Raygun and the Internet Pile-On: Why Mockery Spreads

Name Date Class

Reading

1 In August 2024, breaking made its Olympic debut in Paris, and one of the competitors was a 36-year-old Australian university lecturer named Rachael Gunn. Competing as B-girl Raygun, Gunn had earned her place by winning the Oceania qualifying event, and she had written a PhD on breaking culture. In Paris, she performed an **unconventional** routine that included a "kangaroo hop" and a move called the sprinkler. She lost all three of her battles without receiving a single vote from the judges. Within hours, clips of her routine had gone **viral**.

2 What followed was a wave of **mockery**. The comedian Rachel Dratch **parodied** the routine on The Tonight Show, and the singer Adele stopped one of her own concerts to talk about it. Australia's prime minister, Anthony Albanese, praised her for trying. Then the **pile-on** moved from jokes to accusations. An anonymous online **petition**, which gathered more than 45,000 signatures, claimed that Gunn had **manipulated** her Olympic selection. The Australian Olympic Committee's chief executive, Matt Carroll, said the petition was "vexatious, misleading and bullying," and it was taken down. Three months after the Games, Gunn told a Sydney radio station that she would no longer compete. She said that the **scrutiny** would be too intense, because people would film her and post the videos online.

3 Why did one short routine attract so much attention? Research on online behavior offers part of an answer. In a 2023 study in Nature Human Behaviour, Claire Robertson and colleagues analyzed about 105,000 headline variations tested by the news site Upworthy. Because readers saw different headlines for the same story at random, the researchers could measure cause, not just correlation. For a headline of average length, each extra negative word raised the click rate by about 2.3 percent. A 2021 study in PNAS by Steve Rathje and colleagues found that posts about political opponents were shared about twice as often as posts about the writer's own side. Together, these studies suggest that platforms which reward **engagement**, meaning likes, shares, and comments, create **incentives** to post content that attacks or ridicules someone. Neither study examined sports memes, however, so applying them to Gunn's case is an inference, not a direct finding.

4 Online hostility also tends to fall on a small number of people. World Athletics, the governing body for track and field, worked with the data company Signify Group to monitor the social media accounts of 1,917 athletes and officials during the Paris Olympics. Of more than 355,000 posts that were analyzed, 809 were **verified** as abusive. Just two athletes received 82 percent of that abuse, a **disproportionate** share by any measure. The study covered athletics, not breaking, and it did not include private messages, so the real amount of abuse was probably higher.

5 Gunn believes that her gender played a part. She told CNN that women athletes faced extra scrutiny because of their gender. The evidence makes this claim **plausible** but does not settle it. At the Tokyo Olympics, 63 percent of the abuse that World Athletics detected was aimed at two female athletes, and almost a third of the abuse it verified at Paris was sexual or sexist. However, the same four-year study reported that the gap between women and men had narrowed by the Paris Games.

6 Two years after Paris, Gunn is telling her own version of events. In the Netflix documentary Untold Raygun: Breaking Badly, released on September 1, 2026, she recalls visiting her therapist just before the Games because she feared that "the whole world could laugh at me." In an interview with CNN before the film's release, she said going viral had felt **surreal** and had left her with a sick feeling of dread. She explained that therapy and time had helped her **process** what happened, and that Paris was now "just a part of my story." She also admitted that when she finally watched the routine again, it was less embarrassing than she had expected.

7 The research can explain how a clip spreads, but not what the people sharing it think about the person in it. In the writer's view, most people who shared a kangaroo-hop meme probably saw it as harmless fun, and a single post may well have been harmless. What no single sharer could see was the total. Researchers have not yet tested whether platforms that ranked posts by something other than engagement would produce smaller pile-ons, or simply different ones.

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**unconventional**	_____	**A** spreading very quickly to many people online
2	**viral**	_____	**B** reasonable and likely to be true, but not proven
3	**mockery**	_____	**C** so strange that it feels like a dream, not reality
4	**parodied**	_____	**D** how much people like, share, and comment on online posts
5	**pile-on**	_____	**E** close, critical examination or observation
6	**petition**	_____	**F** to think about and come to accept a difficult experience
7	**manipulated**	_____	**G** a situation where many people criticize one person at once
8	**scrutiny**	_____	**H** comments or behavior that make fun of someone unkindly
9	**engagement**	_____	**I** controlled something unfairly or dishonestly for personal advantage
10	**incentives**	_____	**J** checked and confirmed to be true or correct
11	**verified**	_____	**K** too large or too small compared with something else
12	**disproportionate**	_____	**L** copied someone's style in a silly way to make people laugh
13	**plausible**	_____	**M** a document, often signed by many people, asking for an action
14	**surreal**	_____	**N** different from what is usual or expected
15	**process**	_____	**O** things that encourage people to act in a certain way

