SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE AMONG ELITE ATHLETES:
AN EXPLORATION OF ATHLETE USAGE DURING MAJOR EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms have proliferated the sport industry. Social media is constantly evolving, with platforms being adopted by many sport stakeholders including sport governing bodies, leagues, teams, sporting events, fans, coaches, managers, and athletes. For athletes, social media have provided new avenues to share personal and professional news, manage their personal image and brand, and develop deeper interactions with fans. However, since the rise of social media, sport stakeholders have debated the extent of athlete social media use at major sport events. The purpose of this research was threefold: (1) to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event, (2) explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations, and (3) to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction.

To better understand athlete social media use during major sport events, three studies were conducted sequentially. Each study gathered qualitative data, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into the perceptions of athletes and sport administrators. Study one was guided by uses and gratifications (U&G) theory. The study was designed to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. The study consisted of an open-ended questionnaire which collected data from elite athletes who competed at major international sport events (e.g., World Championships) \(N = 57\). Results indicated that athletes primarily used social media to communicate with their support networks (e.g., family and friends), for promotional purposes, and to gather and share information. As a result of using social media, athletes were gratified through connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. Although social media use appeared to be primarily positive, athletes experienced several challenges.
These challenges presented athletes with feelings of anxiousness, and difficulty balancing an appropriate amount of social media use during events.

Study two utilised semi-structured interviews ($N = 15$) to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. Distraction-conflict theory (DCT) was employed in order to help build this understanding. Data highlighted several elements perceived to be distracting, including an obligation to respond to messages, pressure to build and maintain an athlete brand, and competitor content. Similar to study one, athletes reported that social media allowed them to escape the pressure associated with major sport events. Athletes addressed concerns associated with social media distractions by engaging in self-awareness and switching off the platforms or handing over control to someone they trusted to manage content while they were competing. In terms of the support they received, athletes reported a lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions, inconsistent training and education, and receiving additional informal assistance as required.

To provide an additional perspective, study three consisted of semi-structured interviews ($N = 7$) with sport administrators of Australian NSOs to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. Communication privacy management theory (CPM) guided the study. Findings indicate that a number of support and management mechanisms are used to assist athletes including policy and guidelines, training, providing suggestions and assistance, and monitoring. Further, administrators reported a number of aspects that are perceived to be distracting to athletes including negative commentary and loss of focus. Aligning with the two previous studies, administrators also suggested that social media can have a positive impact on athletes, as it allows them to escape the pressures of major sport events.

Collectively, the current research contributes to the three theoretical frameworks that
guided the studies. First, the research contributed to U&G theory by revealing how and why athletes act as both consumers and producers when using social media. Further, the challenges athletes described could represent failed gratifications and lead to a change in how social media is used in future events. Second, the research extends DCT to athlete social media research and presents a conceptual model to guide future research on the impacts of social media on performance. Finally, the research contributes to CPM by examining social media as a whole, rather than focusing on one particular platform. Further, the research applies a multi-stakeholder approach (i.e., athletes and NSO administrators) and major sport event context to existing CPM research.

The findings also underscore opportunities for sport organisations to bolster training and development initiatives offered to athletes. A number of suggestions are presented including strategies on how to filter competitors’ posts so they are not visible in the athlete’s social media feeds, as this was a source of anxiety for some athletes. Other suggestions focus on equipping athletes with the appropriate coping and mental skills to deal with any negative feelings related to, and beyond, social media use through improved personal development programs.
STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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Michelle Hayes

(September, 2019)
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<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFL/AFLW</td>
<td>Australian Football League / Australian Football League Women’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>AIMAG</td>
<td>Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIS</td>
<td>Australian Institute of Sport</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOC</td>
<td>Australian Olympic Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>CGF</td>
<td>Commonwealth Games Federation</td>
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<td>CPM</td>
<td>Communication Privacy Management Theory</td>
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<td>DCT</td>
<td>Distraction-Conflict Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>GU</td>
<td>Griffith University</td>
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<tr>
<td>IF/s</td>
<td>International Federation/s</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOC</td>
<td>International Olympic Committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>NBA</td>
<td>National Basketball Association</td>
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<td>NCAA</td>
<td>National Collegiate Athletic Association</td>
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<td>NOC/s</td>
<td>National Olympic Committee/s</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSO/s</td>
<td>National Sport Organisation/s</td>
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<tr>
<td>POMS</td>
<td>Profile of Mood States</td>
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<td>PSI</td>
<td>Parasocial Interaction</td>
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<td>SCT</td>
<td>Social-Cognitive Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>U&amp;G</td>
<td>Uses and Gratifications Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCI</td>
<td>Union Cycliste Internationale</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Refereed Journal Articles


Industry Research Report


Refereed Abstracts in Conference Proceedings/Presentations


Zealand HDR Conference (SMAANZ), Melbourne, Australia.

Research Seminars


Guest Presentation/Lecture


Media


Griffith University PhD Activities

2018 Griffith Business School Three Minute Thesis (3MT) Competition (First Prize)

2018 Department of Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management Three Minute Thesis (3MT) Competition (First Prize)

2017 Griffith Business School Poster Competition (Second Prize)
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One provides a background to the research and rationale. The research problem, purpose, and questions are presented, followed by an overview of the research context and design. An explanation as to why this research is significant is provided, and delimitations are addressed. The chapter concludes with an overview of the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Research Background and Rationale

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have had profound effects on sport, particularly on athletes (Pegoraro, 2010). There are approximately 2.77 billion social media users worldwide (Statista, 2019a), with a large number of athletes embracing the platforms due to the many benefits associated with having an online presence. A social media presence allows athletes to increase their interaction with fans (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012) and provides a new avenue for them to manage their brand, market themselves to potential sponsors, and gain endorsements (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hull, 2014; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). A variety of other uses have also been uncovered by researchers examining athlete social media content. For instance, a group of researchers examined professional athletes’ Twitter content and categorised the tweets into six categories including: (1) interactivity, (2) diversion, (3) information sharing, (4) content, (5) fanship, and (6) promotional (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010).

Yet, despite the benefits afforded to athletes, there are some challenges. Athletes who maintain a social media presence may experience unwanted messages or increase their risk of falling victim to online bullying by followers if their performances do not meet certain expectations (Farrington, Hall, Kilvington, Price, & Saeed, 2014; Geurin, 2017). In many
instances, athletes have become the victim of online bullying. For example, Australian boxer Shelly Watts alleged that her preparation for the 2016 Rio Olympic Games was impacted due to negative comments she received through social media (Riccio, 2016). Following the completion of a boxing bout Watts was attacked online as some did not believe she deserved to win the bout. Those who did not believe she won proceeded to send negative messages to her via social media. Watts saw the messages directed to her on the morning of the Australian Boxing Titles final and indicated that the comments directed to her via social media had an impact on her, by saying, “unfortunately I looked at those comments and they upset me leading into a fight, and I was actually crying the morning of my final bout” (News.com.au, 2016, para. 3). Watts declared she would no longer read comments during competition as she believed it could negatively influence her performance. However, increased pressure has been placed on athletes to maintain a social media presence during events (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Athletes can increase the publicity of a major sport event via their social media feeds before and during the event (Carlen & Maivorsdotter, 2017). Further, athletes enjoying their event experience are likely to share content on their social media platforms, which may provide added benefits to event organisers (Prado-Gascó, Calabuig Moreno, Añó Sanz, Núñez-Pomar, & Crespo Hervás, 2017).

Despite these pressures, some athletes have announced their decision to stop using social media during events in order to minimise the potential for distraction (Logue, 2016; Moore, 2015). For example, professional basketball player LeBron James engaged in a social media blackout during the National Basketball Association (NBA) season playoffs for a number of years. When explaining why he takes this approach, James cited, “There’s too much nonsense out there. Not during this time, this is when I lock in right now and I don’t need nothing creeping into my mind that don’t [sic] need to be there” (Moore, 2015, para. 2). The examples of Watts and James reveal that social media can play a role in altering athletes’
mood before competition. Sport psychology researchers have previously examined the effect of mood state on athletic performance. Researchers have suggested that maintaining appropriate emotional feelings before competition contributes to athletic performance (Prapavessis, 2000). As a result of these investigations, it is suggested that athletes who are less anxious, angry, or depressed are more successful (Prapavessis, 2000). However, it is unclear whether elements of social media can impact athletes’ mood state prior to competition and impact their performance.

Following the 2012 London Olympics some Australian athletes received harsh criticism from local media for their use of social media. Social media platforms rapidly grew in popularity in the lead up to these Games. According to Statista (2019a) approximately 970 million people were using social media in 2010, which grew to 1.4 billion in 2012. Athletes appeared to capitalise on this growth by using social media to document personal experiences during the 2012 London Olympics. As a result, the Australian Olympic Team was criticised by local media for looking disorganised and distracted during the opening ceremony of the Games as many athletes were using their mobile phones during the event (Fynes-Clinton, 2012).

Although athletes can harness the power of new media technologies for various reasons, social media has been proposed as a distraction to those using it (Brooks, 2015), and could potentially have a negative impact on athletic performance due to associated increases in anxiety and lack of sleep (David, Powless, Hyman, Purnell, Steinfeldt, & Fisher, 2018; Encel, Mesagno, & Brown, 2017; Fynes-Clinton, 2012; Jones, Kirschen, Kancharla, & Hale, 2018a; Sygall, 2015). As a result, sport stakeholders have debated the extent to which athletes should use and rely on social media at major events. Media commentators and other sport stakeholders have criticised how much athletes rely on social media and discourage them from using it during events, while others have suggested athletes should replicate their daily
habits. For example, athletes have revealed that their social media use may have impacted their individual performances during events. Emily Seebohm, who was one of Australia’s contenders for winning a gold medal in swimming at the London Olympics, conceded that her constant use of social media may have negatively impacted her individual performance. Seebohm suggested that messages of support received before the event could have made her think she had already won the event even before she raced (Ottesen, 2012). As a result of this experience Seebohm altered her habits for the 2016 Rio Olympics and revealed to the media, “some people might like that distraction. Personally, it doesn’t work, I know that” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 2016, para. 6). She also revealed that social media use and its potential impacts vary for each individual. Athletes across a variety of sports have independently decided to minimise their social media usage or disconnect completely in order to focus more on their sporting endeavours (Logue, 2016).

Meanwhile, Britain’s Olympic shooting coach for the 2012 London Olympic Games, Ian Coley, discouraged his athletes from using social media during major sport events. When discussing social media Coley stated, “It could definitely affect their performance, particularly in our game because it is very much a mind game, a self-belief game” (Rowley, 2012, para. 9). The topic was again raised in the lead up to the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games with media commentators suggesting that the safest option for athletes is to simply switch off their social media accounts during the event period (The Daily Telegraph, 2018). The editorial suggested that the lure of checking messages and ‘likes’ athletes receive during these events can be distracting to athletes when their focus should solely be on competing.

Although there has been limited enquiry into the potential impact of social media on athlete performances, research has been conducted in other areas, such as the workplace. For instance, researchers have identified that the platforms could impact an employee’s
productivity in the work place (Ferreira & Du Plessis, 2009). Concerns have also been raised around Australian school-aged athletes and their attempts at managing sport and education. These school-aged athletes highlighted that they use social media to procrastinate their commitments (O’Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013). Although there was no mention of how using social media to procrastinate could impact their athletic performance, there was a suggestion that their school work could be negatively impacted (O’Neill, Allen, & Calder, 2013; Posso, 2016).

Conversely, some sport stakeholders have suggested that athletes who stop using social media altogether for a major sport event may experience more of a negative effect as it is a disruption from their daily routine. Sir Clive Woodward, Great Britain’s Deputy Chef de Mission during the 2012 London Olympic Games, suggested athletes should replicate their daily habits as much as they can at a major event for this very reason (Rowley, 2012).

Additionally, a more recent study highlighted that Internet use reduced stress among student-athletes from a North American university (Frisby & Wanta, 2018). Although there was no specific mention of social media, the Internet was suggested to provide a diversion from the pressures of competitive environments.

Although each athlete may be able to handle social media distractions differently, the Australian Olympic Committee (AOC) and a number of NSOs admitted they were unprepared and did not understand the dangers of social media as a distraction leading into the 2012 London Olympic Games. The AOC also revealed there were no plans in place to manage social media use among athletes during the mega event (Sygall, 2015). Although this was the case during the London Olympics, the idea of Australian sport organisations implementing rules around athlete social media usage was previously highlighted by the AOC during test events for the 2012 London Olympics, when it was revealed that athletes were using social media during test competitions (Tancred, 2012). The AOC believed that
social media was distracting athletes when they should have been focused on the competition. At that time, team managers and coaches were encouraged to implement rules to eliminate the risk of social media negatively impacting athlete performances within their teams. However, it is unclear whether all teams and organisations implemented specific social media rules as per the request from the AOC.

The topic of managing athlete social media use was highlighted again in anticipation of the 2016 Rio Olympics. As the 2012 London Olympics proved to be a disappointing Games for some Australian sports, a review into the culture of the Olympic swimming team revealed social media was one area of concern (Australian Olympic Committee, 2015). As a result of previous athlete misconduct in London, athletes feared that after the review the AOC would place a total ban on athlete social media usage during the 2016 Rio Olympic Games (Adno, 2015). The AOC decided not to ban social media use altogether and, instead, focused on providing education to those who made the 2016 Rio Olympic Games team. This may have been a more effective approach as some athletes believed they did not need a policy to manage their social media use.

1.2 Research Purpose and Research Questions

While research has increasingly focused on the content produced by athletes, there are opportunities for further examination from athletes’ perspectives on how and why they use social media (Sanderson, 2013). Sanderson (2013) highlighted the importance of determining whether athletes align with the findings presented by researchers who have utilised content analysis in their investigations. The few researchers who have investigated athlete social media use from the perspectives of athletes found that athletes prefer to control their own accounts, even during competition (Clavio, Walsh, & Vooris, 2013), demonstrating that athletes will be able to provide valuable information regarding their experiences using social media during major sport events.
Therefore, the purpose of the current research was threefold: (1) to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event, (2) to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations, and (3) to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. The following research questions were developed in order to address these aims:

**Research Question 1:** Why do athletes use social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 2:** What gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 3:** What challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 4:** What elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events?

**Research Question 5:** What practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events?

**Research Question 6:** What support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 7:** How do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events?

**Research Question 8:** What aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events?

### 1.3 Research Context

The research context of a major sport event was selected based on Emery’s (2010) definition of major events. The term major event, in the case of sport, is defined as “the
umbrella term to include mega, calendar, one-off, and showcase events” (Emery, 2010, p. 160). Major sport events present athletes with greater stress levels as these events are of higher importance than regular season matches with increases in performance expectations (Karageorghis & Terry, 2011). Australian athletes and sport organisations that were involved in the events defined by Emery (2010) represented the population for the current research for three key reasons. First, Australians are some of the most active social media users in the world. Recent statistics reveal that approximately 50% of Australians access Facebook at least once a day, with most users between the ages of 25 and 39 (Cowling, 2018).

Second, Australia is described as a nation with a long tradition of using sport to construct both personal and national identities (Australian Sports Commission, n.d.; Stewart, Nicholson, Smith, & Westerbeek, 2005). Similar to other countries, Australians appear proud of the country’s international reputation and achievements in sport, while some of the most inspirational moments in the country’s history are sport-related. Rowe (1999) explained that Australians consider themselves as avid sport fans, with sport firmly entrenched in the nation’s culture. This level of fandom is often accompanied by the belief that Australian athletes should advance others (Billings, Scott, Brown, Lewis, & Devlin, 2019). Researchers have highlighted that Australian sport policy has primarily focused on international sport achievements (Stewart et al., 2005) with a large amount of money invested in success (Hogan & Norton, 2000). Australia’s focus on international success in sport provides an avenue to explore whether social media is perceived to have an impact on an athlete’s performance during major sport events and identify how problematic social media may be to performance targets.

As outlined earlier in the chapter, Australian athletes have experienced criticism from domestic media outlets due to their use of social media during event times, with some labelling the platforms as a distraction from competing and partly the cause of some
disappointing results (e.g., Fynes-Clinton, 2012). Although these incidents may not be isolated to Australian athletes, some athletes admitted they had issues managing distractions associated with social media during high profile events like the Olympic Games.

National teams, such as the Australian team, participate in competitions organised by International Federations (IFs) of sport (Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, & Stewart, 2015). For example, the IF for the sport of cycling is the Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). The UCI manages the World Championships events for track cycling, road cycling, and other forms of cycling. However, major competitions such as the Olympic Games are managed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), while the Commonwealth Games are governed by the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF). Organisations such as the IOC and CGF are known as governing bodies of sport. Within Australia, NSOs provide national representation for their sport and are responsible for various aspects including the development of the sport and selecting teams for international events such as the Olympic Games, and liaising with IFs (Farmer & Arnaudon, 1996; Sotiriadou, 2009). Therefore, a range of events governed by the aforementioned organisations were identified for inclusion in the current research.

The third reason for selecting an Australian context was due to the amount of previous research examining the social media behaviours of athletes conducted in North American contexts (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015), with a focus on how social media is managed in the intercollegiate sport system in the USA and Canada. Filo et al.’s (2015) review of social media and sport research suggested that future investigations should incorporate social media consumer perspectives beyond North American contexts. Few investigations have been conducted in other countries, and this provides an opportunity to expand research on athlete social media use by examining other sport contexts and systems.

Based on these events, the research focuses on Olympic (amateur) athletes rather than professional athletes. There are several factors that differentiate amateur and professional
athletes that may influence their use of social media, which is one of the reasons only one of these samples groups was chosen for the current research. These differences begin with organisational governance. For instance, amateur sport organisations (e.g., NSOs) are predominately non-profit organisations with a primary aim of returning profits to members through improved service delivery such as creating sport development opportunities to encourage participation at the grassroots level (Hoye et al., 2015).

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is one of the largest and most influential organisations in sport events operating on a non-profit basis. In an Australian context, Sport Australia and the Australian Institute of Sport are government-funded. Funding for each sport has predominately been allocated based on success and medals achieved at major sport events such as the Olympic Games (Blood, 2018). Based on these organisational structures amateur athletes would not have the same commercial opportunities as those competing in professional leagues. Therefore, an amateur athlete’s social media use may be concentrated on branding and promoting themselves to create sponsorship opportunities to generate funding opportunities due to minimal salary payments (Geurin, 2017; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Meanwhile, professional sport is more visible and watched by the public and receives more media coverage compared to amateur sport (Crossman, Hyslop, & Guthrie, 1994; Hoye et al., 2015). With a much larger share of media coverage, professional sports generate majority of the sponsorship revenue and corporate support on offer for sport (Hoye et al., 2015) which contributes to athlete salaries. Another difference between the two types of sport exists in competition scheduling. Professional sports consist of leagues that allow athletes to compete throughout a designated season (Hoye et al., 2015), whereas non-professional sports such as Olympic sports are more commonly contested at standalone events. Therefore, athletes competing at major sport event, such as the Olympic Games, only have an
opportunity once every four years to compete at the pinnacle level in their sport which may influence their social media motives. Researchers have investigated the social media habits of amateur (e.g., Geurin, 2017) and professional athletes (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2011; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012) separately, which may be due to the differences outlined in this section and their potential to influence the findings.

1.4 Research Design

The current research employs a qualitative design consisting of three empirical studies to address the research purpose and research questions as outlined in Table 1. The studies were conducted sequentially at the conclusion of the previous study.

Table 1

Research Design, Purpose, and Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>RQ/s</th>
<th>Method</th>
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| Study one | To investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. | 1 to 3 | *Data Collection:* Open-ended questionnaire (n = 57)  
*Data Analysis:* Thematic Analysis |
| Study two | To explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. | 4 to 6 | *Data Collection:* Semi-structured interviews (n = 15)  
*Data Analysis:* Thematic Analysis |
| Study three | To examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. | 7 to 8 | *Data Collection:* Semi-structured interviews (n = 7)  
*Data Analysis:* Thematic Analysis |

Study one employed an open-ended questionnaire to gather the perceptions of 57 elite athletes who had recently competed at a major sport event. The questionnaire was completed
by athletes between July and November 2017. Thematic analysis was used to identify the uses and gratifications as well as the challenges associated with social media use during major sport events. The challenges reported by athletes were further explored in study two.

Study two was conducted using semi-structured in-depth interviews with 15 elite athletes between February and June 2018. Thematic analysis was employed to determine the elements of social media perceived to be distracting and the practices undertaken to address these distractions. Perceptions of the management and support mechanisms utilised by NSOs were also collected. As social media in the hands of athletes has created issues for NSOs, a third study was conducted to examine what support and management mechanisms organisations have implemented to address social media distractions.

Study three provided an additional perspective on the support and management mechanisms employed by NSOs. Study three consisted of seven semi-structured interviews with sport administrators between July and October 2018. The aspects of social media perceived to be distracting to athletes during events were also obtained from sport administrators. Participants primarily worked within the media and communications department of their organisations. Thematic analysis was used to determine what strategies were in place, the perceived effectiveness of the mechanisms, and the perceptions of key organisational personnel on whether social media is a distraction and could potentially impact athlete performance. Consequently, the findings from studies two and three could identify consistencies across the support and management mechanisms reported by athletes and administrators. The findings of the two studies could also explore any differences and why these may be the case.

1.5 Delimitations

The following delimitations are provided to clarify the scope of the thesis. First, major sport events scheduled between July 2017 and November 2017 were initially chosen as the
primary data collection period due to time restrictions of the research. Between these months 46 events were identified and used as a guide to recruit athletes and organisations to participate. These events were considered appropriate and provided a suitable number of organisations and athletes for the research. Additional events including the 2018 Winter Olympic Games and the 2018 Commonwealth Games were identified, as the data collection phases were extended. The addition of the two events resulted in 48 events being identified over a data collection period of 10 months. Although this was the case, not all events are featured in the current research. For instance, the researcher contacted Australian athletes who competed at the 2017 Boxing World Championships. However, athletes who competed at the 2017 Boxing World Championships did not participate in the current research.

Second, professional sports and athletes were not directly recruited for the current research. As previously outlined earlier in this chapter, professional sports consist of leagues that allow athletes to compete throughout a designated season (Hoye et al., 2015), whereas non-professional sports such as Olympic sports are more commonly contested at standalone events. The timing of the events was a considerable factor when selecting the sample. When examining sport calendars, it was evident that the professional competitions were held more frequently. Professional sports such as rugby league and rugby union compete in regular season matches, however, the athletes involved only compete in World Cup events once every two to four years.

It should be noted that some sports included in the current research are represented at an Olympic and professional level. For example, basketball is contested in both the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, however, the sport is more widely known for professional leagues in Northern America, with Australia also hosting a professional league. Athletes competing in professional sporting leagues may also compete for their respective countries in international matches (e.g., Olympic Games) as a result of a ruling by the IOC in the 1980s.
Therefore, one athlete who participated in the current research competed in both a professional league and the Australian Commonwealth Games team. This athlete was asked to only reflect on his experience during the major sport event.

Finally, researchers have suggested that there are vast differences in the experiences of athletes competing in revenue-generating sports when compared to those in non-revenue-generating sports (David et al., 2018). Researchers have also suggested that athletes in revenue-generating sports were more often exposed to criticism which could have an impact on their experience. Therefore, it was beyond the scope of the current research to examine the differences between professional and Olympic athletes.

**1.6 Significance of the Research and Expected Contributions**

By examining athletes’ use of social media through three theoretical frameworks, the current research is expected to make a number of contributions both theoretically and practically. The research will address the gaps identified in the three frameworks and athlete social media research. First, the findings of this research will build on previous literature that has utilised U&G theory as a lens to examine why athletes use social media. Researchers have primarily utilised U&G theory to examine professional athlete social media content, with a large focus on Twitter (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010). However, scholars have called for examinations to include primary data from athletes to advance the understanding of social media gratifications (Sanderson, 2013). In addition, gathering primary data will also enhance the understanding of the challenges associated with social media use. Uncovering the challenges athletes experience using social media will assist in providing insight into the potential for failed gratifications (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) and why some athletes may choose not to use the platforms during major sport events.

Researchers have also noted that advancements in technology, and the introduction of social media platforms, have allowed users to become both consumers and producers (e.g.,
Lee & Ma, 2012; Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Further, Sanderson (2013) highlighted that much of the work integrating U&G theory and athlete social media has primarily focused on the consumption side, while work has begun to explore the production perspective. The current research contributes to U&G theory and athlete social media research efforts by providing insight from both content consumer and producer perspectives.

Next, the findings of the current research will provide further application of DCT to social media research by extending the theory to the context of major sport events. Previous research has established that social media are distracting and can impact employee productivity (e.g., Brooks, 2015). Although this is the case, few researchers have utilised DCT to examine how social media can impact athletes. Research has identified the effects social media may have on athletes and their performance (e.g., David et al., 2018; Encel et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018a). However, the three steps of DCT will enable the current research to explore the elements of social media that are distracting to athletes. By understanding the elements of social media that can distract athletes, the practices undertaken to address such distractions can be explored.

The current research will extend CPM to a major sport event context, and how social media use is managed during these times. As a result, the current research will explore whether communication privacy boundaries are extended to major sport events, and what these contain. For instance, athletes may be required to follow guidelines such as Rule 40, which are unique to certain major sport events such as the Olympic Games. Further, the current research examines the support and management mechanisms offered by NSOs through the perspectives of both athletes and sport administrators. Despite a number of studies examining privacy management between athletes and sport organisations (e.g., McAdow, Jung, Lambiase, & Bright, 2017; Sanderson, 2011), few have approached both
From a practitioner standpoint, the findings of the research will assist sport organisations in enhancing social media education resources delivered to athletes. The perspectives of athletes demonstrate what is lacking from current resources and what additional support is required to minimise the impact social media may have on athletic performance; for instance, the elements that athletes report could inform specific training to combat the areas where they experience distractions. Further, the challenges reported may lead to additional strategies beyond basic social media training. Researchers have identified negative and unwanted commentary as an area for concern (e.g., Farrington et al., 2014; Geurin, 2017). If athletes in the current research report the same issues related to negative commentary, additional psychological training may be required (e.g., mindfulness and coping mechanisms).

1.7 Structure of Thesis

The current research is presented over five chapters that are structured as follows. This introduction chapter (Chapter One) provides a background and rationale for the research, the research purpose, and research questions. The research context has also been established, and the significance highlighted. Chapter Two consists of a literature review while Chapter Three describes the research methods. Chapter Four presents the results. Finally, a discussion and conclusion are presented in Chapter Five.

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two reviews the status of the sport communication research field. The review defines social media, then examines how the accelerated adoption of social media platforms has impacted sport, sport organisations, and athletes. The potential impact social media may have on an athlete’s performance is also addressed. Three theoretical frameworks are reviewed and their application to the current research is explained.
Chapter Three details the research paradigm underpinning this thesis and justifies the research design. An overview of three individual but related studies is provided, while the participants, materials, procedures, and data analysis techniques are detailed. The chapter also discusses techniques used to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings from this thesis. Ethical considerations are also addressed.

