



ONLINE ABUSE IN NCAA CHAMPIONSHIPS
NCAA ANALYSIS REPORT 2024/25

AI MONITORING: PROTECTING ATHLETES, COACHES & OFFICIALS

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INTRODUCTION

The NCAA has partnered with Signify Group and its artificial intelligence Threat Matrix service to identify, investigate and provide ongoing support in relation to online abuse and threats received by athletes, coaches, and officials across 7 sports for the 2024-25 season.

The service monitored social media accounts of competing players, coaches, match officials and teams across X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok, covering the following key components:

- Targeted online abuse and threat
- Levels and categorization of abuse and threat, including gravity of offences, sources and identification of tactics
- Immediate notification to NCAA of any identified (fixed) threat / inappropriate approaches
- Expediting abusive or threatening content take-down / sanctioning of account holders - where platform community guidelines are evidenced to have been broken
- Unmasking of abusers to enable action by NCAA and / or prosecution by law enforcement

The Threat Matrix service covers over 40 languages (or variations of) with abusive posts identified based on text, with layered word, image, emoji and phrase categorization / detection.

The open-source Threat Matrix service allowed for a welfare-led approach into coverage of private direct messages for players that received large volumes of abuse.

Signify provided support and remediation where issues arose and where they were reported to the NCAA. This also included assessment and investigation of abuse and threats sent by other digital means such as email.

The Threat Matrix service focuses on:

- Monitoring – of public accounts and mentions for abusive, discriminatory or threatening content.
- Welfare-led direct message (DM) support – where it was identified that athletes received high volumes of abuse, they were offered DM monitoring and support.
- Investigation & Action – where content was detected and verified, it was actioned by Signify. Captured abusive content was shared with platforms, and evidence of content that passed the threshold of criminal activity / hateful communications was shared with law enforcement (via the NCAA) to support real-world action.
- Wellbeing of individuals – the central goal of these services was to protect athletes, and coaches from abuse allowing them to focus on the event and giving them the assurance that abusers were being held to account.

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PROJECT SCOPE + COVERAGE

All participants and selected stages of competitions in the following championships were covered:



DI Women's Volleyball Championship
(National Semi-Finals + Final)



FCS Football Championships
(Championship Game)



DI Men's and Women's March Madness
(Selection Sunday + First Round onwards)



DI Gymnastics
(Championships)



DI Tennis Championships
(Championships)



DI Women's Softball Championships
(Regionals onwards)



DI Men's Baseball Championships
(Regionals onwards)

ACCOUNTS MONITORED

5,555

College Athletes
(76% increase from 2023-24)

625

Team Coaches
(28% increase from 2023-24)

466

Team Accounts
(182% increase from 2023-24)

277

Event Officials
(41% increase from 2023-24)

26

NCAA Official Channels
(117% increase from 2023-24)

A BESPOKE PROCESS



Build a proactive net around participants:
Scanning for abuse and threats targeting accounts across social media platforms and the dark web.



Proactively identify accounts used by abusers at scale -
using a combination of AI tech and the nuance of security and intelligence experts.



Unmask abusers using specialist Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) forensic tools and real-world intelligence to **de-anonymise and identify abusers to an evidential standard.**



Report abusive accounts to social media platforms, pressuring the **removal of abusive accounts every month.** Removing the expectation on participants to report abuse.



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SUMMARY FINDINGS

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SUMMARY ANALYSIS

Across the 2024/25 year, there were **3,916 abusive, threatening, and discriminatory posts** and comments detected across the 7 monitored sports events. This presented a 22% decrease in comparison to the 2023/24 year.

Women's Basketball observed a significant decrease, of 93%, in detected abusive vitriol, however, Men's Basketball saw a 146% increase.

Whilst there was a substantial overall drop in detected online abuse, **Sexual-related content and Sexist remarks remained ongoing issues** that were also reflected in the previous year's statistics. After General Abuse (30%), 20% of the detected content contained Sexual language, whilst Sexism contributed 12%.

The **Sexualization of female athletes was identified as a key insight** across this report. With the growing interest in Women's sport globally, the risk to female athletes is heightened. Sexual comments detected online can often lead to real-world incidents involving infatuation, fixation, and stalking. Signify's work supports the NCAA in tackling this issue.

Similar volumes were observed in **Sports Betting & Match Fixing-related abuse (11%)** to the previous year. Whilst Racism dropped by 63%, and Homophobia & Transphobia decreased by 72%. The fall in Racism was largely linked to the heightened volumes in the previous year, targeted at Angel Reese, who received the greatest volumes of abuse during the 2023/24 year.

