

2024 BAROMETER REPORT

The first ever industry-wide barometer measuring online abuse in sport, with participation from leading NGOs and International Federations.



UNITED AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE
RESEARCH HUB



UNIVERSITY



FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

PARTICIPANT LIST

This report stands as a testament to the collaborative effort of the following organizations, whose invaluable contributions and commitment to data gathering have made this comprehensive survey possible.





INTRODUCTION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UAOA 1st Annual Barometer on Social Media Abuse in Sport was issued to a total of 73 international sporting federations in October 2023. At the time of completing this report, 22 full responses had been received. The data from these responses are presented in detail throughout the full report, which follows.

However, some of the key findings do highlight the concern that is felt by a range of sporting bodies regarding the systemic impact online abuse against its members, including its competitors and officials, is having. Some of the most important outcomes of the survey include:

- In the last 12 months survey respondents identified **competitors / athletes** as being the primary target of online abuse when compared to all others associated with their sports, e.g. referees, officials, volunteers etc.
- The most common form of online abuse suffered by those engaged in sport is **'flaming'**, which is the sending of threatening, abusive or rude messages to an identified target. **With a rating of 6.5 out of 10, it was, for respondents to this survey, the most prevalent form of online abuse they encountered.**
- Some 90% of all respondents 'strongly' or 'rather' agreed that online abuse directed at athletes/ competitors had the **potential to result in them withdrawing** from participating (in their sport) altogether, if not adequately addressed.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In an overwhelming endorsement of a coalition of sporting bodies to address this issue, **some 85% of respondents agreed that sporting bodies working collectively** represented the most impactful way to address this insidious problem.
- More than three in every four respondents to this survey agreed that athletes who are the target of online abuse are subject, specifically, to **threats to harm them or their dependents (e.g. children)**.
- Some 85% of respondents either 'strongly' or 'rather' agreed that **online service providers are not sufficiently active (i.e. the social media companies)** in supporting the fight against online abuse in sport.
- Nine out of ten respondents believe that **online service providers 'should, under certain circumstances, be obliged by law to detect, remove and report online abuse in sport.'**

INTRODUCTION



DEFINING ONLINE ABUSE

There is no single agreed definition but "hate speech" is common and malicious language targeted at a person or group because of their race, ethnicity, religion, or gender.

R	E	N	R	G
race	ethnicity	religion	religion	gender

This is a non-exhaustive list, other protected characteristics include...





This report contains both findings and a summary analysis of the 1st Annual United Against Online Abuse survey barometer issued in October 2023.

The United Against Online Abuse (UAOA) campaign is a strategic initiative, led by the FIA, designed to address the impact of online abuse against athletes, officials, volunteers, and others involved in sport.

The survey barometer was conceived to offer an assessment of the extent of online abuse against athletes, competitors, officials, and participants aligned to 73 international sporting bodies worldwide, many of whom have also committed to tackling online abuse in sport by signing the UAOA Charter.

Completing the Barometer required respondents to evaluate the direct and indirect impact of online abuse, categorise the forms of abuse that

they considered most prevalent and, importantly, invited sporting bodies to consider how a coherent response to the scourge of online abuse may be shaped, sustained, and measured.

The barometer also required sporting bodies to assess the consequences of online abuse in sport on women, young people, and minority groups, amongst others, as often this activity is targeted at defined sub-populations within wider society. In total the survey barometer collated responses to 35 key metrics tracking online abuse in sport, providing a unique insight into one of global sport's most insidious challenges.





ONLINE ABUSE IN SPORT

Online hate speech is the use of violent, aggressive, or offensive language which is focused on specific sub-groups who share a common identity.

These activities create a power imbalance in which repeated and targeted malevolent commentary has the effect of elevating the vulnerability of its recipients, encouraging their further marginalisation and, ultimately, dissuading them, and those who are like them, from continuing their involvement in their chosen pursuit.

This systematic disparagement of a person or group based, typically, upon their ethnicity, 'race', perceived sexual orientation, gender, and/or nationality etc. exercises a real impact on the lives of everyday citizens. The most obvious consequence of this abuse, particularly if it is persistent and targeted, is upon the mental health of those affected by it.



ONLINE ABUSE IN SPORT

It often increases their anxiety, principally questioning whether online attacks may transition into real-life physical assaults and can prove particularly traumatic if chronic exposure to this form of abuse is not addressed. It can also elevate a sense of isolation felt by the individual impacted by it and trigger a response – entirely understandably – in which the person concerned wishes to remove themselves from the activities that have, on the face of it, given rise to the abuse in the first instance. It is apparent, particularly in the case of young athletes, that this may lead to their withdrawal from participation in the sport of their choice, which would be regrettable under any circumstances.