Chapter Four presents the results of the research. Results for each of the three studies are presented separately and in chronological order. Direct quotes from participants are used to illustrate each of the themes. Results from study one are presented first, revealing eight themes related to the uses, gratifications, and challenges associated with athletes using social media during major sport events. Next, results from study two are presented, revealing 10 themes related to the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address concerns, and the support and management they receive from sport organisations. Finally, the results from study three are presented, revealing seven themes. The themes relate to the management and support mechanisms sport organisations utilise to ensure athletes use social media appropriately, and the perceived impacts of social media on athletes.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis with a discussion highlighting the contributions of this thesis. The chapter discusses the results in line with the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The theoretical and managerial implications of the research are presented. Next, the limitations of the thesis are detailed and directions for future research that address these limitations are presented. Finally, a conclusion of the current research is presented.

1.8 Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research problem as well as a justification for the research. The chapter revealed that significant contributions have been made to athlete social media research; however, there are still areas that require further exploration. The
structure of the thesis has been outlined, including an overview of each of the five chapters.

The next chapter provides an overview of the research that highlights the impact social media has had on sport, sport organisations, and athletes. First, a definition of social media is presented. Next, the impacts social media has had on sport are briefly presented, followed by an introduction and discussion of U&G theory. An in-depth review of research that has examined athlete social media use follows, including an overview of athlete social media use in the context of major sport events. Next, DCT theory is introduced and discussed. An examination of the impacts social media may have on athletes is presented. CPM theory is introduced, before a discussion of the support and management mechanisms sport organisations have implemented to assist athletes with their social media use. Lastly, the research questions and knowledge gaps are restated.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two provides a review of literature on athlete social media use, the potential drawbacks athletes may experience, and how this is managed by athletes and sport organisations. First, the chapter defines social media and introduces the impact communication platforms have had on sport. A review of literature concerning the reasons athletes use social media is presented, while the first three research questions are established. Next, the potential impacts social media have on an athlete’s performance are presented leading to an additional three research questions. How sport organisations manage athlete social media use is then explored. The final two research questions are established based on the review of social media management literature. Finally, an overview of the literature reviewed is presented and the eight research questions are restated, before an overall summary of this chapter.

2.1 Defining Social Media

Social network and media platforms have grown exponentially among users since their initial development. Statista predicts that there are 2.77 billion social network users around the world in 2019, with the number predicted to climb to 2.9 billion by 2020 (Statista, 2019a). Among those worldwide users, approximately 18 million Australians use the platforms in 2019, which is expected to grow steadily in subsequent years (Statista, 2019b). Many people are aware that social media exists, however, it is important to define social media and understand how it applies to the current research. Researchers have defined social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Moreover, Filo et al.’s (2015) review of social media and sport research extended the previous definition and applied it to the
sports domain. Filo et al. (2015) defined social media as “new media technologies facilitating interactivity and co-creation that allow for the development and sharing of user-generated content among and between organisations (e.g., teams, governing bodies, agencies and media groups) and individuals (e.g., consumers, athletes and journalists)” (p.167).

The two definitions describe social media as a platform to produce user-generated content with the latter defined specifically in a sport context. These definitions were used to guide the current research. However, the current research only focused on athletes as the social media users rather than other groups. In order to understand the impact social media has had on athletes, an overview of the implications in the sport environment is provided.

2.2 Social Media and Sport

Social media platforms have been at the forefront of recent transformations in sport communication and consumption (Abeza, O’Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Social media are constantly evolving, with platforms being accepted by many stakeholders including sport governing bodies, leagues, teams, sporting events, fans, coaches, managers, and athletes (Abeza et al., 2015; Hutchins, 2014). The influence of social media on sport has created a number of implications for these stakeholders. Social media have created a new avenue for marketing and publicity for sport organisations (Pegoraro, 2010; Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Eagleman, 2014). Having a social media presence has allowed sport organisations to have more direct contact with their fans, and increase engagement activities and experiences, which can also foster fan loyalty (Abeza, O’Reilly, & Reid, 2013; Hopwood, Skinner, & Kitchin, 2012). The platforms initially provided another avenue for sport organisations to market their products in addition to traditional marketing avenues. More recently, some sport organisations have decided to distribute news through their social media accounts rather than opting for traditional media (Sherwood, Nicholson, & Marjoribanks, 2017).
Sport event organisers have also leveraged social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) to develop loyalty and nurture relationships with fans instead of simply undertaking short-term marketing campaigns (Thompson, Martin, Gee, & Geurin, 2018). The Internet-based platforms have also altered the way sports news are disseminated. Sports journalists now compete with sport organisations and leagues to break news or report on other stories (Hull & Lewis, 2014; Schultz & Sheffer, 2010). Social media have also influenced how sport is communicated, with traditional broadcasters competing with platforms such as Twitter and Facebook as livestreaming via social media has been introduced (Hull & Lewis, 2014).

It is evident that sport organisations can use social media to their advantage to engage with fans and market their brand. For example, social media allows athletes to take more control over their image and development of their identity when compared with traditional media (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Research has also shown that the ways athletes use their social media presence can develop certain expectations among their followers (Frederick et al., 2012). For instance, fans can feel as though they are closer to athletes through interacting and developing relationships (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). Fans can also feel closer to their favourite teams, leagues, and athletes through social media by engaging with social media content (Billings, Qiao, Conlin, & Nie, 2017). As social media expands, researchers continue to explore how the platforms impact multiple sport settings in order to gather insights and understand ongoing trends (Abeza, et al., 2015). A key focus of these examinations is understanding why certain groups use social media. Researchers have utilised various theoretical underpinnings, including U&G theory, in order to understand what drives sport stakeholders to use social media.

2.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The current research utilises U&G theory; however, additional theories were
examined to consider their suitability for the current research. These theoretical frameworks included agenda-setting theory, parasocial interaction (PSI), and self-presentation theory. The following section examines the additional theories more closely, before explaining why U&G theory was chosen to underpin the current research.

Agenda-setting theory is a social science theory used in the context of news media and examines how media have the power to set public agenda and influence public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theoretical framework may be useful when examining athlete social media posts in order to understand what messages and content athletes deem most important for their followers or the public to consume. However, the current research was not focused on the perceived importance of certain messages, and/or how these were presented but, instead, on how athletes use the platforms as a whole. PSI was also considered for the current research as the framework has underpinned multiple studies examining athlete social media use, including those in sport event contexts (e.g., Frederick et al., 2012; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). PSI refers to the relationships between a media figure (e.g., athletes) and media users (e.g., fans) (Auter & Palmgreen, 2000; Horton & Wohl, 1956). However, the current research aims to encompass the various reasons athletes use social media, rather than focus on one specific relationship. Therefore, the theory was not suitable for the current research.

Lastly, self-presentation theory has underpinned numerous studies within the sport management discipline, including those that examine elite athletes and social media (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). The theory has also been used in a number of event-specific studies of athlete social media use (e.g., Hull, 2014). Self-presentation theory is linked to impression management, which is described as a process in which people attempt to control others’ impressions of them (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The terms self-presentation and impression management have been used
interchangeably in the past; however, some researchers have preferred to make a clear
distinction between the two terms. For instance, Leary and Kowalski (1990) argued that the
term self-presentation is reserved for situations where images are simply self-relevant,
whereas impression management is attempting to control images that are displayed.

Self-presentation theory appears to be a primary framework adopted by researchers
examining athlete social media (e.g., Geurin, 2017; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Smith &
Sanderson, 2015). Although this is the case, the theory was not considered a suitable
framework for the current research. Instead of trying to understand how athletes present
themselves on social media during major sport events, the current research aims to investigate
why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they
experience during a major sport event. Therefore, U&G theory was considered an appropriate
framework to meet this aim.

U&G theory assumes that users, or in this case athletes, are considered active in their
pursuit and use of certain media. Further, U&G theory posits that consumers choose media
based on their goals, and that the users are drawn to specific media and channels to satisfy
their needs and receive gratification (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Ruggiero (2000)
highlighted that “uses and gratifications has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical
approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio
and television, and now the Internet” (p. 3). Research underpinned by U&G theory reveals
that the perspectives of the media users (e.g., athletes) should be obtained in order to examine
their use of certain media (e.g., social media) and why they use it (Katz et al., 1974).
Gathering data from the media consumer (e.g., athletes) can develop an understanding of
what users gain, or what they do not gain, from their selected media (Hambrick et al., 2010;
Ruggiero, 2000).

Early research in media gratifications shared a similar approach consisting of
obtaining statements from media users in an open-ended way and a qualitative approach to analyse the information obtained (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G theory has developed over time and has created a shift within the area of mass communication research. The shift has revealed that the focus of U&G theory is no longer on media content. Instead, U&G theory directs attention towards media audiences (Perse, 2014). Ruggiero (2000) also suggested the benefits of U&G theory are derived from the theory’s focus on highlighting media users’ motives for media participation. The theory achieves this by relying on its basic assumptions and elements which are described below.

Katz et al. (1973) reviewed the basic assumptions of the U&G model and highlighted five key elements. First, as previously mentioned, the audience is presumed to be active in the U&G model. In regard to the current research the audience is classified as athletes, as they are the users of the specific media (social media). Second, the selection of media is reliant on the audience member and their need for certain gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). For instance, an athlete competing at a major sport event may want to engage with fans and provide insights on the competition. As a result, athletes would select a specific media (e.g., social media) platform that easily facilitates this through the use of images or short messages. Third, media channels contend with various other sources that are able to satisfy the needs of individuals (Katz et al., 1973). Fourth, obtaining an understanding of the goals of media use and gratification can be elicited through the audience member.

These assumptions revealed a common approach to data collection which draws on user perceptions and open-ended questioning (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of the current research, the approach to data collection would mean that data should be drawn from athletes who use social media by employing open-ended questions to gather a deeper understanding on what they gain from using it. The fifth assumption is that any judgements regarding cultural significance should be removed while audiences are explored (Katz et al., 1973).
Following these assumptions, the current research assumes that athletes are active in their use of social media based on their needs and search for gratification. The common approach to data collection also argues that athlete perceptions and first-hand accounts should be obtained in order to sufficiently understand the uses and gratifications athletes have for social media.

Although U&G theory can be beneficial when examining media use, there are some criticisms of the theory which challenge its underlying assumptions (Ruggiero, 2000). For instance, researchers have noted that U&G theory has overextended itself through the assertion that people are free to choose their media and interpretations (White, 1994). Elliott (1974) highlighted that the focus on audience consumption makes U&G theory too individualistic. Due to the criticisms, some scholars have reformed the underlying assumption that audience members were continuously active media users (Perse, 2014). Audience activity is now considered a variable in U&G theory (Perse, 2014).

Ruggiero (2000) suggested that the elements and assumptions of U&G theory allow researchers to extend media studies to new Internet applications due to the increase in choice for consumers. Examinations of new media users can also be done using the same basic principles of the theory. For instance, Internet audiences are considered active in their media selection and may select this type of media to meet their needs. Ruggiero (2000) also highlighted that U&G theory can be used to examine the unique attributes of new media. These unique attributes include multiple content types (e.g., videos, photographs, audio, and text), interactivity, and asynchronous information exchanges and retrieval (Ruggiero, 2000). The unique attribute of interactivity mentioned by Ruggiero (2000) describes the ability of users to not only consume content, but also to produce content (Ha & James, 1998). In social media it is argued that the distinction between media consumer and producer tends to overlap, which has led to the terms prosumer and prosumption being introduced (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).
The terms *prosumer* and *prosumption* describe users’ ability to take more control over the distribution and production of content in new media (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) suggested that prosumption has increasingly become central to media behaviours of various groups as consumption is no longer the only reason people seek out certain media (e.g., social media). Communication researchers have revealed that a number of gratifications can also be elicited from social media users who act as content producers in addition to being consumers (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012; Nonnecke et al., 2006). For instance, Lee and Ma (2012) suggested that social media users received gratifications in the form of information and status seeking, and socialising as a result of sharing news on their platforms.

Although not specific to athletes and their use of social media, the investigations reviewed in the previous paragraph indicate that athletes could seek certain gratifications from both consuming and producing content on their platforms. Although this is the case, it appears that many examinations of athletes’ use of social media guided by U&G theory have been conducted through a consumer lens (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010). As a result, the first two research questions were advanced:

**Research Question 1**: Why do athletes use social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 2**: What gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events?

Sport scholars have adopted U&G theory to better understand social media users and consumers. As a result, several motives for social media use have been established (Hambrick et al., 2010). These motives are discussed in further detail in the following section.

**2.4 Social Media and Athletes**

A majority of social media platforms are free or inexpensive mechanisms that allow
users to communicate instantly with large numbers of people in various locations (Whiting & Williams, 2013). For athletes, social media platforms have provided new avenues to share personal and professional news, manage their image and brand, and interact with fans at any time (Sanderson, 2011). Research has indicated that athletes are willing to put concentrated effort into improving their interactions and posts on their social media platforms (Clavio et al., 2013). Social media also provides athletes with an avenue to manage their reputation and image (Bell & Hartman, 2018). Athletes can take control of the narrative surrounding them, should they find themselves in a crisis and use strategies to repair their image (Allison, Pegoraro, Frederick, & Thompson, 2019). Strategies may include using social media to admit mistakes and seek forgiveness and understanding.

In order to understand why athletes use social media, research has examined the content athletes post. Hambrick et al. (2010) applied a set of categories to determine the content of athletes’ posts, including: (1) interactivity, (2) diversion, (3) information sharing, (4) content, (5) promotional, and (6) fanship. Examining a sample of professional athletes’ content, it was revealed that interactivity was a key motive for using social media (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Social media platforms allow athletes to develop relationships through interacting with their fans or followers (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Pegoraro, 2010). Further, Browning and Sanderson (2012) revealed that social media allows athletes to maintain contact with a range of people including friends, family if they were separated, and team mates.

However, the rapid development of social media may have implications for the motives of athletes to use the platforms. As social media develops, and new platforms are created, athlete motives may change. Although this may be the case, the personal lives of athletes appear to be a key talking point on social media and this has remained consistent over time (Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010; Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Athletes
commonly post such content and images in places related to their work (e.g., training centre) and in moments of relaxation (de Oliveira, Tertuliano, Montiel, Bartholomeu, & Machado, 2019).

Interestingly, athletes may feel pressure to make posts about their sports to create publicity. The publicity-raising activity is particularly pertinent to athletes who do not typically receive large or consistent amounts of traditional media coverage (Eagleman, 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Publicity in this form can extend to self-promotion. Athletes are drawn to social media as it provides a way to expand their influence, reputation and earning power (Cunningham & Bright, 2012; Farrington et al., 2014). Social media platforms provide a unique communication channel for marketing endorsements (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Athletes who have endorsements utilise the channel to promote brands to followers (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011). Sponsorship opportunities can also arise from having a social media presence (Geurin, 2017). Many athletes use social media platforms to build their own individual brands in order to market themselves to potential sponsors or corporate partners (David et al., 2018; Macková & Turková, 2019). Meanwhile, brands are able to distinguish themselves from others by creating an alliance with athlete endorsers (Brison, Byon, & Baker III, 2016).

However, some athletes have reported a lack of time as one key challenge associated with self-branding (Hodge & Walker, 2015). The lack of time stems from athletes focusing on their competition results. Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) suggested that performance was a primary dimension of the athlete brand model and may help explain why some athletes focus less on their social media branding. The dimension of athletic performance and expertise encompasses an athlete’s individual sports capabilities and achievements (Arai et al., 2014). However, recent research has highlighted that some athletes (e.g., women) have to rely on more than their athletic performance to build their brand (Korzynski & Paniagua, 2016;
Lobpries, Bennett, & Brison, 2018; Parris, Troilo, Bouchet, & Welty Peachey, 2014). Korzynski and Paniagua (2016) highlighted that in addition to sports performance, athletes must also actively engage with followers on social media to attract and increase contract values with brands.

In more recent years, research has examined the additional uses athletes may have for social media. For instance, researchers have investigated the role of social media in doping surveillance. Sefiha and Reichman (2017) found social media to be a powerful communication tool for athletes to criticise fellow competitors for doping scandals. In addition to providing a platform to voice opinions on sport-related issues, social media is an avenue for athletes to address and provide their own attitudes toward social issues (Yan, Pegoraro, & Watanabe, 2018). In 2015, athletes at a university in Missouri organised a protest via social media in response to racial unrest. This protest became the context for researchers to investigate the mobilisation of athlete activism. The researchers suggested that although the organisation of the protest was initiated from 20 football players’ Twitter accounts, the global reach was rather significant (Yan et al., 2018). There are numerous examples of athletes weighing in on social media, with this line of inquiry expected to continue among sport communication researchers.

It is evident that there are certain advantages to athletes having a social media presence. For instance, athletes appear to remain active on social media when they experience injuries and may not be able to compete in competitions for a certain period of time. Athletes have revealed that during their time out of competition they seek social support from their followers (Nankervis et al., 2018). However, there are a number of drawbacks that arise from having a social media presence. The accessibility that comes with having an online presence can create an avenue for fans to target athletes with racist and sexist content (Doidge, 2015). Social media enable fans to commentate on matches played during major sport events, with
much of this dialogue focusing on athletes’ success and failures (Burch, Billings, & Zimmerman, 2018). Disgruntled fans can blame or bully athletes through social media if their performance did not meet the person’s standards or expectations (Farrington, et al., 2014). Sanderson and Truax (2014) revealed a growing development whereby fans have engaged in online attacks toward college athletes after athletic competitions. These attacks manifested in four ways: (1) belittling, (2) sarcasm, (3) threats, and (4) mocking. It is suggested that mental health issues could arise if athletes are constantly victimised through online attacks (Sanderson & Truax, 2014).

Female athletes have highlighted that receiving unwanted direct messages (e.g., marriage proposals) through new media platforms was a challenge associated with maintaining an online presence (Geurin, 2017). In addition to direct messages, athletes experienced rude public messages that were initiated through comments on their posts (Geurin, 2017). Although some athletes may feel a need to respond to these types of messages, others believed that replying could aggravate the situation (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). In an examination of how student-athletes responded to criticism it was revealed that some chose to ignore or delete the person from their social media feed (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Deleting or blocking the person directing the criticism toward athletes is not always effective as new accounts are easily created (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Meanwhile, other athletes chose to retweet the comment, allowing other followers to respond and provide support.

Although student-athletes engage in these strategies when dealing with critical tweets, Kilvington and Price (2019) highlighted some sport organisations underestimate the impact social media abuse may have, and suggested that organisations need to take a more proactive approach in educating athletes on how to deal with abuse. Athletes may choose to adopt similar strategies during a major sport event which may have a larger audience, however this
requires further investigation. As previous research has demonstrated that athletes experience challenges associated with negative or unwanted commentary, few researchers have investigated whether there are additional challenges presented via social media use. As a result, a third research question is posed:

**Research Question 3:** What challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events?

In addition to examining how athletes use social media in general, researchers have investigated whether these reasons are extended to different contexts, including major sport events. A number of empirical examinations have been completed and are presented in the following section.

### 2.5 Athlete Social Media Use During Major Sport Events

Documenting and sharing the experience of participating in a major sport event has become common practice for athletes. Competing at a major sport event such as an Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, or World Championship is often the pinnacle of an athlete’s sporting career. It is plausible for athletes to use social media and post content before, during and after sport events (Hutchins, 2011). An increased emphasis has been placed on athletes to maintain a social media presence during events (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Athletes can assist in increasing the publicity of a major sport event via their social media feeds before and during the event (Carlen & Mavorsdotter, 2017). Further, athletes enjoying their event experience are likely to share content on their social media platforms, which may also provide benefits to event organisers (Prado-Gascó et al., 2017). As a result, researchers have attempted to understand how athletes have used social media during the context of sport events.

Similar to examinations outside of the major event context, these investigations have primarily been conducted through analysis of athlete social media content with a focus on a
particular platform (i.e., Twitter). The studies have also looked at different facets of social media use. For instance, developing areas include fan-athlete interaction (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010) and how athletes present themselves or manage their image during events (Hull, 2014). The events serving as the contexts of such studies have also been diverse, and include the Giro d’Italia, which is a regular major sport event on the cycling calendar, held in Italy (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), the Masters, which is an annual major golf tournament (Hull, 2014), the 2012 Paralympic Games (Pate, Hardin, & Ruihley, 2014), and the Women’s Soccer World Cup (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). The studies reveal that athletes primarily use social media to provide insights and behind the scenes content to their followers (Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

One of the first studies to examine athlete social media use in the context of sport events also identified that the platforms enhance fans’ experience of the event (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). For instance, social media allowed athletes to provide greater insights to fans during Giro d’Italia via (1) athlete perspectives and thoughts, (2) interactivity, and (3) commentary and opinion. Athletes are able to develop relationships with their followers by providing insights such as how they were recovering from the day’s ride (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Although providing insider perspectives of the event and performance aspect was a primary reason for using social media, athletes also discussed additional activities that surrounded the event (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Similar results were evident in other examinations which revealed social media are used to provide followers or fans with insights and behind the scenes content (e.g., Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014). The findings demonstrate interactivity as a primary motive for using social media both during and outside of major sport events (Hambrick et al., 2010; Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

Athletes are also able to foster interactivity during events by posting photos, videos,
blogs, or links to additional content that may have been posted elsewhere (e.g., personal website) (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Although athletes may focus on interactivity, not all interactions were planned or scripted, with some occurring spontaneously. Social media also served as an avenue to highlight issues associated with an event. For instance, athletes stressed an apparent lack of concern from the Giro d’Italia organisers in regard to safety issues and challenging areas throughout the racing course. The finding demonstrates that athletes are likely to discuss issues with the event that could present problems for event organisers. More recent research suggested athletes who enjoy their event experience are likely to share content on their social media platforms, which may also provide benefits to event organisers (Prado-Gascó et al., 2017). However, negative experiences and content posted by athletes may have the opposite effect on the image of the event.

Meanwhile, several studies have examined athlete social media content in the context of various major sport events (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014; Pate et al., 2014). As a result, researchers have identified that social media are an avenue for athletes to present themselves in a way they want to be perceived. For instance, Hull (2014) examined how professional golfers presented themselves at an annual major golf tournament. Similar to previous studies (e.g., Kassing & Sanderson, 2010), the findings revealed that golfers gave their followers glimpses into the lives of professional athletes on the tour. The remaining studies revealed that both front-stage and backstage glimpses are provided by athletes when using social media (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014; Pate et al., 2014). Front-stage performances are defined as the user being on their best behaviour and acting in a certain manner that will appease their audience. Meanwhile, backstage includes more private and informal information as the user is more relaxed. Balancing both front-stage and backstage glimpses gives followers a more holistic view of an athlete’s life (Hull, 2014). From the studies, it appears that athletes focus on interactivity, promotion, and information
Athletes appear to maintain their presentation strategies before, during, and after an event (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016) with only slight differences occurring. For instance, athletes appear to promote celebratory content after an event (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Pate et al., 2014). Small differences are evident in certain categories such as the behind-scenes-reporter (backstage) and fan aficionado (front stage) categories during competition time, suggesting that athletes would be more focused on the competition (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016). Research has also revealed that female and male athletes may have slightly different strategies when using social media during a major sport event. Pate et al. (2014) revealed promotional content related to the event itself was more common among female athletes. Similar to Browning and Sanderson (2012), athletes used social media to communicate with other people during the event, suggesting resemblances in the reasons for using social media during event and non-event times. Although these studies were not underpinned by U&G theory, the findings suggest that athletes use social media to engage with their fans and manage their image (Hayes Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014; Pate et al., 2014). However, the gratification that athletes receive from engaging with fans was not examined and provides an opportunity for further inquiry.

Although a majority of studies that have investigated athlete social media content in the context of sport events have utilised content analysis, an earlier study conducted interviews with professional Indy Car drivers to determine how they used Twitter during a major racing series and whether they had social media plans for the following season of racing (Clavio et al., 2013). Similar to other studies, athletes focused on strategies to connect with their followers through authentic information, promotion, and cross-platform integration. Although sponsorship promotion was identified in other athlete social media research (e.g., Hull, 2014), Clavio et al.’s (2013) study revealed that not all athletes were
bound by sponsorship contracts to promote endorsements on their social media platforms during the series (Clavio et al., 2013).

Sponsorship agreements and contracts may differ for each athlete and reveal different expectations. Therefore, the finding highlighted by Clavio et al. (2013) may not be applicable to other athletes and other major sport events. The IOC have taken measures to protect sponsors of the Olympic Games. Athletes who compete at any Olympic Games are bound by Rule 40 of the Olympic Charter, which provides additional guidelines athletes must follow if they are selected to compete at an IOC governed event (e.g., 2018 Winter Olympic Games). These rules are passed down through National Olympic Committees (NOCs) such as the AOC. NOCs are directed to enforce the IOC’s policy on athlete social media use (Schlereth & Frederick, 2017). The ruling restricts the advertisement and promotion of athletes’ personal and non-Olympic sponsors during the Games (Grady, 2017). This may present challenges for athletes and their sponsors when competing at Olympic-sanctioned events. However, in recent years the strictness of Rule 40 has been reduced to assist brands that rely on athletes to promote their products.

It is evident from these examinations that a key focus has been on the content that athletes posted during events. The results of these studies suggest that athletes use social media platforms primarily to inform their followers of their experiences when competing at a major sport event (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). However, Twitter has been a key focus of these studies and few studies have investigated how athletes use other platforms. The gratification athletes received when using social media during events is also unclear. For instance, as a key focus is facilitating interactions with fans it could be suggested that athletes then receive an increase in popularity which may be satisfying for some. However, what gratification athletes receive from engaging with fans has not been a focus of previous research and presents an opportunity for exploration. Therefore, the current research aims to
explore further the uses athletes have for social media, while also attempting to understand what gratification athletes receive from their social media use.

Research has also overlooked the challenges that athletes may experience when engaging in the strategies outlined previously. U&G theory suggests that users can experience failed gratifications (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). As a result, a number of challenges may be associated with athletes’ use of social media. Whether these challenges present areas of distraction for athletes is unclear and presents an opportunity for the current research to explore further. Therefore, an additional theoretical framework is needed to explore whether social media can become a distraction to athletes. The second theoretical framework is described in the following section.

2.6 Distraction-Conflict Theory

A number of sport psychology theories have been used to understand the impacts social media may have on individuals through distractions. The Profile of Mood States (POMS) is a self-report inventory system that identifies personality states that may differ in athletes with different levels of ability (Renger, 1993). The POMS framework has been used extensively in the sport psychology field with many using it to examine the performance of athletes (e.g., Beedie, Terry, & Lane, 2000). For example, the POMS questionnaire was distributed to equestrian athletes prior to competition to understand their pre-competitive mood states (Wolframm, Shearman, & Micklewright, 2010). Athlete moods may change if they receive critical content from their followers (David et al., 2018). However, as the POMS framework primarily focuses on mood states, an understanding on the effects social media has on athletes would be difficult to establish. Thus, the POMS framework was not considered suitable for the current research.

