Canadian Interuniversity Sport: Survey of Athlete Experiences and Use of Social Media

Gashaw Abeza, University of Ottawa
Nadege Levallet, Queen’s University
Norm O’Reilly, University of Ottawa
Benoit Seguin, University of Ottawa
Mark Dottori, University of Ottawa
Michael Naraine, University of Ottawa

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A considerable body of research exists regarding the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) on student experiences, perceptions of the NCAA, and related topics about student-athletes reality in the NCAA (e.g., Beam, Serwatka, & Wilson, 2004; Cianfrone & Baker, 2010; Ellenbogen, Jacobs, Derevensky, Gupta, & Paskus, 2008; Holmes, McNeil, Adorna, & Procacciono, 2008; Kaburakis, Pierce, Cianfrone, & Paule, 2012; Kang, Lee, & Lee, 2010; Kimball, 2007; Lawrence, Merckx, & Hebert, 2009; Morris & Merckx, 2006; Paule & Gilson, 2010, 2011; Pauline, 2010; Popp, Hums, & Greenwell, 2009, 2010; Popp, Love, Kim, & Hums, 2010; Zimbalist, 1999). In contrast, however, there is little research regarding Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) student-athletes, nor particular studies on their experiences related to social media. This work addresses the knowledge gap in a two-part study.

The first part addresses issues concerning CIS student-athlete experiences using social identity theory (SIT) and self-categorization theory (SCT) as frameworks. The theories offer unique insights into the factors that best describe student-athlete experiences. For example, how important is being a student-athlete to their university experience. These theories have been used in a number of sport communication studies (e.g., Billings, MacArthur, Licen, & Dan, 2009; Brown, Devlin, & Billings, 2013; Phua, 2010; Smith, Smith, & Sanderson, 2012; Spinda, 2012) to investigate the factors that serve as identifiers for individuals when forming casual and formal associations with in-groups and out-groups based on demographics, personalities, and beliefs. The second part addresses student-athletes’ experiences related to social-media use by employing uses and gratification theory. Motivations for social media use are highly informed by uses and gratification theory (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Athletes produce and share a variety of content via social media, for various purposes including interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, fanship and promotional purposes (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Indeed, a number of studies (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Clavio, 2008; Sanderson, 2011; Wallace, Wilson, & Miloch, 2011) reported that the growth of social media in college athletics is evident on many fronts (Stoldt & Vermillion, 2013) and it is presenting both opportunities and challenges for the athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Currently, however, there are no studies on CIS student-athlete experiences related to social media.

In an effort to respond to the above mentioned knowledge gaps and to provide research that will help make informed decisions, the CIS undertook its first survey of its membership, 11,000 student athletes, in the fall of 2013. The survey was conducted in both English and French, and distributed to more than 50 schools. Anonymous in nature, the survey design has variables related to demographics (university, grade point average, year of eligibility, gender), performance success (CIS champion, conference champion), student experience (various questions related to importance, value, role, etc., that are both Likert scale and open-ended), and social media use (questions for each platform, such as Twitter, Facebook, and others, on use, importance, satisfaction, reach and value). An assessment was also taken regarding athletes’ relationship with supporting institutions such as the CIS, regional sport bodies, universities, athletic departments, and coaches. Data was also gathered on factors that enhance student-athlete experiences and their views on building school pride.

Descriptive analysis of the data will be employed to explore the student experience and to identify the motivational factors that play a role in using various social media platforms. A series of independent-sample t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests will be employed to investigate the extent to which differences in CIS students’ responses to the survey could be explained by their demographics (university, grade point average, year of eligibility, gender), performance success (CIS champion, conference champion), student experience (various questions related to
importance, value, role), social media personal use (questions about hardware, software, and time), and social media use (questions for Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms on use, importance, satisfaction, reach and value).

The results of the study will be used to inform CIS decisions and increase our understanding of social media use by student-athletes. Specifically, a model of student-athlete social media use will be built and presented at NASSM. The findings on CIS student-athletes social media use will be compared to those of their NCAA counterparts and other athletes, with the goal of ascertaining if student-athletes social media usage varies across league and country.