Consequently, across Europe and indeed worldwide, many sporting bodies and competitors have become increasingly concerned at the growth of online hate speech, with content targeted at volunteer officials, personnel, competitors and, on occasion, fans, proving particularly disconcerting.

Online hate has become pernicious precisely because it exists outside socially established norms of acceptable behaviour, cultural taboos, or any other concern on the part of the perpetrator of being censored by others. Rather it operates amid a largely unregulated and anonymous sphere, where individuals act without fear of sanction or even

identification, espousing views that, under most other circumstances, may potentially lead to prosecution. This willingness to act with apparent impunity, nevertheless, has a caustic and harmful impact on the individuals concerned, the standing of the sport in question, and society at large.



ONLINE ABUSE IN SPORT

It remains puzzling for many people, similarly, anxious about the impact this activity continues to exercise upon virtually all sports, why the social media companies concerned are not doing more to address this issue.

Why is it that when individuals are subjected to vile and abusive commentary and are otherwise innocent of any wrongdoing, the social media publishers fail to adopt more obvious forms of intervention, such as immediately removing harmful content (especially when it is highlighted to them), more robustly pursuing the perpetrators and banning them from using their services and/or supporting the victims of abuse disseminated on the sites they own and profit from.

Finally, of course, the significant changes shaping the social media industry itself may also impact its role as a medium for the transmission of online hate speech in the future. The recent (2022) changes in the ownership and organisational structure of the company formerly known as Twitter Inc. (now 'X') and the exponential rise in the popularity of TikTok, especially amongst a younger demographic, will be monitored as being potentially significant in this field.

There is clearly much more research to be conducted in this field, including understanding the motives of those engaged in online hate, and the direction of travel for research in this domain.

Of interest too, particularly for global sporting bodies, will be those parts of the world where this issue is most problematic. It would appear, based on all available evidence, that **the continents of Europe and South America combined account for around 75% of all online abuse**, notably in other major sports such as association football, and so more work needs to take place to better understand why these geographic areas are particularly relevant in this regard.



75%

of global online abuse is attributed to Europe and South America combined*

*figure relates to online abuse in association football



METHODOLOGY

73

global federations

were issued the UAOA barometer.

35

metrics were recorded,

requiring respondents to provide detailed information on all aspects of the impact of social media on their sport.

The survey that was issued to all Federations took the form of a Barometer in which respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they felt a specific issue was problematic in their sport, or the degree to which they either 'agreed' or 'disagreed' with a statement that encouraged them to reflect on a specific aspect of online abuse in sport.

This approach had the dual effect of providing an assessment, at a given timepoint, of the impact of a specific issue on the respondent's sport but, importantly, also permits comparison across time, in this case annually, meaning it will be possible to state whether an issue identified in this survey has either become more pronounced over time or, by contrast, has declined in terms of its significance relating to online abuse in sport, possibly as a result of a federation adopting an evidence-based response or intervention to address it.

Finally, survey findings, outlined in this report, will be used to support the UAOA campaign by providing an evidential basis upon which to lobby key stakeholders for action, advocacy, and investment.

The survey was launched in late October 2023 and by December 2023 had received full replies from 22 Federations, approximately one third of all those surveyed, and therefore it is these data that is presented in this report.





MONITORING AND REPORTING BREAKDOWN OF FINDINGS

The survey illuminated several trends and behaviours across online abuse, which are summarized below.

