

# **An Examination of Athlete Social Media Education Provided by National Governing Bodies of Sport**

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## **Aim**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the social media-related resources provided to athletes by their sport national governing bodies (NGBs). The study was conducted within a U.S. context, but its findings can be utilized by NGBs in other countries, such as those in Europe or Australasia.

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ 1 – What social media training and education methods do U.S. NGBs use with their athletes?

RQ 2 – What have been the impacts of social media training and education for athletes from NGB communication employees' perspectives?

RQ 3 – How do NGB communication employees believe they can improve their social media education and training efforts?

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Social media use provides athletes with the opportunity to craft their desired image and begin developing their personal athlete brand (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). 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 reported receiving unwanted communication on social media from so-called “fans”, and it was often negative or sexual in nature (Geurin, 2017). 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 & Danylchuk, 2014; MacIntosh & Dill, 2015).

Based on the limited information available regarding social media education for elite athletes, combined with the knowledge that such education is necessary, the purpose of this project was to develop a better understanding of the social media-related resources provided to athletes by their sport NGBs.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

The study employed a sequential mixed method design consisting of an online survey of U.S.-based NGB employees to assess their perceptions of social media education/training for athletes, and then in-depth interviews with U.S.-based NGB employees to gather additional details about their organization's social media education/training resources. Out of 39 U.S. NGBs from both Summer and Winter Olympic sports, employees from 20 NGBs completed the survey in September 2017. Based on the survey results, questions were developed for the interviews, and nine NGB employees participated in in-depth interviews between December 2017 – February 2018.

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed to analyze the interview data, which involved two stages of data coding. The first stage included the development of descriptors, or codes, to identify various areas within the transcripts that related to the study's research questions and purpose. In second cycle coding, the researcher summarized and grouped codes from the first cycle into smaller categories/themes. Member checking and peer debriefing took place to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of the analysis.

## **Results and Discussion**

The survey data were used to determine results for the first research question. Results revealed that 65% of NGBs had a social media policy that athletes were required to follow, 85% conducted social media training for athletes, and 50% provided athletes with additional social media education resources such as best practices guides. The second research question regarding the impacts of social media training yielded three themes: very few negative social media incidents, greater willingness to seek advice/assistance from the NGB, and the athletes built stronger personal brands. Finally, the third research question revealed two prominent themes regarding NGB communication employees' beliefs about how to improve social media training and education efforts: more frequent communication or training with athletes, and enhanced education/training materials. The results will be discussed in much greater detail in the presentation if this abstract is accepted for the 2018 EASM Conference.

## **Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the findings, it appears that U.S. NGBs are making a strong effort to provide athletes with social media education and training opportunities. Moving forward, NGBs from both the U.S. and abroad can use the data from this study to better develop training and educational materials that assist athletes in capitalizing on the opportunities that social media provides, while minimizing the challenges. As a result of this study's findings, sport organizations are encouraged to develop consistent communication points with athletes throughout the year, and to find ways to communicate one-on-one with athletes in order to increase open communication and enhance the athletes' trust in the NGB. The findings of this study, while unique to the U.S. context, also hold practical applications for national sport organizations outside of the U.S., which will be discussed further in the presentation. Additionally, recommended future research directions on this topic will be covered.

## **References**

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