Olympic Tweeting: An Examination of the Athlete Experience from the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Summer Olympic Games

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Athletes are a critical component of sports events such as the Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games (Parent & Chappelet, 2015). Yet, despite their importance, there have been few examinations of the athlete experience at sports events aside from recent endeavors by MacIntosh and Nicol (2012), Parent, Kristiansen, and MacIntosh (2014), and Peters and Schnitzer (2015), with no depiction of these experiences in an online setting. Understanding the athlete experience is vital for both property rights holders and organizing committees as it allows them to improve upon future events and ensure a positive experience for these key stakeholders (MacIntosh & Nicol, 2012).

Concurrently, the present understanding of athlete communication has explored content on various mediums including, but not limited to, press-releases, interviews, press-conferences and other media related activities (e.g., Kristiansen & Williams, 215; Sanderson, 2010; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). Social media has given athletes an additional outlet by which to share their multi-sport event experiences with stakeholders (e.g., fans, family, and sponsors; MacIntosh & Weekend-Dill, 2015). Using various platforms (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Pegoraro, 2010), and unlike traditional forms of communication, social media provides a unique opportunity for athletes to share information in real-time and enhance their personal brand. Yet, despite these previous examinations of athlete representation on social media, to our knowledge, our understanding is lacking in regards to the athlete’s experience via social media, specifically as it relates to communicating training and participation at a multi-sport event. As social media fosters an informal environment where athletes share unmediated thoughts and feelings (Pegoraro, 2010), understanding what athletes are communicating in relation to their multi-sport experience using social media (e.g., communicating their satisfaction and feelings about the event) can provide scholars with a new perspective that differs from previous research and offers new information for sport event managers as they seek to create a positive environment for athlete stakeholders.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to reveal the athlete experience during a multi-sport event using social media. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how the athlete experience manifested itself on Twitter prior to and during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. While Geurin-Eagleman and Burch’s (2016) assessment that athlete communication on social media at a multi-sport event can improve the athlete’s personal brand, the present research examines athletes’ social media content as a means of assessing their (dis)satisfaction. This study seeks to answer the following research questions: RQ1 – What type of experiences are athletes communicating on social media? RQ2 – Are there similarities and/or differences regarding the type of experiences communicated via Twitter between athletes who compete in individual events versus those who compete on team events?

Research has identified several management-controlled aspects of the athlete experience important for realizing athlete satisfaction within the multi-sport event environment, such as accommodations, communication, ceremonies, social, and cultural aspects (cf. MacIntosh & Nicol, 2012; Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). Research has also noted athletes utilize both traditional methods of communication (e.g., Kristiansen & Williams, 215; Sanderson, 2010; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008) and more recently, social media to communicate their perceptions, opinions, and experiences (e.g., Pegoraro, 2010). Social media’s availability and usage has resulted in new policies for athletes to follow, particularly around what is acceptable communication shorty before and during a multi-sport event (cf. MacIntosh & Weekend-Dill, 2015). Yet, it remains unclear what athletes are communicating on social media based on their multi-sport event experience which can impact how the management of sport events and the types of initiatives and policies that are enacted to satisfy this key stakeholder group.
The literature on social media usage by athletes identifies opportunities to engage in self-presentation strategies which promote and manage their brand (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014a). In their study examining Olympic athletes’ self-presentation on Instagram, Geurin-Eaglem and Burch (2016) found the majority of photos were personal in nature. Similarly, when examining the content of professional athletes’ tweets, Pegoraro (2010) found athletes tweet about topics relating to their personal life, business life, their sport, fellow athletes, pop culture references and/or fans. Concurrently, athletes discuss their personal lives on social media and potentially their Games-related experiences, hence making them co-creators to and ambassadors for the sport event brand (MacIntosh, 2015). In this study, we seek to advance the present understanding of social media usage by athletes, namely how social media posts reflect what athletes are experiencing during mega sporting events.

In order to examine the athlete experience prior to and during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, this study collected data from Twitter, the micro-blogging platform (cf. Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Naraine & Parent, 2016; Pegoraro, 2010). The data collection process began by identifying athletes; 260 athletes belonging to Team Canada were identified using the Canadian Olympic Committee’s (COC) Twitter list. Tweets from all 260 athletes were extracted using the NCapture function of NVIVO 11, akin to Naraine and Parent (2016) and Abeza, Pegoraro, Naraine, Seguin, and O’Reilly (2014). Once extracted, a random purposeful sample of 26 athletes (10%) was selected based on the athlete’s gender (i.e., female or male), their competition type (i.e., team or individual), followed by a screening of Twitter activity during two key time periods: the pre-games period (PGP) and during-games period (DGP). The PGP period consisted of the month before the Games (i.e., July 4th, 2016 to August 4th, 2016), while the DGP was simply the entirety of the Games (i.e., August 5th, 2016 to August 21st, 2016). Six athletes were selected under the female-individual and male-individual category, respectively, in addition to seven athletes selected under female-team and male-team category, respectively. NVIVO was able to capture all PGP and DGP for the 26 athletes, totaling 2,127 posts. While the data analysis phase has not yet been completed at the time of abstract submission, the researchers intend on manually coding the data using NVIVO and open and axial coding strategies to elucidate patterns and higher-order themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

At the time of submission, full results have not yet been obtained. However, the researchers anticipate several findings based on the literature and an initial overview of the data. First, it is anticipated athletes will tend to be very social in communicating their experiences on social media. Athletes tend to ‘tag’ and ‘mention’ other athletes within their own sport discipline and Team Canada more generally, thus showing what experiences athletes are communicating from a multi-sport event on social media. Second, it is anticipated athletes may communicate about the host city/country, separate from their competition experiences. These elements (i.e., social and cultural) have important implications for sport event rights holders as it allows for enhancements to the athlete experience and thus impact the perception of the event from a key stakeholder group.