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# The Impact of Social Media Use on Athlete/Fan Communication During the Olympics

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The Impact of Social Media Use on Athlete/Fan Communication During the Olympics

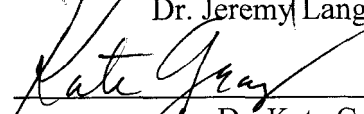
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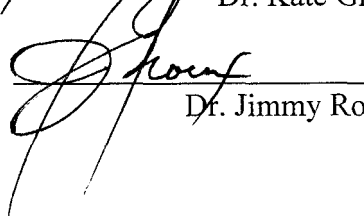
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Abstract

The 2012 London Olympic Games were known as the “Social Media Olympics.” For the first time, the International Olympic Committee encouraged athletes to use social media sites. Athletes, fans, countries and news outlets all used social media to share information and opinions about the Olympics. This thesis examines whether or not athletes communicated effectively on social media sites.

## Introduction

The 2012 London Olympic Games were known as the “Social Media Olympics” because of the event’s prevalent use of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blog platforms, and other social media sites. Athletes, fans and news outlets all used social media to communicate information and opinions about the Olympics. These were the first games to centralize social media as the premier channel of communication among athletes, countries, and the audience back home. The use of social media helped to improve the overall Olympic experience for both fans and athletes.

Fans were able to participate in the “Social Media Olympics” as audiences and contributors. Fans were constantly updated on social media trends by the many news outlets covering the Olympics. One news outlet that recognized the increased use of social media was NBC, the official network of the Olympics. TV personality Ryan Seacrest served as a reporter on social media use during the 2012 London Olympics for NBC’s *Today Show*. One of Seacrest’s roles as a social media reporter was to “follow what he called the ‘culture of 24/7 information’” (Ryan Seacrest, 2012). Seacrest reported on trends on Facebook and Twitter about the Olympics and the participating athletes. Fans also contributed to the “Social Media Olympics.” Fans were able to check their favorite athletes’ Facebook and Twitter pages to stay updated about athletes’ Olympic experience. Fans could discuss big events that had occurred during the Olympics and post their own opinions about the games. After American gymnast MaKayla Maroney was photographed looking unhappy about her second place finish in the vault, a Tumblr blog entitled “MaKayla Is Not Impressed” placing an unimpressed Maroney in pictures of major events in history, went viral. Social media allowed fans to contribute to the Olympic conversation.

The use of social media during these past Olympics had a positive impact on athletes' communication with their fans. This thesis first looks at the history of social media. Next it will review concerns about athletes using social media while competing in the Olympic Games. Then it moves on to examine social media's philosophical foundations. Next, this thesis will look broadly at the use of social media during the Olympics. This thesis will then go on to analyze the social media use of Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt and Gabby Douglas during the past Olympics, while examining the overall use of social media during London 2012. Then, it will look at the negative aspects of using social media. This thesis will then form a proposal of guidelines for social media use during future Olympics and conclude with an analysis of the overall impact of social media on the Olympic experience. Overall, this thesis will look at whether or not athletes were communicating effectively with their fans on social media sites.

### **History of Social Media**

Social media sites are still relatively new, creating debate concerning how to define what a social media site is and determine how these sites are used. According to danah boyd, a social media site is defined as

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system (2007, p. 2).

The first social media site, SixDegrees, was established in 1997. While others sites only incorporated some form of profiles or "friends," SixDegrees was the first site to incorporate all three of boyd's aspects. "SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and beginning in 1998, surf the Friends list," (boyd, 2007, p. 4). After SixDegrees, over the next five years, many other social networking sites were founded. One of the most recognized sites was Friendster, which was launched in 2002. Friendster was meant to be a rival of Match.com, a

dating site that would help people meet friends of friends. Friendster allowed users to create profiles to learn more about others. Friendster met many technical and social troubles and the site eventually failed. However, this site helped pave the way for future social media sites as they learned from the early success of Friendster. (boyd, 2007, p. 7). For instance, one year after the launch of Friendster, MySpace was founded. MySpace attracted the attention of “indie-rock bands who were expelled from Friendster for failing to comply with profile regulations,” (boyd, 2007, p. 8). Like SixDegrees and Friendster, MySpace used profiles to help users interact with one another. MySpace grew in popularity because of users’ ability to customize their profiles. Also, MySpace became popular among teenagers, and thus social networking sites began to direct their focus towards younger audiences (boyd, 2007, pp. 8-9). Elevating these trends to new heights, two of the most prominent sites today are Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook: According to Facebook’s Facebook page, “Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected,” (Facebook).