Meanwhile, attentional control theory assumes that anxiety can impair efficient functioning when it comes to goal direction (Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007).
According to Power and Dalgleish (1997), when a current goal is threatened, a person’s anxiety is increased. In the case of the current research, the athlete’s goal might be performing to their best ability at a major event; however, anxiety may be caused through social media. As the current research also aims to look more broadly at the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, another theory was considered appropriate.

DCT was developed within the social psychology field. The theoretical framework enables researchers to understand the effects distractions and interruptions may have on the performance of primary tasks (Baron, 1986; Brooks, 2015). Brooks (2015) highlighted that distractions can result in a number of negative impacts, and that it was important to determine whether social media could provide the same impacts. The DCT model can be broken down into three key phases: (1) others are distracting, (2) distractions can lead to an attentional conflict, and (3) an attentional conflict can lead to elevated drive (Baron, 1986; Brooks, 2015). This elevated drive can increase the occurrence of impaired performance (Baron, 1986; Brooks, 2015). The theory posits that the presence of others can be distracting and could lead to attentional conflict (Sanders, Baron, & Moore, 1978).

In addition to the presence of others, DCT assumes that attentional conflict can be created from both internal and external distractions in pressure settings (Baron, 1986). Pressure settings refer to when there is pressure to perform quickly and to a high standard (Baron, 1986). These internal distractions have been described as any mental activity that is not directly related to the individual’s task at hand (Baron, 1986). For instance, attentional conflict can occur when an individual feels a tendency to allocate their attention to more than one input (Baron, 1986; Sanders et al., 1978). In the context of the current research, the task at hand for athletes is preparing for their event or competition, while the distraction or attentional conflict could be thinking about checking their social media platforms for messages or other notifications (Encel et al., 2017).
When an individual is exposed to a distraction or interruption, some of the information required to process or perform the primary task efficiently may be lost (Brooks, 2015; Speier, Valacich, & Vessey, 1999). At the completion of the interruptive task a recovery period is needed before completing the original primary task at hand in order to regain the information that may have been forgotten during the time spent on the non-primary task (Brooks, 2015; Kahneman, 1973). The consequences of interruptions can result in reduced, and also impact upon, mental attention (Brooks, 2015). DCT does not always necessarily assume that distractions will cause an attentional conflict. Rather, it represents the conflict an individual may be presented with when determining how to allocate attention (Baron, 1986). For instance, an elevated drive may present positive or beneficial effects on a simple task (Baron, 1986). The current research can apply the three steps of DCT in order to understand the elements of social media that athletes perceive to be distracting. Based on the review of literature on athlete social media use it is evident that athletes utilise social media for a variety of reasons. In contrast to this well-established area of literature, less is known about the impact social media may have on an athlete’s performance during major sport events.

2.7 Social Media and Athletic Performance

The potential impacts social media may have on an athlete’s performance have been raised anecdotally in recent years with some suggesting the platforms can have a negative impact on athletes and their performance. Examples of incidents that highlight the negative impacts of social media for athletic performance have been previously outlined in the introduction chapter of this thesis.

There is a small but growing area of research investigating social media distractions on athletes. Other research has identified that athletes utilise social media to apologise for not performing their best during major sport events (Litchfield, 2018). These apologies typically
come from athletes who have had intense media scrutiny prior to a major sport event. However, there are various aspects of an athlete’s life that may cause distractions and result in lower performance levels than anticipated, with McCann (2008) suggesting that almost anything could become an issue. For instance, a study that examined what factors were perceived to influence American athletes’ performance across the 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympic Games and 1998 Nagano Winter Olympic Games revealed several important findings. The factors varied across different aspects of the athletes’ lives and included overtraining, injury, departure from normal routine, coach and team issues, lack of support, and media distractions (Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001).

Greenleaf et al.’s (2001) study revealed that traditional media constituted the media distraction, with no mention of social media. However, social media had a limited presence at the time the study was conducted. Media distractions were highlighted by athletes due to the increase in attention they were receiving in the lead up to each Olympic Games. Athletes felt obligated to create publicity for their sport by engaging in media activities. These obligations may also transfer to a social media context, whereby athletes could feel pressured to post about their sports in order to create publicity. These pressures would be more evident for sports that receive minimal mainstream media coverage (Eagleman, 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

Additional studies have investigated the impacts of media presence on athletes in high performance contexts (e.g., Kristiansen & Hanstad, 2012; Kristiansen, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2011a; Noblet & Gifford, 2002; Smith, Arnold, & Thelwell, 2018). Performance expectations of athletes are a key focus of media reporting before, during, and after a major sport event (Heaviside, Manley, Didymus, & Backhouse, 2018). In an examination of performance expectations for Olympic and Paralympic athletes ahead of the London 2012 Olympics, Heaviside et al. (2018) revealed that although reporting has typically been in traditional
media outlets (e.g., newspapers), the articles produced are being transferred to digital media spaces. Expectations are predominately based on previous performances, while speculation on why athletes may not reach such expectancies are reported. However, athletes felt that the media focus on their performance was intensified and caused stress. Further, media pressures have been linked to mental fatigue in elite athletes, which can lead to impaired performance (Russell, Jenkins, Rynne, Halson, & Kelly, 2019). Yet, whether social media engagements result in mental fatigue, with subsequent impacts on the performance of athletes is not well known.

The presence of media personnel at major sport events have caused additional stress for athletes (Kristiansen et al., 2011a). Some athletes have highlighted that the intense scrutiny placed on them was due to underperformance at previous events, which made it difficult to appropriately focus on the competition (Kristiansen et al., 2011a). As the stress levels increase during the event due to the presence of media, athletes can engage in coping strategies to minimise any impact this may have on their performance. For instance, one strategy athletes engaged in was seeking social support from team leaders and media representatives (Kristiansen et al., 2011a). Avoiding media reports related to themselves is also an option for minimising stress (Kristiansen et al., 2011a; Kristiansen, Roberts, & Sisjord, 2011b).

From these investigations, it is obvious that media presence and reporting can increase stress in athletes, particularly during major sport events. However, in addition to mainstream media, social media could also contribute to stress experienced by athletes (Rice et al., 2016). A group of researchers sought to understand the relationship between sport anxiety and social media (e.g., Encel et al., 2017). The researchers examined 298 athletes from varying levels (i.e., local, regional, state, national, and international) and found that one-third of the sample accessed Facebook during a competition, with more accessing the
platform within two hours prior to competition. Athletes were relatively quick to access social media after competing. However, the key findings highlighted that specific applications of social media, such as push notifications, can cause concentration disruptions. If an athlete’s mind consistently wanders to these notifications or the messages they receive on social media, they may experience reduced feelings of happiness (Killingsworth, & Gilbert, 2010). Further, these concentration disruptions may not be experienced by athletes when dealing with traditional media and may be unique to social media. For instance, athletes may find it easier to avoid hearing or reading certain content in the form of traditional media (Kristiansen et al., 2011a), yet it may be difficult for them to switch off their social media platforms to avoid content that could be disruptive.

Encel et al. (2017) highlighted that an athlete’s mental preparation for events may be harmed if they experience concentration disruptions before and during a competition. Athletes who experience poor mental preparation may exhibit higher states of anxiety. Although the study examined elite and non-elite athletes’ use of Facebook, the results indicate the impact social media platforms could have on performance, particularly around event times, and may be transferable to elite athletes competing at major sport events. Encel et al.’s (2017) study employed correlations, with minimal understanding of the causality between sport anxiety and social media. While there were correlations present, it is important to understand why and how athletes experience concentration disruptions and anxiety associated with social media use, revealing opportunities for additional research. Meanwhile, researchers who examined the stressors evident in Australian cricket captains’ autobiographies highlighted that social media could enhance stress as it allows for constant scrutiny to be directed to athletes (Smith et al., 2018). The changing landscape of media and social media pressures were demonstrated by cricket captains who highlighted issues with traditional media coverage and scrutiny before social media existed. However, one cricket
captain felt social media made these pressures worse and revealed his experiences were different to those who occupied the position before him (Smith et al., 2018).

Platforms such as Twitter may also have psychological impacts on athletes (David et al., 2018). The benefits of Twitter use have been recognised in previous sections of this review, however social media use may also impact performance through disruptions in the form of critical tweets. Rice et al. (2019) suggested that certain psychosocial pressures, such as social media abuse, may be unique to athletes and should be examined further. The online abuse of athletes has become a significant social problem (Kavanagh, Jones, & Sheppard-Marks, 2016; Kilvington & Price, 2017). Athletes can become the target of bullying, racial abuse, and other unwanted commentary through an online presence (Farrington et al., 2014; Geurin, 2017). Sanderson and Truax (2014) revealed that athletes are criticised by fans with messages manifesting with belittling, sarcasm, threats, and mocking. Social media may also provide an avenue for fans to direct sexist remarks toward athletes (Litchfield, Kavanagh, Osborne, & Jones, 2016; 2018). Previous research has identified that athletes receive sexual comments, physical threats, emotional ridicule (Geurin, 2017; Litchfield et al., 2016), and public shaming in response to legal, social, and sport-related norm violations (MacPherson & Kerr, 2019). Athletes could experience increased mental health issues or emotional distress if those types of messages are received frequently (Kavanagh et al., 2016; Sanderson & Truax, 2014).

Researchers have revealed that these types of negative comments may have impacts on an athlete’s performance and general wellbeing. Some athletes have revealed that they reflect on critical tweets during training, especially when they are seeking to improve aspects of their performance that were scrutinised (David et al., 2018). Further, athletes have also reported feelings of anxiousness, thinking about the potential criticisms they may receive if their upcoming performance does not meet certain expectations (David et al., 2018).
Although David et al.’s (2018) study focused on Twitter, the findings may have applications to other social media platforms that facilitate direct interactions between athletes and their followers.

In addition to the psychological impacts Twitter may have on athletes (David et al., 2018), researchers have begun to investigate how social media and electronic devices affect sleep patterns and athletic performance (Jones et al., 2018a; Jones et al., 2018b; Kölling, Duffield, Erlacher, Venter, & Halson, 2019; Taylor, Chrismas, Dascombe, Chamari, & Fowler, 2016). For instance, social media use has been associated with a fear of missing out, whereby some athletes may feel the need to constantly check the platforms to stay updated with information (Taylor et al., 2016). In their examination of late night Twitter use among NBA athletes, Jones et al. (2018a) suggested that using the platform at abnormal hours can result in poorer performance the following day. The study observed lower performance results in specific measures such as shooting percentage for those athletes that engaged in late night Twitter activity.

In contrast, Jones et al. (2018b) suggested using an electronic device up to two hours prior to a recommended sleeping time has little to no effect on an athlete’s performance. The studies may have implications for athletes competing at major sport events. For instance, social media allows athletes to document and share their experiences before, during, and after such events (Hutchins, 2011). A continuous focus on documenting experiences may lead to a lack of sleep and, as a result, facilitate lower performance levels. However, providing basic education to athletes may not be effective in combating sleep disturbance caused from prolonged use of social media. Halson (2019) revealed that many athletes engage in behaviours that impede night-time sleep including using social media among other activities (e.g., computer games and streaming services) despite the amount of education provided.

Another issue that may arise from extended smartphone and social media use is
mental fatigue. Fortes et al. (2019) concluded that approximately 30 minutes or more of smartphone application use before a competition increased athletes’ mental fatigue which led to impaired performance and decision-making during competition. Meanwhile, as little as 15 minutes of smartphone exposure appears to have minimal to no effect on mental fatigue. As social media are readily available through smartphone applications, the results could indicate that extended use of the platforms prior to competitions may result in performance impacts for athletes. Meanwhile, athletes who briefly use social media before a competition may not experience mental fatigue and impaired performance. The findings from Fortes et al. (2019) have important implications for the current research. For instance, prolonged exposure to social media applications on smartphones can lead to mental fatigue and impaired performance. Yet, if athletes are aware they are experiencing mental fatigue from their use of the applications, they could undertake practices to minimise the risk of negative outcomes.

Researchers investigating student-athletes in Australia and the pressures to perform also highlighted the impact social media may be having on younger athletes. Although social media was not the central topic of investigation, findings related to the platforms have still been presented. For instance, social media was a way for athletes to procrastinate their commitments such as studying and training (O’Neill et al., 2013). Research has suggested that social media can impact school results in education classes such as math, science, and reading (Posso, 2016). Although not an examination of athletes, the study argued that social media may have a high opportunity cost for those using the platforms (Posso, 2016). Potential opportunity costs highlighted in Posso’s (2016) study revealed that students who spend more time on social media rather than studying receive lower grades in school.

Based on the results mentioned above it could be suggested that similar opportunity costs may be transferable to athletes (Posso, 2016). For example, sport psychology research revealed that training plays a significant role in the development of expert performance which
athletes strive to achieve when competing on the world stage (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002). Therefore, there may be an opportunity cost if athletes become distracted by posting photos or videos and reading content on social media instead of directing their full attention to training and, later, competing.

Although few researchers have focused on how athletes may experience social media distractions, research outside of the sport management discipline suggests that social media are associated with addictive behaviours and could cause emotional exhaustion if not managed correctly (Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Sriwilai, & Charoenukmongkol, 2016). Researchers have acknowledged that behavioural disorders inherent with internet and social media addiction may be an area of concern in athletes (Reardon et al., 2019). However, social media platforms are not limited to athletes and the concerns for addictive behaviours extend beyond one user group. For instance, the effects social media can have on employee productivity has been an area of concern. Early indications reveal that if social media addiction is not managed correctly it can, in turn, impact a person’s or employee’s productivity (Ferreira & Du Plessis, 2009).

In contrast to the negative impacts social media may have on athletes and other social media users, researchers have highlighted that the use of the platforms may be a positive distraction. For instance, Frisby and Wanta (2018) highlighted that Internet use reduced stress among student-athletes from a North American university. Although there was no specific mention of social media, use of the Internet was suggested to provide diversions from the pressures of competitive environments. Building on findings from Frisby and Wanta (2018), a recent examination of the factors that are perceived to enhance performance in Malaysian Badminton players identified social media usage was both a positive and negative influence (Fitriana & Xin, 2019). Positive emotional impacts were elicited from using social media in free time and studying the skills of competitors. The study also demonstrated that athletes
respond differently to criticism, with some developing determination, self-motivation, and self-confidence. Comparing these findings to other research it appears that some athletes are able to overcome criticisms extending from negative commentary and use the comments as motivation, while others develop feelings of anxiousness (David et al., 2018; Fitriana & Xin, 2019).

The previous paragraphs have highlighted the potential impact that social media may have on athletes during major sport events by drawing on literature from sport and other contexts (e.g., employee productivity). Researchers have begun to examine how social media could be distracting to athletes with some key factors including negative commentary and the frequency of use which can lead to sleep disturbance (e.g., David et al., 2018; Encel et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018a). However, it is unclear which (if any) elements of social media lead to distractions during major sport events. Further, an opportunity to examine the practices athletes may utilise to address concerns about social media distractions is presented. As a result, research questions four and five were formed:

**Research Question 4:** What elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events?

**Research Question 5:** What practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events?

Wilson (2009) suggested that social media poses several risks to an organisation, including a perceived loss in employee productivity. Suggestions have also been made that organisations are concerned about a decline in productivity due to their employees spending time on social media during working hours (Aguenza, Al-Kassem, & Som, 2012). Although these studies involved employees rather than athletes, the findings may be transferable to those who consistently use social media for a variety of reasons (Pegoraro, 2010). For an athlete, productivity may refer to how well they perform during training and competition at
major sport events. Sport organisations have adopted management mechanisms in order to mitigate issues associated with athlete social media use. However, research has primarily examined the content of social media policies and athlete perceptions of social media bans during competition season (e.g., Snyder, 2014). Therefore, a sixth research question is posed:

**Research Question 6:** What support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events?

Researchers have examined these management mechanisms, primarily through the lens of CPM which has developed an understanding of how support and management mechanisms are conveyed to athletes. The following section discusses CPM and its application to social media management literature.

### 2.8 Communication Privacy Management Theory

Numerous studies have examined how sport organisations manage athlete social media use (e.g., Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Snyder, 2014) as a result of a number of issues these entities face over inappropriate use. A number of theoretical frameworks have underpinned such studies including CPM, framing, and social cognitive theory (SCT). Framing has been used in previous studies that examined how sport organisations manage athlete social media use, with a key focus on social media policies (e.g., Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, & Gramlich, 2015b). Framing is more commonly used and known within media. For instance, framing typically occurs when media outlets or organisations emphasise a certain aspect of a story in order to promote specific interpretations (Entman, 1993; Sanderson et al., 2015b). Research that utilised framing in a sport context has demonstrated that governing institutions framed social media in the hands of athletes as risky (Sanderson, 2011). However, as the current research was more interested in the perceived effectiveness of various social media management mechanisms, framing was not considered limiting.

Meanwhile, SCT creates a lens to examine how certain behaviours are developed and
acquired (Bandura, 1986). The theoretical framework posits that behaviour is a result of internal and external environments. SCT suggests that individuals adapt their behaviours based on consequences. The theory has been used to investigate how college athletes perceive social media training, however, as the theory appears to be more focused on the behaviour of the media user, an alternative approach was sought.

A key theory that has been used to understand how athlete social media use is managed is CPM theory. CPM theory (Petronio, 1991) posits that communication is a goal-oriented task. The theory “offers a privacy management system that identifies ways privacy boundaries are coordinated between and among individuals” (Petronio, 2002, p. 3). CPM theory is used to understand the ways people personally manage private information and how they manage private information in conjunction with others (Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009). Further, CPM theory allows researchers to understand any tension between and among individuals in terms of private information (Petronio, 2007). Although traditionally used for face-to-face communication, the theory has recently been extended to social media technologies (e.g., Child et al., 2009), providing an appropriate theory to underpin the current study. CPM theory has also been extensively used in previous research examining social media-related issues, particularly in intercollegiate sport research. Specifically, multiple studies examining athletic departments’ social media policies have utilised the theory (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; McAdow et al., 2017; Pulido, Yang, & Kang, 2017). As a result, the theory provides an appropriate lens to examine how NSOs manage athlete social media use.

The current research will extend CPM to a major sport event context, which has been previously overlooked by researchers. Major sport events may facilitate additional restrictions and guidelines athletes are expected to follow. There are six key propositions that underpin CPM theory (Child et al., 2009). The first proposition reveals that people believe
their information only belongs to them. For instance, athletes who use social media may view their content solely as their own, and not a reflection of their affiliated NSO. As a result, proposition two demonstrates that people also believe they should be the only person to control the flow of the information they reveal.

The third proposition reveals that people develop and use rules to protect their privacy based on what is important for them and to stay in control of the information. In terms of the current research, it may be important for NSOs to develop information boundaries to protect their reputation, which might be damaged by content posted by an athlete on their social media channels (Sanderson, 2011). Further, NSO practices might be criticised if athletes are seen to focus more on social media than their performance during a major sport event. CPM theory reveals rules can impact both individual privacy and collective privacy boundaries. Sanderson (2011) argued that it is plausible for social media policies enforced by athletic departments to regulate or restrict information that is disclosed by student-athletes in public and private domains.

The fourth proposition focuses on individuals and granting others access to their private information. Specifically, an extension of privacy boundaries occurs when an individual discloses private information to another. The information then enters into collective ownership, whereby the recipient is made a co-owner and is expected to co-own the responsibilities of managing the information (Child et al., 2009). Proposition five states that the co-owners negotiate privacy rules for how the information is disseminated to other parties. Three main types of privacy rules are forwarded by CPM (permeability, negotiations of ownership, and linkage rules). First, permeability rules allow co-owners to determine how much third-parties know about information. Second, negotiations of ownership rules are designed to determine how much control the co-owners have over the private information. For instance, athletes may be required to sign a team agreement when representing a national
team at a major sport event. The team agreement may include certain boundaries and restrictions on the content they publicly post via social media (Australian Olympic Committee, 2017). Third, linkage rules are in place to consider and manage who else can know the information.

The final proposition (proposition six) represents the possibility of boundary turbulence due to a breakdown in communication between the co-owners of information. This may be evident through athletes not following a social media policy if one is implemented. Boundary turbulence occurs when co-owners experience disruptions, violations, or unwanted mistakes when attempting to control and regulate the flow of information to third parties. In terms of the current research, NSOs may place information boundaries on athlete social media use during competition for a variety of reasons. In return, athletes may have differing opinions or be unaware that the information they post is potentially considered co-owned, causing a boundary tension.

Sanderson (2013) highlighted that CPM can provide value to sport social media research, particularly investigations examining the management of athletes’ use of the platforms. CPM has provided a theoretical framework to sport researchers who have examined athlete social media management mechanisms, primarily policies (e.g., Sanderson, 2011). Whether social media policies are extended to major sport event contexts or inclusive of additional guidelines for events is unclear. However, there are additional strategies that sport organisations use and these are discussed in the following section.

2.9 Management of Athlete Social Media Use

By being so active on social media, athletes have created a number of issues for sport organisations in terms of managing use effectively. As social media gives athletes an unfiltered way of communicating their opinions, sport organisations have striven to maintain some control over the content posted in order to minimise potential negative consequences.
Research has focused on ways that sport organisations manage athlete’s social media use to primarily minimise public relations problems that may occur and damage the reputation of the organisation.

There are countless anecdotal examples of athletes posting content on social media that was considered controversial. Although social media can be empowering, athletes using the platforms can also create tensions between the athlete and their sport organisation (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). However, social media may not be a problem for all athletes which creates a difficult task for sport organisations trying to effectively manage their use (Blohm, 2012). A strategy implemented by sport organisations to gain some control over social media use has occurred in the form of social media policies. Social media policies are suggested to be helpful in establishing boundaries for athletes (Sanderson, 2018).

Policies have become a tool in the governance of social media use in a range of industry workplaces (Guerin, 2015; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). Sport organisations have followed suit and have also adopted social media policies designed to govern how athletes use social media in certain situations (Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). For some organisations, social media policies are built into athlete contracts (Gabison, 2017) with the intention to decrease the potential negative outcomes of athletes using social media, such as an offensive photo going viral (McAdow et al., 2017). Social media policies can also protect the reputation of the sport organisation attached to the athlete. Australian NSOs and NOCs are also impacted by the IOC’s Rule 40. These rules are passed down through NOCs such as the AOC. NOCs are directed to enforce the IOC’s policy on athlete social media use (Schlereth & Frederick, 2017). The strict guidelines prevent athletes from posting any content on their social media accounts related to non-Olympic sponsors during a specified black-out period which includes the weeks of competition (Grady, 2017; Schlereth & Frederick, 2017). This can present issues for athletes and their use of social media, particularly those who rely on
extra funding generated through sponsorship.

In addition to the IOC’s rules, sport organisations have developed and implemented social media policies to minimise any potential backlash from athlete social media use. There is a growing body of literature focused on exploring the social media policies used to govern intercollegiate athletes in the USA and Canada (e.g., Blohm 2012; Sanderson & Browning, 2013). As social media are easily accessible to athletes, coaches, and other organisational officials, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) developed regulations and rules to manage and monitor use with the primary focus of protecting its image. However, in earlier years, Blohm (2012) highlighted that the NCAA were providing athletes with sanctions for inappropriate social media use, even though there was no formal policy implemented. Blohm (2012) revealed athletes were provided with sanctions based on problematic tweets which consisted of student-athletes retweeting racially and/or sexually inappropriate content that brought the sport organisation into disrepute. Although these social media policies have been a prevalent tool in social media governance in the NCAA system, research in an Australian context is lacking. Further, whether social media policies are bolstered during major sport events is unclear.

Although social media policies have been implemented to protect sport organisations, student-athletes revealed they had not received training and were unaware of social media rules outlined in policies (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Many student-athletes held assumptions that certain rules in relation to their social media use existed but were unclear of the boundaries set out by sport organisations (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). However, many athletes became aware of social media policies after a violation had occurred. Brown (2012) highlighted that some coaches have placed social media bans on athletes due to potential team distractions. Athletes have highlighted that a complete ban on social media was unacceptable (Brown, 2012; Snyder, 2014). Further, athletes have also objected to bans on
their social media use during competition seasons and expressed their dismay with these decisions (Brown, 2012; Snyder, 2014). Yet, athletes do not appear to question authority when instructed by a coach (Brown, 2012).

In an effort to ensure policies are followed, sport organisations have also turned to social media monitoring. Monitoring software allows organisations to observe the content athletes post. Meanwhile, some departments have opted to follow the personal social media accounts of athletes in order to monitor their content (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Research has also revealed that in some cases student-athletes are also obligated to connect with or follow the university’s official social media pages as part of these monitoring efforts. Although this is the case, the volume of social media content produced by numerous student-athletes can be daunting. By using software, athletic departments can flag keywords that appear in athlete social media content across their various platforms (Sanderson et al., 2015b). For instance, keywords may refer to racism, drug use, other illegal activity, and sexism. Athletic departments receive alerts from the monitoring software program that signal athletes’ posts with the keywords. Upon receiving these alerts, athletic department personnel then take the required action based on the content of the athlete’s post. (Hopkins, Hopkins, & Whelton, 2012).

Although researchers have established monitoring as a way to ensure athletes follow policy (Sanderson & Browning, 2013), the mechanism may provide sport organisations with an opportunity to determine how frequently athletes are using the platforms during major sport events, and whether or not this could become a distraction. However, there have been some criticisms of social media monitoring as it is seen as reactive rather than proactive (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Hopkins et al. (2012) revealed that restraining social media use may not be the most effective method when promoting appropriate use. Athletes have also highlighted the ineffectiveness of monitoring (Sanderson et al., 2015b). Therefore, some
sport organisations have opted for social media education to mitigate any potential negative consequences associated with an athlete’s social media use (Sanderson et al., 2015b).

