Winning a Silver Medal or Losing a Gold Medal? Examining Olympic Medalist's Self-Representation on Press Conferences

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The media plays a crucial role in assisting athletes enhance awareness and branding, and elite athletes also accept the need to be available to the media (Kristiansen & Broch, 2013). Elite athletes rely on the media for publicity, however, athletes also perceive pressure from media attention which may influence their athletic performance (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001).

Scholars have examined athlete’s self-presentation strategies used on digital media platforms: Twitter (i.e. Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012), Facebook (i.e. Emmons & Moscarski, 2013), and Instagram (i.e. Geurin-Eagelemtn & Burch, 2016). Little research has focused on how athletes present themselves in front of traditional media. Guided by self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1956), this study attempted to gain an in-depth understanding of athletes’ self-presentation in media by conducting content analysis of press conferences by Olympic medalists at the 2018 PyeongChang Olympic Games. In addition, this study also aims to explore whether Western athletes and Asian athletes present themselves differently after winning medals at the Olympic Games.

To understand athletes’ self-presentation strategies, press conference transcript files from 310 Olympic medalists representing 30 countries during the 2018 Winter Olympic Games were obtained. Among these athletes, 117 won gold medals, 104 won silver, and 83 claimed bronze.

Content analysis (Weber, 1990) was used for investigating data and classifying phrases into categories by looking for recurrent instances in the data set. Following Creswell’s (2007) suggestions, two researchers used open coding to label and separate the themes. Open coding allows researchers to categorize textual data based on similar features, and then gradually reduces categories into major themes, which maximizes variations between themes and minimizes variation within themes (Creswell, 2007).

Intercoder reliability was introduced in this study (Creswell, 2013). Coding results showed kappa levels of reliability between two coders reached .81 which were higher than .75 - the acceptable level (Wimmer & Dominick, 2004).

The results of content analysis revealed that topics of Olympic medalists fall into the following three themes: (a) expressing the feeling of winning the Olympic medals, (b) exposing the secrets behind their successes, and (c) disclosing their understandings of the Olympic Games.

The results also revealed that Asian and Western athletes used different strategies at press conferences. The majority of Asian Olympic champions gave credit of their successes to their team, mentioning "their personal victory is team’s victory (Sungbin Yun, South Korea)" while Western Olympic medalists stressed that their successes were due to their hard work. Another finding was that Western athletes and Asian athletes had different attitudes toward not winning an Olympic gold medal. Western athletes expressed their satisfaction and excitement after winning a medal, while more than 60% of Asian Olympic silver/bronze medalists expressed "regrets" (Zhangxin, China) or "disappointment" (Takagi, Japan) after missing an Olympic gold medal.

The study may assist public relations professionals better understand athlete’s self-presentation strategies, and could also help them develop better media trainings in the future which could teach athletes how to communicate effectively with media members.