Understanding Athletes’ Use of Instagram: A Content Analysis of Iranian Professional Athletes on Instagram

Zahra Sharifzadeh, Texas Woman’s University
Natasha Brison (Advisor), Texas A&M University
Gwendolyn Weatherford (Advisor), Texas Woman’s University

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Emergence of social media in the sport landscape has given a voice to sport stakeholders, especially fans, which they never had before (Sanderson, 2011). According to Clavio (2013), the social media evolution had various implications in sport resulting in increases in fan engagement and improved fan interaction with athletes, sponsors, organizations, and other fans.

Presently, sports have been consumed by social media and are thriving at a remarkable pace (Weathers et al., 2014). Social media platforms offer an exceptional access of athletes’ personal lives to fans. Specifically, athletes are utilizing different mediums to bypass the public relations’ filtering process, make direct connections with fans, and build their brand. Athletes can explain about their game performance, communicate with teammates, present endorsement activities, and develop team identification (Hambrick et al., 2010). This engagement can be beneficial for sport organizations as well through inducing loyal fans to act more supportively, attend games more frequently, and invest more money for their popular teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993). Sport marketers can generate capital out of this unprecedented intimacy that social media has brought to fan–athlete interactions.

There are numerous social media platforms, but Instagram has become prominent since launching in October 2010 (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014). In June 2018, Instagram reached one billion monthly active users (Statista, 2018). While other popular social mediums including Twitter and Facebook are filtered in Iran, Instagram has emerged as the most popularly used social media platform in the country. In January 2018, Instagram had 24 million active users in Iran, making Iran the seventh largest market for this application (financialtribune, 2018). Professional marketers around the world are consistently seeking new approaches to connect with their entity’s consumers, and Instagram is playing a significant role to share sport team and athlete news with fans. Iranian professional athletes, like other celebrities, are exploiting Instagram for interaction with friends, fans, and other sports stakeholders.

Using the Uses and Gratification Theory as the foundation, this exploratory research study will examine how Iranian high performance athletes are using Instagram to improve their interaction with sports stakeholders. A content analysis of in-competition and out-of-competition Instagram posts from 107 Iranian athletes during the 2018 Asian Games will be explored. The Asian Games is the second largest games in the world (after the Olympics) and the first in Asia in terms of participation figures (reuters.com). Researchers will review posts 30 days before games, during games, and 30 days after games. Guided by Hambrick et al. (2008) six categories of online sport consumption, the posts of each athlete will be coded to determine how Iranian athletes use social media. Theoretically, results will join the growing body of literature on sport media and marketing and will make a new category of literature in Iran. Practically, the results of will provide a schema for sport marketers who are working with Iranian athletes, to see why and how they are communicating with other sport stakeholders and help them to choose the most appropriate athlete for their endorsement activities.