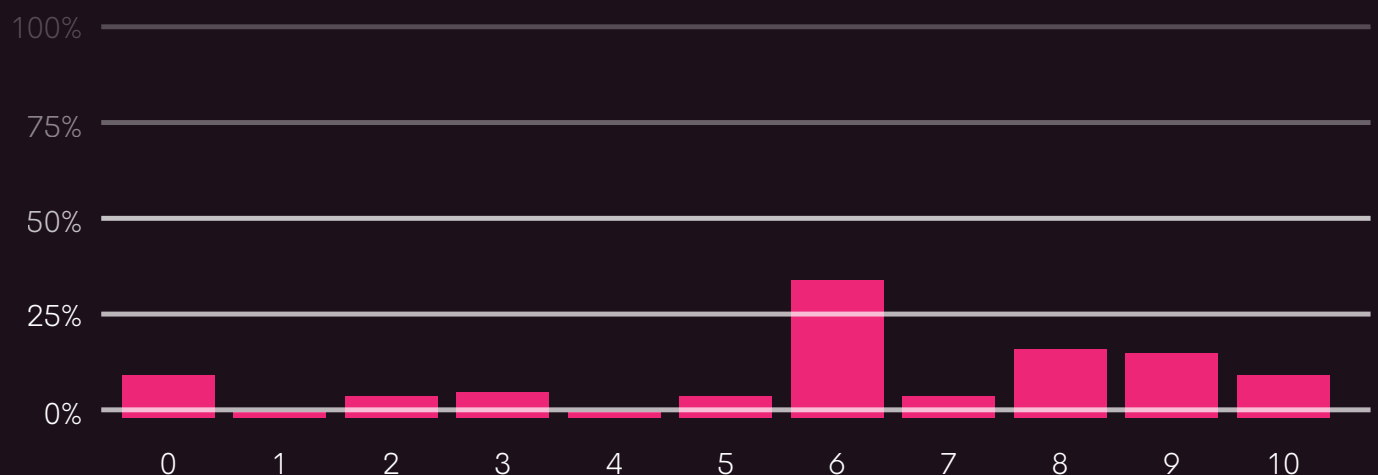
Insofar as there are a range of different groups and individuals involved in sport, it might reasonably be assumed that match officials, referees or even team coaches/managers would be the focus of online abuse, even proportionately so.

However, **participants – players, competitors – remain the primary targets for online abuse according**

to the Federations who responded to our survey, and this is concerning because for young athletes or those from a minority ethnic group, for example, this can be extremely challenging to deal with, particularly in the absence of adequate support measures being in place.

On a scale of 1-10, rate the extent of online abuse that athletes/competitors in your sport have experienced over the past 12 months.

AVG 6.2





MONITORING AND REPORTING

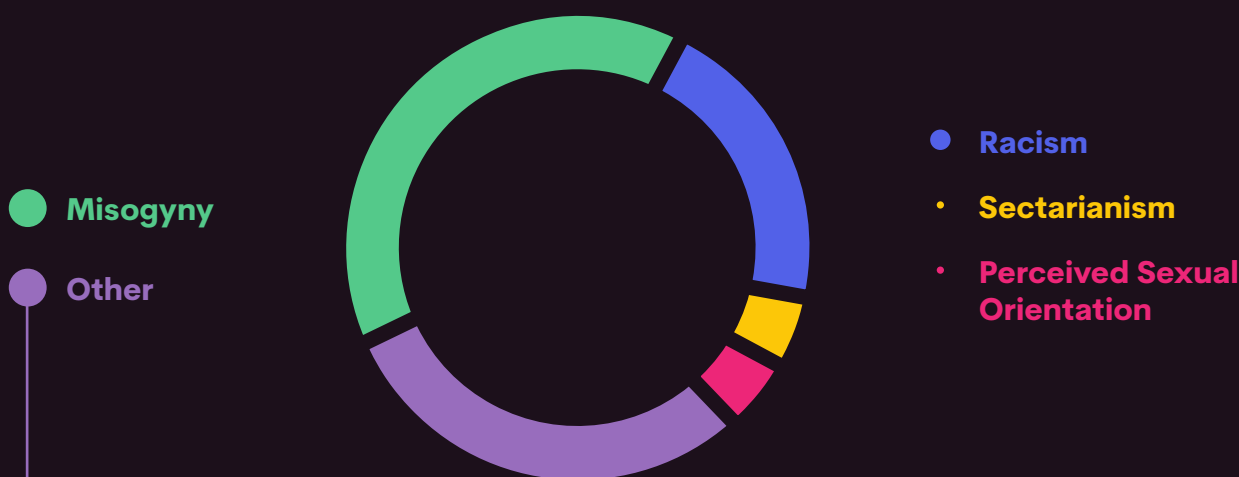
The published literature in this field of online abuse in sport has typically supported a view that there are four main categories of abuse that people endure in the online environment.

Of this typology, racism is by now well understood as being the most dominant form. Whilst this is true from the findings of this survey barometer, what is particularly noteworthy is that **40% of those who responded to this question indicated that the type of abuse they were witnessing could not be easily categorized**, indicating that a significant minority of online abuse relates to an individual quite separate

from otherwise established identity markers such as ethnicity, gender, or religion.

This is an important finding, especially considering several high-profile organisations have invested heavily in combatting racist abuse above all other categories.