Social media education has addressed the ongoing and growing presence of social media. The strategy has been adopted in college athletics in the USA to complement social media policies (Sanderson, Browning, & Schmittel, 2015a). A lack of effective new media training was highlighted by Geurin (2017), who examined female athletes’ perceptions of new media. However, Sanderson et al. (2015a) suggested that training should be aligned with the athlete social media habits and inputs as it could potentially stimulate more responsible usage. Further, social media training should illustrate both the benefits and the consequences of the content they publicise on their social media accounts (Geurin, 2017). Based on Sanderson et al.’s (2015a) and Geurin’s (2017) research, understanding the social media habits of athletes could enable Australian sport organisations to design educational programs that could be more effective. Effective education programs could also potentially minimise the risk of athletes experiencing social media distractions during major sport events. For social media training programs to be effective, athletes need to engage in them and find them beneficial and applicable to their own use of social media (Sanderson et al., 2015a). To further understand how organisations support and manage athletes’ use of social media, the following research question is posed:

**Research Question 7:** How do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events?

The previous section revealed that sport organisations recognise the impact that an athlete’s use of social media can have on their business. According to Pegoraro (2010), sport organisations respond by setting social media time limits for athletes while in competition. Further, the use of social media during games is not permitted by some coaches (Brown, 2012; Ratten, 2018). In addition to setting social media time limits during competitions, sport
organisations often take a number of approaches to managing athlete social media use in general. Early research indicated the variables that coaches believed to have influenced athlete performance (Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, & Chung, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999). Coaches believed that having plans for dealing with distractions was one variable that assisted in minimising the impact on athlete performance. As the study was conducted a number of years before social media began to permeate the sport industry, the platforms were not recognised as a potential distraction to athletes. Gould, Nalepa, and Mignano (2019) indicated that social media and mobile phone use has become a challenge for coaches. As a result, coaches have begun to emphasise setting expectations around use, particularly with younger athletes who are preoccupied with mobile phone and social media, with others enforcing a complete ban (Brown, 2012; Gould et al., 2019). However, whether coaches or other key personnel perceive social media to be a distraction or an impact on athlete’s performance during sport events is unclear. Therefore, the final research question is put forward:

**Research Question 8:** What aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events?

### 2.10 Synopsis of Research Gaps and Research Questions

The previous sections reviewed literature surrounding the athlete social media context. As a result, a number of opportunities for further research arose. This section highlights the gaps in the reviewed literature and restates the research questions. First, a large amount of literature has examined the reasons athletes use social media. This chapter reviewed the theoretical frameworks that have generated this knowledge creation. U&G theory was found to be one of the prominent theories underpinning research on athlete social media use, however, the first-hand perspectives of athletes is absent. Researchers have predominately utilised content analysis in order to understand the reasons athletes use social
media. By using content analysis, an understanding of the gratifications athletes seek is lacking. Researchers within the sport discipline have also examined athletes as content consumers, not producers nor a combination of both. Therefore, the first three research questions are:

**Research Question 1:** Why do athletes use social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 2:** What gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 3:** What challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events?

In addition to literature investigating the content of athlete social media posts, distraction appears to be a complex issue as multiple components of the platforms could be impactful and translate to performance. The review identified that research has begun to examine the effects social media may have on athletes and their performance (e.g., David et al., 2018; Encel et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2018a). In addition, continued use of social media into late hours of the night can impact athlete performances the next day (Jones et al., 2018a). Researchers have focused their attention on the impacts of Twitter and have not considered how social media as a whole could be distracting to athletes. Therefore, opportunities exist to further this line of inquiry and incorporate the perspectives of the social media user (e.g., athletes). To address these gaps an additional three research questions were forwarded:

**Research Question 4:** What elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events?

**Research Question 5:** What practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events?

**Research Question 6:** What support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events?
Lastly, it is evident that researchers have focused their attention on how athlete social media use is managed. This chapter has demonstrated that much of the research has been conducted through content analysis of social media policies in the context of intercollegiate student-athletes in North America (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). However, opportunities remain to build on this field of research, while also examining how key sport organisation personnel view social media in terms of distraction. Therefore, two additional research questions were posed:

**Research Question 7:** How do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events?

**Research Question 8:** What aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events?

### 2.12 Summary

This chapter defined social media and highlighted the effects the platforms have had on the sport industry. The chapter revealed how athletes use social media, while highlighting the potential impact this use may have on their athletic performance. Further, managing athlete social media use has become a key area for sport organisations. The review revealed a number of key gaps remain prevalent in the literature. As a result, eight research questions have been presented in line with the gaps identified in the review. By addressing these gaps, the current research is expected to contribute to three theoretical frameworks, while also presenting implications for practice.

The following chapter (Chapter Three) explains the research method utilised for the current research. Qualitative data were collected to address the research questions derived from the review of literature in this chapter. The paradigmatic framework is detailed first, followed by a description of the qualitative research design and context. Next, three individual but related studies are discussed in detail including the participants, materials,
procedures, and data analysis techniques employed. Validity, reliability, and ethical considerations are addressed.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Chapter Three describes the research paradigm, the research design, and the context that was used in the current research. Three individual studies are discussed in detail including information on the participants, materials used, the procedures undertaken, and how the data were analysed. Strategies to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings are presented. Finally, the process behind obtaining ethical clearance is described.

3.1 Research Paradigm

An interpretive constructivism paradigm was adopted for the current research. A paradigm can be described as a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world (Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 1992) with the term being traced to Kuhn’s (1970) analysis of revolutions in the science field. Paradigms dictate how investigations should be conducted and assist researchers in interpreting results in relation to a particular discipline (Sparkes, 1992). Paradigms are diverse due to the various methods and assumptions underpinning each (Bryman & Bell, 2015). For example, the positivism paradigm is geared towards experimental design whereby researchers attempt to verify their hypotheses through quantitative methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Sparkes, 1992). In contrast, constructivism researchers aim to interpret and understand the phenomenon under examination.

Due to the nature of constructivism, various terms have been used in a range of research fields including interpretive and interpretive constructivism. The paradigm aims to understand the social world through subjective experiences (Sparkes, 1992). Researchers using the interpretive paradigm strive to understand the meanings of an individual’s reality and how it is created by delving deep into their consciousness (Sparks, 1992). In order to create this understanding, research conducted within the interpretive paradigm seeks to
answer *how* and *why* questions. The paradigm was appropriate for the current research as the research sought to answer a number of *why* questions such as why do athletes use social media during major sport events? The thesis also sought to understand the phenomenon of athlete social media use from the participant’s perspective, which can be done by exploring the behaviours and emotions of participants (Tracy, 2013).

Research positioned within the interpretivist paradigm often requires the use of qualitative methods to explore participant experiences (Creswell, 2014; Edwards & Skinner, 2009). The use of qualitative methods in the current research allowed the researcher to ascertain participants’ views of certain events through in-depth exploration about their social media use. However, within the interpretive constructivism paradigm the researcher must also interpret the qualitative data collected from participants and then attempt to uncover meanings and explanations (Edwards & Skinner, 2009; Gratton & Jones, 2004).

The interpretive constructivism paradigm was considered suitable as the thesis relied on participants’ views on a number of topics. For instance, the thesis gathered data on how athletes use social media and what gratification(s) they receive when doing so, through firsthand accounts. One of the key theories utilised in the thesis (U&G theory) also emphasises the need for participants’ views to understand the phenomena (Ruggiero, 2000). The thesis also aimed to uncover the social media user’s (i.e., athletes’) perspectives on how their usage could potentially be a distraction when competing at a major event through DCT.

Although considered appropriate for the current research, there are some criticisms of the paradigm due to the reliance on the researcher’s interpretations. Criticism lies in the influence the researcher’s perspectives, beliefs, and values can have on research findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This influence can cause difficulties for the researcher attempting to conduct an objective investigation. Researchers using this paradigm should be aware of how they may influence findings and disclose anything that could be influential (Creswell &
Miller, 2000). Although the researcher can disclose their assumptions, looking at the data in new ways and from other perspectives is encouraged (Fontana, Frey, Denzin, & Lincoln, 1998). As the current research was conducted under the supervision of experienced researchers, additional interpretations of the data were gathered in peer debriefing sessions (Spall, 1998). The peer debriefing sessions consisted of extensive discussions between the researchers about the findings that were derived from each of the studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). Peer debriefing is further detailed in the validity and reliability section of this chapter (see page 85).

### 3.2 Research Design

The current research utilised an exploratory qualitative research design (Bryman & Bell, 2015). This qualitative research design was deemed appropriate as one of the primary aims of qualitative research is to investigate a phenomenon from the views of those experiencing it (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A qualitative research design allowed more in-depth data from the relevant sample groups (i.e., athletes and sport administrators) to be obtained (Tracy, 2013). Gaining in-depth data would have been difficult using quantitative or mixed method research approaches (Neuman, 2000), as qualitative studies tend to incorporate open-ended questioning techniques to derive themes and patterns (Andrew, Pedersen, & McEvoy, 2011). As a result, the research adopted a collection of qualitative methods in order to address the research questions.

Reviews of sport and social media research revealed opportunities for researchers to adopt various methods, as many researchers have utilised content analysis to examine athlete social media content in order to understand how athletes use and present themselves on their platforms (Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015). Sanderson (2017) highlighted that advances in software technology have assisted researchers in collecting social media data more expediently than through other methods such as interviews and surveys. As a result of
researchers using this advancing technology, and focusing their attention on Twitter, some have suggested the method is a way to collect “quick and dirty data” (Wenner, 2014, p.104). Therefore, this research incorporated open-ended questionnaire and interview approaches to gather data and address gaps in the literature. Study one utilised an open-ended questionnaire to answer research questions one, two, and three, while studies two and three were conducted using semi-structured interviews to address research questions four through eight. Each study’s theoretical framework, research question/s, sample, and data analysis technique are represented in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Overview of research design](image)

Each study was conducted at the conclusion of the preceding phase of data collection. Study one sought to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive,
and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. Next, study two sought to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. Lastly, study three sought to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. The study also gathered differing perspectives from those obtained in study two by understanding what support sport organisations provide to athletes in terms of minimising the potential distractors of social media.

Although the three studies were guided by different theoretical frameworks, some findings were explored further in subsequent studies. For example, the challenges identified in study one provided a background to some of the elements of social media that could present distractions to athletes. Further, the support and management mechanisms identified by athletes assisted the formation of an interview guide for study three which involved NSO administrators. However, the interview guide for study three was not solely based on the results previously identified by athlete interviews, as literature and CPM theory also supported the development of the questions posed to participants.

The researcher attempted to gather participants from the same organisations for each study to ensure consistency and a more holistic examination of the phenomenon (e.g., athletes and administrators from Swimming Australia). However, there are some variations among the sample across the studies as participants became unavailable or were unwilling to participate in further studies. Of the 53 athletes who participated in the open-ended questionnaire in study one, 24 registered their interest to partake in a follow-up interview for study two. Once interviews were scheduled, only two athletes from study one responded to the request for the interview. As a result, additional athletes were sourced for study two in order to obtain an appropriate sample and reach a saturation point. For example, an athlete
who participated in study two was from the Australian Sailing Team. However, the athlete did not participate in study one, nor did a sport administrator from his NSO participate in study three. Some organisations that participated in study three differed from those involved in studies one and two. The organisations are not named in order to ensure anonymity, which was requested during interviews in study three.

3.3 Research Context

3.3.1 Major Sport Events. The thesis sought to examine athlete social media usage during a major sport event. The research context was selected based on Emery’s (2010) definition of major events. These events are typically held every two years or, in the case of mega-events like the Olympic Games, every four years. A major sport event context was deemed appropriate as these events provide athletes with a unique competitive environment where the pressure to perform to the best of their ability is higher and more publicised (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Heaviside et al., 2018). Additionally, these types of events provide athletes with both expected and unexpected stressors that may influence their performance (Dugdale, Eklund, & Gordon, 2002) such as increased media attention (Greenleaf et al., 2001; Kristiansen et al., 2011a).

Early research highlighted many factors that can affect an athlete’s performance during major sport events such as injury, loss of confidence and negative thoughts, and expectations from self and others (Dugdale et al., 2002). Other researchers have suggested that social media use can be a cause for concern as it may result in concentration disruptions during competitions (Encel et al., 2017). Social media has also received a large amount of attention from practitioners and news media who voiced their concerns over the distracting and addictive nature of the platforms (Brooks, 2015).

A range of major sport events primarily held between July 2017 and November 2017 were identified based on Emery’s (2010) definition and used for the data collection phases
(see Appendix A for a list of events identified and targeted for the current research). The sample groups were then targeted based on these events. This period was selected to ensure an appropriate number of athletes relevant to the purpose of the study could participate. Past research has acknowledged the difficulties in accessing elite athletes for empirical research (e.g., Geurin, 2017). The difficulties appear to consist of finding a suitable number of athletes willing to take the time to partake in similar research (Geurin, 2017). Further, by targeting events over this time period, a diverse sample of athletes competing in different sports and competing at different times throughout the year were able to participate. For instance, athletes who competed at the events were also identified and approached for studies one and two, while administrators within the NSOs who had athletes competing at these major sport events were targeted for study three. As the period of data collection was extended for study two, additional events were sourced including the 2018 Winter Olympics and the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

3.3.2. Social Media Platforms. Following the definition of social media in a sport context outlined by Filo et al. (2015) in Chapter 2, four social media platforms were chosen to be presented to athletes. These platforms were demonstrative of the type of social media examined in the current research. The four social media platforms were also selected based on previous research that has examined athlete use of social media and Australian user statistics. The platforms consisted of Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. However, as the focus of this research was not to understand how athletes use each platform individually, but rather social media usage more broadly, the platforms were only presented to athletes via the open-ended questionnaire in study one. The platforms, their description, examples of previous literature, and the approximate Australian user statistics are presented below in Table 2.

*Main Social Media Platforms Included in this Research*
Table 2

*Main Social Media Platforms Included in this Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples of Previous Literature</th>
<th>Approximate Australian User Statistics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Twitter is a microblogging social networking site where users post and interact with short messages known as “tweets”.</td>
<td>Clavio, Walsh, &amp; Vooris, 2013; Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick et al. 2010; Hayes Sauder &amp; Blaszka, 2016.</td>
<td>3,000,000 (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Facebook is a social networking site that allows users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send messages, and stay connected with friends, family and colleagues.</td>
<td>Encel et al., 2017.</td>
<td>15,000,000 (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Instagram is an online photo-sharing application and social networking site.</td>
<td>Geurin-Eagleman &amp; Burch, 2016.</td>
<td>9,000,000 (monthly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>Snapchat is a mobile application that allows users to send and receive temporary photos and videos to other users known as “snaps”.</td>
<td>Billings, Qiao, Conlin, &amp; Nie, 2017.</td>
<td>4,000,000 (daily)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Australian monthly user statistics are based on data from September 2017 retrieved from SocialMediaNews.com.au. Snapchat only provide daily data indications.

### 3.4 Study One

The purpose of study one was to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. In order to gather this information an open-ended questionnaire was administered. The participants, materials, procedures, and data analysis process is explained in depth in the
subsequent sections. The open-ended questionnaire data answered the following research questions:

**Research Question 1:** Why do athletes use social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 2:** What gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events?

**Research Question 3:** What challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events?

### 3.4.1 Participants.

Australian elite athletes who competed in Summer Olympic (e.g., archery, cycling, and rowing) and Winter Olympic (e.g., skiing) sports between July and November 2017 were recruited and formed the sample for study one. Additional details regarding the recruitment of participants for study one are provided in the procedures section. An open-ended questionnaire yielded a sample of 57 usable responses. Of the 57 athletes who responded to the online questionnaire, four revealed they did not use or access their social media during the event in which they were competing. These four athletes were not included in the study as it was beyond the scope of the current research to examine the reasons athletes opt out of using social media during events. Therefore, a sample of 53 athletes was included for analysis. The lack of athletes opting not to use social media demonstrates the popularity of the platforms among athletes during major sport events, especially those recruited for this study.

Although minimal identifying information was obtained, basic demographic information was requested and revealed participants were primarily female (57.90%) and male athletes (40.35%) with one athlete not disclosing a gender (1.89%). Participants ranged between 16 to 43 years old and competed across 20 major sport events (see Table 3 for additional demographic information of participants). Athletes who competed at the Athletics World Championships represented the largest portion of the sample, while a number of
events were represented by only one participant even though attempts were made to increase the response rate for each event. Attempts to increase the response rate were made through reminder emails to NSOs and contacting athletes via their social media accounts based on publicly available event team lists.

Table 3

*Study One Participant Demographic Profile (N = 53)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>58.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>39.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to disclose</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-24</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>60.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Event</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archery World Championships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Indoor Martial Arts Games</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics World Championships</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquatic (FINA) World Championships</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beach Volleyball World Championships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canoe Sprint World Championships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hockey Oceania Cup</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Bike World Championships</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania Continental Climbing Championships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Cycling World Championships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowing World Championships</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Track Speed Skating World Cup</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squash World Doubles Championships</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trampoline Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triathlon Grand Final</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winter Games (New Zealand)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Rugby World Cup</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Roller Games</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3.4.2 Materials

The online software program Qualtrics was used to develop and distribute the open-ended questionnaire for this study. Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire which allowed firsthand experiences from athletes to be obtained. The
focus of the open-ended questionnaire was on why athletes used social media during a major sport event and the satisfaction obtained or challenges they experienced from this use (see Appendix B for full open-ended questionnaire). There are a number of benefits to using open-ended questionnaires such as allowing participants to explain their answers freely, which would be restricted with closed questions (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Further, open-ended questionnaires are useful for exploring relatively new research areas (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The use of an open-ended questionnaire allowed the participants to respond without any interference from the research group. A closed-ended survey would have also prohibited the depth required to fully understand the gratifications and challenges associated with social media use (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, & Vehovar, 2003).

Demographic information including age, gender, sport, and major sport event was obtained first. Next, participants were required to select whether they used social media during their event. As U&G theory also focuses on why certain populations do not use certain types of media (Katz et al., 1973), participants who stated they would not use social media during their event were asked why they had made this decision. Obtaining this information allowed the researcher to direct those who did not use social media during an event to the end of the questionnaire. These qualifying questions were embedded in the questionnaire to ensure each athlete met the study objectives (Gratton & Jones, 2004).

Participants who indicated they used social media during an event continued to the next question where a background of the time athletes spent on social media was obtained. Four platforms were included: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. As outlined in section 3.2.2 of this chapter, these platforms were chosen based on the focus of previous research (e.g., Encel et al., 2017; Geurin, 2017; Hambrick et al., 2010). In addition, these platforms represented the most popular sites accessed by Australian social media users. However, as social media are constantly developing, an additional item was presented to
athletes which was labelled ‘other’. Including this option allowed athletes to disclose what other platforms (if any) they were actively using in their everyday lives and during events. Gathering this information allowed the researcher to understand if athletes were replicating their everyday habits, or whether they planned to spend less or more time on social media during event times.

A series of open-ended questions were then presented to participants who specified using social media during their event. The open-ended questions were guided by gaps identified in the literature and U&G theory. First, a gap identified in athlete social media research was the lack of depth on the gratifications athletes receive through their social media use, even though it is one of the main focuses of U&G theory (Katz et al., 1973). Therefore, a broad question was posed to athletes about their intentions for using social media during their event. Several additional questions asked athletes about the satisfaction they intended to receive from using social media (e.g., what satisfaction do you intend to gain from using social media during a major sport event?). Specific questions focused on how using social media benefited athletes, what they gained from using it, and what feelings were elicited during use were posed to athletes in order to derive further information on the gratifications aspect. Participants were also asked how they would respond if they could not use social media during their event. The line of questioning highlighted any potential challenges participants encountered through their social media use. The last question asked participants if they would alter the way they used social media for future events.

3.4.3 Procedures. Ethical clearance was sought from the researcher’s institution prior to recruiting athletes. An application detailing the sampling and recruitment techniques considered was submitted to the institution’s human ethics board. Additional information regarding the ethical conduct of this research is presented in section 3.8 Ethical Considerations of this chapter. Athletes were recruited through purposeful and convenience
sampling approaches (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016), consistent with qualitative methodologies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following the advice of Creswell (2014), participants were selected in a purposeful approach in order to understand the research problem and question(s). A convenience sampling approach was required due, in part, to the location of the researcher (Etikan et al., 2016). The pragmatic constraints of accessing athletes prohibited the use of other sampling procedures (Suri, 2011). Athletes were recruited from a number of sport entities including relevant NSOs, a government-funded high performance sport institute, and the researchers’ sport college within their university. These recruitment strategies provided a limited number of respondents and, therefore, the researcher also recruited athletes through the direct messaging function of social media platforms such as Instagram. The athletes contacted via Instagram were identified from national team lists that were publicly released on the websites of sport organisations and news outlets. The researcher contacted the athletes with the link to the online questionnaire and a brief message about the project which was limited to the number of characters and words available through the direct messaging function.

The open-ended questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics. Prior to distributing the questionnaire to participants, it was pilot tested by the researcher, thesis supervisors, and several PhD students. The questionnaire was also pilot tested with high school students who were of similar age to the younger athletes (ages 16 to 17). The pilot test was conducted to ensure the wording of the questionnaire was clear, unambiguous, and understandable before being administered to the sample (Gratton & Jones, 2004). In addition to the wording, the sequencing of questions was assessed to ensure it was logical, while the estimated completion time was calculated. A number of sequencing and wording errors were identified by the pilot test and fixed before the questionnaire was distributed online to athletes.

The questionnaire was distributed online as it provided convenience to participants
who were based in various geographic locations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). The questionnaire was open between July and November 2017. Participants took approximately 8 to 12 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Reminders were sent via email to participants who began the questionnaire and entered their email address after one week of inactivity. Emails were also sent to sport organisations who had distributed the questionnaire internally. A gift card prize draw was used for this study to incentivise the cooperation of elite athletes (Singer & Ye, 2013). The gift cards on offer consisted of a first prize valuing $100 and second prize valuing $50. Upon completion of the study, a PhD candidate who was not involved in the research assisted with drawing the winners of the gift cards. Winners were then notified by email and sent their gift card via postal mail.

3.4.4 Data Analysis. Data analysis was conducted in two parts. First, descriptive and frequency analyses were used to evaluate demographic data including gender, age, and event (Selvanathan, Selvanathan, & Keller, 2014). Second, the six phases of thematic analysis were used to analyse the data obtained through the open-ended questions. Qualitative thematic analysis is a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Thematic analysis allows sport researchers to examine people’s behaviours and their views on a specific issue or phenomena (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Thus, thematic analysis has been proven an effective method in sport research (Braun et al., 2016). Thematic analysis can be used across a variety of methods, but has been most commonly applied to qualitative interviewing studies and data (Braun et al., 2016). Although the current study did not utilise qualitative interviewing, the analysis process was similar due to the open-ended questions presented to participants in the questionnaire. The six phases of thematic analysis consisted of: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
In order to become familiar with the data (phase 1), the researcher read and re-read the responses that were downloaded from Qualtrics and entered them into an Excel spreadsheet. In contrast to qualitative interviewing, the data were already written and did not need to be transcribed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses ranged from one word to 131 words in length, with numerous responses consisting of several sentences. Some responses were shorter due to the question posed. For example, one question asked whether athletes were required to promote sponsors. Therefore, those who did not have sponsors simply responded with “no” or “no sponsors”.

While familiarising herself with the data, the researcher applied U&G theory as a guiding framework and to assist in identifying interesting features of the data and the generation of initial codes (phase 2) related to the three research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses to each individual question were coded first, before combining all codes in order to see the general themes emerging across the data. Codes were colour coded using highlighters. Similar codes were highlighted using the same colour, which assisted in recognising potential themes.

Once the initial codes and potential themes were identified, they were sorted with corresponding data extracts (i.e., responses from athletes). Theme maps were used to create visual representations and assist with sorting the different codes into themes. Once the themes were finalised they were defined, before a review for any overlap was conducted (phases 3-5). While engaging in the thematic analysis phases and applying U&G theory as a framework, eight themes were identified.

The first six themes related to the uses and gratifications and consisted of communication with support networks, promotion, information gathering and sharing, connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. The remaining two themes represented the challenges athletes faced when using social media during an event and
consisted of anxiousness and balancing social media use. The results from the thematic analysis are provided in Chapter Four (phase 6). Table 4 provides the outcomes of the thematic analysis process including the themes, operational definitions, and an example quote. In addition, the themes are quantified in the same table based on how many extracts of questionnaire data related to each theme.

Table 4

*Study One Themes, Operational Definitions, Example Quotes, and Quantity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Operational Definition</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity/Extracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication with Support Networks</td>
<td>Social media providing an avenue for athletes to keep in contact with key support networks.</td>
<td>“Mainly for communication with family and friends as normal phone access is not normally available.”</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>An avenue for athletes to increase their personal profile and the profile of their sponsors during the event.</td>
<td>“I am required to promote, however it is not specified to any particular amount/time. I had planned to post every couple of days around the event.”</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Gathering and Sharing</td>
<td>The sharing and gathering of information related to the event such as competition times and information on competitors.</td>
<td>“Researching competitors in my division. To distract myself from the games’ atmosphere. Finding the schedule for competition and monitoring for changes to schedule. Checking medal count and how other sports within the team are performing.”</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectedness</td>
<td>Athletes striving to feel connected to the outside world, support networks, and the event.</td>
<td>“Together, they mostly made me feel connected to the world, up to date on the championships - other athlete’s form, teammate’s results etc. Not a lot changed from normal life use of social media or the consequences of it.”</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study one uncovered both benefits obtained and challenges experienced for athletes who use social media during major sport events. Some of the themes uncovered highlighted the potential for social media to be distracting. As a result, study two was designed to understand what elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, what practices they undertake to minimise such distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. Study two builds on study one by delving deeper into the topic of social media distractions with athletes through semi-structured interviews.

3.5 Study Two

The purpose of study two was to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support
they receive from sport organisations. In order to do so, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 elite athletes. The interview data answered the following research questions:

**Research Question 4:** What elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events?

**Research Question 5:** What practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events?

**Research Question 6:** What support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events?

### 3.5.1 Participants

A total of 15 elite athletes (N = 15) agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. The study was designed to follow-up with athletes from study one, however only two individuals participated in both studies. Pseudonyms were assigned in order to protect the identity of each athlete. The same pseudonym was used for the two individuals who participated in an open-ended questionnaire in study one and the interviews in study two (i.e., Gwen and Oscar). The remaining pseudonyms are presented in Chapter Four. All participants represented Australia at a major sport event (e.g., Olympic Games, Commonwealth Games, or World Championship) within six months prior to the interviews taking place. The sample consisted of female (n = 9) and male athletes (n = 6) who ranged in age from 18 to 34. The number of years representing Australia on the national team at major sport events also varied between athletes from one year to over 10 years. Some participants were relatively new to international competition, while others were more experienced and competing on the national team for over 10 years which included competing at three Olympic Games. Table 5 provides an overview of the participant demographics of this study.

Table 5

*Study Two Participant Demographic Profile (N = 15)*
### Demographic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>46.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years on National Team</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26.66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 3.5.2 Materials.

Prior to conducting interviews, an interview guide was developed containing a list of open-ended questions and probes (see Appendix C for the interview guide used in this study). First, demographic information was obtained from participants including age, gender, and sport. Additional information consisting of the highest level of educational attainment and the number of years participants had represented Australia at the international level was obtained. Participants were also asked the status of their sport career and whether it was paid, unpaid, or part of the government awarded scholarship.

Interview questions were based on DCT theory and gaps in the literature. As limited research has been conducted on athlete attitudes toward social media distractions, several questions were quite broad to gather a basic understanding on how athletes felt about social media as a distraction during the preparation phase of an event and during actual competition. For example, one of the first questions posed to athletes was “do you think using social media is distracting during major sport events?” Depending on their answer, athletes were also asked to elaborate further through questions such as “why do you think this?”

As DCT suggests that others can cause attentional conflict (Sanders et al., 1978), participants were asked to provide an example of whether they experienced an attentional conflict between social media and focusing on their event and whether they perceived this to impact their performance. To expand on this, athletes were asked questions about the
messages they received at events from followers (Geurin, 2017; Sanderson & Truax, 2014) and whether these messages caused attentional conflicts. Expanding on Browning and Sanderson (2012), athletes were also asked how they responded to messages or performance pressures. As previous research suggested media pressure and scrutiny is a key stressor for athletes, participants were asked whether they felt social media exacerbated this tension (Smith et al., 2018).

