“We need to do more!” National Governing Bodies’ Social Media Education Efforts for Youth Olympic Games Athletes

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The Youth Olympic Games (YOG) is an international multi-sport event for athletes aged 14-18 organized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). First introduced in 2010, the YOG takes place every two years with alternating Summer and Winter Games. The most recent Summer YOG, held in Nanjing, China in 2014, drew over 3,500 athletes from 203 nations, and the most recent Winter YOG, held in Lillehammer, Norway in 2016 consisted of 1,100 athletes from 71 different nations (Olympic.org, n.d.). Many YOG athletes have gone on to compete in major international competitions after their YOG experience, such as the World Championships for their sport or the Olympic Games. For example, Viktoriia Komova, a Russian gymnast, won the All-Around competition and two individual apparatus gold medals at the 2010 YOG at age 15, then went on to win silver medals in the All-Around at the 2011 World Gymnastics Championships and the 2012 Olympic Games. Additionally, she won the gold medal on uneven bars at the 2015 World Gymnastics Championships (FIG database, n.d.)

According to Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014), social media use provides athletes with the opportunity to craft their desired image and begin developing their personal athlete brand. As many young athletes are placed in the international spotlight for the first time in their careers when they compete in the YOG (Kristiansen & Parent, 2014), the event provides an ideal platform from which to begin developing their personal athlete brands, which will follow them throughout their athletic careers (Peters & Schnitzer, 2015). This can be accomplished through the creation of official social media profiles and efforts to build their social media following amongst fans of their sport. Although social media use provides valuable brand-building and communication opportunities for athletes, it also poses threats. For example, Olympic-level elite U.S. female athletes between the ages of 24-35 reported receiving unwanted communication on social media from so-called “fans”, and it was often negative or sexual in nature (Geurin, 2017). The athletes in Geurin’s study also felt that they did not receive adequate social media training or guidance from their national governing bodies (NGBs). Numerous studies analyzing athletes’ social media use have suggested that social media education is of paramount importance in ensuring athletes use social media in a way that is beneficial to their image, and in preparing them for negative situations they may encounter on social media (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danychuk, 2014; MacIntosh & Dill, 2015; Sanderson & Browning, 2013).

If social media education for athletes is truly crucial to their long-term success in building and maintaining a desired image, it seems that such education and training is especially critical for young athletes, such as those who compete in the YOG. The IOC published a “Social and Digital Media Guidelines” document for each of the four previous YOG, so it is expected that a similar policy will be published for the upcoming 2018 YOG in Buenos Aires. The most recent policy for the 2016 Lillehammer YOG stated that athletes were encouraged to share their experiences via social media through a “first-person, diary-type format” (IOC, 2016, p. 1). The policy provided specific information about what type of content was permissible and impermissible to post, but did not offer any education or training for athletes.

Research focused on YOG athletes’ experiences at the YOG revealed that “communication aspects are particularly important to young athletes’ Games experience” (Parent, Kristiansen, & MacIntosh, 2014, p. 315). Further, Peters and Schnitzer (2015) found that through their YOG experience, young athletes felt they learned about self-presentation and how to communicate with the media more effectively. Despite these findings, no research to date has focused the training and/or resources YOG athletes receive prior to the Games. Parent, Houlihan, and Hanstad (2014) suggested one area of importance for future YOG-related research was to examine “the role and significance of social media” (p. 240). This study attempts to provide an initial answer to their call by examining the social media-related resources (e.g., education and training) provided to athletes prior to competing in the YOG, and by studying the perceptions of NGB employees regarding their organization’s social media education and training for YOG.
A sequential mixed-methods design involving an online survey and in-depth interviews was used to achieve the research purpose, and the research is still in progress at the time of this abstract submission. The first phase of data collection is complete, which consisted of an online survey that was emailed to communication staff at every U.S.-based NGB in September 2017. The survey contained closed and open-ended questions regarding the NGB’s social media training and education efforts, with specific questions focused on training/education of YOG athletes. The survey link was emailed to 81 potential participants, and 20 individuals completed the entire survey, resulting in a response rate of 24.7%. Of those who completed the survey, 65% reported that their organization had a social media policy that national team athletes were required to follow, 85% reported that their organization conducted social media training for athletes, and 50% said that their organization provided athletes with additional social media education resources such as best practices guides. The majority of respondents felt that each of these methods were effective for the athletes. When asked specifically about social media training/education for YOG athletes, however, the results presented a different picture. Seventeen of the 20 respondents said that their organization had sent athletes to the YOG in the past. Of these 17 organizations, only one reported providing YOG athletes with the organization’s social media policy, and only 17.65% indicated that they held social media training for this group. None indicated that they provided any additional educational resources. Qualitative analysis revealed that the NGB employees represented in the survey felt they needed to do more for their YOG athletes. For example, one participant wrote, “We do not do a ton of training for our youth athletes, so overall, we need to do more!” Another wrote, “[We need to] bring them into the fold.”

The second phase of data collection is set to take place in December 2017, when in-depth interviews will be conducted in-person or via telephone with communication staff members from several U.S. NGBs. The interviews will build on the findings of the survey and will allow richer and more detailed data to emerge regarding NGBs’ social media education/training efforts for YOG athletes, and will potentially reveal the rationale for some organizations excluding YOG athletes from these efforts. The findings from this study will allow researchers to better understand social media training and resources provided to YOG athletes. Additionally, the findings will be beneficial for Olympic organizations such as NGBs or the USOC, as the research will expose current gaps in social media training practices for YOG athletes while also highlighting the need for these athletes to receive education and training as they launch their elite sport careers.