Facebook was originally created in 2004 for Harvard students to connect to one another. The site slowly opened up to other colleges and then to high school students, professionals and eventually everyone by 2006. Facebook users create profiles and have the option of making these profiles open to their networks or to just their friends, but not to the general public, as Myspace or Twitter have allowed (boyd, 2007, pp.9-10).

Twitter: According to Twitter’s website, Twitter is a social media site that allows users to share a 140 character story, or a tweet, with their followers. Users can also share photos, videos, and website links with their followers, as well as start conversations with their followers by “tweeting” at a follower. Twitter has users in almost every country, connecting the world in a global community (Twitter).

Two reasons for using the internet are to find information, and as a channel of communication. Social media allow users to do both. Teresa Correa, Amber Willard Hinsley and Homero Gil de Zúñiga (2009), authors of *Who interacts on the web?: the intersection of users' personality and social media use* references James and Fox (2009) who state "...almost all Internet users say one of their primary purposes for going online is for communication" (p.247). Email and instant messaging services, such as AIM and Google Chat, allow internet users to communicate. Social media are also a communication platform. Facebook and Twitter users can use these sites to communicate with their friends and followers.

Social media sites are used to help users to stay informed about friends, local news, international news, etc. According to Chei Sian Lee and Long Ma (2011),

...social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube) are changing the way individuals consume and share news. Specifically, a news item can be distributed across societies and discussed by people around the world within minutes via social media platforms (p.331)

With the click of a mouse, information and news from multiple outlets can be shared. Users have the ability to respond to news right away, starting a conversation that others can continue to contribute to. Celebrities, athletes and other public figures have access to their fans through social media, as the fans have access to celebrities, athletes and public figures. Their profiles can keep fans updated about their careers and personal lives. Athletes and celebrities can reach out to fans and start a conversation with them. During the Olympics, athletes were able to post their thoughts or activities throughout the games, starting a conversation with their fans. Also, fans using social media sites were able to stay updated on sporting events' results during the Olympics.

### **Concern for Social Media Use on Athlete Performance: Distractions and Ghostwriters**

Critics of social media use saw the positive outcomes, yet they still had concerns about athletes using social media during the Olympics. In particular, critics feared that social media would become a distraction for athletes. The NFL (National Football League), the NBA (National Basketball Association) and the NHL (National Hockey League) all recognized the distraction of social media. In order to eliminate the threat of distraction, these professional athletic organizations banned the use of Twitter and other social media sites “30 minutes before and after games, practices, meetings and media access periods, Reuters reports. The ban would also apply to coaches, trainers and all game-related personnel,” (Avery, 2009).

Two athletes who were critical about athletes using social media were British tennis star Andy Murray and American weightlifter Sarah Robles. Murray said “You don't want to be on it (Twitter) too much. It's a bit like sitting on a computer 20 minutes, 30 minutes before your match. You wouldn't be advised to do that. The same applies with tweeting or mobile phones, I would have thought,” (Imray, 2012). Murray advised other athletes to focus on their competition. In his opinion, social media have the ability to distract athletes, but avoiding it close to competition will allow athletes to stay focused. For Robles, social media acts as a channel of communication, not a distraction, meant to enhance communication with her fans and her overall Olympic experience According to Pilon (2012), an author for the *The New York Times*, “Sarah Robles, a weightlifter for the women's U.S. team, said she primarily uses Facebook to interact with her fans, but only in her spare time,” (*Twitter and the Games*). Athletes should not be using social media while they are practicing, training, or about to compete, as social media will become a distraction.



With the fear of social media becoming a distraction for athletes, it would not be uncommon for an athlete to give up control of his or her social media sites to a ghostwriter. Ghostwriting is very common in PR. Public figures will allow a PR practitioner to create speeches or other public writings for them. These PR practitioners become an alter ego of the public figure, using the same phrases they use and sharing their ideas. While ghostwriting is common in PR, the words that ghostwriters publish are considered to be one and the same as the person for whom they are writing (Jackall & Hirota, 2000, pp. 147-148). Therefore, it may not always be known whether a ghostwriter is being used or not.

### **Social Media Philosophical Foundations**

The foundation of social media is rooted in communication philosophy. For decades before social media grew in popularity, communication scholars were discussing ideas that are apparent in social media use today. Three significant communication scholars whose ideas are evident in social media are Hannah Arendt, Jurgen Habermas, and Leopaldina Fortunati.