What form of abuse, directed towards those engaged in your sport, do you regard as being most common:



40% of respondents reported witnessing abuse types that couldn't be easily categorized

Responses to 'other' reveal key issues in sports: **referee abuse, cyberbullying, performance bullying,**

and discrimination against Arab/Palestinian athletes, highlighting broader inclusivity challenges.



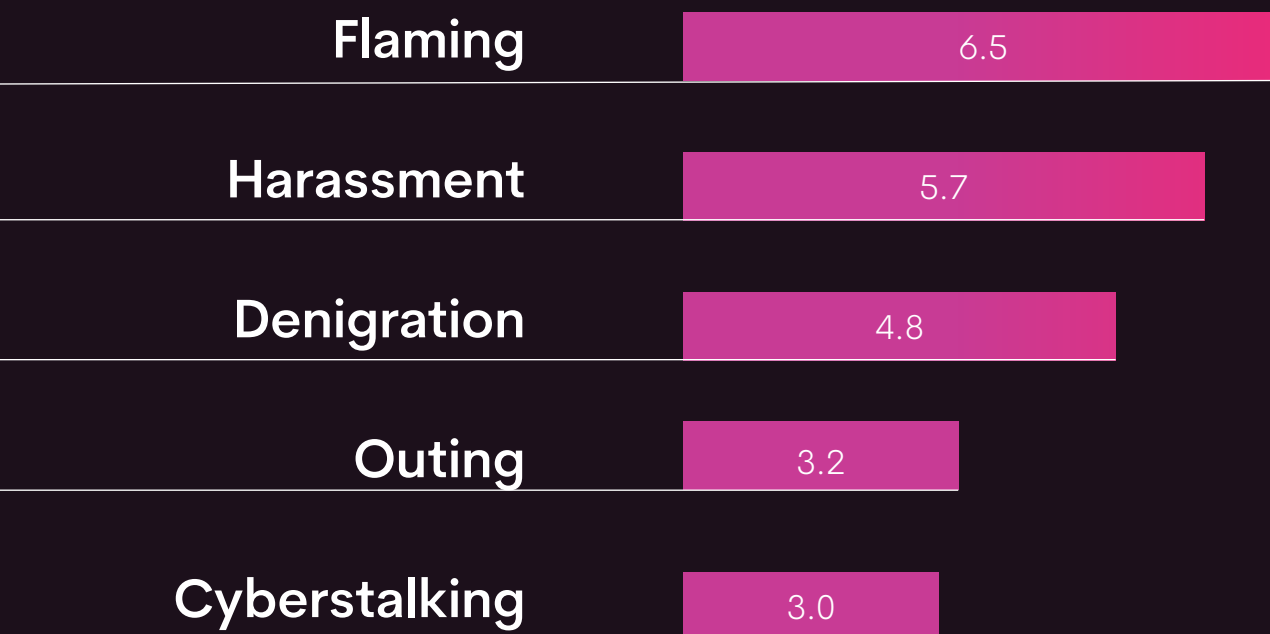
MONITORING AND REPORTING

Whereas online abuse can take many forms, **'flaming'**, in which individuals send threatening, abusive, or rude messages, was cited as being the most commonly occurring form (of abuse) according to the results of this survey.

This is relevant because whilst online abuse can often be dismissed by those not directly impacted by it as being comparatively harmless (i.e. people are not being physically harmed), the sending of threatening messages

(especially hostile and deliberately unnerving ones) has a deleterious impact upon the recipient, especially if the threat extends to members of their immediate family, including children.

Of a list of the most common methods of providing online abuse in sport, rated on a scale from 0 to 10, flaming is deemed the most prevalent.





MONITORING AND REPORTING

The survey barometer then asked respondents to consider the ultimate effect of online abuse in sport, if left unchecked.

Over 90% of those who completed the survey either 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that that if online abuse is not addressed it may result in some athletes/competitors withdrawing from participating altogether.

This finding should serve as a 'clarion call' to all stakeholders concerning the seriousness with which they should take the impact of online abuse on their sport. Put another way, it is reasonable to conclude that if there were other activities in their sphere of influence that meant governing bodies of sport risked losing some of their most talented

competitors, they would robustly intervene to prevent this. Yet this survey has evidenced a clear and present danger presented by social media hate speech and it is evident that more can and should be done, with greater urgency, by sporting authorities to address this issue.