A second category of questions was also posed to participants. These questions focused on the support they receive from NSOs or other governing sport organisations. A broad question was posed to participants in order to gauge whether they were aware of any support made available to them to ensure they used social media effectively. Additional questions were asked dependent on participant responses. For example, if participants revealed they attended an educational session organised by their NSO or Olympic Committee, the researcher asked, “What did this session entail?” to elicit more detail about the experience.

3.5.3 Procedures. Prior to recruiting athletes for interviews, an ethical application was lodged to the researcher’s institution. The application was submitted at the same time as study one as both studies included athletes. However, ethical clearance for study two was updated once the interview questions were finalised. A more detailed discussion of the ethical information for this study can be found in section 3.8 Ethical Considerations. Athletes were recruited through purposeful and convenience sampling techniques. Similar to the same pragmatic constraints from study one (i.e., access to athletes for data collection), a convenience sampling approach was required. These constraints prohibited the use of other sampling procedures (Suri, 2011). Athletes were identified based on publicly listed team lists on event websites and NSO announcements. Those who were identified were recruited through personal email addresses provided on their websites, social media pages, and sport
networks. The open-ended questionnaire from study one also provided a platform to recruit athletes. However, only two athletes who completed the survey agreed to participate in a follow-up interview. Recruitment through social media differed from study one, as an additional feature or update of Instagram allowed the researcher to directly click on an email button on the athlete’s page. Therefore, the researcher did not have to send direct messages through the social media platform. The email consisted of a personal introduction, an overview of the research and request for interview. Emails were then sent back and forth, organising a suitable time to conduct the interviews with each athlete.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed suitable for study two as more in-depth information in relation to the participants’ viewpoints and experiences attempting to manage social media during major sport events could be collected (Turner III, 2010). The semi-structured interview approach allowed for some flexibility during interviews whereby the researcher could further pursue certain comments made by participants (Horton, Macve & Struyven, 2004). Structured interviews would have constrained this flexibility.

Two pilot interviews were conducted with athletes. These interviews were not included in the dataset. The pilot interviews identified questions that were unclear and areas where additional probes could be included to elicit better responses from athletes. Pilot interviews were conducted prior to collecting data between February and June 2018. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were conducted via telephone \((n = 10)\), Skype \((n = 4)\), and face-to-face \((n = 1)\) based on the preference and location of participants. Based on the recommendation of Gratton and Jones (2004), interviews were conducted until saturation occurred. After conducting 15 interviews, it was determined that the saturation point had been reached as no new or different data were being obtained (Gratton & Jones, 2004). Previous literature has also suggested that data saturation typically occurs within the first 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), while other research on athlete use of
new media reached data saturation with a smaller sample (i.e., Geurin, 2017). Further, similar studies have also conducted analysis on a similar sample and size. For instance, research into factors that can influence athletic performances was conducted through qualitative interviews with 15 elite athletes (e.g., Greenleaf et al., 2001). More recently, David et al. (2018) conducted seven focus group interviews examining the psychological impacts of Twitter use among athletes.

Interviews were audio recorded on a digital recording device while a mobile phone was used as a backup in case the recorder failed. Recordings were uploaded to a folder and then sent to a professional transcriber to be transcribed. One copy of each recording was kept while any on the mobile phone were deleted. Using a professional transcriber ensured the accuracy of each interview. Once transcribed, the researcher engaged in member checking with participants by providing them with a copy of their interview transcript and a summary of the key themes generated from the interview (Creswell, 2014). One participant recorded minor revisions to their transcript due to the audio being unclear at times.

Athletes were encouraged to participate in the interviews through incentives in the form of a gift card prize draw. The first gift card was valued at $100 and the second $50. Every athlete who participated in an interview was automatically entered into the draw to win one of the gift cards on offer. Upon completion of the study, a PhD candidate who was not involved in the research assisted with drawing the winners of the gift cards. The winners of each gift card were notified by email. Cards were sent via post to each winner.

3.5.4 Data Analysis. Once the transcripts had been checked and approved by participants, thematic analysis was employed to analyse interview data through six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As mentioned in the previous procedures section, interviews lasted between 20
and 45 minutes, which resulted in 149 transcript pages analysed using the thematic analysis process.

Data were analysed manually through the use of Microsoft Word documents and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The researcher read through each transcript multiple times in order to become familiar with the data (phase 1). While familiarising herself with the data, the researcher applied DCT theory as a guiding framework to identify interesting features and assist in the generation of initial codes (phase 2) related to the research questions. Data extracts were imported to an Excel spreadsheet along with each pseudonym and the initial codes. Initial coding resulted in 874 rows of data extracts transferred into the Excel spreadsheet. Once all data and their corresponding initial codes were entered into the spreadsheet, the sorting function was used to group codes together. The spreadsheet was then printed and highlighters were used to colour the initial codes. Similar codes were highlighted using the same colour which assisted in recognising potential themes.

Once the initial codes and potential themes were identified, they were sorted with corresponding data extracts (i.e., transcript extracts from athletes). Theme maps were used to assist with sorting the different codes into themes through the creation of visual representations. Once the themes were finalised they were defined, before a review for any overlap was conducted (phases 3-5). While engaging in the thematic analysis phases and applying DCT theory as a framework, 10 themes were identified.

The 10 themes identified through the thematic analysis process were: obligation to respond, susceptibility to unwanted commentary, pressures of maintaining and building a brand, competitor content, avenue for escape, need for self-awareness, switching off and handing over control, lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions, inconsistent training and education, and informal assistance. The results of the thematic analysis are presented in Chapter Four (phase 6). Table 6 provides the outcomes of the thematic analysis.
process including the themes, operational definitions, and an example quote from participants. In addition, the themes are quantified in the same table based on how many extracts of interview data related to each theme.

Table 6

*Study Two Themes, Operational Definitions, Example Quotes, and Quantity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Operational Definition</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity/Extracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Obligation to Respond</td>
<td>Athletes receiving an influx of messages and feeling compelled to reply.</td>
<td>“It’s just like sometimes you don’t have the time to reply back, and you’re like, oh maybe I should, maybe I shouldn’t sort of thing. I definitely haven’t replied to all my messages since I got them, I just don’t have time to read through all of them and do all these individual messages back, lots of stuff. But it is nice. Like it is encouraging.”</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susceptibility to Unwanted Commentary</td>
<td>Social media providing an avenue for followers to direct adverse messages to athletes.</td>
<td>“And whilst normally it doesn’t bother me, and I’m quite entertained by people trying to troll me, because I find it pretty funny, it’s not stuff that you want to read when you’re extra stressed. Just to put a doubt in your mind.”</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressures of Building and Maintaining an Athlete Brand</td>
<td>The perception that creating a brand on and through social media is time consuming and can distract athletes from focusing on the event.</td>
<td>“When they compete, they’re sort of like, torn between what I should do and what I should look like, and stuff, and between actually just competing and letting their results sort of show.”</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitor Content</td>
<td>Athletes seeing their competitors’ posts on social media and second-guessing their preparation.</td>
<td>“You can appreciate what they’re doing, but not worry about it. And that comes with practise and experience, and a bit of maturity and stuff, but for sure, for some of the younger people, it absolutely gets to them. And I know that, so</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avenue for Escape

Athletes seeking a distraction or reprieve from the sport/competition through social media during an event.

“It gives me some time to switch off and not think about it and get distracted. Sometimes distraction is actually a really good thing.”

Need for Self-Awareness

Athletes being aware of how social media effects them, discovering what works for them to minimise any impacts, and prioritising activities.

“It’s definitely individual and it does come down to what your priorities are and why you’re using the social media.”

Switching Off and Handing Over Control

Athletes switching off from their social media for a specified period of time (i.e., during competition) or handing their accounts over to someone else to manage throughout an event.

“So I found personally for me, I found it quite beneficial; what I did I deleted the apps off my phone and I had my sister running um, my social media accounts during the events.”

Lack of Distraction related Guidelines and Restrictions

Social media use being regulated by guidelines and restrictions set by national and governing bodies of sport, yet lacking guidance on how to manage distractions.

“It is presented to us at team induction. The last Olympics in Sochi 2014 we had to sign a waiver - it was like a documentation that we had to get approved, or we just signed, saying - asking that we can use our social media and phone during the games. That was only at Sochi though. In Korea, in February, we didn’t have that. So I don’t know. That was just Olympics, usually they don’t really care what you do with your phone each competition.”

Inconsistent Training and Education

Receiving some or minimal specific training on managing social media distractions.

“We just had an induction day and they get all the athletes in and we run through examples and how would you answer this, how to do that, but it’s not so much social media related, it’s all like, face to face interviews, cameras.”
Informal Assistance

Athletes seeking assistance from governing bodies (e.g., NSOs) or sport psychologists if they are struggling with their use of social media.

“If it’s something that’s really bothering people, we do also have a team psychologist that is, if it’s something that is going to affect their performance, that they confide in the psychologist, and they can give them more insight into how to deal with it a bit better.”

Study two uncovered athlete attitudes toward social media as a distraction and the potential implications for athletic performance. Study two also revealed that athletes reported receiving restrictions and inconsistent support from NSOs, yet few were related to social media distractions. As social media in the hands of athletes has created issues for NSOs, a third study was conducted in order to explore what support and management mechanisms organisations have implemented to minimise the potential distractions associated with social media for athletes.

3.6 Study Three

The purpose of study three was to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. Study three involved seven semi-structured interviews with sport administrators working within NSOs. Study three data answered the following research questions:

Research Question 7: How do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events?

Research Question 8: What aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events?

3.6.1 Participants. The focus of the study was to gather the perspectives from the appropriate point of contact within the sport organisation who manages athlete social media use and/or would be the most knowledgeable on the subject area. When approaching each
organisation, the researcher asked for the most appropriate person to participate in the interviews. A total of seven interviews were conducted with sport administrators (N = 7) (see Table 7 for an overview of participants).

Table 7

**Study Three Participant Demographic Profile (N = 7)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<td>71.43</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>25-34</td>
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<td>35-44</td>
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<td>28.57</td>
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<td><strong>Organisation Department</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media and Communications</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Performance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Job Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years in Role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University undergraduate degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University postgraduate degree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>42.86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were primarily female (n = 5), with two male (n = 2) partaking in the interviews. The ages of the participants varied between 25 and 44. Most of the participants worked in media, communications, and/or public relations roles within their organisations. The remaining three participants worked within the high performance area of their organisation. One participant, who had a job title change three months prior to interviews, however, continued to work within the same organisation department. Of the seven participants, four occupied a management position, while the remaining three worked in a coordinator role. The years within their roles varied between one month and six-and-a-half
years. Participants were working in their role for three years or less. Three participants had completed an undergraduate university degree, and three had achieved a postgraduate qualification. The organisations involved in the study are not named at the request of participants. However, the researcher can reveal that the practices of eight organisations were discussed, as one participant had recently transitioned from one NSO to another, but explained her experiences from both organisations.

3.6.2 Materials. An interview guide containing a list of open-ended questions and potential probes was developed prior to conducting interviews (see Appendix D for the interview guide used in this study). Questions were based on CPM and gaps identified in the literature. Interview questions were grouped into two categories: (1) support and management mechanisms, and (2) attitudes toward social media distractions. The first group of questions focused on what support or management mechanisms the organisations utilised and what these contained. The guide contained questions about three support and management mechanisms identified in the literature including social media policies, education, and monitoring (Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015a; Snyder, 2014). Questions were grouped by each support or management mechanism.

First, participants were asked whether their organisation had a social media policy in place. The question was generated from the literature previously reviewed in Chapter Two (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson & Kassing, 2011). Sanderson and Kassing (2011) suggested that sport organisation social media policies govern how athletes use social media in certain situations. Therefore, follow-up questions were dependent on whether the organisation had a social media policy. For example, if the participant revealed their organisation had a social media policy for athletes to follow, additional questions were asked about the perceived effectiveness of the policy, what the policy contained, and whether there had been any issues of athletes not following the policy. If there was no social media policy
in place, participants were asked if the organisation had considered implementing one and, if so, why.

Second, participants were asked about social media education and whether this was conducted within their organisation. The question was created based on suggestions from the literature that education has become a more prominent or effective management mechanism (Sanderson et al., 2015a). A number of follow-up questions were asked about social media education if organisations revealed that this was a management mechanism available for athletes. These follow-up questions included asking for clarification on what the education contained, how and how often it was delivered to athletes, and the perceived effectiveness. If there was no education program in place, participants were asked if the organisation had considered providing this to athletes and, if so why, and what it might contain.

Third, participants were questioned about social media monitoring and whether this was conducted within their organisation. As social media monitoring appears to primarily be conducted to ensure athletes do not post certain content (Sanderson & Browning, 2013), only two questions were included in the interview guide. The questions consisted of ‘do you or someone within your organization monitor your athletes’ social media accounts?’ and ‘how and why is social media monitoring conducted?’ Other questions were asked based on participant responses. If monitoring of athlete social media accounts was not conducted, participants were asked if the organisation had considered using the mechanism in the future and why.

The second group of questions focused on the administrators’ attitudes toward social media as a potential distraction for athletes during major sport events. A general question was posed to participants asking whether they perceived social media to be distracting for athletes competing at major sport events. Participants were then asked whether the organisation had experienced any specific incidences whereby an athlete was distracted by social media. There
have been numerous anecdotal examples where sport stakeholders debated whether social media is a distraction to athletes (e.g., Fynes-Clinton, 2012; Rowley, 2012). Further, Pegoraro (2010) revealed sport organisations have developed time restrictions for athletes in competitions suggesting some concern around use during important times. In order to empirically develop the understanding of Australian sport administrators’ perspectives on social media distractions, an interview question was formed in order to gauge whether social media changed the way the organisation prepares athletes for major sport events.

3.6.3 Procedures. The study was conducted using semi-structured interviews which were deemed suitable as more in-depth information could be collected (Turner III, 2010). Similar to study two, the semi-structured interview approach allowed for some flexibility in the questioning so the researcher could follow-up on certain comments made by participants (Horton et al., 2004). An ethical application was submitted to the researcher’s institution prior to the recruitment of administrators. Additional ethical information can be found in section 3.8 Ethical Considerations of this chapter. A list of Australian NSOs (Olympic and Commonwealth Games disciplines) was compiled to guide the recruitment process (see Table 8 for a list of Australian NSOs that guided recruitment). Each organisation was contacted at least twice for participation.

Table 8

List of Australian NSOs identified for Study Three

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australian National Sport Organisations (NSOs)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archery Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Biathlon Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Curling Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Fencing Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Handball Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Ice Racing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Rugby Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Hockey Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice Skating Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judo Federation of Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern Pentathlon Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Bike Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netball Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddle Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowing Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Australian Sailing  
Australian Taekwondo  
Australian Weightlifting Federation  
Badminton Australia  
Baseball Australia  
Basketball Australia  
BMX Australia  
Bowls Australia  
Boxing Australia  
Cycling Australia  
Diving Australia  
Equestrian Australia  
Football Federation Australia  
Golf Australia  
Gymnastics Australia  
Hockey Australia  
Shooting Australia  
Skate Australia  
Skateboarding Australia  
Sliding Sports Australia  
Softball Australia  
Sport Climbing Australia  
Squash Australia  
Surfing Australia  
Swimming Australia  
Synchro Australia  
Table Tennis Australia  
Tennis Australia  
Triathlon Australia  
Volleyball Australia  
Water Polo Australia  
Wrestling Australia

Note. Some NSOs govern more than one sport. For example, Sliding Sports Australia govern the sports of Bobsleigh, Skeleton, and Luge.

Once the interview guide was confirmed, participants were recruited via a purposeful and convenience approach (Etikan et al., 2016). Following the advice of Creswell (2014), participants were selected in a purposeful approach in order to understand the research problem and answer the two research questions. Study three also presented pragmatic constraints in regard to accessing participants. Therefore, the use of other sampling procedures was limited (Suri, 2011). Participants were recruited through publicly listed email addresses on NSO websites. The email contained a personal introduction, an overview of the research topic, and a request for the most appropriate person regarding the topic to ensure the interviews would gather accurate data. Recruitment was also conducted through the researcher’s university sport college which supports elite athletes studying at the institution, and a government funded sport institute. Emails were then sent back and forth organising a suitable time to arrange the interview with the sport administrator.

Interviews were conducted between July and October 2018. The interviews ran between 20 and 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted via telephone (n = 4) and face-to-face
(n = 3) based on the availability and location of participants. The number of interviews conducted were determined on whether data saturation occurred (Gratton & Jones, 2004). After conducting seven interviews it was determined that the saturation point had been reached as no new or different information was being obtained from participants.

Each interview was audio recorded on a voice recording device and mobile phone. The mobile phone recording was used as a backup in case the voice device failed during the interview. Mobile phone recordings were erased after the interview if the primary device was successful. Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber to ensure the accuracy of transcripts. Upon receiving the transcripts, the researcher engaged in member checking with the participants to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The member checking technique used in this study is described further in the validity and reliability section of this chapter. An incentive was used to encourage prospective participants to partake in an interview (Singer & Ye, 2013). A gift card prize draw with two prizes was offered. First prize resulted in a gift card worth $100, while second prize resulted in a card to the value of $50. The prizes were drawn with the assistance of a PhD candidate not involved in the research. Winners were notified by email, while gift cards were sent via post.

3.6.4 Data Analysis. Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. Interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes which resulted in a total of 69 pages of transcript data analysed using thematic analysis. Although the sample number was small, researchers have revealed that six in-depth interviews is an appropriate number to conduct thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016). Therefore, it was determined that thematic analysis was an appropriate analysis method to analyse the seven interviews that were conducted in this study. The researcher engaged in the following six phases as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report.
Data were analysed manually through the use of Microsoft Word documents and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The researcher read through each transcript multiple times in order to become familiar with the data (phase 1). While familiarising herself with the data, the researcher applied CPM theory as a guiding framework to assist the generation of initial codes and identify interesting features (phase 2) related to the research questions. Data extracts were imported to an Excel spreadsheet along with each pseudonym and the initial codes.

Initial coding resulted in 313 rows of data extracts transferred into the Excel spreadsheet. Once all data and their corresponding initial codes were entered into the spreadsheet, the sorting function of Microsoft Excel was used to group the same codes together. The spreadsheet was then printed and highlighters were used to colour the initial codes. Similar codes were highlighted using the same colour which assisted in recognising potential themes.

Once the initial codes and potential themes were identified, they were sorted with corresponding data extracts (i.e., transcript extracts from sport administrators). Theme maps were used to assist with sorting the different codes into themes through the creation of visual representations. Once the themes were finalised they were defined, before a review for any overlap was conducted (phases 3-5). By engaging in the previous phases of thematic analysis seven themes were revealed. These themes consisted of policy and guidelines, social media training, providing suggestions and assistance, monitoring athlete social media, negative commentary, loss of focus, and connection and escape. Phase six of the thematic analysis process is reported in Chapter Four. An overview of the themes, operational definitions, and an example quote are presented in Table 9. In addition, the themes are quantified in the same table based on how many extracts of questionnaire data related to each theme.
Table 9

*Study Three Themes, Operational Definitions, Example Quotes, and Quantity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Operational Definition</th>
<th>Example Quote</th>
<th>Quantity/Extracts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy and Guidelines</td>
<td>Acknowledging the importance of having social media policies and guidelines in place to primarily protect the organisation.</td>
<td>“It doesn’t say when they can use it, but it says they can’t post certain things on social media. Whether that’s derogatory towards [organisation], or inappropriate content.”</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Training</td>
<td>Acknowledging the importance of providing training to athletes on the best practices of social media use.</td>
<td>“We highlight about how other athletes in other sports have talked about it, I tend to go over this thing where I talk to them at the end of it, we say about the Nan rule of responsibility.”</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing Suggestions and Assistance</td>
<td>Providing suggestions and additional assistance to athletes experiencing challenges related to social media.</td>
<td>“We encourage them to not [use social media], as much as possible, if they’re not comfortable. Just come back from it, stay off it because that’s, for now, all we’ve got. We don’t have a better strategy to manage it presently.”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring Athlete Social Media</td>
<td>Conducting social media monitoring to ensure no breaches of the policy, and to achieve organisation-specific goals.</td>
<td>“It’s literally like using say with twitter, I’ve got just columns set up on tweet deck that will have our athletes in them and overseas athletes so I can keep across who’s posting what.”</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Commentary</td>
<td>Athletes being affected by negative comments or messages directed at them from other social media users.</td>
<td>“There’s a lot of negative things on social media. I don’t think that filling an athlete’s head with - I mean, there’s positive things on there as well, but that kind of just - and, really, it’s just - it’s garbage.”</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Focus</td>
<td>Aspects of social media interfering with sport process (e.g., sleep,</td>
<td>“I think it can be. I heard a story the other week about a [athlete] who would finish a</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
recovery). race and instead of going to the warm down pool needed to fire off a tweet immediately after the race and I was talking to a more senior person in the team who’s not on social media and was kind of saying it in a sense it was distracting from the processes.”

Connection and Escape Social media providing an avenue for athletes to stay in contact with family and escape competition pressures. “We have some athletes that like to post to social media and their coaches feel that actually them engaging with it is a good way for them to get sort of, calming down and in a way to stop overthinking their racing and overthinking their performance.”

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are important components of any research or study as they can determine the quality of the project overall and the outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The term validity focuses on whether the method used to examine the phenomenon was effective (Bryman & Bell, 2015), whereas reliability signifies the consistency of the findings (i.e., if each of the studies were conducted again the same results should be obtained) (Gratton & Jones, 2004). A number of validity and reliability techniques were adopted to improve the quality of the research conducted in this thesis.

Member checking was carried out to enhance the rigour of the study (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Validation was sought from interview participants in studies two and three through member checking techniques to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, as Seale (1999) suggested this is crucial in qualitative studies. There are a variety of member checking techniques that can assist in validating research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Having participants view the raw data (i.e., interview transcripts) and provide comments on their accuracy is one strategy. As the participants of study two
were engaged in competitions and training camps in various geographical locations (primarily Europe, Asia and the Pacific, and Americas), participants were emailed a copy of their transcript to check. Participants in studies two and three were also provided with a summary of the researcher’s initial interpretation in addition to their transcript and asked to comment on whether the researcher’s interpretation was accurate and/or realistic (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

As the thesis was underpinned by the interpretative constructivism paradigm, analysis relied heavily on the researchers’ interpretations. Therefore, peer debriefing sessions were conducted across all three studies to enhance the trustworthiness and reliability of the thesis (Spall, 1998). Morrow (2005) suggested that alternative interpretations of the data can be elicited during peer debriefing sessions. According to Spall (1998), engaging in peer debriefing sessions helps ensure that the findings of a research project and the interpretations are honest. Spall (1998) also highlighted that peer debriefing sessions should begin at the initial stages of investigations, and that any issues related to preliminary data collection and analysis be discussed. Peer debriefing sessions also included undertaking extensive discussions about the findings that were derived from the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). Those who act as the peer debriefers should have a background in the area of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Following this advice, the researcher conducted these peer debriefing sessions with the thesis supervisors, who are all experienced sport management and qualitative method researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). A peer-debriefing approach also assists in minimising bias within the thesis.

During the peer debriefing session for study one a number of questions were asked about the themes and what they entailed. As a result, some of the themes were renamed (e.g., positive reinforcement was originally summarised as support). The peer debriefing session conducted for study two also consisted of a number of questions and comments. These
comments resulted in minor amendments to three theme names and redefining two definitions to ensure they were clearer. The same process was conducted for study three whereby a number of questions were asked about the name of the themes, the definitions, and the relevant quotations. The peer debriefing session conducted for study three resulted in redefining four themes, renaming two themes, and providing clarification of some quotations.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Prior to any studies in the current research an ethics application was submitted and approved by Griffith University (GU reference number 2017/285) (see Appendix E: Ethical Clearance Letter). Throughout the duration of the research ethical standards were adhered to consistent with the Griffith University Ethical Guidelines and the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans. Information sheets were distributed to each participant prior to their participation in the research (see Appendices F to H for information sheets for each study). The ethical application included clearance to conduct the research with participants under 18 years of age. Amendments were made to the original ethical application in order to receive clearance to recruit athletes through their social media platforms. Recruitment from social media platforms was not conducted until the amendment was approved by the ethics committee.

A disclaimer was made available to participants in study one stating that proceeding past the welcome page of the online questionnaire resulted in their consent to participate in the research. However, a link to the information sheet was provided on the welcome page for participants to view. A consent form, accompanied by the information sheet, was distributed to interview participants prior to interviews being conducted in studies two and three. Interviewees were asked to read and complete the consent form prior to participating.

3.9 Summary

An overview of the methodology used for this research has been discussed.
Specifically, the research paradigm of interpretive constructivism has been presented, in addition to a justification for a qualitative research design. An overview of each of the three studies and their respective methods used in the current research have been presented. Validity, reliability, and ethical considerations have also been discussed.

The next chapter presents the results of each of the three studies. Results of study one are presented first, followed by study two. Finally, the results of study three are presented. Direct quotes from participants are used to illustrate the themes of each study that were briefly outlined in this chapter. The quotes are introduced using pseudonyms assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Chapter Four presents the results of the research conducted in this thesis. Results for each of the three individual studies detailed in Chapter Three are presented separately and in chronological order. Results from study one are presented first, revealing eight themes related to the uses, gratifications, and challenges associated with athletes using social media during major sport events. Next, the results from study two are presented revealing 10 themes that represent the elements of social media athletes perceived to be distracting, the practices undertaken to address these concerns, and the support received from sport organisations. Finally, results from study three are presented revealing seven themes related to how sport organisations manage or support athletes with their social media use during events, and their perceptions of social media as a distraction.

Direct quotes are used to illustrate each of the themes identified in each study. As suggested by Braun et al. (2016), the quotes used in this chapter were selected to provide rich examples and illustrate the themes derived from the analysis of each study. Names of athletes, sport administrators, and organisations have been removed from some quotes to ensure the anonymity of participants.

4.1 Study One: An Open-Ended Questionnaire of Athlete Social Media Use

Study one utilised qualitative data obtained from an open-ended questionnaire in order to answer the first three research questions. Specifically, study one explored the uses and gratifications athletes have for social media during major sport events, and the challenges they may face. Athletes from a range of sports participated in the study, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect participant identity (Table 10). The pseudonyms are used to introduce quotations from participants in the remaining content of this section.
Table 10

Study One Respondent Demographics (N = 53)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
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<td>35</td>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Glenn</td>
<td>Triathlon</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Mountain Bike</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Hayden</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Gloria</td>
<td>Artistic Gymnastics</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwen</td>
<td>Climbing</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Keith</td>
<td>Cross-country skiing</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Road Cycling</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Squash</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>Rowing</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Rowing</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Mackenzie</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>Synchronised Swimming</td>
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<td>Phillip</td>
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<tr>
<td>Octavia</td>
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<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Rugby</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Quinton</td>
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<td>Patricia</td>
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<td>Wade</td>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
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<td>Peta</td>
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<td>Xavier</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Cross-country skiing</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Taylor was a 17-year-old rhythmic gymnastics athlete who did not disclose a gender.