Arendt (1958) discusses the Greek ideas of “oikos,” the private realm, and “polis,” the political or public realm. The ancient Greeks emphasized the strong distinction between these two realms. The oikos was the domain of the household, of privacy and seclusion and kept mysterious to others outside of the home. Polis, on the other hand, was a more public domain, in which individuals could try to win glory for themselves. Even though these two domains were meant to be kept separate, oikos was necessary for polis. The private realm was necessary for one to take care of his or her personal needs, so that he or she had the time and the leisure to engage in the public realm.

Today though, the line between these two domains has been blurred and the distinction between the private and the public sectors is unclear. Arendt (1958) explains that over time,

oikos and polis have become more dependent on each other and have formed society: "Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities of sheer survival are permitted to appear in public," (1958, p. 46). In other words, individuals find it necessary to address their private issues in a public setting. This is especially evident in social media use. When using social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter, users may share information with the world that once would have been considered to be too private and personal to announce to the world.

In public, individuals share private, intimate details about themselves that are really not anyone else's business. While the motivations for sharing personal details differ among users, research suggests that the reason for sharing private information on social media sites is to attempt to connect on a deeper level with others. By sharing personal details about their lives on social media sites, users make themselves relatable to others, and they are able to connect to one another based on the private aspects of their life. When celebrities and athletes share personal information on social media sites, they seem like humans and they become more accessible to the average person than they previously had been. Social media users have crossed the line between "polis" and "oikos" on these sites in order to make themselves more accessible and relatable to others.

Habermas (1990) also discussed the idea of a "public sphere" and a "private sphere." In the public sphere, individuals come together to discuss issues that concern all humans. Communication within the public sphere is intended to allow users to express and receive opinions giving them opportunity for immediate response. Social media use today has become an outlet for public communication, providing the opportunity to share opinions or news, while also receiving news and opinions. By sharing news and personal opinions, users have the

opportunity to learn and understand what is important to others. Also, on social media sites users have an opportunity for immediate response. Athletes using social media during the Olympics can post information about their events or their thoughts about other events and start an immediate conversation with their fans. Fans can post messages wishing athletes good luck or congratulating them on a win and athletes can immediately see these posts and respond to their fans, again, starting a conversation.

Thirdly, Fortunati discusses the “communicative act” and whether or not communication is as successful when it is not body-to-body communication (Forunati, 2005, p.53). Body-to-body communication is important because it communicates nonverbal cues. However, when technology such as phones or social media is being used as a form of communication, the message that is being communicated loses some meaning because there is no body language, it is not always feasible. We look to social media as a necessity to communicate when we are unable to talk to someone in person. Olympic athletes are able to keep their fans updated on their training and events by posting updates on their social media pages. While this might not be the best way to communicate, it is the best alternative to body-to-body communication when the fans can not actually talk face-to-face with athletes.

### **Social Media Use during the Olympics**

These past Olympic Games were the first games to feature the heavy use of social media. Since the previous games, use of social media grew enormously. According to Eric Pfanner (2012),

In the four years since the Beijing Games, use of social media platforms has surged. Facebook has gone from about 100 million active users to about 900 million, Twitter from six million to about 150 million

Not only did the number of people using social media increase since Beijing, but the amount of people talking about the Olympics also increased. According to Kelly Whiteside, a writer for *USA Today*, the Olympics were mentioned on social media sites more times in one day in the week leading up to London 2012 than in all two weeks of the Beijing Games (Whiteside, 2012).

Considering the increase in social media use, it is not surprising that athletes were taking to social media sites. According to Pfanner (2012),

Athletes have taken to Twitter and Facebook with considerable enthusiasm. Rare is the Olympic competitor who does not have a Twitter account, monitored and updated 24 hours a day, either in person or via an agent.

For the first time, athletes were tweeting, updating their Facebook pages and using other forms of social media during the two week span of the Olympics. The Olympic Committee had even attempted to make it easier for fans to have access to athletes' social media pages. According to *The New York Times*, "This time around, there is an 'Olympic Hub,' to help fans find and follow competitors' Twitter feeds and Facebook pages" (Pfanner, 2012). The Olympic committee was encouraging communication among athletes and their fans now that social media have become more popular.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) anticipated, and even encouraged, a large number of athletes using social media during the Olympics. Thus, the IOC created a set of guidelines for athletes to adhere to. According to the IOC,

Postings, blogs and tweets should at all times conform to the Olympic spirit and fundamental principles of Olympism as contained in the Olympic Charter, be dignified and in good taste, and not contain vulgar or obscene words or images (IOC, 2011)

Athletes needed to uphold the Olympic spirit while using social media. Athletes were encouraged to maintain the same professionalism they would in the Olympic Village or in competition on social media sites.