Online abuse against athletes/competitors has a detrimental effect on their attitude towards their sport and, if not addressed, may lead to some athletes/competitors withdrawing from participating altogether.

Extent to which respondents agreed with this statement:





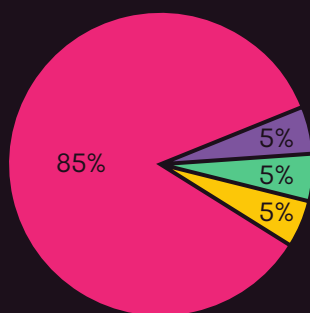
MONITORING AND REPORTING

Nevertheless, all sporting bodies, perhaps inspired by the UAOA campaign, are now acutely aware of their responsibilities concerning the

protection of their athletes and officials and, particularly over the last 12 months, have become ever more strident in their determination to tackle online abuse.

Whilst some continue to see the merit of adopting a unilateral response to the issue, **some 85% of respondents to the survey expressed support for a coalition of interested parties to take this fight forward, stating that the issue is best addressed when international and national governing bodies of sport act together to present a unified opposition to online abuse.**

Respondents clearly supporting a broad, encompassing and inclusive response to this issue



- **International and National governing bodies of sport acting together to present a unified opposition to online abuse in sport represents the most impactful approach (85%)**
- Opposition to online abuse in sport is best achieved by individual athletes speaking out against it (5%)
- Online abuse in sport is best addressed when governing bodies of sport, on an individual level, decide to take a stand against it (5%)
- Prefer not to answer/Don't know (5%)

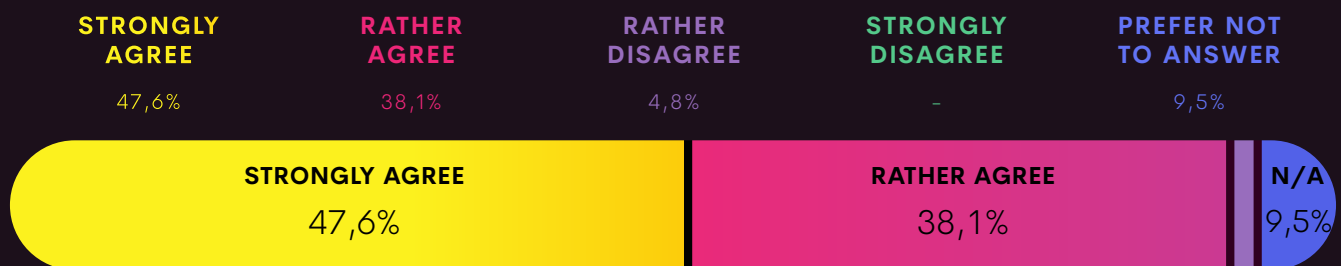


MONITORING AND REPORTING

As the previously published UAOA White Paper on Online Abuse in Sport confirmed, despite the insidious nature of online abuse in modern sport, comparatively little is known about the

subject. Indeed, academic research, which is often in the vanguard of investigations of this kind, has only been undertaken in this field for the last four years.

Thus, when asked, it is little surprise that **sporting federations confirmed that they felt that only by developing a research base in this field could they, in turn, speak with authority on the issue, with more than 3 in every 4 respondents supporting this perspective.**



Respondents clearly favouring an evidence-based approach to addressing this issue



MONITORING AND REPORTING

One of the challenges that those concerned with the negative impact of social media, which remains a largely unregulated space despite the introduction of the EU Digital Services Act (DSA) (2023) (with the UK Online Safety Bill (2023) being understood as an

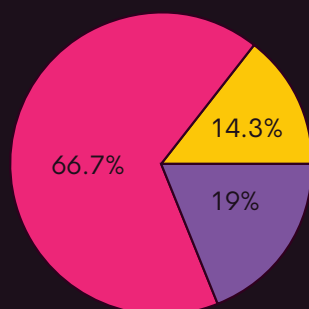
example of a piece of national legislation aligned with the principles of the DSA), face when highlighting its effect upon modern life, is countering the accusation that they, in turn, are seeking to restrict freedom of speech or expression.

However, the response to our survey indicates that sporting federations have given careful thought to this apparent contradiction, and **some 2/3rd (of sporting federations) conclude that the right to online privacy and the ability to detect online abuse in sport are, in fact, broadly of equal importance.**

This finding, read another way, represents a belief that whilst respondents see merit in being able to express opinions openly and freely, equally this should not be seen as an

unconditional right and, especially when individuals overstep broadly acceptable forms of expression, they should be able to be identified and, ultimately, held accountable for their actions.