The open-ended questionnaire data revealed eight themes. The first three themes demonstrate the reasons athletes used social media during major sport events and answer
research question one, which asked: why do athletes use social media during major sport events? The themes are presented in Figure 2 before each theme is discussed in detail. The themes reveal that athletes use social media to both consume and produce content during major sport events.

**Figure 2.** Social media uses

**4.1.1 Communication with support networks.** Communication with support networks was the first social media use identified. The theme was defined as social media providing an avenue for athletes to maintain contact with key support networks. Athletes used social media to communicate with various members of their support network including family, friends, fans, and their team. Isla presented a synopsis of how she communicated with various members of her support network. Her comments demonstrated that various platforms had different uses:

My Facebook profile is purely personal and only share content with family and friends. I use it to keep in contact with friends who are coming down to watch the tournament and also friends at home who want to keep updated with results. I mainly just use it to post photos of game times and results. Instagram is my public profile which anyone can see. During Oceania Cup, I will keep my followers updated with game results/times and whatever else I find interesting on tour. Snapchat is also personal and something I use with close friends only so generally not a lot of hockey or performance stuff goes on there.

Social media appeared to provide athletes with an avenue to communicate with
friends and family while competing in overseas locations. Many described communicating with support networks and other people as their primary purpose for using social media during their event. Matilda simply described this purpose as staying “in contact with family and friends whilst being overseas”, while Xavier further elaborated that he used social media “mainly for communication with family and friends as normal phone access is not normally available. It’s a simple way of communicating your experience for anyone that might be interested and to pass on important info on the competition itself.”

Georgia revealed that her communication with her support networks also involved updates on her preparation by saying, “to keep my friends, family and followers who cannot attend the event updated with regular updates on how the event is going and how I am feeling going into competition.” Similarly, Zac revealed one of his key purposes for using social media was to “keep friends, family and fans up to date with how I’m progressing leading up to and at the competition.” In addition to communicating with friends and family, Quinton also revealed that his personal weightlifting coach did not travel with him and relied on social media to communicate while they were apart. Quinton said he used social media, “to inform family and friends how I was going, what the trip was like, etc. Also to speak to my personal coach back home and keep him updated on my progress.” Glenn revealed that his positive mentality may suffer if he could not communicate with his support networks during his event:

Would have had quite an impact as I used social media to keep in contact with my girlfriend while away as well as my family and coach. Keeping in contact with them helps me mentally so I don’t get too homesick and stay positive leading into the race.

The theme also indicates that team personnel and sport organisations have adopted social media to communicate in real-time with athletes and teams. A number of athletes used group chat platforms and social media to communicate with their coaches and teammates
about event logistics. Melissa revealed Facebook Messenger was used “to communicate with team and coaches. It is our way of scheduling and communicating while abroad and in different rooms.” Gwen exposed a similar strategy by revealing she “also used FB messenger to communicate with other athletes around logistics (organising taxis, coaches passing on info, etc.).”

4.1.2 Promotion. The second social media use identified from the open-ended questionnaire was promotion. The promotion theme was defined as an avenue for athletes to increase both their personal and sponsor profile during the event. The theme represents one of the reasons athletes produce content on social media, yet is not necessarily a reason for consumption. Promotion was evident in two ways; sponsorship promotion and self-promotion. Sponsorship promotion varied among the sample, with some athletes revealing they did not have sponsors to promote. Not all athletes who had personal sponsors were required to post promotional material during the event. For instance, Harriet revealed that she would “acknowledge them but it is up to me and there is no pressure put on me from sponsors for what I do/don’t post because I’m not dealing with major money contracts.” Octavia summarised she had “no specific requests, I was [sic] only asked to compete in sponsors footwear.” Other athletes saw the value in promoting their sponsors, even though they were contractually obligated, with Zac revealing, “[promoting sponsors] isn’t a specified thing in contract but I [sic] do it to create value for sponsor. Done by product placement – having shoes/clothes/brand logo viewable in picture/video.”

Other athletes were required to promote their sponsors in some form via their social media platforms. However, it appeared sponsors did not give athletes any specifications on how to promote their brand on their social media profiles. Instead, it was left up to the athlete to decide when and how to post. Owen said, “I am required to promote, however it is not specified to any particular amount/time. I had planned to post every couple of days around
the event.”

Although sponsors were not pressuring athletes to promote their brand during the event referenced in the open-ended questionnaire, athletes felt that there was an increased expectation to promote sponsors during larger events. For instance, it was revealed there might be more pressure to promote sponsors at an Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games, if allowed by the event governing bodies. These mega events provide a greater platform for increased exposure to a brand. Xavier was not contractually obliged to promote his sponsors. However, he revealed he was an ambassador for an upcoming mega event and explained his unique experience:

I am not required for sponsorship reasons but I am the Ambassador for [my sport] for the [major sport event]. I normally give a little bit of insight into my preparation and camp leading into the competition through social media, through Facebook and Instagram. I also do a post competition review of my performance. In any of the posts that link to my competition, in this case the AIMAG I tag the Australian Olympic Committee (as they sent the team) and Commonwealth Games Australia and most of my posts get shares through their social media platforms as well.

Of the 53 athletes who responded to the open-ended questionnaire, only 12 explicitly revealed they had requirements to promote their sponsors. These athletes revealed the strategies they used to promote their sponsors. Georgia summarised her sponsor promotion strategies:

Yes [I am required to promote sponsors], by posting daily updates whilst wearing or using sponsors product. Tagging sponsors in the photo or video and posting it on my social media channels. Using Snapchat and Instagram stories to give a bit of a behind the scenes insight on what it’s like at an event of this
Additional strategies included thanking sponsors in event recaps or the posting of results. Meanwhile, promoting personal sponsors proved difficult for Whitney. She revealed she was required to promote her sponsors; however, she was unable to do so due to a conflict with her sponsoring organisation, the AOC:

Yes I am [required to promote sponsors]. On this trip I was not able to promote my personal sponsors as the AOC and team had sponsors for the event.

However, usually I promote personal sponsors with photos on social media.

For athletes without personal sponsors, many believed social media was a way to market themselves to attract personal sponsorship. Keith revealed he would try to promote himself on social media if he performed well during the event by saying, “part of it will be to promote myself if I have a good race.” Whitney provided insight on how she would promote her personal brand by saying “to promote myself as an individual and an athlete in order to gain more sponsors in Australia by doing interviews, uploading photos, stories.”

Penelope revealed she did not have sponsors to promote, but saw an opportunity to promote herself to potential brands by saying “posting on social media about major sports events you have attended is also a great way to gain sponsorship because you are promoting yourself to the brand.” However, some athletes found that they could do more to engage with their followers and develop their profile. Harriet stated she would make changes to her social media pages to increase the level of interest in her personal profile particularly in relation to her performance at events.

It seems everyone is so good at frequently updating and living through their social pages that it’s probably something I need to continue to work on so that followers do feel the need to come to my page and not just check result websites, etc.
4.1.3 Information gathering and sharing. The third use identified from the data was information gathering and sharing. Information gathering and sharing was defined as the sharing and gathering of information related to the event such as competition times and information on competitors. Similar to the promotion theme, information sharing and gathering presents athletes in the role of both the consumer and producer. Athletes used social media to gather information related to their event. Athletes sourced information about their team and fellow competitors. Emily summarised how she used social media to source competition and event information:

I see what other athletes are doing and get insight into things. What’s happening etc. Although the team uses WhatsApp for team broadcast messages and we do see each other at meal times as we stay in the same hotel.

Xavier shared a similar synopsis of how he used social media to source competition-related information: “researching competitors in my division. To distract myself from the games’ atmosphere. Finding the schedule for competition and monitoring for changes to schedule. Checking medal count and how other sports within the team are performing.” Nate found using social media enabled him to stay up to date with social activities happening after the event. Nate said he was able to “be aware of any events during the course of the world champs (after parties).” In addition to gathering information about their event, athletes also used social media to keep up to date with current affairs outside of the event environment. Specific platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were primarily used for “looking at the news and other current trending issues” as described by Keith.

In addition to gathering information, athletes saw social media as an avenue to provide insights to followers. Athletes found social media was a quicker way to disseminate important information that followers (e.g., fans, family and friends) wanted to know. Isla revealed the convenience social media provided when disseminating information to a larger
group of people: “I was able to do one post about when the game was or how we went instead of people messaging me for information”, while Ken said he used social media “to inform people at home on the state of fitness and race schedule.” Athletes also provided their followers with information on how they prepared for the event. For instance, Nicholas revealed he used social media to provide insight into his preparation and to “inform my fans about preparation or days before the event.”

The next three themes reveal the gratifications athletes received from using social media during their selected event. The three themes answer research question two, which asked: what gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events? The three themes that answer the research question are summarised in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Social media gratifications

4.1.4 Connectedness. The first gratification derived from the open-ended questionnaire consisted of connectedness. Connectedness was defined as athletes striving to feel connected to the outside world, support networks, and the event. The theme was strongly associated with the theme of communication with support networks. Hannah highlighted that she was able to stay connected to various people, stay up to date on news throughout her event, and keep her routine somewhat consistent through the use of social media:

Together, they mostly made me feel connected to the world, up to date on the championships - other athlete’s form, teammate’s results etc. Not a lot changed from normal life use of social media or the consequences of it.

Athletes also revealed that connecting with family and friends via social media made
them feel less isolated while away from home competing at their events, particularly in their downtime. Penelope described her experience:

I enjoy remaining in contact with family and friends at home during our rest time away from competition or training. It allows me to feel less isolated from the social part of my life when I spent long periods away from home, making me feel connected.

Wade revealed that if social media was not available during his event, he would have struggled to stay connected and keep up to date with his family and friends by saying, “it would keep myself out of the loop with what was happening back home with friends and family as well as not having a form of contact with people back home to share my experience with.” When asked about the impacts not having access to social media would have on her, Quinn revealed the importance of staying connected to her support networks. She revealed that the connection to her home life was important in order to stay calm during major events by saying she “would feel disconnected from home and therefore stressed” if her access to social media was limited during her event. Further, Zane suggested that it would be difficult to keep his support network up to date if his social media use was limited by saying, “[not having access to social media] would suck because then my grandmother who is my biggest supporter would have no clue how everything went.”

Athletes also used social media as a way to develop connections with fellow competitors and feel connected to the events they were competing at. Talia highlighted that using social media made her feel more associated with the event and fellow athletes by saying, “I feel more connected to the event as I can see other athletes’ perspectives of it, and also interact with those athletes.” Quade demonstrated the ability to connect so easily with other athletes as one of the key benefits of using social media by saying, “being able to talk to people at low points during and between the competitions helped keep my mental game
running. Also getting to know other athletes, Facebook helped me find their names if I forgot them.”

4.1.5 Positive reinforcement. The second gratification derived from the data was positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement was defined as athletes receiving satisfaction from the supportive messages of followers and support networks (e.g., family and friends). Social media enabled athletes to receive supportive messages during their event. Messages of support were suggested to increase athletes’ confidence in their performances and overall satisfaction with the event as the messages were overwhelmingly positive. Quinton highlighted that using social media gave members of his support network an avenue to express their good luck messages. He revealed social media “allowed me to receive numerous kind messages of support which improved my confidence.” Yasmin also realised how much support she had simply by using social media and stated, “it makes you realise that there is a lot of support out there. So it made me feel good about what I was doing.”

Harriet revealed it was nice to receive recognition for her efforts and performances during her event. She emphasised that although she did not have a large following on social media, she still found it supportive to receive comments by saying, “I don’t have a large following so maybe that’s why I don't rely on it but I guess ‘recognition’/ support for my efforts.” Similarly, the importance of receiving supportive messages was clarified by Yvette who explained that without access to supportive messages directed to her via social media, her confidence and performance during the event would likely be impacted: “it would significantly impact my overall confidence toward the event. The support given from sponsors, friends and family through social media is very mentally stabilising.” William summarised how receiving ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ on his social media content felt like he was supported and resulted in some satisfaction:

Can make you smile when you get heaps of support/comments… My ego likes
it when I get heaps of likes etc. a lot of people don’t like to admit to themselves how much their ego loves getting likes, comments, virtual pats on the back. But I don’t go into a tournament thinking how it’s going to be an advantage. It’s a small thing and sometimes a nice satisfaction.

Talia alluded to support in an additional way. She found using social media enabled her to see other athletes’ experiences which made her feel better about her own emotions in the competitive environment: “[using social media] made me feel better about my nerves, as seeing other athletes post about their experiences made me realise that we are all the same and are all feeling the same emotions.”

4.1.6 Relaxation and escape. The third gratification derived from the data was relaxation and escape. Relaxation and escape was defined as athletes seeking an escape from their sport or the pressures associated with competing. Relaxing through using social media was heavily linked to having communication with support networks. Athletes found using social media was relaxing and beneficial for them to take their mind off the competition. Mike found social media was a tool that enabled him to relax and escape the sport pressures of the competition environment:

It only benefits me to relax myself and take my mind off my sport when I am not needed to focus on it. I don’t like to always be switched onto athletics while at championships because it mentally fatigues me.

Athletes also suggested that social media was a tool that enabled them to disconnect from the competition, especially in their downtime. Hayden said he used social media, “as a distraction and to pass the time as there are often days where not much training is required and I don’t like to spend too much time thinking about my event.” Isaac’s comments supported Hayden’s when he revealed that social media “helped distract me from the competition when away from the sitting venue.” Quinn alluded to social media being a tool
that could enhance her performance and ensure she competes to the best of her ability. She revealed, “being able to switch off during competition mode is important for me to be able to perform at my best.” Xavier elaborated on his experience using social media as an escape:

During the games there is normally a lot of down time when you’re preparing for your event so it can be a good way to cope with boredom. Sometimes it can be used as a distraction, in that if you get too warped up \textit{sic} in the atmosphere of the competition you can become overwhelmed and social media can be another outlet you can focus on for a little while.

Zara further highlighted the benefits of using social media as an escape from the highly competitive environment associated with major sport events. Zara had implemented a personal social media ban at previous events she had competed in. From this experience, she suggested that a ban could potentially lead to negative impacts on her performance in contrast with keeping her social media use consistent with their everyday use:

It made me feel much more relaxed than at other competitions where I did a social media ban and was overwhelmed with the pressures to perform and be serious and focused at training. Now, using social media I could flip that focus switch on and off whenever I wanted to…It allowed me to keep a level head, when things were getting intense in pre-comp training, I could switch that off and go back to the real world. It didn’t make the pressures or stresses go away, but it did help me view them with a more level head, knowing that it’s not the end of the world.

Meanwhile, Talia revealed that if she did not have access to social media during her event, she would have to seek alternative ways to relax or escape. Talia found social media was a tool she used in addition to other things in her everyday life that could be easily transferred to a major sport event:
I would struggle as I have a pretty short attention span during these times, and the things I would usually do at home (like painting, arts, crafts, etc.) I don’t have access to when I’m away. I would need to find something else to do that I can easily switch off to.

The open-ended questionnaire revealed an additional two themes to represent the challenges athletes faced when using social media during their event. The themes answer research question three which asked: *what challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events?* The two themes that answer the research question are summarised in Figure 4 before each is discussed in detail.

**Figure 4. Social media challenges**

4.1.7 *Anxiousness*. Athletes’ use of social media during major sport events appeared to be primarily positive. However, athletes experienced some challenges related to their social media use. Some athletes felt that using social media during their event made them feel anxious. Anxiousness was defined as athletes feeling uneasy through the content they were exposed to and posting on their social media pages. Wendy revealed that she experienced additional stress in the lead up to her event as social media allowed her to see information on her competitors. Wendy said, “it [social media] made me feel a little anxious in the lead up to competition as I didn’t want to know or see other competitor’s results which would increase the pressure on my performances.” Zoe supported Wendy’s statement regarding seeing her competitors’ posts even though she also felt relaxed by the entertainment value social media
provided. Zoe revealed, “social media can make me feel anxious as I become aware of my competitors’ feelings and training.”

Some athletes experienced concerns when deciding what to post to their profiles. For instance, Georgia found “being an athlete this is what I consider to be a part of my job, it’s a normal behaviour for me it’s quite routine. I can sometimes get anxious about choosing what photo to post.” Gwen found she felt anxious as she was comparing her content to other athletes: “I would probably give more thought beforehand to how I wanted to post, so that it was more regular throughout the event, and not just afterwards. I think that this would alleviate some anxiety around others posting.”

Meanwhile, Emily detailed her unique experience with an incident involving a fellow team member following a photo she shared on her social media profile. The incident appeared to be isolated among the sample. The incident demonstrates the impact that a photo or post could cause for an individual athlete and/or a team if not managed effectively and efficiently:

Actually - I had an incident on social media with a teammate and this really made me anxious, upset and angry. A team member asked me to remove a post because she was in it - I took this personally. She was in the background and the post wasn’t related to her. The team staff got involved but they didn’t even get us together to actually resolve it so [we] just avoided one another. Typical and solves nothing - the bad vibes continue. So even though I seek out positive and funny posts, there are downfalls and things out of your control.

Feelings of anxiousness could also be experienced after an influx of positive messages. Although receiving messages of support from followers was primarily considered positive, Ken revealed that constant encouragement may unintentionally provide athletes with more pressure. Ken found that if he could not access social media during events he might be
able to relieve the unintentional pressure.

I actually think it will impact me in a positive way, in that I’m not really worried about the outside world but rather focusing on me and my performance. There’s a little bit of pressure with social media when you post and everyone comments encouraging you on.

4.1.8 Balancing social media use. The second challenge revealed from the open-ended questionnaire was balancing an appropriate amount of social media use. This theme was defined as athletes finding it difficult to obtain a satisfying level of social media use. Holly aimed to be as consistent as possible with her behaviours in her everyday life, which included her social media use, by saying, “keep my life as normal as possible during competition. Just because I was at an event I didn’t want that to change my other behaviours.” Meanwhile, Ken found that there were both positives and negatives in the ways he used social media during his event. In doing so, he revealed the importance of maintaining a good balance:

It did help me feel a little bit more relaxed and because there wasn’t much to do or I wanted to chill out it was a good form of entertainment. However, I think it also did provide a lot of nerves, while using it most things that appear online and or people I spoke with it was about the race so couldn’t mentally switch off running even though I wanted to.

While some athletes acknowledged the importance of keeping their routines consistent, others indicated that they would minimise their use for future events. In contrast, other athletes suggested increasing the amount of content and posting would assist them to achieve their goals such as attracting sponsorship. Although athletes were able to use social media as a way to escape and relax, some found they used social media more than they originally intended to. Some of these athletes suggested they could find better alternatives to
escape and relax for future events. Talia stated, “I could use my time better i.e. by doing something a bit more productive where I can still switch off, do more mindfulness.” Other athletes revealed the importance of staying focused on themselves and not others during their competitions. As a result, some suggested they would minimise their social media use at future events. Oscar found he was able to maintain a good balance through a social media plan:

Specific timing for social media, time limits on it and making sure to stay focused on what I wanted to do on social media, things like not using it before bed, or when I first wake up, not using it 4 hours out from my race and 1 hour after my race, not using it during practice or in meetings to ensure I stayed focused on what I needed to.

Mackenzie also acknowledged that she should remain focused on herself and not others during future events. She revealed she finds it “annoying that people find it necessary to post every little detail of what they’re doing” and she “wouldn’t use social media at all. I need to focus on myself not others.” Balancing the positives and negatives of social media use were also conveyed by Quade. He found having minimal access would have made him more focused on competing, recovery, and his own teammates. Conversely, if his access to social media was limited he would struggle to meet other athletes at the event:

It would make meeting new people and making friends with other athletes harder because you might not have the opportunity to introduce yourself in person. It would also make it harder to promote yourself or share photos and tell friends about the experiences you’re having. On the other side, it might make me as an athlete focus more on the competition e.g. I may have used recovery times more effectively or been more involved with teammates and the training we did beforehand.
Wendy revealed that if she could not access social media during her event, it would make the decision not to use the sites more straightforward:

In the past at major competitions we have had our phones taken off us or internet access restricted. This is actually easier to cope with rather than personally making the choice not to use social media and try to avoid temptation when others in the team use it.

Overall, the results of study one revealed the reasons athletes use social media to produce and consume content during major sport events. The study revealed a number of challenges athletes face with their social media use. With this information uncovered, study two delved deeper to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. The results of study two are presented on the following page.
4.2 Study Two: Interviews with Athletes Regarding Distractions and Support

Mechanisms

Study two employed qualitative data collected through 15 semi-structured interviews in order to answer research questions four, five, and six. The assigned pseudonym, age, gender, and sport of each participant are presented in Table 11. These pseudonyms are used to introduce quotes related to each theme in the remainder of this section.

Table 11

Study Two Participant Demographics (N = 15)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sport</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Ski Cross</td>
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</table>

The interviews revealed 10 themes. The first five themes relate to research question four which asked: what elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events? The five themes that answer research question four are summarised in Figure 5 before each is discussed in detail.
Figure 5. Distracting elements of social media

4.2.1 Obligation to respond. The first element of social media athletes perceived to be distracting was obligation to respond. The theme was defined as athletes receiving an influx of messages and feeling compelled to reply. Athletes primarily received messages of well wishes, while a few mentioned that they received negative comments or messages during their event. The positive messages made athletes feel supported; however, some highlighted that it was difficult to respond to all messages. Matilda explained her experience:

Yeah, so I suppose that was another reason that I wanted to switch off, because it is hard, especially when people private message you, as opposed to just posting a comment. I think, if they post a comment on a post, they don’t necessarily expect a reply, but when they private message you, it’s almost like they actually expect a reply from you. That’s probably the hardest bit, I find, because I feel rude if I don’t reply, because it’s really nice that they’ve taken the time to show us their support, but some days, you know, when you’ve been competing all day and you get back and you’re having dinner late and you get back to the room, the last thing I want to do is have to do all of that and all the obligatory stuff. I feel selfish by doing that, so that was probably another reason that it was good to switch off, because if I didn’t see it on there, I couldn’t feel guilty for not replying.

In line with Matilda, Evelyn revealed her struggle with feeling as though she should
respond to good luck or supportive messages sent to her on social media:

It’s just like sometimes you don’t have the time to reply back, and you’re like, oh maybe I should, maybe I shouldn’t sort of thing. I definitely haven’t replied to all my messages since I got them, I just don’t have time to read through all of them and do all these individual messages back, lots of stuff. But it is nice. Like, it is encouraging.

For other athletes, responding to comments was considered a low priority. For example, Vanessa revealed she treated the event as work and if she did not have time to respond instantly it would not cause any stress:

I guess it’s like anything, if you are busy doing work you don’t reply to your friend’s text message right then and there, if you don’t have to, like if it’s not life threatening. It’s more of prioritise that it’s quite a low priority. It can wait, where you comp and stuff can’t wait, so therefore. It’s more based on the priority factor where it’s not do or die if you don’t reply.

She explained further by revealing at the completion of the event she decided it was time to respond to messages: “…once I had nothing on like me and my friend, we were on the bus and we were like, oh we probably should reply to some messages now.” Meanwhile, Robert explained that it was nice to receive supportive messages even though it was difficult to respond to everyone:

Yeah, if I read anyone who’s going out of their way to be nice and positive, if I’ve seen it and I get the chance to, these days I’ll like it or respond and say thank you. I feel like there’s never enough people who go out of their way to be nice, but obviously it’s hard to see everything all the time, but I try to say thanks or like it if I can.

4.2.2 Susceptibility to unwanted commentary. In contrast to responding to
supportive messages, some athletes revealed they engaged with unwanted commentary. The theme was defined as social media providing an avenue for followers to direct adverse messages to athletes. Many athletes who participated in the study disclosed they were fortunate to not receive negative or other unwanted comments from the public, but some explained they had instances where these types of comments were brought to their attention. Matilda identified instances when she received unwanted commentary from followers by saying:

They’re not really negative. It would be more like weird people sending messages. The weird messages that you get from some guys. That’s really weird. It’s not really negative, but you’re like I don’t really think you’d say that to my face.

Others explained the impacts negative comments had on them and why it could be an issue for other athletes. Warren highlighted that seeing negative comments while already stressed can make athletes have more doubts about their own abilities and performances:

Normally it doesn’t bother me, and I’m quite entertained by people trying to troll me, because I find it pretty funny, but it’s not stuff that you want to read when you’re extra stressed. Just to put a doubt in your mind…. Some people get really upset by it. But in the end, the negative comments are from random people who are keyboard warriors.

Natalie suggested that negative commentary may make some athletes feel as though they do not want to use social media anymore: “It wouldn’t be very nice to see, and might make you not want to be on social media….so it depends on how you take it.” Although she rarely received negative comments, Gwen highlighted that the adverse messages from followers can add to stress or foster undesirable emotions. She explained by saying:

If I’m already feeling down on myself for some other reason and that comment
came in, I may not as easily be able to put it aside. Also if for example I saw it just before I went out and competed versus the night before, like if it was the night before, then I would have time to kind of process it and change it into whatever I want to change it into whereas if I saw it a half an hour before I was about to climb, like that would be different.

Meanwhile, Robert explained his experiences dealing with negative commentary from other social media users. He clarified that it was not hard to find both positive and negative content about himself; however, athletes should be wary of how much time they focus on the unpleasant comments:

You can get caught up in, obviously, what people think, and what people say, nobody likes... nobody, athletes, no one likes reading things that are negative about them, but that’s part of what we do. And you have to understand that not everyone is going to like you. A lot of people have no idea who you are, are will say things about who you are as a person like they’ve been your mate your whole life. It is part of how it goes, it’s probably not fair in a way, but I think it can be a distraction if you let it get to you.

Athletes disclosed that they mostly try to ignore negative messages, while some responded to followers’ comments. In response to receiving comments, Chloe simply said “Yeah, yeah I would, or I’d just reply saying you know, cool thanks, I’m at the Games, you’re not, you don’t need to say these negative things to me.” Robert explained his experiences with responding to negative comments or criticism:

I have responded back at times, and I normally respond if somebody said something negative and then they don’t think you’ll see. Sometimes I just write back saying thanks. Often people write stuff to be rude or whatever, and when they find out it’s actually read by someone they normally backpedal and say
something nice to you. So it’s kind of funny watching people backpedal, but that’s the rare occurrence where I’m being bored, or just trying to be silly.

Victoria highlighted an incident where she saw a teammate receive some negative commentary on social media during an event. She explained that her teammate eventually responded to the criticism after letting her emotions settle:

I thought the way she handled it was really mature. She ended up writing something back and it was quite mature and succinct. I thought it was a very good answer and it could have gone very differently. I don’t know how she personally reacted to it. But what I saw online I was very impressed.