During the London Olympics, many athletes used social media. Michael Phelps had the largest presence on social media during London 2012. According to *Huffington Post*, “Phelps added one million Twitter followers at the London Olympics which started on July 27 to bring his total number of followers to 1.2 million and 800,000 Facebook fans,” (Goldsmith). Other athletes with a large presence on social media were Usain Bolt who added 725,000 followers on Twitter for a total of 1.36 million followers and 800,000 Facebook fans, and Gabby Douglas who gained 600,000 Twitter Followers and fans on Facebook, (Golodsmith).

### **Michael Phelps**

American swimmer Michael Phelps is the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time with 22 medals and more gold medals than any other Olympic athlete with 18, (Michael Phelps biography). Phelps also holds the world record in the 100-meter butterfly, the 200-meter butterfly, and the 400-meter individual medley as well as being a member of the world record 4x100-meter freestyle, 4x200-meter freestyle and the 4x100-meter medley relay teams (FINA, 2013).

Phelps rarely posted on his Facebook page during the week that he was racing. He did however have two posts that sparked conversation and the interest of his fans. On July 29, 2012, the day after fellow American swimmer Ryan Lochte defeated Phelps in the 400m Individual Medley (Phelps came in fourth), Phelps posted a status congratulating Lochte. Phelps wrote,

Congrats Ryan... Way to keep that title in the country where it belongs!  
Not pleased at all...But today is a new day! And a new race! (Phelps)

This post received 119,123 likes, 11,412 comments and 1,111 shares. This was an important message for Phelps to share with his fans for several reasons. First, he was letting them know that he supported his teammate even though they had been competing against each other. Second, it showed his fans that he was not bitter about performing poorly in his race. Although

he was upset about his performance, he was not going to dwell on it. Finally, he was informing his fans that he was taking responsibility for his loss and not making excuses for why he didn't perform well. It was important for Phelps to directly communicate this message to his fans. If Phelps had relied on traditional media, such as an interview, to share this message, he might not have been able to share the right message. The reporter might not have asked the right questions or might have framed the interview to make it seem as though Phelps was bitter about losing. With social media, Phelps was able to share the message in his own words.

The second post that sparked a lot of attention from his fans was posted on August 2, 2012. The post said

Thank you fans for all your support, I'm speechless. Thank you to my relay teams! The US team has had some great nights at the pool, happy for my teammates. It has been a sentimental week. (Phelps)

This post received 220,642 likes, 16,364 comments and 2,408 shares. It let his fans know how much he appreciated their support throughout the games. He was also thanking his fans and his teammates for all playing a role in helping him to break the record for winning the most gold medals ever. His fans helped by supporting him and his teammates helped him by swimming their hardest to win gold in team events.

Phelps had a much bigger presence on Twitter during the Games than he had on Facebook. Phelps might have preferred Twitter to Facebook because the 140 character limit makes it easy to tweet from anywhere. From July 27 through August 12, 2012, Phelps tweeted and retweeted fans 109 times. Many of his tweets thanked his fans. On August 1, 2012, Phelps tweeted his gratitude for the support that he was receiving from fans on Twitter. Phelps tweeted, "Thanks for all the support on here everyone!!! Couple more races left!!!" (Phelps). By tweeting his fans, Phelps was able to quickly let them know how much he valued their support during his

races. Sometimes Phelps also retweeted his fans. He often retweeted fans who had either wished him good luck before his races or congratulated him on good performances. For example, Phelps retweeted a fan who wished him good luck and told him how he felt about Phelps leaving the sport after these games. The tweet read:

Thanks! RT @mjcouture28: “@MichaelPhelps: I’m going to be sad 2 c u go. u changed how people look @ swimming. As a swimmer myself I thank you! Good luck and enjoy yourself (Phelps)

When Phelps retweeted this fan, he was showing the fan that he got his message and that he was grateful for the fan’s support. He was acknowledging that he had a positive impact on this fan’s life. Also, Phelps was able to immediately respond to this fan, something that he would not have been able to do without social media. Phelps also retweeted the congratulations that he received from President Obama. The tweet read:

Thank you Mr. President!! It's an honor representing the #USA !! The best country in the world!! RT @BarackObama: Congrats to Michael Phelps for breaking the all-time Olympic medal record. You’ve made your country proud. – bo (Phelps)

Phelps was recognizing the President’s support during the games. He was opening up communication with the President. This retweet also caught the attention of Phelps’ followers. This tweet was retweeted 2, 678 times and “favorited” by 1,978 followers. When Phelps retweeted the President and his fans, he was showing them that he saw their comments. It was a simple and fast way of communicating with his fans. For Phelps’s, his fan base was a motivation. In an interview with Visa, Phelps said that he goes onto his Facebook and Twitter every day and sees the posts and comments from his fans. Their support encouraged him to go out and swim faster and to do his best (Pehlps, 2012). Phelps fans mean a lot to him. He wanted to perform well to please them. For him, social media improved his relationship with his fans, as well as his performance.

## Usain Bolt

Usain Bolt, a Jamaican sprinter, is considered to be the fastest man in the world. Bolt won the 100 meter and 200 meter at both the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2012 London Olympics, the only man to ever win both of these sprints in consecutive Olympics. He is also the only man to win back-to-back gold medals in double sprints in a single Olympics, (*Usain*).

Usain Bolt's Facebook page is clearly not run by him. Most posts are written in the third person, which implies that someone else is updating his page. Bolt is not using a ghostwriter because the writer is not writing as an alter ego of Bolt, but as another person talking about Bolt. Most of the posts on Bolt's Facebook page during the Olympics are updates and highlights of his achievements. There are photos posted from the Opening Ceremony and links to his personal website.

Although most posts are not actually written by Bolt, one status in particular, posted a few days before the start of the Games, was a post that Bolt personally wrote to his fans. On July 23, 2012, Bolt wrote on his Facebook wall,

Dear Facebook Fans, I want to thank you all for your support over the last four years. You have been some of the greatest fans I have. I have now passed the 7 million mark and that is an accomplishment for me. Thanks again for the love and support.  
One Love  
Usain (Bolt)

This post received 62,939 likes, 3,468 comments and 549 shares. Unlike other posts on his Facebook page, this one is written in first person and is signed by Bolt (*Usain*). Bolt was able to communicate with his fans, through non-traditional media, how grateful he was for their continuous support since the Beijing Games.



After the Opening Ceremonies, there weren't any more posts until Bolt started racing. The lack of posts was probably due to the fact that he had yet to achieve anything. Other posts on Bolt's Facebook page highlighted his accomplishments. However, in the week between the Opening Ceremonies and Bolt's first day of racing, he hadn't accomplished anything. During this week, Bolt was most likely focused on training for his races and did not have the time to be concerned with updating his Facebook page.

Between July 27, 2012 and August 12, 2012, Bolt tweeted 67 times. Unlike his Facebook posts, Bolt's tweets were written in first-person, thus implying that he personally updated his Twitter. Bolt tweeted throughout the entirety of the games. The contrast between his Facebook page and Twitter suggest that the purpose of his Facebook page was to update fans about the highlights of the Games whereas his Twitter was meant for him to communicate with his fans.

Many of Bolt's tweets were pictures. He tweeted pictures of himself at the Opening Ceremonies, racing, and with fans. By tweeting pictures, Bolt was able to show his fans what he was doing. This was an effective form of communication because so many fans were not actually able to be in London to experience the Olympics. The pictures that Bolt post were the best alternate to body-to-body communication.

Bolt also thanked his fans for their support. On August 5, 2012, Bolt tweeted,

Thanks to all the fans for supporting and believing. You have been a part of the journey.. [sic] "To the World Me Say" (Bolt)

Bolt was letting his fans know how thankful he was for their continuous support. The tweet was retweeted 7,227 times and 1,453 of his followers "favorited" this tweet. This response to this tweet shows that the fans received the message and that they are continuing to support him. The fans were immediately responding to Bolt's message.

Bolt used social media for two reasons. First was to keep his fans updated about his accomplishments during the Olympics. Second, Bolt used social media to thank his fans overall. Bolt was successfully able to communicate with his fans through social media

### **Gabby Douglas**

Gabby Douglas is an American gymnast. In the 2012 London Olympics, Douglas won the gold in the individual all-around and a team gold. She is the first African-American to win a gold medal in the all-around (Gabby).

