantifiable audience engagement (likes, comments, emojis) that invites surveillance of their exercising bodies (Fullagar et. al., 2019). When women post, they do so with an

understanding of safety that takes into account the visibility mandate and its inherent assumption that audiences are watching. Their strategies are developed in a context where women's desires to be recognized as physically-active subjects occupying leisure spaces intersect with an agentic capacity to shape how and where they are seen, and the limits of data surveillance culture. Participants are aware that their attempts to capture real-time presence in active recreation can be used to monitor their daily movements. This knowledge appears to shape women's choices around how they use Instagram to communicate the immediacy of their exercise movements while mitigating fear of physical attack, as witnessed in Emma's preference for the ephemeral Stories feature and Lee's decision not to post her morning runs. These responses draw attention to the collision of online and offline worlds for exercising women, as well as the importance of cultivating a sense of place for women visualizing their physical activity experiences (Olive, 2015). Safety, for these respondents, is constituted through the relational process between embodied spatiality (how women inhabit physical space when exercising) and their digital networked encounters (place-based data shared online) through which corporeal experiences and affects are rendered visible and meaningful.

Notably, a feminist consciousness informed Fiona's decision to share details of her running routes on Instagram, and she challenged the expectation that women monitor and restrict Instagram content to stay "safe." Despite knowledge of a recent attack on a woman runner on her track, which meant she avoided running there for a while ("it took me two months to run past the place where she was attacked, because it freaks me out

so much"), she was cognizant of the complex workings of power and privilege that make posting relatively safer for some women than others:

> … there's a politics to it as well, "I'm visible, I'm here and I'm not going anywhere." And I think I posted the morning after, that morning I got home and I didn't realize this woman had been attacked, and I put the map of where I'd run on Instagram, and I was, "I will not be frightened by this random, awful thing. I refuse to be cowered by that," which is a luxury because I'm cisgender, white, able-bodied. I have a lot of privilege that allows me to take that kind of attitude.

Fiona recognizes multi-sectional inequities and privileges that shape who feels safe enough to contest perceptions of who can use space, when and how, as has been documented for multicultural and queer exercising women (Green & Singleton, 2007; Roy, 2013). Her comments also call attention to the politics of visibility and being seen within networked communities of runners in ways that disrupt the "geographies of fear" (Valentine, 1989) limiting women's participation in digital and public leisure spaces. Although respondent anecdotes evidence women's internalization of fear as a factor in determining the degree of online sharing, such concerns are mitigated to some extent by the social and political value women ascribe to being visible within their physical activity communities.

Cultivating safety through visibility

As we have begun to extrapolate, some participants did not express an understanding of visibility as a demand (Duffy & Hund, 2019, p. 4988), but instead visibility was an opportunity to enact care for self and others. Unlike the participants in Duffy and Hund's study, the women who volunteered for our project were not all "influencers" who used their accounts to generate income. Much of their posting practices and decisions around what and how to use Instagram were *socially* motivated, rather than purely economic. And rather than an emphasis on avoiding vulnerability, instead we found that meanings of safety were opened up to mean more than the absence of risk and instead gestured towards "a mode of being" (Farhadi, 2018, p. 144). This idea is a shift from understanding safety as "a sense of place," towards a "mode of being" that foregrounds being safe, rather than being in a safe place. This is an embodied safety which the women in our study enacted through their posting practices and use of DMs and comments.

Communities of care

Participants understood Instagram as a site of community, support and care, of which they were key actors. Panelli et. al. (2004) show "that community and feelings of fear or safety are integrally linked in symbolic and practical ways" (p. 464). Their study of rural communities in New Zealand found that women appreciated being checked-in on and shown concern from other community members. Understanding their community as "good" was an important part of women's feelings of safety and security in this offline setting. In our research there was a similar attempt to conceptualize their online

community as a “good” one, central to which was the women’s own influence over the types of content posted. Rika, for example, used her Instagram account to “connect to my people and be part of the aerial silk community. I feel that I, through Instagram, have got to know more people and I learn a lot of things from them and it’s a source of inspiration for me.” Jamie used her running-focused Instagram account to make mental health issues more visible, and Jane appreciated the opportunity to disrupt dominant portrayals of women’s health and fitness: “It's so nice seeing fit, healthy-looking 55 year old women.”

Another example was Caroline whose feed emphasized “inner strength,” supporting others and redefining success. In this way her account was a “safe space,” focused on effort and not outcomes. Her acknowledgment of others’ suffering, including lives lost in Christchurch, and run4digity–a women’s charity for alleviating period stigma–forms part of the embodiment and implacement of safety through Instagram. Caroline states,

> I feel like in the scheme of things and my little contribution, I want to give back, when younger women or people like my daughter see social media they don’t feel insecure because all of these people are just typical on there.

Caroline also used hashtags to reinforce her commitment to creating a safe space. In particular she used #littleeyesarewatching as a reminder that she is not only posting for herself (or running just for herself) nor her peers, but others potentially influenced by her words and actions. She also talked about the affordances of Instagram for creating a community of support beyond the online world. For example, a woman she met online started following people she was following, hence connecting to a broader community of

fitness posters with similar goals around supporting others and making Instagram a positive and emotionally safe space.

Other participants purposefully avoided posts or comments that could be taken as criticism or shaming others.

> I will try and be quite engaging and positive in general on their posts. With your typical comments like, “looking strong” or “you’re looking confident.” I try to never mention things like, “your legs look so skinny or your arms look so taut.” I would never mention their actual physique or their body in it (Laura).