4.2.3 Pressures of building and maintaining an athlete brand. The third element of social media athletes perceived to be distracting was the pressure of building and maintaining an athlete brand. The theme was defined as the perception that creating a brand on and through social media is time consuming and can distract athletes from focusing on the event. Some athletes acknowledged they needed to do more to build their brand, but revealed it would be difficult due to time constraints. Victoria summarised her thoughts on the time consuming nature of building an athlete brand by saying, “I’m trying to get better at it to try and help build my brand a bit more, but to me it’s a lot of energy.” Sam revealed that he had received encouragement to put more effort into building his social media brand:

I don’t think anyone—it’s not impacting on that—but actually the opposite is kind of true. I have seen people who are embellishing the fact that you need to build a social media to build your active brand. There are people who are like, ‘You should be posting more regularly. You should be trying to build a following. You should be on Instagram, you should be on Facebook.’

Athletes also highlighted that it can take a lot of effort to build or maintain a brand, as described by Chloe: “I think it’s important to post and get posts going, but
like to post regularly, once a week or something like that. If you don’t, it’s not going to look like anything.” Chloe’s thoughts were echoed by Lincoln, who also found it can be time consuming to build a brand:

…the one thing is though, like when you are trying to build your brand, you know that you need to do X amount of posts per week and it is actually quite time consuming. I find that actually doing it properly does build up - does eat up quite a bit of time and you actually have to dedicate some time towards it if you are trying to do it properly.

As some athletes demonstrated that building and maintaining a brand can be time consuming, Oscar highlighted the importance of athletes balancing their branding expectations, while not letting it take over during important event times:

Yeah, in terms of managing it so that you are meeting requirements and stuff but it’s not sort of taking over your life too much. Especially when it comes to competing because it can possibly ruin your race if you’re worried about that sort of stuff too much.

Evelyn reinforced the notion of building a brand being time consuming by highlighting the difficulties of promoting a brand during an event while also trying to focus on winning a gold medal:

So when Olympics come around you kind of want to promote yourself as much as possible, and it’s hard because you want to also win gold, and that’s why you’re there, and that’s why you’re putting all the hard hours, not because you want to get an extra thousand followers or so on Instagram or Twitter.

Meanwhile, other athletes discussed how they have seen the pressures or focus on brand building affect other athletes. For example, Yvonne revealed her opinion on why athletes may feel distracted in relation to building or maintaining their brand:
Um, I feel like it would be, um, them wanting to build their profile as well as just, um, want - yeah wanting to stay in that popularity and, um, just, you know, as an athlete and then just sponsors as well because I know a few of the people that I compete against are sponsored and I feel like that does put some pressure on to, um, post things on social media.

In addition to athletes expressing their difficulty overcoming the time-consuming nature of building and maintaining their brand, some suggested athletes can become too invested in their brands rather than focusing on competing. Vanessa revealed that when it comes time to competing she has seen athletes focus too much on their social media brands by saying, “when they compete, they’re sort of like, torn between what I should do and what I should look like, and stuff, and between actually just competing and let their results sort of show.” She also revealed that some of this pressure came from the athlete’s personal managers. Warren suggested there were elements to social media use that were positive, but cautioned athletes against paying too much attention on promoting their image “…if you use it to talk and communicate with your friends, that’s fine, but if you’re there just to promote your image, and you’re relying on people’s attention to make you feel good, it’s a huge distraction.” He further elaborated:

…It can definitely be distracting, and I’ve seen a couple, I’ve seen at least one person specifically lose focus on an event and training because they put so much effort into promoting themselves and sort of trying to earn money by online stuff and advertising that it did take away from their training and their performance at the actual Olympics.

4.2.4 Competitor content. The fourth theme related to the elements of social media perceived to be distracting was competitor content. The theme was defined as some athletes who see their competitors’ posts on social media may second-guess their preparation leading
up to the event. Competitor content demonstrates how social media can affect each athlete differently, with some experiencing negative feelings toward viewing a competitors’ content, while others acknowledge that they can learn from them. Gwen detailed her experience seeing her competitors’ content on social media:

What I would say is most – I don’t know if it’s distracting but most impactful to performance is seeing other athletes’ postings on social media. So for example, one of my closest rivals trains in Brisbane and because I’m not living in Australia, I can’t access the same services that she has through the [organisation] and so she posts videos and photographs of things of the work that she’s doing with them and I’m looking at those and going – constantly second-guessing, “Oh, am I doing the right things? Should I be doing that thing that she’s doing? Oh, how do I look compared to her? Is she a bit stronger than me?” like all of that sort of stuff.

Yvonne highlighted that competitors’ content could be distracting and make athletes think about their competitors rather than focusing on themselves. She said, “for example if you saw, um, a competitor posting something you could be distracted, um, thinking about what they’re going to do rather than thinking about your race.” Warren added that competitors’ content may not affect all athletes and suggested that those with more experience understand that social media can be used as a way to worry about the competition:

You can appreciate what they’re doing, but not worry about it. And that comes with practice and experience, and a bit of maturity and stuff, but for sure, for some of the younger people, it absolutely gets to them. And I know that, so that’s why I put some stuff up… And that’s just knowing how it works, and that they [competitors] obviously put up their best stuff to 1) show it off, and 2) psych out the competitors.
Evelyn illustrated why she believes some athletes may struggle after seeing their competitors’ content on social media during an event. She highlighted that it may be natural for some to compare themselves to others:

Yeah, and I think it’s very – it’s very human to go towards negative thinking. To compare - looking at someone’s, your competitors’ posts, and think, oh, I can’t even do that. Like, why can’t I do that, maybe I’m not good enough? That just starts a domino effect, you start to feel down, and all that stuff, and it’s the biggest downfall for athletes.

Conversely, some athletes followed their competitors to see if they learned any new skills. For example, Vanessa built on Warren’s comments by revealing she enjoys seeing her competitors’ new skills and does not let it affect her performance:

I personally don’t think it gets caught up in my head. I would just say ‘Oh, that’s cool’, like they’re doing this. I’m more concerned of like what they’re doing actually within that to make them jump that, rather than like or either whatever they’re doing to throw that far, like watch their technique and stuff rather than actually like ‘Oh wow, they’re jumping that’.

Victoria revealed she did not pay too much attention to her competitors’ content and that she tended to skip over them when scrolling through her account feeds. She said:

For me, it doesn’t really bother me too much. I don’t take too much into it. I generally just skip over it. It depends what they are doing in the photo, or something. I don’t tend to read what is written, I just click on a photo, or something. Yeah, I would say I give about 10% of interest.

4.2.5 Avenue for escape. The final element of social media athletes perceived as distracting was the avenue for escape the platforms provided. Athletes revealed that social media provided an escape from the pressures of events, indicating that not all social media
distractions are negative. The theme was defined as athletes seeking a distraction or reprieve from the sport/competition through social media during an event. The theme appeared to resonate with the finding in study one whereby athletes suggested they used social media to relax and escape the pressures of the competitive environment.

Victoria summarised her feelings toward using social media as an escape by saying, “It gives me some time to switch off and not think about it and get distracted. Sometimes distraction is actually a really good thing.” Vincent echoed the same sentiment shared by Victoria in saying, “I think it can be a positive escape if you look at it that way, manage it correctly. But if you don’t, and you sort of let it go, then there can definitely be some negative impact.” Meanwhile, Evelyn elaborated further on using social media as an escape:

I think, social media, I think it can be used as a distraction. So it’s sort of like focusing on one thing for so long, you can take away your focus onto something else which may be just on your phone, checking up with your friends, family, Instagram photos and stuff for a brief few minutes, and then coming back to what you need to do.

Chloe shared the same thoughts of the athletes mentioned above by saying, “I think it’s a good distraction when you want it to be, and you can kind of escape to other people because you know, you’re - we travel and compete with the same teams.” Meanwhile, Natalie highlighted that social media was used to alleviate boredom: “I mean, I guess. It’s more like, just to pass time. You know how you just sit there scrolling your phone and it’s like a, you know, I’m bored activity.” The notion of searching for a distraction was further illustrated by Gwen:

Um, so during events – I’m actually not on social media a lot during events. Um, I’m usually really focused on my performance and any time that I review social media would more be from a perspective of kind of wanting to be a bit
distracted and like see what other people not in competition are doing, like, “Oh, what’s my friend’s kid doing today?” or, you know, so I’m not actually thinking about the competition.

Gabriella revealed she has specifically used social media for a distraction during an event. She explained that using the platforms was a way to distract her from the nerves associated with an upcoming match by saying:

I think there are times where I’ve used social media as a distraction. For example, if it was the day of the game and we didn’t play until the night time, and it was an important match. I think in order to not think about the match and the nerves, I would use social media a lot to distract myself from that. We have a saying, "Don’t play the game in your head before the actual game". A lot of girls can do that, because you can get really nervous about stuff. So I think a lot of us do actually turn to social media to not do that in your own head. So I think I’ve used social media as a distraction, like on purpose, rather than it subconsciously distracting me.

Sam revealed that he has used social media to calm his nerves before a competition by saying, “personally, I don’t think it’s a distraction. I actually think the opposite. I have actually used social media to kind of calm my nerves down before like a big match.”

In addition to the five themes discussed in this section, the interviews revealed an additional two themes related to research question five which asked: what practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events? The two themes are summarised in Figure 6 before being presented in more detail in the following sections.
4.2.6 Need for self-awareness. The first theme related to the practices athletes undertake to address social media concerns was the need for self-awareness. The theme was defined as athletes being aware of how social media affects them, discovering what works for them to minimise any impacts, and prioritising activities. Athletes appeared to be aware of the pitfalls of social media in terms of their preparation and performance during major sport events and as a result suggested they would only do what works for them personally. Gwen described her experience with social media distractions by revealing she can recognise when her use may be affecting her preparation or performance and make the necessary changes:

In terms of the impact that it can have, yeah, it is definitely impactful and it requires a level of, um, self-awareness to know that that’s happening, um, self-regulation to know how to deal with it and then self-discipline to, you know, when it is actually affecting my performance or my preparation, choosing not to engage in that way, maybe shutting off social media altogether or whatever. Um, I think if I was constantly thinking about, um, taking photographs and videos for social media, then yes, it could be very distracting. Um, I’ve chosen or I’ve been sheltered from having to do that so far but that may change.

Other athletes supported the notions forwarded by Gwen by revealing the importance of finding what works individually. Victoria explained:

I think in retrospect you can always have a clear vision, but when you’re in it, I
think that you don’t know that you’re in it. Having an idea about how to indicate, how to teach people to indicate that, that would be an interesting side of it. I think until you think back, “I didn’t perform as well, why was that? I was probably distracted at the time.” Sometimes not thinking about the event is really good, but having that self-awareness of it…

Robert explained that he is a frequent user of social media, but manages to not get caught up in the things people say about him online. He also suggested that social media can be dangerous for athletes who live their life based on other people’s opinions:

I think if people get caught up in all the stuff that goes on, and things people say, and all of that, and that’s the world they live in, then they’re probably living a very dangerous life. I don’t think that’s the way you want to live your life. As much as I’m a very social media person, I like looking at it, I like being on it, stuff like that, but I don’t get too caught up in it.

Matilda presented a similar thought process to Robert by saying, “It’s just finding that balance and making sure that you don’t get sucked into the negative side of it too much and use it for the positive.” Meanwhile, Sam revealed he did not have many issues with social media in terms of distraction but suggested others athletes experiment and find what works for them:

But I think a lot of it is, you know, just experimenting, seeing what works for you, yeah. I found that—because if you don’t need to relax maybe it’s better for you to drop the phone and try to be more focused. But if sometimes people are too testy, you know—maybe it’s better to relax a bit, go on social media, and just go through it a bit. But, I guess that it is not for everyone.

Warren highlighted that some athletes may have developed a habit of using social media so much that it has become their routine. He highlighted the importance of not
changing routines before major sport events:

…if you take that away from people, you actually change their routine. And that’s not what you want leading into events. So there’s pluses and minuses on both sides…The least you’re exposed to the better. But if that’s what you normally do and you’re used to it, that’s your comfort zone and you want to be in that all the time. So it’s tricky.

Many athletes were also aware that they would need to prioritise certain activities (e.g., recovery) before using social media to post photos or respond to messages. Chloe simply explained that athletes should know what their priorities are and when they can go on social media by saying, “You’ve got to, you know set your priorities and go on it when you should be on it, and not on it when you shouldn’t be on it.” When talking about prioritising activities Oscar revealed:

I obviously do recovery first and all that sort of thing and it’s kind of the last thing when I’m just sitting around after the hype sort of dies down and then I go have a look. It’s not like I’m rushing to get on to it or anything like that.

Another important point was raised by Robert, who suggested athletes tend to prioritise their social media popularity over other aspects of their life. He summarised the importance for athletes to distinguish between their life and other people’s perception of them by saying, “Somebody who’s living their life based on what people have said, and likes, and things on social media, I think they probably need to revaluate their life.”

Meanwhile, Sam and Evelyn highlighted that prolonged exposure to social media on a small screen could affect their reaction time when training and competing and that it is important to be aware of how long they are using it. Sam explained:

I don’t really see an impact on my performance from using social media. The only exception is if I go a really extended long hour, in which case—but that’s
not just on social media, it’s just on anything. You know when you’re just staring at a screen for a long time, everything is just kind of fuzzy. You get a bit disorientated.

Evelyn revealed that she minimises her screen time, and the social media use inherent to screen time, to prevent any negative outcomes on her skills. She said it was important to stay away from her phone for extended periods of time to maximise her output:

That’s what I find personally is that if I see my phone for too long, then it’s like everything’s a bit slower to process everything… I think it’s just the narrow screen. It’s just yeah, its narrow screen, so looking at one little thing for so long, it messes with your - like your eye focus, your brain like perception skills and everything... it will impact on your hand eye coordination how you perceive things and how you react. I notice just in myself, so I try and stay away from my phone as much as possible when I’m in the training sessions. Just so I can get maximal output.

4.2.7 Switching off and handing over control. The second theme related to the fifth research question was switching off and handing over control, which was defined as athletes switching off from their social media for a specified period of time (i.e., during competition) or handing their accounts over to someone else to manage throughout an event. A number of athletes revealed that they either switched off by disabling notifications or removing certain apps from their mobile phones. Other athletes handed control over to someone they trusted (e.g., a family member) to manage their social media accounts for the duration of their event. Matilda explained her experience of switching off at the time of her event:

I switched off from it, from the opening ceremony, but up until that point, I was posting things and it was really good to get the feedback from people back home and just in the general bowls community and the sports community that were
wishing us all the best for the Games. So, for me, in the preparation phase, I found that a really good motivator, because it was really nice to get the comments of support leading up to it, and all the well-wishes.

Natalie suggested that social media can impact each athlete differently, but revealed she deleted some of her social media apps before the competition by saying, “I guess it’s how you use it, but I use a social media lockout for I think four days. As soon as I started training, I deleted Facebook and then, when I was on Twitter, I’d just scroll the feed.” She also said that looking at social media after a disappointing performance would bring her mood down by adding “because it will probably just enforce what’s happened and bring your mood down a little, so I guess you want to just focus on changing things, not on the past.” Vincent suggested a way to minimise the time spent on social media by saying, “You know, you just sort of try and you know - when you’re training, you leave it in your bag, or switch it off until you come back to it yeah, keeps it off you.”

Yvonne was another athlete who switched off from social media and revealed her reasons by saying, “…just turn off social media altogether until after I’ve finished competing just because I know that if I saw that it would probably distract me so I’d just try and shut it down.” Meanwhile, Chloe said that turning off her notifications allowed her to miss seeing her friends organising an event to watch her compete during the Olympics. She said that if she saw the messages and knew her friends were watching she would have felt more nervous and added pressure:

So for my second race, I - as I said, I didn’t check my notifications. After I competed, I read through all my notifications, and there were a few from my friends, like a bunch of my friends got together to watch the race, and I didn’t know they were all doing that, so I didn’t realise that everyone I knew was all watching the race. I think if I knew that beforehand I would have been way more
under pressure, because so many eyes on me. So glad I didn’t see that beforehand, because I would have gotten way more nervous with that.

Other athletes handed over control of their social media accounts to someone else they trusted (e.g., family members). For instance, Lincoln realised that some of the things he was seeing on his social media platforms were affecting his mood and possibly impacting his performance. He then made the choice to hand over his accounts to his sister to manage. Lincoln said, “So I found personally for me, I found it quite beneficial; what I did I deleted the apps off my phone and I had my sister running um, my social media accounts during the events.” He also added, “What I do during events is, so if I shut down my all my apps I use. WhatsApp is the way that I contact with the people that I want to contact.” Warren also handed over his Twitter account to his brother to minimise the negative content he could view and explained his decision:

I did change it a little bit, I... my brother has access to my Twitter account, and Twitter is an interesting one, because that’s where the real trolls come out. And whilst normally it doesn’t bother me, and I’m quite entertained by people trying to troll me, because I find it pretty funny, it’s not stuff that you want to read when you’re extra stressed. Just to put a doubt in your mind. So I gave... I had Twitter, but I didn’t really look at it. I actually deleted it off my phone, just so I couldn’t access the app.

In addition to athletes’ own practices for addressing social media distractions, the interviews revealed that they receive support from sport organisations. The support available to athletes manifested in three ways and these are summarised in Figure 7 before being presented in depth. The three themes answer research question six, which asked: *what support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events?*
Support and management mechanisms (athletes’ perspective)

4.2.8 Lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions. The first theme, lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions, is associated to the support athletes receive from sport organisations. The theme was defined as social media use being regulated by guidelines and restrictions set by national and governing bodies of sport, yet lacking guidance on how to manage distractions. Athletes revealed they were aware of Rule 40 implemented by the IOC restricting when or what they could post during Olympic events. However, these restrictions were not related to managing distractions. Natalie detailed her experience with Rule 40: “when I post about my sponsors in the Olympics – I don’t know if you – there’s a – Rule 40, I’m pretty sure. So, we’re not allowed to post any sponsors in that time.” Warren further described his experience of Rule 40:

So the rule for the Olympics is you’re actually not allowed to post up any sponsor stuff during this blackout period leading into the Games and through the Games. You’re not allowed to promote any sponsors, which is annoying for some of us who want to do that, because it’s the only time that we get sort of recognised. But we have this blackout period where we’re not allowed to promote anything. But you can still use your accounts.

Vincent highlighted the restrictions Rule 40 placed on athlete social media behaviours while referencing the blackout period:

Just a little bit, we’re limited in social media in terms of what we can post, because of sponsors, especially at the Games, that’s what I’m talking about.
Because we can’t promote sponsors outside of the Olympic Committee. So that is something, and some athletes do a blackout period because of it, because they don’t want to focus on - like attention towards it coming in.

Other athletes were unsure of what guidelines and restrictions were in place during events but assumed there were some rules associated with social media use. Yvonne said, “Um, I am pretty sure there are some guidelines and policies around that. I’m just not 100 per cent sure, um, at the moment.” Oscar was able to provide more information regarding his NSO’s social media policy. However, it appears the policy is not directed at helping athletes minimise distractions:

Mountain Bike Australia does have a social media policy when we go away to Worlds. In terms about helping you use social media, it doesn’t really help you too much. It basically just gives you the rules to what not to do. Like there’s rules about if you’re wearing the Aussie kit you can’t tag sponsors and there’s certain things like that. There’s not really a structure, I suppose, to help you in that term.

Lincoln also highlighted certain restrictions regarding social media use on the national sailing team. Again, the social media policy does not appear to focus specifically on minimising distractions. He detailed the guidelines and restrictions he has received:

Well I know that basically, there’s certain things that we are and aren’t allowed to post. We are never allowed to post anything that’s like the Australian team’s IP. Um, anything that we could deem as being a competitive advantage in any way, shape or form, we are never allowed to post. Not allowed to um, post anything that will put the sport into disrepute, that’s pretty standard and then um, we are also not allowed to make any deals or partnerships or post anything that’s, you know, racist or deemed offensive in any way or any drugs, gambling
or drinking.

Although some sport organisations implemented guidelines and restrictions during events, it appears they could be clearer and more concise as some athletes had difficulty understanding them fully. For example, Natalie alluded to her difficulty understanding the guidelines and restrictions:

We got given like a giant brief, but honestly, it was like 50 pages and I didn’t read it. Yeah, so, I sent it to my dad and I said, which pages do I need to read? Yeah, and just guidelines that we were made to follow. Representing your country and all that sort of thing, but it was a lot of reading.

Other athletes disclosed that they set guidelines as a team and discussed how they were going to approach social media during the event which may have been due to the lack of guiding principles provided by organisations. For example, Matilda explained the process her team engaged in:

We discussed the potential for distraction and how it could impact us, both negatively and positively, and things like that. We talked about that as a team. Ultimately, the decision was left with us, as individual athletes, to decide whether we were going to remain on social media and if we were, how much involvement we were going to have. There was nothing hard and fast put down to us by our NSO or anything like that, it was just more guidance and open discussion about it.

Athletes also revealed their teams implemented their own rules regarding social media. Further, Gabriella suggested that the restrictions in place for her team at an event meant that it would be difficult to access their phones. She illustrated this by saying:

Well there are a lot of restrictions. So, once our team comes into camp, we kind of hang out all the time. And it’s not with phones. So, in competition it’s kind
of harder to be on your phone that much.

In addition to guidelines and restrictions on social media use, some athletes revealed they had attended social media training presented by their NSO, Olympic Committee or Institute of Sport.

**4.2.9 Inconsistent training and education.** The second theme related to the support athletes receive from sport organisations was inconsistent training and education. The theme was defined as receiving some or minimal training specific to managing social media distractions. Some athletes appeared to receive general media training in the lead up to the event focusing on how to respond in face-to-face interviews during a broadcast. Robert explained that he had not attended specific training; however, he revealed that the topic of social media was spoken about with team staff: “[have] not [attended] social media training, but obviously there’s been conversations about it and stuff like that… team staff, really.”

Further, Evelyn received recommendations from her sport organisation by saying, “they just recommend you should tone it down during that week of competition and then try not to do much during the comp, actual comp day.”

Other athletes who attended training sessions revealed that some focused on the security aspect of having a public profile. For example, Matilda described her experiences engaging in social media training and education:

We actually had the AFP come along and discuss security settings and different things like that, social and personal accounts, whether you want a personal or public account, things like that. We’ve also had our media guy from Bowls Australia come along and spoken to us about if any of us wanted to actually set up an athlete profile, so that’s where you contacted me through, was my athlete’s profile, so that one’s basically all about bowls.

Meanwhile, Lincoln revealed he had access to training from personal excellence
advisers from his NSO and National Institute of Sport. The training appeared to focus on managing benefits of social media, while also not letting it become a distraction:

Within, um, our Australian Sailing Team we have Personal Excellence advisers from like AIS and the Institute of Sports that are always providing workshops on how to manage your social media. How to leverage it when you can, but also how not to get, um, distracted it by it when racing.

Vincent described a similar experience to Lincoln in terms of the regular training he received from his sport organisation:

Yeah with the Institute, we have sort of like a media officer, or something like that, that helps that. We get training every year, to show what’s new, and what’s good to do, and what’s bad to do, and how to sort of present yourself. Not only social media, but all terms of media. So yeah that’s definitely helpful.

Other training was delivered in the form of examples of the benefits and pitfalls that other athletes had experienced. For instance, Matilda spoke about additional training she and her teammates received from athletes from other sports outside of Lawn Bowls:

Not really, only the open discussions that we’ve actually had in teams. We’ve had other athletes, when we’ve had other athletes from other sports come and talk to us and do presentations, our coaches asked them, in front of us, what their involvement was with social media leading into events, things like that, so we’ve tried to learn from other athletes.

Gabriella suggested her sport organisation provides yearly seminars on social media focusing on the time-consuming nature of social media:

We have definitely, or probably every year, we have little seminars that teach us about that. And ways that we can avoid, or if we do feel like it’s taking up too much time, trying to do a post of something, techniques to reduce that time.
So we definitely have people come in and talk to us that would be arranged from our football organisation.

While describing their experiences with social media training and education, athletes presented some suggestions where social media training could be improved to become more consistent. Oscar suggested that all athletes would benefit from the training, especially the younger athletes coming through: “I think definitely that would benefit not just all the athletes but everyone that comes along in the team would certainly be great. I think, just to help everyone manage it better. There’s always room for improvement.” Warren elaborated further:

I would teach the younger kids... I’d probably just give more examples of like, here’s where something, here’s where someone won, or did really well and here’s what they posted on social media, and this is how it backfired. Or this is how it came across. This is how they were perceived. So, maybe teaching or giving examples of here’s good and bad ways to go about it. And obviously you can make your choices but sort of give examples of anything you put up can be used and once it’s online, it’s online.

Victoria revealed she would like to attend some training to help her maximise the benefits of social media while also not letting it become a problem. She also highlighted the importance of sport organisations educating athletes about social media early on in their sport careers:

I definitely would have liked and I’m trying to get time to actually go do it is how to maximise the potential of social media and also how to minimise the distraction that it causes. The two sides of the coin, how do you use it and how to not let it use you, essentially…. I think putting people on it straightaway without teaching them how to deal with it is going to—they are just going to sit
there and think, “I wonder what is happening now. I wonder how many people
have liked that photo I just put up, all that sort of stuff.”

Gwen suggested a broader approach for dealing with social media. In particular, she
referenced some athletes who were not well equipped to regulate their emotions. She saw an
opportunity for organisations to educate athletes on better ways to regulate their emotions in
general, which could help with negative outcomes associated with social media use:

I don’t think that it’s limited just to social media. I think that what the NSOs
could do is actually give people – give the athletes the tools to deal with the
repercussions and potential outcomes for social media interactions as opposed
to banning social media, um, and then it becomes the athlete’s decision. If the
athlete doesn’t think that they can handle it, then they have to be disciplined and
choose not to go on or whatever.

The current theme revealed some athletes were supported through training and
education, however there were inconsistencies in how this training was delivered to athletes.
Athletes also presented several suggestions that would assist the training programs address
social media distractions. The final theme related to research question six revealed that
athletes were able to seek assistance from various sport personnel if needed.

4.2.10 Informal assistance. The third and final theme identified that athletes receive
assistance from sport organisations in an informal way. The theme was defined as athletes
seeking assistance from governing bodies (e.g., NSOs) or sport psychologists if they are
struggling with their use of social media. Although many of the athletes revealed they did not
engage in specific social media training, they indicated that if they needed help they could
seek assistance from their NSO. Athletes suggested they could seek out assistance for a range
of concerns including experience with a negative comment and coming up with a social
media plan. Gabriella revealed that if an athlete was bothered by something related to social
media (e.g., receiving a negative comment) they could contact a sport psychologist for assistance:

If it’s something that’s really bothering people, we do also have a team psychologist that is, if it’s something that is going to affect their performance, that they confide in the psychologist, and they can give them more insight into how to deal with it a bit better.

Vincent spoke about social media plans for athletes who might be struggling with finding what works for them by saying, “Get in touch with someone who knows how to do it, set a plan in place and do that.” Further, Robert revealed a similar sentiment to Gabriella and Vincent. He suggested that if athletes were struggling with negative commentary about themselves on social media they should talk to someone about it:

I think just seeking help, I guess. It’s one of those things that people get caught up in their own little worlds, and if you are caught up in that social media world where it affects you what people say, then I think you need to be able to go and ask and seek someone else to be able to talk to you and help you through it. Give you ideas to maybe not react to it, or not get caught up in it, because it can be a problem. I don’t really know anyone personally that is struggling with that kind of stuff, but I think that would be the biggest thing for it.