Douglas had very few posts on Facebook. Throughout the Olympics, she had two posts informing fans that this was in fact her official Facebook page. The first time Douglas informed fans that this was her official page was on July 30, 2012. Douglas wrote,

I just wanted to thank everyone for all of your inspiring words and encouraging messages! I am so excited for Team Finals tomorrow! Thank u for all of your support & prayers! ♥ Gabby P.S. [www.facebook.com/GabrielleDouglasUSA](http://www.facebook.com/GabrielleDouglasUSA) is my only Official Facebook Page that I personally comment on. I see some others pages that say they are me but they are not me. Also my Official Twitter is @gabrielledoug Love you guys :) (Douglas)

By confirming that this was her official page and providing a link to her Twitter, Douglas was helping her fans to follow her authentic pages. This was helpful to fans who wanted to follow Douglas and not an imposter. Since fans knew this was her page, they were able to communicate with her. For other athletes, whose Facebook pages were not confirmed, fans might have been misled.

Douglas also posted her excitement about winning her gold medals on Facebook. On July 31, 2012, Douglas posted,

We are the 2012 London Olympic Gold Medalists!!! We are all so happy right now. It's a dream come true! Gotta give God the Glory! Thank you everyone for praying for me! It means so much to me! Now I have to prepare for the All-Around competition! I am so excited! ♥ Gabby (Douglas)

This post received 123,370 likes, 6,430 comments, and 1,716 shares. This post revealed to the fans that Douglas appreciated all the support that they had given her. She was able to share her excitement about winning immediately with her fans as well as thank them for praying for her. This message from Douglas allowed fans to connect to her on a personal level. It made fans see her as a teenage girl, excited about winning, not just as an Olympic athlete. Teenage girls who were fans of Douglas might have seen this post and realized she was just like them, making them more likely to comment.

On August 4, 2012, Douglas again posted a Facebook status expressing her excitement about winning another gold medal. Douglas wrote,

Wow!!! I am still trying to grasp that I am the All-Around Olympic Gymnastic Champion and that my teammates and I won the Team Gold Medal. You all have been so great to me! I am sooooo thankful for all of your support and love! We have event finals coming up this week - starting tomorrow with Vault Finals. I would love it if you would keep my teammate MaKayla Maroney in prayer & cheer as she competes for a medal :) #TeamUSA (Douglas)

This post received 153,237 likes, 5,801 comments and 2,230 shares. Again, Douglas was able to let her fans know her excitement about winning right away. By liking commenting on and sharing this status, her fans were able to let her know that they too were excited for her. Also, her fans were able to immediately respond to her messages.

Douglas was using her social media pages to share her excitement with her fans. She was able to express her exhilaration as soon as she won her events and received immediate feedback from her fans. Douglas' social media use helped to improve communication with her fans.

### **Overall Social Media Use During the 2012 London Olympics**

Social media seemed to have a positive impact on these three athletes' communication with their fans during the Olympics. Phelps, Bolt and Douglas successfully separated the private realm from the public realm. These athletes were not sharing information that was too private or

writing statuses that were inappropriate. Rather, they shared information that helped their fans connect to them, just as many do in the public realm. They were using social media to let their fans know about their achievements during the Olympics and to thank their fans for their endless support. Phelps, Bolt and Douglas were posting information that their fans wanted to know about.

By posting statuses on Facebook and tweeting, these athletes were able to immediately inform fans about what was going on during the Olympic Games. As soon as their competition was over, the athlete was able to articulate their excitement about doing well and their gratitude to their fans that supported them. Phelps, Bolt and Douglas were expressing their opinions and thoughts on their own terms, rather than waiting to be interviewed by the media.

Using social media also helped to enhance communication between athletes and their fans because of immediacy. Athletes were able to post a status on Facebook or tweet and their fans could respond to these statuses and tweets right away. Fans were able to send messages to the athletes, and the athletes were able to receive these messages instantly. Athletes could thank their fans for their support and fans could wish their favorite athletes luck and congratulate them when they performed well. Social media helped for conversation to happen even though the fans and the athletes were not in the same place.

The frequent use of social media during the Olympics by athletes, though an effective way for athletes to communicate with their fans, could be seen as a way for them to feed their egos. Athletes no longer had to wait to be approached by the media to discuss their preparation or reflect on their performance. Instead, athletes could share all of their thoughts any time they wanted to. However, not all of their Facebook posts or tweets were pertinent or interesting. Some posts and tweets could have been seen as athletes just sharing their opinions because they

had an outlet to share on and an audience to share with. Fans might not have been interested in everything that athletes had to say, but athletes might have been under the impression that their fans cared what they thought because of the number of followers they had.