However, in Volleyball, **Transphobia remained a prominent issue** with 28% of the abuse detected during the Volleyball Championships, of that nature. This was triggered by changes made to the NCAA transgender policy following the Supreme Court ruling.

A key observation of this year's analysis and insights was that coaches were often amongst the most targeted individuals. Across all sports, **38 coaches received directed abuse** which was triggered by a variety of on-field decisions, personal views, public outbursts, post-match interviews, and moving to new teams.

Additionally, **Match Officials** continued to be targeted across this year's events. Some of the largest spikes of abuse detected were triggered by controversies related to Match Official decisions. Whilst it was rare for Match Officials to receive directed abuse that named them publicly, it is likely that more received abuse through their direct messages. The NCAA also faced backlash in relation to these incidents with 'fans' making corruption allegations.

During **March Madness**, concerning posts were detected targeting members of the Selection Committee. Some of these messages contained threats and were investigated by Signify's OSINT team before being shared with law enforcement. This highlights the real-world risk that exists, but where the NCAA is protecting their stakeholders during upsetting situations.

One player during the **Women's March Madness** tournament experienced a heavy onslaught of online abuse following an on-court incident. Utilising the welfare-led approach to direct message (DM) service onboarding, the NCAA and Signify acted quickly in supporting the individual at a tough time. This was the first instance where the DM service has been used by an NCAA stakeholder and allowed the player to be further protected. This also reassured the player that the issue was being handled, and that she did not need to deal with it alone.

Lastly, the **NCAA DI Tennis Championships** was a monitored event, but no abuse was detected. It would be recommended to cover additional stages in the tournament next year to cover a larger population of players as it is known that Sports Betting & Match Fixing-related abuse is a prominent issue in tennis.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY BREAKDOWN

WHAT THE DATA ILLUSTRATES? TOP 10 FINDINGS

1. **Coaches are a key target of online abuse** within College sports, and they need protecting. 38 coaches were targeted across all competitions.
2. The **sexualization of female college athletes continues to be a major issue**. This was particularly prevalent in Gymnastics, whilst there was also a distinct difference in language used towards female Softball players, compared to male Baseball players.
3. **Decisions made by Match Officials acted as a catalyst for abuse**, with a number of key issues triggered by controversial decisions across several sports.
4. Whilst there was an **overall reduction in Homophobia and Transphobia**, in Volleyball, Transphobia remained a prominent issue. This was exacerbated this year by NCAA transgender policy changes following the Supreme Court ruling.
5. There is a **concerning risk towards Selection Committee members**. Online protections are imperative to their safety, and mental wellbeing.
6. The **substantial decline in abuse observed in Women's Basketball** highlights the weighting high-profile players have in triggering abuse. Two players received high volumes of abuse in the previous year's event, but were not competing in the 2024/25 year.
7. **Welfare-led Direct Message (DM) support** was an effective approach to additional protections.
8. Almost **three times less Racist content** was detected. This was linked with heightened volumes detected in the previous year towards one player.
9. The **NCAA DI Tennis Championships** did not trigger any detected abuse.
10. **Sports Betting & Match Fixing** related abuse volumes remained similar to the previous year.

TOP 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **EDUCATION:**
Athletes, coaches, officials and selection committee members should be informed of the protections currently in place, as well as educated on how they can further protect themselves online. As part of this, they should be advised as to how they can report concerning messages that they receive.
2. **ON-GOING MONITORING OF EVENTS:**
With the Threat Matrix service operating for the NCAA over two years, the program not only ensures ongoing protection for stakeholders but also enables trend comparisons in online abuse across sports. As women's sport audiences grow rapidly, the nature of abuse toward female athletes is evolving – an example of an area where the NCAA can lead with unique insights.
3. **WELFARE-LED DM SUPPORT:**
The welfare-led approach to DM support should be continued. This process could be enhanced by utilising the data recorded across the last 2 years to assess if there are any at-risk individuals. These stakeholders should be approached prior to a tournament for onboarding, or education.
4. **SPORTS BETTING & ONLINE ABUSE:**
This service continues to strongly justify further research into the connection between sports betting and online abuse. As the US betting industry expands, close attention to this link remains essential.
5. **CONNECTING TO EVENT SECURITY TEAMS:**
With several accounts of concern investigated in this study, it is inevitable that some will be linked to specific colleges or indicate attendance at an event. Establishing a fast-track process for sharing intelligence would be a valuable outcome.