Respondents recognizing the need for balance between the right to privacy and the need to address this issue.



- The ability to detect online abuse in sport is more important than the right to online privacy (19%)
- The right to online privacy and the ability to detect online abuse in sport are broadly of equal importance (66.7%)
- Prefer not to answer/Don't know (14.3%)



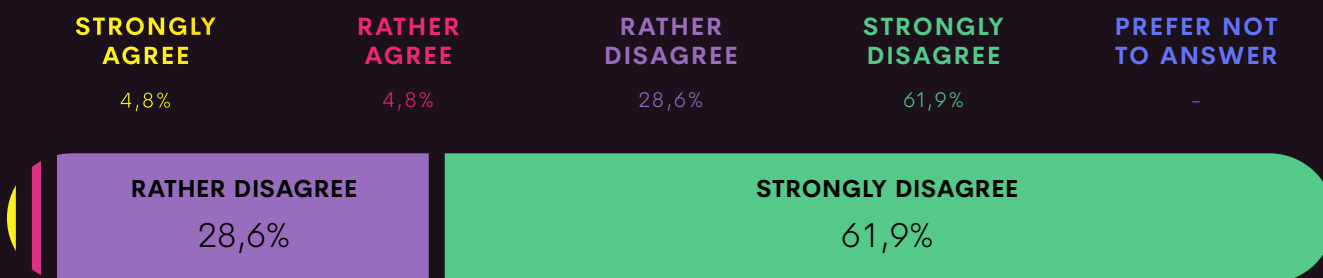
MONITORING AND REPORTING

When asked to comment on whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: 'As things stand, athletes can use online social media platforms without concern that they may be exposed to online abuse', some 9 out of 10 respondents to the survey either 'strongly disagreed' (61.9%) or 'rather disagreed' (28.6%) with it.

This finding has several implications, not least to highlight a chilling effect on athletes' use of social media, interaction with fans and the media and serves

also as a measure of how the fear alone of online abuse can create a profound impact on competitors' use of social media platforms.

As things stand, athletes can use online social media platforms without concern that they may be exposed to online abuse.



Respondents clearly concerned at the prevalence of online abuse in their sport.



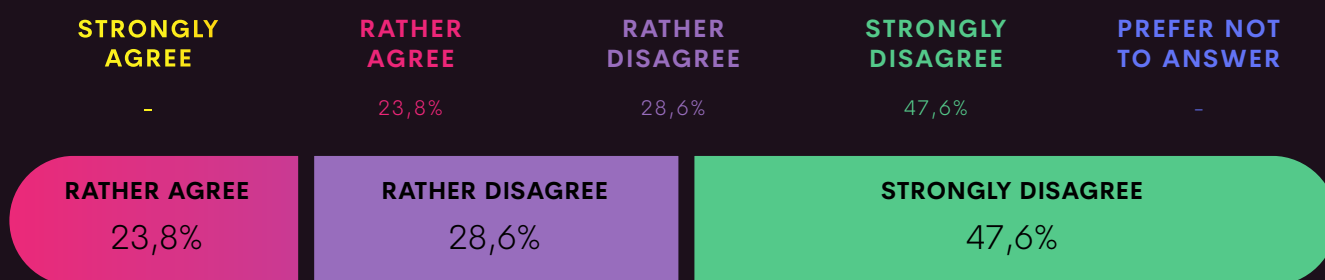
MONITORING AND REPORTING

There is a concern that online abuse may be dismissed, in some quarters, as simply part of the reality of being a

high-profile sporting 'actor', particularly within major global sports.

Yet when more than **3 out of every 4** respondents to our survey barometer conclude that threats to harm sportspeople, or their dependents, now constituted a reality for sportspeople using social media platforms, the stark conclusion is drawn that this issue constitutes an existential threat to a free, open, and social sporting discourse.

At present, athletes can use online social media platforms without, specifically, being subject to threats to harm them or their dependents.



Genuine concern at the potential for athletes / their dependents to endure threats or harm



MONITORING AND REPORTING

There appears to be an understanding on the part of sporting federations that they require some level of collaboration

with social media platforms to ensure a meaningful response to the challenges they evidently now face in this space.

Despite this, **85% of respondents to this survey stated that they, by now, have concluded that online service providers are not sufficiently active in supporting the fight against online abuse in sport.** This merely confirms the extent of the challenge that yet lies ahead and an understanding that more must be done to disarm a degree of scepticism around social media companies' commitment to meaningful change in this area.