Overall, among the most popular athletes of these past Olympic Games, social media had a positive impact on the communication between athletes and their fans. Phelps, Bolt and Douglas effectively communicated with their fans, separating the public and private realms, taking advantage of the opportunity for immediate response and understanding that social media was the best alternative to body-to-body communication. Effective communication on social media helped to improve the Olympic experience for athletes and fans.

### **Negative Use of Social Media**

Although social media did help to improve communication between athletes and fans, some athletes used social media incorrectly, damaging communication with their fans. Several athletes posted inappropriate and racist comments about other athletes or countries competing in the Olympics. These comments on Facebook and Twitter resulted in the removal of these athletes from competition and the Olympics.

A Greek triple jumper was removed from the Games by the Greek delegation after making a judgmental comment on Twitter. Paraskevi Papahristou was kicked out of the Olympics after she tweeted,

“With so many Africans in Greece, at least the mosquitoes of West Nile will eat homemade food.” (Pilon, 2012)

This comment was deemed inappropriate and cost Papahristou her spot in the Olympics. After she was removed from the Games, Papahristou apologized on her Facebook page, writing,

“I would like to express my heartfelt apologies for the unfortunate and tasteless joke I published on my personal Twitter account. I am very sorry and ashamed for

the negative responses I triggered, since I never wanted to offend anyone, or to encroach human rights.” (Pilon, 2012)

Papahristou took responsibility for her comments, even though the damage was already done.

Another athlete whose comments on social media sent him home was Swiss soccer player, Michael Morganella. After losing to South Korea, Morganella took to Twitter to vent his frustration at losing. His tweets were insulting and discriminatory to South Koreans, and were quickly removed from Twitter. The Swiss delegation decided that these actions were inappropriate coming from a Swiss athlete and they sent him home. Morganella released a statement stating “that he had ‘made a huge mistake’” and was “truly sorry for the people in South Korea, for footballers, but also for the Swiss delegation and the Swiss football in general,” (Belson, 2012). Morganella was penalized for his behavior on social media.

Social media did, in many cases, have a positive impact on communication between athletes and their fans. However, some athletes took advantage of their freedom to tweet or post whatever they wanted. Athletes who insulted others or made derogatory remarks were punished and sent back home, losing their chance to compete in these and all future Olympics.

### **Problem Solving for Social Media**

As these were the first Olympic Games to extensively use social media as a form of communication between athletes and fans, many had uncertainties about how athletes could effectively use social media. These Games can be used as an example of the positive and negative aspects of social media use. After analyzing the effective forms of communication and the use of social media during the past Olympics, a guideline for proper social media use can be formed.

Athletes should remember that social media should enhance their Olympic experience, not detract from it. It might be tempting for an athlete to post every thought that pops into his or

her head right away. However, athletes need to remember that they are at the Olympics first and foremost to compete. Updating their Facebook posts or tweeting should not distract them from preparing for their competitions. Athletes should focus on their practices and races, meets or games and wait for their downtime to share information on Facebook and Twitter. By waiting for their downtime to use social media, they will ensure that they are not being distracted from competing. If an athlete is worried that social media will become a distraction, they should think about turning over their social media sites to a ghostwriter, thus eliminating the temptation.

When athletes do post statuses on Facebook or tweet, they should be composing statuses and tweets that help them to effectively communicate with their fans. The first way to effectively communicate with fans is for athletes to understand the difference between the private realm and the public realm as defined by Arendt and Habermas. The IOC can share this information when providing countries and athletes with a set of guidelines for social media use. Athletes should never post things that are too private. Fans do not need to know every intimate detail about an athlete's personal life. This information is unnecessary and inappropriate for fans to know. Instead, they should post things that will make them more accessible to fans. As Habermas (1990) suggests, communication in the public realm is communication that helps one to connect to others. Such topics that might help fans to connect with athletes are anxieties and enthusiasm about competing at the Olympics, gratitude to friends, family and fans that have supported them along the way, or excitement about performing well in the Olympics. These types of posts aren't too personal for an athlete to share, yet, are personal enough that a fan will feel as though they can relate to the athlete. Athletes should only cross the line between personal and public when it is to make them more accessible to their fans.