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KEY FIGURES: ALL CHAMPIONSHIPS

	TOTAL MESSAGES (Mentioning target accounts)	TOTAL FLAGGED BY AI (Reviewed by analysts)	TOTAL VERIFIED ABUSIVE (Reported to platform)
 VOLLEYBALL	43,641	2,011	92
 FOOTBALL	6,645	201	34
 BASKETBALL	1,070,637	54,096	3,161
 GYMNASTICS	30,285	274	19
 TENNIS	1,660	25	0
 SOFTBALL	68,812	3,113	176
 BASEBALL	110,627	6,092	434
TOTALS	1,332,307 Mentioning target accounts 2023/24: 1,313,465 	65,812 Reviewed by analysts 2023/24: 72,412 	3,916 Reported to platform 2023/24: 5,020 

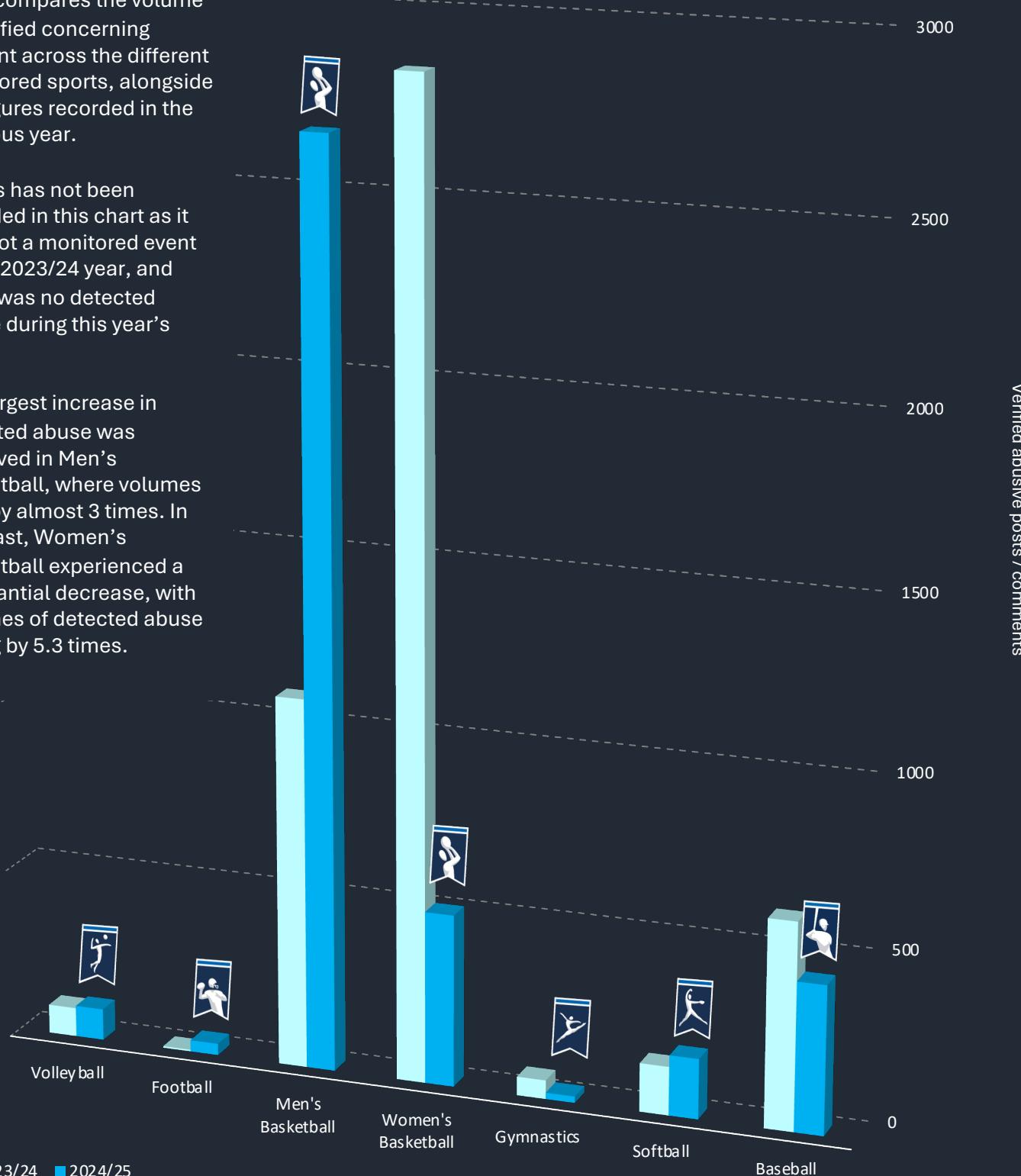
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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The chart presented on this page compares the volume of verified concerning content across the different monitored sports, alongside the figures recorded in the previous year.