Currently, online service providers are not sufficiently active in supporting the fight against online abuse in sport.



Despite their role in addressing the issue on online abuse in sport, there is appreciation that OSPs have much more to do in this regard



MONITORING AND REPORTING

In recognizing the extent of the challenge presented by online abuse against their participants and officials, it is heartening to note that **38% of federations that responded to this survey confirmed that they have a formal plan in place to address online abuse in their sport.**

In most cases that has meant collaborating with an artificial intelligence (AI) company engaged in monitoring and, through machine learning, shielding/ removing harmful content, particularly on their official social media channels (e.g. X or Facebook). Whilst this approach has the effect of removing most – although notably not all – harmful content, arguably it does not address the extent or even genesis of the challenge posed by this issue. A further 28.6% of respondents indicated that their

federation was currently working on a plan, or it was in some stage of development, whilst only a third of those who replied stated that did not have a plan in place and, moreover, were not composing one at the time of completing this survey. It is probable that the latter category of respondents do not regard online abuse as being a particular concern for them, at least currently, and therefore are focused on other immediate challenges for their sport.

Does your Federation have a formal plan in place to address Online Abuse as it relates to your sport?



- **Yes (38,1%)**
- **No (33,3%)**
- **No, but it's under development (28,6%)**

Combined, there is a majority of INGBs / NGBs that either have a plan already in place or are developing one to mitigate online abuse in their sport



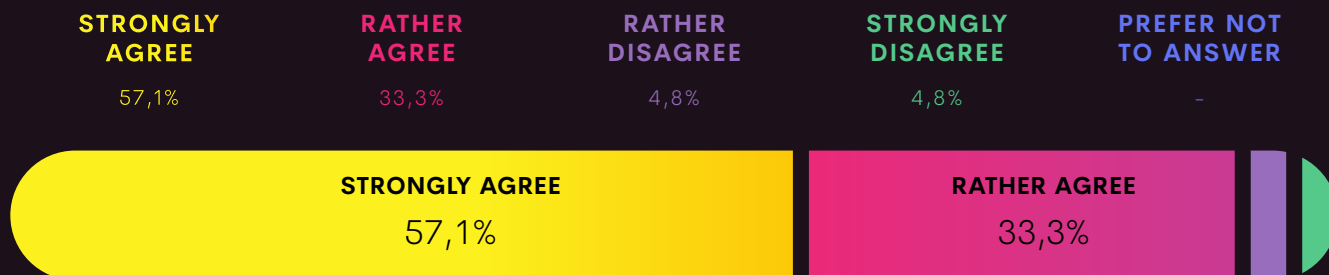
MONITORING AND REPORTING

When the survey turned to enquire about attitudes to the detection and, where appropriate, prosecution of offenders, sporting federations expressed their clear support for the full rigors of the law to be imposed on those perpetrating online abuse against

their members. As a first principle, respondents suggested that online service providers should take immediate action to remove harmful content and, in so doing, avoid further distress to its intended recipients.

Indeed some 57.1% of respondents said they 'strongly agreed' with this approach (outlined above) and, by contrast, less than 10% of those who replied to this question indicated they opposed these measures.

Online abuse posts should be promptly detected and investigated to prosecute offenders, and the content removed to avoid further distress, including to the targets.



Respondents clearly in favour of prosecution where it can be proven and immediate action by OSPs to remove harmful content



MONITORING AND REPORTING

It's clear national and transnational legislatures are becoming increasingly focused on the issue of online abuse, albeit not exclusively in the sporting

realm, and are either considering introducing legislation or, in fact, are in the process of doing so.

Sporting federations have a clear position on the role any new law should play in this realm indicating in overwhelming terms (90.5%) that online service providers should, under certain circumstances, be obliged by law to detect, remove, and report online abuse in sport.

Online Service Providers (e.g, social media platforms):

...should be able to take voluntary actions to detect, remove and report online abuse in sport 4.8%

...should, under certain circumstances, be obliged by law to detect, remove and report online abuse in sport 90.5%

...should not detect, remove and report online abuse in sport

Prefer not to answer / Don't know 4.8%



MONITORING AND REPORTING

Finally, whilst there is a sense amongst sporting bodies that they and others may need the support of legislation to see meaningful change, for now they

were clear that any campaign against online abuse in sport must have the support of online service providers.