Creating safe communities of care and support was central to all participants in various ways. For some, this equated to acknowledging the importance of mental health (and the role of social media in both supporting and undermining mental health). Through Instagram a number of participants created communities that supported their own and others' mental health. For example, Caroline talked about Instagram’s DM function as an important feature of the platform that enabled individuals to privately offer support and express solidarity around experiencing mental health issues without the risk of public disclosure through “liking” or “commenting”:

> ...for example, Are U Okay Day. The amount of conversations that were happening in my inbox on Instagram with runners and people I have never met before from the running community, people that I have not seen for six months, that I have gone out for a run once or twice with. They are really in tune with what is going on in your life.

Another participant, Jamie, had experienced her own mental health challenges and provided a thoughtful way of thinking about creating a safe community and culture through Instagram. Through her experiences of accessing posts on social media that were “dark” or “not healthy” she realized that she had control over what she was exposed to through search terms and blocking functions, practicing what Hockin-Boyers et al. (2020) term “digital pruning.” In choosing what to post on her own page she had to contemplate the risks and benefits of visibility. Safety for Jamie was not about avoiding vulnerability, but challenging things she understood as unhealthy. Safety, similarly to Farhadi’s (2018) analysis of safety selfies, was embodied in that Jamie’s posts emphasized her recovery from an eating disorder and depression:

> there are some posts that I put out, especially ones to do with mental health, that are quite confronting, so I ask myself: is this going to help more people than it’s going to trigger in building awareness? I try to stay aware that there’s certain ways to talk about body image, there’s certain ways to approach it that are healthy and some that are really not.

She acknowledged that posting personal information comes with consequences, including some of her posts being deleted by Instagram and receiving requests for help in her DMs. However, she mostly welcomed this opportunity to support others: through her vulnerability other women could connect and feel less alone with their struggles.

Emphasizing imperfection

Creating communities of safety on Instagram was an iterative process of input (the accounts participants followed, who they allowed to follow them) and output (what they posted in their feed, Stories and DMs). Caroline, as part of her goals of creating a safe community on Instagram, specifically chose not to use filters so as to not present a "fake" image of perfection. This emphasis on imperfection was discussed by several participants:

> I don't follow anyone that's on there to look good. I know the effect it can have, because back in the day, yes I used to look at people and go "oh shit, I don't look anything like that, therefore something's wrong with me," and I'm very wary that people do that... (Jamie).

> I took the warm up for the Epilepsy Foundation a few months ago and one of the girls came up to me and said "I have been following you on social media, it's just so good to see that who you are on there [Instagram] is who you are now"...That really makes me want to keep it authentic and not edit my photos (Louise).

This emphasis on imperfection is markedly different from the responses of Jong and Drummond's (2016) young female participants, who used social networking sites to share images of perfect bodies for fitness inspiration. We would argue that the practices of our respondents extend the visibility mandate conceptualized by Duffy and Hund (2019) in that these women were not emphasizing imperfection in order to cultivate a particular image, but to create connection and communities of care. Reade's (2020) work on authenticity on Instagram is instructive here as she writes about the ways fit

women kept it “raw” (or real). She understands raw as “a form of aesthetic, emotional and affective labour which works to cultivate digital intimacies,” viewing such intimacies as “socially and economically productive in that they facilitate a shared sense of belonging and connectedness, and assist existing or aspirational influencers to establish branding and commercial value through personal recommendations and endorsements” (Reade, 2020, p. 16). Yet what is different in our study, which sought to capture the experiences of women from a range of ages and physical activity cultures, is that the women’s motivations for showcasing imperfection and authenticity appeared less concerned with commercial gains than in their own and others’ feelings of safety and wellbeing.

Conclusion

This paper extends current thinking about the operations of visibility and vulnerability for women online by identifying the significance of spatial and relational elements to cultivating women’s feelings of safety on Instagram. Feminists have long understood the gender-specific risks to women’s participation in sport, exercise and leisure. For the women we interviewed, Instagram, and other social media, are everyday sites of identity expression, income generation, communication and connection, so their perceptions of how safety and risk is experienced are important. Participants understand risk and safety differently, yet they each made strategic and effective use of Instagram’s platform affordances to navigate the risks of making their exercising activities public. Their use of

Instagram functions such as multiple accounts, blocking and restricting, Stories and DMs, allowed them to share content without compromising feelings of safety.

In addition to establishing their own sense of personal safety, respondents approached Instagram with a sense of personal ethics and a socially-aware orientation towards sharing content that would support, rather than harm other women. They demonstrated an understanding of the potential negative effects of social media on women's mental health and body image when making decisions about what to post and share. In this way, they implaced women's safety in their Instagram practices by managing their own visibility and vulnerability and taking into account the effect of their posts on the visibility and vulnerability of others. Our findings suggest that women embraced the risks of vulnerability in the hope that through their visibility, other women might "see" themselves differently.

Women's commitment to making their Instagram accounts "safe" spaces was entangled with their perceptions of Instagram as a "positive" space. In their efforts to minimize "negativity" on Instagram, participants eschewed controversial or political content along the lines of feminist call-out culture (Mendes, Ringrose & Keller, 2019), and self-presented in ways that do not radically disrupt racialized and gendered identities of white digital leisure spaces (Pinckney et al., 2018), which in the case of women's fitness is typically lean and toned (Jong & Drummond, 2016; Toffoletti & Thorpe, 2019). Following the participants, we recognize that what some users consider to be "safe spaces" are albeit perhaps not safe for everyone as there is a discourse of success and linearity associated with self-improvement through exercise, which may not feel safe to many women (Fullagar et al., 2019). In this way, women's safety, and their ability to feel

safe, are relational and shifting, but also explicitly navigated through the affordances of the technologies that they are using.

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