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

disproportionate	**engagement**	**incentives**	**manipulated**	**mockery**	**parodied**	**petition**	**pile-on**
plausible	**process**	**scrutiny**	**unconventional**	**verified**	**viral**		

1 The architect is famous for her _____ buildings with curved walls.

2 The dancing cat video went _____ and got ten million views.

3 He ignored the _____ of his classmates and kept practicing.

4 The sketch show _____ the prime minister's way of speaking.

5 After the referee's mistake, there was an online _____ against him.

6 Students started a _____ asking for longer library hours.

7 Investigators said someone had _____ the election results.

8 Famous people's private lives are under constant _____ .

9 The brand measures _____ by counting likes and comments.

10 Lower prices are strong _____ for people to take the train.

11 The bank _____ her identity before opening the account.

12 Young drivers are involved in a _____ number of accidents.

13 The detective found the suspect's explanation _____ .

14 It can take time to _____ the news that a close friend is moving away.

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 Who is Rachael Gunn, and how did she qualify for the Paris Olympics?

2 How did public figures respond to her routine?

3 What did the anonymous petition claim, and how did the Australian Olympic Committee respond?

4 Why did Gunn decide to stop competing?

5 What did the Upworthy study find, and why could it measure cause?

6 What does the World Athletics study show about how online abuse is distributed?

7 What is Gunn's claim about gender, and how strong is the evidence for it?

8 How has Gunn described the experience two years later?

9 The writer says "no single sharer could see" the total. What does this mean, and do you agree?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Most of the headlines in the Upworthy study contained at least one negative word."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer believes the research proves that social media caused the mockery of Gunn."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer include the World Athletics study, even though it did not cover breaking?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Gunn was a university lecturer when she competed in Paris.

2 **T / F** Gunn won one of her three battles in Paris.

3 **T / F** Adele stopped one of her concerts to talk about Gunn's routine.

4 **T / F** The petition against Gunn was signed by fewer than 10,000 people.

5 **T / F** The Australian Olympic Committee called the petition misleading.

6 **T / F** The Upworthy study found that positive words increased clicks.

7 **T / F** The writer says the research on headlines directly studied sports memes.

8 **T / F** The World Athletics study monitored more than 1,900 athletes and officials.

9 **T / F** The World Athletics study covered breaking as well as athletics.

10 **T / F** Gunn was afraid before the Games that the whole world could laugh at her.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1 Before reading this, had you seen any Raygun memes? What was your first reaction?

2 Have you ever shared a funny clip of a stranger online? Did you think about the person in it?

3 Is there a difference between laughing at a performance and laughing at a person? Where is the line?

4 What kinds of posts get the most likes and shares among people you know?

5 Do you click more often on negative headlines? Why might that be?

6 Gunn stopped competing because people would film her. Would you keep doing something you love under that kind of scrutiny?

7 Should sports organizations protect athletes from online abuse? What could they realistically do?

8 Should petitions on public websites be checked for false claims before they are published?

9 Do you think women in sports or public life are judged more harshly than men? What examples can you think of?

10 Why might online hostility fall on just a few people rather than spread evenly?

11 If social media platforms stopped ranking posts by engagement, what might change? What might they rank by instead?

12 Is it fair to blame one person for sharing one post, if thousands of others did the same?

13 Gunn made a documentary about her experience. Can telling your own story after a pile-on change how people see you?

14 Some people say public figures must accept mockery as part of the job. Should the same apply to an amateur athlete?

Language Focus: Reported speech (tense backshift)

When we report what someone said with a past reporting verb (said, told, explained), the verb in the reported clause usually moves one step back in time: will becomes would, is becomes was, and past simple or present perfect becomes past perfect.

In the reading:

- "Gunn told a Sydney radio station that she **would** no longer compete." (will → would)
- "…Matt Carroll, said the petition **was** "vexatious, misleading and bullying," and it was taken down." (is → was)
- "…she said going viral **had felt** surreal and **had left** her with a sick feeling of dread." (felt/left → had felt/had left)

Practice: Change the direct speech into reported speech: *"I am not going to compete any more," Gunn said.*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/raygun-olympic-breakdancer-update

Notes