Tennis has not been included in this chart as it was not a monitored event in the 2023/24 year, and there was no detected abuse during this year's event.

The largest increase in detected abuse was observed in Men's Basketball, where volumes rose by almost 3 times. In contrast, Women's Basketball experienced a substantial decrease, with volumes of detected abuse falling by 5.3 times.



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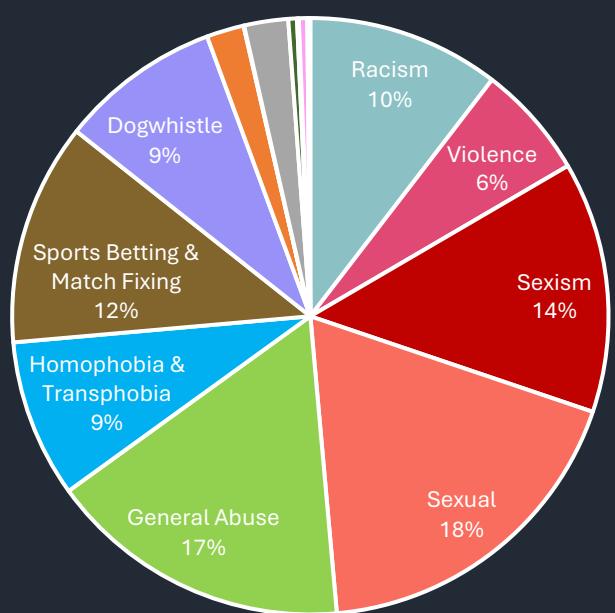
ABUSE CATEGORIZATION

In a comparison of the categories of abuse detected across all monitored events during the 2023/24 year, and the 2024/25 year, General Abuse, Sexual, and Sexism remained the top three targeted categories in terms of volume.

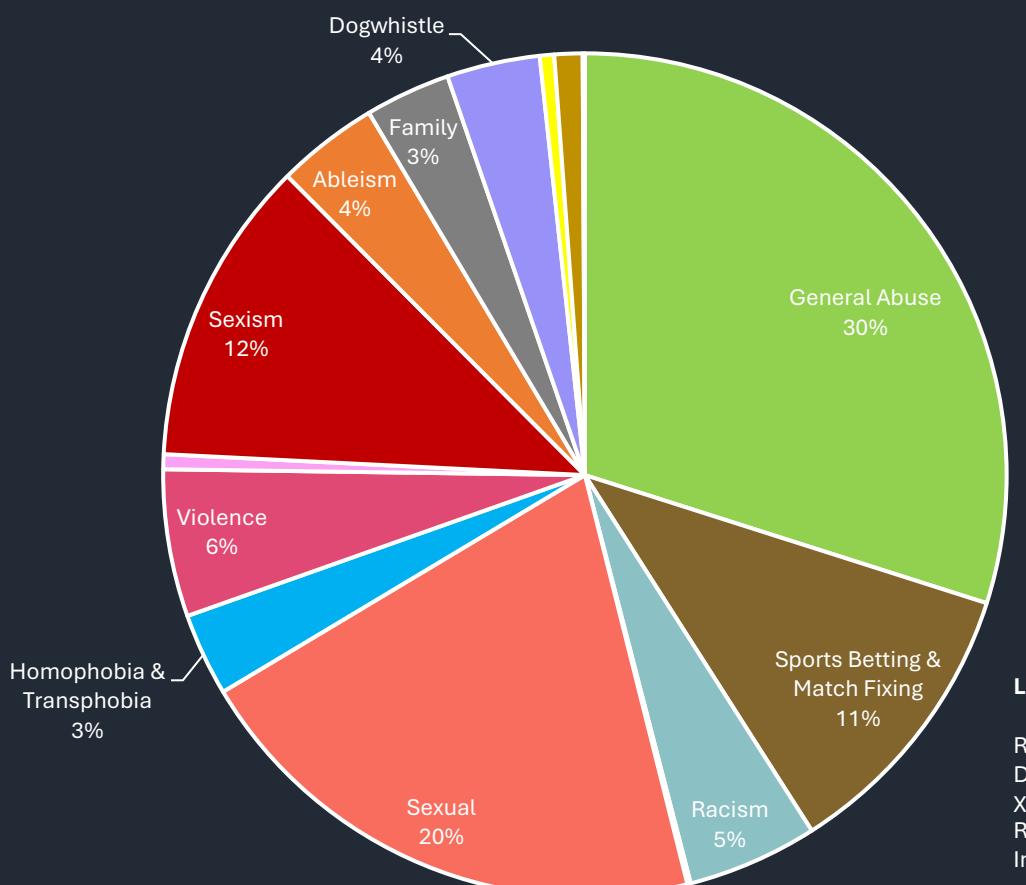
Whilst Sports Betting & Match Fixing related content continued to contribute a similar proportion of the overall abuse, there was a significant decrease in Racist abuse, with 2.7 times fewer cases detected.