Indeed **over 75% of respondents confirmed that the support of social media companies was crucial to the long-term outcome of any campaign for change in this realm.**

Any campaign against online abuse in sport must have the support of online service providers:



Recognition that progress will require support from OSP



UAOA PLAN OF ACTION

The UAOA campaign will form the basis of a sustained commitment to tackling the issue of online abuse in sport in the time ahead.

A key goal of the campaign is to support, based on a fuller appreciation of the impact of online hate speech on those directly harmed or compromised by it, the implementation of concrete actions to provide a robust response to this issue, which remains one of the most concerning threats to modern sport. This will be achieved through:

- Engagement with a range of governing bodies of sport (and relevant national and international authorities),
- Consultation with individuals, institutions, and agencies with the intention of better serving the needs of those directly affected by online abuse (e.g. support and guidance),
- Collaborating with world leading research centres to offer an informed, evidence-based approach to the issue so that the Campaign can act with authority and be 'thought leaders' in this realm. In this regard, the UAOA Campaign's continued collaboration with Dublin City University (DCU) is evidence of this stated aim in practice.

A key strength of the UAOA campaign is it represents a coalition of sporting bodies and others around a single issue, which concerns these organisations in broadly equal measure. Acting alone, the ability of these agencies to bring about meaningful and sustained change may prove only proportionate to their individual standing, but through working alongside other sporting bodies, representatives of professional athletes, national governments, and other policymakers, and, importantly, social media



UAOA PLAN OF ACTION

companies, real change can and, inevitably will, follow. The public declaration of support by so many collaborating agencies, through the signing of the UAOA Charter, and the high-level commitment of many more to follow suit in 2024, merely confirms the momentum for change that the UAOA Campaign has generated since its inception in late 2022.

As a mark of its own commitment to eradicating online abuse in its sphere of influence, the FIA, a co-signatory to the UAOA Campaign, has prioritised a research-informed approach, commissioning global research on the issue, with grant funding from the FIA Foundation. This research is currently being undertaken by DCU, which is one of the leading Universities in Europe for the study of online abuse in sport. DCU will also host 6 Masters scholars, again fully funded by the FIA Foundation, to undertake research in a range of national settings worldwide examining social media abuse in sport. Finally, partnering with the FIA University, the UAOA campaign will generate peer-reviewed academic publications, White Papers, policy statements, host global conferences and other forms of public dissemination over the next 12 months.

Through dedicated branding and strategic communications, the UAOA will activate all available channels to implement and amplify its call for change, bringing forward dedicated bespoke campaigns, working with media partners to ensure this message is consistently communicated and, generally, acting proactively to challenge those who, despite all of this, choose to persist with this activity. They simply cannot be permitted to act in a way that harms the very fabric of sport.

Ultimately, the UAOA Campaign recognises that the success of this strategic undertaking will be understood when meaningful change is delivered. Success is already evident through the proactive approach being taken by a range of our partners, both unilaterally and collaboratively, designed to de-normalise toxic hate speech, communicating a message that they will not tolerate this activity in all its various forms.



PARTNERS

OUR PARTNERS



Mohammed Ben Sulayem – UAOA Founding Partner and FIA President
with **Jorge Viegas** – President of the FIM



PARTNERS

The United Against Online Abuse coalition would like to thank our partners who share a common vision and commitment to creating positive and lasting change, throughout the sporting ecosystem.





PARTNERS

GOVERNMENTS

The United Against Online Abuse campaign is supported by the endorsement of the following governments:



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
Ministry of Education,
Religious Affairs and Sports



REPUBLIKA E SHQIPËRIË
MINISTRIA E ARSIMIT,
SPORTIT DHE RINISË



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
GOV.SI



Liberté • Égalité • Fraternité
RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

*Pictured Above:
Governments of Greece, Albania, Slovenia and France*

With the following governments endorsing the campaign and participating in extensive discussions concerning the trajectory of the campaign within their own jurisdictions: Australia, Belgium, Brazil, China, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Monaco, Rwanda, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, UK.

Together, in partnership with the UAOA Coalition, these governments will strive towards fostering a safer digital environment for all individuals, uniting to explore innovative strategies and policies in the field of digital responsibility.

CONTACT DETAILS



[UNITEDAGAINSTONLINEABUSE.COM](https://www.unitedagainstonlineabuse.com)

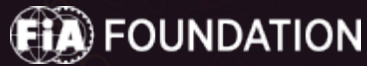


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UNITED AGAINST ONLINE ABUSE

COALITION TO STOP HATE SPEECH IN SPORT



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