The information that athletes post on their social media pages should also help to open up conversation with their fans. When athletes post something about the Olympics, it should be significant enough that fans want to respond back and continue the dialogue. Habermas (1990) discusses the open forum of response back and forth in the public realm. Athletes should take advantage of the immediate response on social media to communicate with fans. When athletes are interviewed by the media on the news or for an article, there isn't a forum for instant responses from the fans back to the athletes. Social media, however, is unique because it allows for two-way communication. Athletes should be aware of the prospect of two-way communication when they post statuses on Facebook or tweet.

While athletes are considering what information is appropriate to post on social media sites, they also need should remember that social media is an alternate to body-to-body communication. Leopaldina (2005) says that body-to-body communication is the most effective form of communication because it allows people to pick up on others' nonverbal cues. However, it is not possible for athletes competing at the Olympics to actually talk face-to-face with all of their fans. Thus, social media is the next best thing. Athletes should consider what things they would say to fans if they were talking face-to-face. Then, athletes should ask themselves if these ideas can be communicated the same way through social media. If an athlete's opinion or thought cannot be effectively communicated without fans seeing their nonverbal cues, then the athlete should not post it on Facebook or Twitter. Rather, the athlete should wait until he or she are being interviewed on video so that the message can come across successfully. Also, athletes can post photos and videos on their social media sites that will help them to communicate non-verbal cues to their fans. By realizing that social media is an alternate to



body-to-body communication, athletes will be able to determine what messages can efficiently be communicated on social media, and what messages should be reserved for video.

Finally, athletes need to be respectful on social media. Just because social media allows athletes to share their opinions, it is not an excuse for them to insult others. The Olympic Games are about countries coming together in a fun, competitive environment. Just as it would be unacceptable for an athlete to conduct an interview and make racist comments or insult another athlete, it is intolerable for an athlete to share these comments on social media. Athletes who are not respectful of other athletes or countries should be sent home for their actions and banned from participation in future Olympic Games. By insulting others, athletes are not upholding the values of the Olympics.

Social media can help to enhance both the athletes and fans Olympic experience. However, there is a proper way for athletes to approach sharing messages on Facebook and Twitter. By following these guidelines, athletes will be able to effectively communicate with their fans.

### **Conclusion**

Communication is changing. Social media is being used more and more by everyone to connect to each other and to stay updated about the world. The fact that these past Olympics were given the title the “Social Media Olympics” demonstrates how prevalent social media has become as a channel of communication.

Social media helps fans to learn about athletes and acts as a form of image-enhancement for athletes. However, the sole purpose of social media is not just image-enhancement. Athletes can use social media to communicate with their fans like never before. Social media as a new channel of communication helped to improve the Olympic experience for athletes and fans.

The “Social Media Olympics” allowed athletes to communicate with their fans through a different outlet than in the past. Athletes were no longer restricted to the traditional communication channels to spread messages to their fans. Instead, athletes now had the chance to share their thoughts and opinions with their fans on their own terms and at their own convenience. The use of social media had both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, social media opened up the door for communication between athletes and fans in a way that had never been possible before. On the other hand though, some athletes abused their freedom to express their thoughts and ended up insulting other athletes.

Since these were the first Olympic Games to take advantage of the popularity of social media to improve the experience for athletes and fans, the athletes’ use of social media needed to be evaluated to learn what worked and didn’t work. After evaluating the use of social media, a set of guidelines could be formed for athletes to refer to for future Olympics. These guidelines should be used to enhance athletes and fans Olympic experience.

The guidelines that were determined for athletes’ social media use are not limited to just the Olympics. These guidelines can apply to all athletes, both during their seasons and off seasons. All athletes who choose to use social media should be using it to communicate with their fans, as effectively as possible. Social media should never distract athletes from their training or competition. Also, athletes need to always be respectful towards rivals, other athletes, and other people in general. By following these same guidelines, all athletes can efficiently communicate with their fans.

The widespread use of social media had a huge impact on the Olympic experience for athletes and fans. For the first time, athletes had access to their fans. Social media allowed athletes to connect with more of their fans than ever before and on a personal level. Fans also

had non-stop contact with their favorite athletes. Fans learned what athletes were thinking and doing throughout the entirety of the Games, not just when they were being interviewed. Social media had a mostly positive impact on these past Olympic Games. After evaluating social media use during these Games, we will be able to continue to improve the Olympic experience using social media.

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