There was also a substantial reduction in Homophobia & Transphobia, with incidents decreasing by approximately 72%, equating to 3.5 times fewer cases detected.

2023 / 24:



2024 / 25:



Less than 2%:

- Religion (1.08%)
- Doping (0.57%)
- Xenophobia (0.55%)
- Rape Allegations (0.13%)
- Intracommunity Slurs (0.08%)



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MENTAL HEALTH

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THE MENTAL HEALTH TOLL ON VICTIMS

The risks and mental health challenges associated with being a victim of online abuse or threats are real and have a direct and immediate effect on athletes, coaches, officials, and their families.

This can impact them on both a personal and professional level and ultimately affect their wellbeing and ability to perform at their best.

By putting the Threat Matrix service in place, the NCAA is able to demonstrate to participants that they are being protected, and that proactive action is being taken on their behalf to hold abusers to account.

Participants in sport are regularly demanding action be taken against those who send them abuse and threats.

Threat Matrix is providing this proactive support to athletes and officials giving them the assurance that perpetrators are being flagged, investigated, and reported to the appropriate authorities.

REAL WORLD SYMPTOMS OF ONLINE ABUSE

The abhorrent abuse that Signify monitors across social media and all online platforms exposes athletes, officials, and even their families to serious risks.

Being a victim of online abuse and continuous hatred online can lead to a range of real-world consequences and symptoms, including (but not limited to) instances of anxiety, depression, loss of confidence, panic attacks and in extreme cases, can be a contributory factor in suicidal tendencies / actions.

Intervention, recognition and outreach can provide a victim with a real sense of support and protection – at the very least, recognition of the issues.



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APPENDIX / GLOSSARY

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GRAVITY OF ABUSE DEFINITIONS

Tier 0 - there was concerning communication*, but not of a level where we would expect platform action – client to review with a view to informing safeguarding / athlete welfare teams in cases of prolific volumes of abuse.

Tier 1 - the concerning communication* may be sufficient to warrant intervention from the platform for breach of guidelines – client to review with a view to informing safeguarding / athlete welfare teams in cases of prolific volumes of abuse.

Tier 2 - egregious abuse or threat warranting intervention from platforms for breach of guidelines and additional examination by the client – client to prioritise and alert safeguarding / athlete welfare teams and event / competition teams (cf. entry to events) in the case of verified accounts.

Signify's in-house OSINT investigations activated within this Tier.

Tier 3 - egregious abuse or threat reaching a criminal threshold or case of imminent threat – intervention for breach of platform guidelines, preparation of evidence pack and referral to law enforcement – client to prioritise and alert safeguarding / athlete welfare teams and event / competition teams (cf. entry to events) in the case of verified accounts.

Signify's in-house OSINT investigations activated within this Tier.

**Concerning communication = any abuse, threat, intrusive or problematic communication either posed publicly or sent directly, which may cause an emotional or physical risk to the recipient.*

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TERMINOLOGY + GLOSSARY

- **Abuse / Abusive posts and accounts:** refers to content that includes discriminatory, egregious and aggravated terminology.
- **Discriminatory flags:** Posts flagged for content that may include racist, homophobic, sexist etc. terms.
- **Dogwhistle:** An abusive message clearly exploiting a racist trope without explicitly using directly racist language.
- **Flagged posts:** Posts flagged for content that may include personally abusive or discriminatory content. Personally abusive content can include calling someone a c***t, etc.
- **GRT:** Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities.
- **Inclusion criteria:** a post will have mentioned one of the monitored player handles.
- **Special terms:** Mentions of particular terms (as an example - Antiziganism).

FILTER CATEGORIES

Identified posts are based on text, with layered word, emoji and phrase categorisation and an AI-empowered threat detection algorithm.

Our flagging system is based on a series of issue specific keywords, from the following example categories (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Ableist
- Child abuse
- Dogwhistle
- Doping allegations
- Family members
- General abuse & allegations
- Homophobia
- Intra-communal abuse
- Misogyny (incl: Sexist & Sexual)
- Sports Betting & Integrity issues
- Racism
- Religion (incl: Antisemitism & Islamophobia)
- Special terms



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