Vanessa revealed that her NSO had social media specialists working in a department who were available to athletes if they needed assistance or advice on things related to managing their platforms. She said, “I think you can get, obviously Athletics Australia has this, social media people, and media, and you know? Like that sort of department. Which I’m sure you could contact if you did want some help in regards to that.” Natalie also highlighted the assistance athletes can ask for related to social media:

We have a giant support staff that were just there to do everything for you, pretty
much, the whole time. I guess, if you wanted anything done social media-wise or whatnot, they would do that for you. They’d help you get involved in different people and things afterwards, if you wanted to do that.

Overall, study two provided an explanation of the elements of social media that athletes perceive to be distracting and what practices they undertake to minimise these distractions. The findings revealed athletes are lacking effective support mechanisms from sport organisations. Specifically, managing distractions appears to be conducted in an unstructured and informal way. However, athletes raised several key elements of distraction associated with social media use. Further assistance is required by organisations in order to combat the potential negative implications associated with social media use during events. In order to gather a full understanding of the support presented to athletes in terms of managing their social media use, study three gathered a different perspective from sport administrators on support or management strategies. The results of study three are presented next on the following page.
4.3 Study Three: Athlete Social Media Management: An NSO Perspective

Study three employed semi-structured interviews with seven NSO administrators to answer research questions seven and eight. Pseudonyms were assigned to each of the seven participants to protect their identity. A list of pseudonyms and their respective age groups, genders, and organisation department are presented in Table 12. The organisations involved in the study are not named at the participants’ request. Eight NSOs were discussed in the interviews, as Giselle had recently transitioned from one organisation to another at the time of interviews. She spoke about her experience at both organisations. The pseudonyms listed in the table are used to introduce quotations in the remainder of the section.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Organisation Department</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Irene</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Media and Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Media and Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nellie</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Media and Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Media and Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Giselle</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High Performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High Performance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews revealed seven themes. The first four themes derived from the thematic analysis process answer research question seven, which asked: *how do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events?* The themes related to the research question are summarised in Figure 8 before each is discussed in detail in the following sections.
4.3.1 Policy and guidelines. Participants revealed that social media policies and guidelines were implemented in their organisations. The theme was defined as acknowledging the importance of having social media policies and guidelines in place primarily to protect the organisation. The social media policies appeared to be designed to protect the organisation’s brand, while few had specific guidelines for athlete social media use during major sport events. For instance, Rose revealed details of her organisation’s social media policy by saying, “We’ve got a social media policy, and it’s on the [organisation] website. It doesn’t say when they can use it, but it says they can’t post certain things on social media. Whether that’s derogatory towards [organisation], or inappropriate content.” Further, Irene simply stated, “The policies that we get given are more thinking of the Australian team as a brand and protecting the brand image.” Some participants reported receiving guidelines from the AOC prior to a mega event such as the Olympic or Commonwealth Games. However, it appeared that there were no additional guidelines on managing the potential for social media distractions as described by Irene:

For anything that’s with the Australian team we actually get given a policy. For the Commonwealth Games, Commonwealth Games Australia send all of us a policy, and they go, "This is for your athletes." If they breach those then we come to you for an explanation. With the Olympics, the Australian Olympic team sends us their policy. Their policy is basically anything the athletes want to publish has to go through them for approval first, including personal pages.
Meanwhile, Giselle revealed her previous organisation’s difficulty with managing athlete social media through policy. As the sport was predominately professional, but also included in the Olympic and Commonwealth Games, the organisation experienced some push back from some of the athletes:

[My Sport] did have a policy, but I don’t think anyone knew where it was, and we didn’t have any control, because the athletes were professional and they were only in the national team for a certain period. There was more of a ‘this is mine and this is my profile, and my voice. You can pretty much f-off and not tell me how to use it.’

Harry revealed his organisation did not have specific event guidelines for athletes by saying “…I had a chat to our CEO more about this to try and find out whether there are limitations either side of events and there’s nothing. We actually don’t have anything formalised.” Meanwhile, Wayne revealed his organisation had specific guidelines athletes are required to follow during events in addition to the other guiding principles:

So it says during competition no use, after competition one hour after social media ban. I’m sure I’ve seen athletes on social media within an hour, so that’s really good, but it gives guiding principles, so before competition can I stay off social media for two hours before I compete?

It appeared the implementation of specific event social media guidelines for athletes was primarily at the discretion of team coaches. For instance, Nellie revealed the experience within her organisation:

To be honest that kind of thing is more controlled by the coaches, some coaches, like for example with our girls like the coaches are much stricter on, than some of the boys, part of that is age, part of that is just the nature of the sport.

Irene revealed a similar sentiment to Nellie by saying, “There’s usually almost
nothing about distraction of the individual athlete [in the policy], which is why our coaches manage those because they know the athletes on a personal level and they know how they can be distracted in certain ways.” In addition to policy and guidelines, organisations acknowledged the importance of social media training to assist athletes in managing social media effectively.

**4.3.2 Social media training.** The second theme related to management and support mechanisms for athletes was social media training. Social media training revealed sport organisations acknowledged the importance of formalised education sessions or programs for athletes. The theme was defined as acknowledging the importance of providing training to athletes on the best practices of social media use. Participants revealed their experience with social media training, while others acknowledged that it was important to develop and implement some form of training for athletes. Nellie explained the components of the social media training conducted in her organisation:

>We do a social media presentation with the underage athletes. But what we would do is normally before we go into World Cups, probably, I tend to do it a couple of weeks before. So when we’re overseas, but not when we’re actually there, so normally somewhere between two, two and a half weeks out from World Champs we’ll have a conversation with them, just to remind them to make a plan before they go into competition.

She also revealed that the training sessions highlight the benefits and challenges athletes in other sports have experienced from their use of social media:

>We highlight about how other athletes in other sports have talked about it, I tend to go over this thing where I talk to them at the end of it, we say about the Nan [grandmother] rule of responsibility. So it’s like don’t put something up on social media that your Nan wouldn’t be proud of and that tends to hit home a
lot more with the underage athletes.

Wayne highlighted a gap in which athletes are receiving social media training within his sport’s national and state organisations:

So we’ve got the media marketing communications officer saying she does - has done some work with some of our top guys that get interviews regularly, like, our top performers, but that only is typically - that only typically happens, you know, further on in their career. Like, you know, when they’ve come through juniors, 23s and then they’re up high performing, elite national team athletes. So we have tried - I think there’s an attempt to delve earlier in the pathway so that it’s kind of more ingrained when they’re coming through, so they’re aware of it. We have to this point in time left that with our State organisations to manage, like, in their kind of daily - like, their State camps and things like that. I have worked - like, I used to work for [state sporting organisation] before this role and we did do that kind of training on some of our camps. So that would be for, like, 15 to 18-year-olds.

Meanwhile, Irene acknowledged that her organisation needed to implement social media training for athletes. She explained that she would like to consult athletes about training first and had some idea of what the training might entail:

First of all, we need to... because there is a lot of research on the impacts of media use around, you know, times where you need to focus, and so I think using the hard facts would be a good way to show the athletes, like, ‘This can impact your performance, and if you’re working so hard to perform well, then maybe try minimising this and it might help,’ because they do so many little things to do well and it’s real fine detail stuff that gets in the middle.

Similar to Irene, Nancy acknowledged the importance of having social media training
available to athletes. However, she revealed that in order to develop and implement a training program she would need cooperation from other departments and that it was not one of the highest organisational priorities at the time of interviews:

And something like social media training, would definitely be on there, but it would also require a lot of cooperation from other departments. So, I guess at this stage, it’s probably not the highest of priorities, in terms of the fact that we are trying to get our own house in order as such and then go on to stuff that we need other teams for.

Harry highlighted that it was important for athletes to build a brand and promote the sport, however he explained that training was needed to show athletes how to use social media appropriately and effectively:

But the thing that we don’t do at the moment, and need to do is there’s not really formalised social media training as such. So there’s no sit downs with our junior players talking about what they’re doing, what they could be doing better, showing them examples of social media done well compared to breaches and stuff not working.

Overall, social media training varied among the NSOs included in the study. The theme demonstrates that there is no formal national framework in place on how sport organisations should educate athletes on the benefits and challenges of social media. Instead, NSOs are attempting to create their own training resources, while some highlighted that introducing this education is not a high priority.

4.3.3 Providing suggestions and assistance. In addition to policies and guidelines and social media training, participants revealed they provided suggestions and assistance to athletes. The theme represented less formalised education or assistance when compared to the previous social media training theme and was defined as providing suggestions and additional
assistance to athletes experiencing challenges related to social media. Suggestions and assistance appeared to be provided on an ad-hoc basis if requested by athletes. Giselle synthesised that administrators would advise athletes to unfollow things that may affect them by saying, “We just keep looking at it and engaging with it. It’s like, you should just unfollow. That’s the biggest advice we used to give athletes, unfollow.” Further, Irene revealed her organisation encourages athletes to minimise their social media use if they are experiencing negative feelings:

   We encourage them to not [use social media], as much as possible, if they’re not comfortable. Just come back from it, stay off it because that’s, for now, all we’ve got. We don’t have a better strategy to manage it presently.

Similar to Irene, Rose explained that she and her colleagues would advise against using social media if the athletes were distracted by it. Ultimately, the decision was left to the individual athlete, explaining: “but there is that advice or guidance if they aren’t sure what to do then we tell them it is up to them but if it’s going to distract them, then it may be best to stay away.” Nellie also revealed that she has had conversations with athletes, but again it was up to them to make the final decision about how they would use social media:

   They’re adults, so ultimately, and this is focussing on the senior team, they’re adults so we have a conversation with them and suggest these are some of the options that they can go with but it’s ultimately up to them and it’s their performance that they have to think about.

Nellie further elaborated by providing an example of an incident where she was forced to step in and explain to an athlete that they do not need to engage with content posted about them online:

   Before we’ve gone into an actual event where they’ve engaged unnecessarily with someone who’s made a comment on a post on a [organisation] page and
they’ve gotten frustrated by it, so got engaged in it. We had a conversation with them and said you don’t need to engage with that. You don’t need to worry about it, don’t get caught up in it, you’ve got bigger fish to fry kind of thing.

Meanwhile, additional assistance appeared to be in the form of facilitating interactions with staff (e.g., sport psychologists) who were able to help athletes experiencing challenges related to social media. For instance, Wayne revealed the athletes from his organisation had access to sport psychologists if assistance was required. He also revealed athletes were able to speak to their coach and the national performance director if needed:

We’ve got psychologists. Whether they’re readily available or not at the major champs is the kind of next question. The coach is a big sounding board for most things, but I mean some don’t like to get involved with the kind of psychology perspective, but at the Commonwealth Games we did have two psychologists around the village. So, yes, at Commonwealth Games they had them on standby. Like, they were there to talk to when required…And then [employee] - so [employee] is our national performance director, so anything else they would go to him as well if someone else wasn’t around.

4.3.4 Monitoring athlete social media. The final theme related to the support sport organisations offer to athletes was monitoring athlete social media. The theme was defined as conducting social media monitoring to ensure no breaches of the policy, and to achieve organisation-specific goals. Participants revealed that social media monitoring was conducted to enforce social media policies. Irene revealed she monitors athlete social media as a way to enforce the organisation’s policy:

Because it is pretty much like, "Be respectful. You’re representing the organisation," it’s been quite simple. You can decide very quickly whether that’s okay or that’s not okay. But yeah, contact the athlete first, because it is
social media, it’s on the internet. It’s already there, even when they take it down it’s already been up there. Time is the most... trying to fight against time to get it down, get it out of wherever it is.

She further highlighted that the nature of her sport required around-the-clock social media monitoring:

But we do monitor around the clock because it is a sport that, I think with other sports they probably don’t have threat of being shut down whereas we do. The moment something bad happens there is the potential that the whole sport could just get pulled, and fair enough. With good reason there are concerns around certain things. We're constantly operating on that level of urgency.

Social media monitoring also provided organisations with the ability to share content on their own pages and accounts. Nancy highlighted this by saying, “Yeah, and also sometimes if they’re on a trip and I need content and no one’s sent me anything, sometimes they’ll put stuff up, so it’s good for that.” Similarly, Harry revealed he monitored athlete social media accounts to source content for sharing purposes. He also provided an in-depth account on how monitoring was conducted:

It’s literally like using, say, with Twitter, I’ve got just columns set up on tweet deck that will have our athletes in them and overseas athletes so I can keep across who’s posting what. Facebook is a hard one because it’s so big. Twitter I can keep more of a tight look on, as to what’s happening and it’s more for me, it’s looking at who’s doing what so we can share it rather than who’s doing what so we can pull them into line. It’s more trying to promote the good stuff they’re doing on twitter. Instagram’s a hard one the education around that as well. I think needs to be around tagging the national body as often as possible in posts.

So again, so we can re-share.
An additional reason for monitoring athlete social media pages was discussed, but was not prevalent amongst other administrators. Specifically, one participant suggested monitoring social media allowed organisations to see any changes in athlete behaviour and observe their well-being. Giselle explained:

So you can sort of, at times, like yeah, I think it’s important to monitor, to watch. Like you wouldn’t see them at training, like if you come in every day and you’re happy and you’re go-lucky, and then all of a sudden one day you walk in and you’re dark and moody, like you will talk to them. So, social media’s no different, and they need to be accountable for what they put up too, by just asking, ‘Are you okay?’

The interviews revealed four themes related to the support and management of athlete social media. In addition to the four themes presented in the current section, the interviews revealed three themes related to the aspects of social media sport administrators perceive to impact athletes. The findings present both positive and negative impacts on athletes. The themes answer research question eight which asked: what aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events? The three themes are summarised in Figure 9 before being presented in depth.

**Figure 9.** Distracting aspects of social media

4.3.5 **Negative commentary.** The first theme related to the perceived impacts of social media was negative commentary, which was identified by participants as having a negative impact on athletes. The theme was defined as athletes being affected by negative
comments or messages directed at them from other social media users. Sport administrators reported negative commentary facilitated through social media as one of main reasons athletes may be distracted. Irene summarised why she believed negative commentary could be an issue for athletes:

When these nasty comments come through, depending on the group, some of them are very heavily affected by a little comment and some of them can easily brush it off. I think with our [group of athletes], they probably would just brush it off and go, ‘Whatever. You think I’m dumb. I think you are dumber.’ They’d be completely fine, but some of the others, personality-wise, even a small comment like, ‘Maybe you should change your jacket,’ or something that seems irrelevant could affect them long-term and they’d constantly bring it up in our focus groups.

Wayne revealed that although there are positive things for athletes to see on social media, the negative aspects can stand out in an athlete’s mind before a competition and potentially create problems. He described the importance for athletes to be fully focused on the competition. A competition-focus was the primary reason his organisation encourages athletes to abstain from social media before a competition:

There’s a lot of negative things on social media. I don’t think that filling an athlete’s head with - I mean, there’s positive things on there as well, but that kind of just, really, it’s just garbage. Like, there’s nothing really of use on social media, so why you would put yourself to looking at that hours before competition when you don’t know what’s going to be on there. You know, you don’t know what’s going to - you’re going to see that’s going to have some kind of negative impact, a negative aspect on yourself leading into a competition when you need to be 100% focused. So I think it has a - I think it has a negative
impact, hence why we suggest nothing two hours out from competition.

Meanwhile, Harry revealed that the athletes from his organisation had not faced as many issues pertaining to negative commentary compared to what other athletes would have:

So I guess our players in a sense are lucky that they… I mean they still probably get a bit of this bit of commentary from people criticising their performances on court, but it would be nowhere near what others would face. So I guess that’s another area where it could be distracting is reading the commentary and more so the hate stuff that social can present. But for us even that hasn’t been such an issue, just hasn’t really reared its head too much.

Rose believed one of the main distractions for athletes was negative commentary. She suggested that athletes using social media during their event who see negative comments directed at them may experience disruptions for the remainder of the competition:

Negative comments. Mainly. You know, them telling them that they could have done better or they’re not good enough or that’s a shit [competition]. You know. And then they’ve got the rest of the meet to go through knowing that everyone back at home is saying all this bad stuff about me. How am I going to keep competing?

4.3.6 Loss of focus. In addition to negative commentary, social media also impacted an athlete’s level of focus. The theme represents another negative aspect of social media perceived to impact athletes and was defined as aspects of social media interfering with sport processes (e.g., sleep, recovery). Harry revealed how social media could be disruptive to the processes athletes need to take before and after a competition including warm downs by saying:

I think it can be. I heard a story the other week about a [athlete] who would finish a race and instead of going to the warm down pool needed to fire off a
tweet immediately after the race and I was talking to a more senior person in the team who’s not on social media and was kind of saying it in a sense it was distracting from the processes.

Nancy highlighted that social media could distract athletes from their priorities (e.g., the competition) by saying, “[It] is probably thought about less than just, you know not having your mind in the game. So, yeah I’d say that’s probably what I saw the most, as the distraction.” She also acknowledged it was important for athletes to minimise their use of social media at night to ensure the platforms do not have an impact on sleep. She drew on her experience as an athlete by saying:

Oh, look, I don’t know specifics, I know of stuff in the past, I know, I don’t know specifics now. I know that when I was on teams, not Australian teams you know like we would only get our phones for like an hour a day, things like that. We’d have to give them in. And we were teenagers, it’s only fair enough, and also part of it is because, like you know, they’re all sharing rooms so you know, so if someone doesn’t turn their phone off or it might wake someone up in the night, and they’re trying to prepare for competition and they can’t sleep. Like, it all plays into that type of thing as well. Which sometimes kids, especially if they’re younger, don’t really think about the impact it can have on others. So I think that is a big part of it too.

Nellie revealed that although her organisation’s athletes are very performance-focused and have experienced minimal issues, some athletes can get caught up in trying to find the best photos of themselves to post on their platforms:

Athletes can get caught up with ensuring they have the best photo of themselves competing for posting on their account, or constantly monitoring the [organisation] accounts to see if they feature in and image and they can get
caught up with why they may not appear in a post.

Meanwhile, Giselle illustrated that technology advancements have facilitated easier access to social media. She explained that it is important for organisations to manage how often athletes use social media, despite it being readily accessible:

It’s more making sure they manage it and that sort of stuff. That can be a bit of a distraction, but yeah, you can see - and their phones don’t stop anymore. Like you get global roaming for $5.00 a day and it works normal, so there’s no break from it. Yeah, there has been a few times. I mean, [athlete] was a big one, but [athlete] was making her own choices and she was pretty adamant that she was going to make her own choices. But yeah, I don’t understand the psychology of it enough, why they want to, but they live their lives in public and they make money for it.

4.3.7 Connection and escape. The final theme was connection and escape. The theme was defined as social media providing an avenue for athletes to stay in contact with family and escape competition pressures. In contrast to the previous two themes, connection and escape was described as positive for athletes. Rose highlighted the time athletes spend away from home competing and that social media was a way for them to stay connected by saying, “Homesick, yeah. It’s a bit like they go away for five weeks at a time, it’s a long time to be away.” Further, Nellie explained the benefit of using social media particularly for athletes who are competing away from home for long periods of time:

They’re travelling around that world and they’re away for quite long periods of time, so I think it’s actually a nice way for them to be able to engage with their family and their friends to see what they’re doing. And to feel connected to back at home and to feel connected to their friends and family and the sport in general.
Nellie added that some team coaches acknowledge the benefits social media can offer athletes as a relaxation tool by saying:

We have some athletes that like to post to social media and their coaches feel that actually them engaging with it is a good way for them to get sort of, calming down and in a way to stop overthinking their racing and overthinking their performance.

Meanwhile, Harry simply revealed that some athletes may enjoy a distraction by succinctly stating, “It’s a nice distraction, I think, for some.” Further, Irene highlighted that not allowing athletes to access social media at all could have adverse effects by saying:

If they need it, because it’s such a part of some people’s lives that they need it to relax. We don’t want to be affecting them in that way…. It’s not even about the content. It’s the action of scrolling in mindless pictures, it’s just what they need to calm down. That’s how they’re managing it at the moment, but we definitely are looking at a more comprehensive way to structure that for the athletes so that the coaches don’t have to think about it and we can just say, ‘Okay, everyone, just do it this way.’

Giselle explained that athletes compete away from home for long periods of time and may start to experience homesickness and that social media facilitate interactions with family members. She also revealed that social media allows athletes to take a break from the competition and focus on something else by saying:

Yeah, they’re not isolated, but also life is going on and it probably makes them more homesick than anything when you’re away. You continually see what your friends and family are up to and you realise what you’re giving up to be where they are. But at the same time, I think it just gives them a break. They have a laugh. Because when you’re stuck in a country like Belarus and Russia, which
we were for a while, like you can’t watch TV because it’s in Russian. The internet doesn’t work very well and, yeah, they tend to use social media to make their own fun.

Overall, study three revealed sport administrators have acknowledged and adopted a number of practices to manage and support athletes in their social media use. Sport administrators appear to acknowledge both negative and positive aspects of social media for athletes. Some of the themes resonated with those reported by athletes in study two.

4.4 Summary

This chapter detailed the results from each of the three studies conducted in this thesis. Study one utilised an open-ended questionnaire to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. The results indicated three uses and three gratifications. Communication with support networks, promotion, and information gathering and sharing were revealed as the three uses athletes have for social media during events. Three gratifications were revealed including connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. Two challenges were associated with athletes using social media during their event and included anxiousness and balancing social media use. These results addressed the first three research questions.

Study two utilised semi-structured interviews to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations. The interviews revealed 10 themes. The first five themes demonstrated the elements of social media that can be distracting for athletes. Specifically, obligation to respond, susceptibility to unwanted commentary, pressures of building and maintaining a brand, competitor’s content, and avenue for escape were identified. Next, need for self-awareness and switching off and handing over control represented the practices athletes undertook to minimise distractions. The final three themes
revealed the support and management mechanisms athletes reported receiving from NSOs. Lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions, inconsistent training and education, and informal assistance represented the support athletes receive from sport organisations to manage their social media use. These results addressed research questions four to six.

Lastly, study three utilised semi-structured interviews to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. Four support and management mechanisms were revealed including policy and guidelines, social media training, providing suggestions and assistance, and monitoring athlete social media. The interviews also revealed sport administrators acknowledged that social media can have both negative and positive impacts on athletes. Sport administrators revealed negative commentary and loss of focus could have a negative impact on athletes, while connection and escape could be beneficial. These results addressed research questions seven and eight.

The next chapter discusses the results presented in this chapter. First, each research question is addressed in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Second, the theoretical and managerial implications of the research are described. Third, limitations of the current research are acknowledged, while suggestions for future research are presented. Finally, an overall summary and conclusion of the research is presented.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this thesis begins with a brief summary of the research purpose. Next, a synthesis of the findings from each of the three studies is presented as they relate to each of the research questions and literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The theoretical and managerial implications are presented, followed by acknowledgment of the limitations of the current research. Directions for future research are identified to address the limitations and build on the current findings, before final conclusions are made.

5.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of the current research was threefold: (1) to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event, (2) to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations, and (3) to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. The current research was designed to empirically examine athletes’ use of social media in the context of major sport events. This is pertinent, given the focus of elite sport systems on international success, including the Australian sport system (Stewart et al., 2005), and increasing concern that social media use by athletes could be a distraction and negatively impact athletic performance (David et al., 2018; Encel et al., 2017; Fynes-Clinton, 2012). The following sections discuss the results in relation to each research question. These findings are examined in the context of previous research reviewed in Chapter Two to provide an in-depth understanding of the current examination and its implications for theory and practice.

5.2 Study One

Study one was designed to investigate why athletes use social media, the
gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event. This study addressed the first three research questions.

5.2.1 Research question 1. The first research question asked: why do athletes use social media during major sport events? Study one utilised U&G theory (Katz et al., 1973) as a framework in order to understand athletes’ uses and gratifications of social media in the context of major sport events. The results from the thematic analysis process revealed three themes related to social media uses, including communication with support networks, promotion, and information gathering and sharing. The themes offer new insights into athlete social media use during events, while also lending support to previous research (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Specifically, the themes explore why athletes use social media to both consume and produce content.

Communication with support networks appeared to be driven by several gratifications sought by athletes and their use of social media during events. This theme presented a nexus of consumption and production of social media content on behalf of athletes as they were consuming messages from their supporters while also occasionally sharing content to showcase their experience at the event. Researchers have identified that athletes share stories of family and friends and other non-sports related information (Hambrick et al., 2010). Yet, in the current study athletes did not reveal they were consistently sharing stories publicly. Instead, athletes primarily used social media to communicate personal matters with family and friends who were unable to attend the event. The communication explained by athletes in study one would not have been available for content analyses studies (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010), as the information was not typically made public but, rather, through closed messenger applications (i.e. Facebook messenger). The theme extends the findings of Browning and Sanderson (2012) who highlighted athletes use Twitter to stay in contact with their friends and family. However, in contrast to Browning and Sanderson’s (2012) research, the current
study was contextualised to major sport events which may help explain why communicating with support networks appeared to be the primary reason athletes used social media, as the events were located in various geographic locations and not Australia, where their supporters were primarily based.

Meanwhile, athletes did not mention they were directly responding to fans through replying to comments as identified in previous research contextualised to major sport events (Clavio et al., 2013; Hull, 2014). The finding may be explained by the types of events previous researchers have investigated and the theoretical lens utilised. As outlined in Chapter Two, researchers have examined athletes’ self-presentation during larger and more publicised events such as an annual major golf tournament (the Masters) (e.g., Hull, 2014), whereas the events included in the current study were less publicised and potentially less popular. Other researchers specifically focused on fan-athlete interaction during a cycling tournament, whereas the focus on the current study was to examine the motives and gratifications obtained through athlete social media use. Communicating with support networks was linked to three gratifications including connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape which helps explain why it was the primary motive for using social media during events. Being able to communicate with support networks and eliciting gratifications were identified as having a positive impact on athletic performance. These gratifications are discussed in further detail in later sections of this chapter.

The second theme related to research question one was promotion. Using social media for promotional purposes positioned athletes as content producers. During events athletes promoted personal sponsors and engaged in self-promotion, aligning with previous research conducted in event contexts (Clavio et al., 2013; Hull, 2014). In terms of self-promotion, athletes used social media to market themselves to sponsors and manage their own brand supporting previous work on athlete branding (Clavio et al., 2013; Geurin, 2017; Pegoraro,
2010). Some athletes preferred to manage their brand by posting about their achievements at the competition, providing more evidence that major sport events are a unique opportunity for athletes to enhance their brand. The finding demonstrates that athletes are utilising major sport events to engage in a key component associated with brand building as described by Arai et al. (2014). However, the theme highlights a challenge that may be specific to a major sport event context, particularly for those contesting Olympic-based sports. For instance, some athletes faced restrictions on how much content could focus on their personal sponsors during their event. Previous research did not appear to acknowledge these challenges associated with self-promotion, which may be due to the types of events researchers used as a context. These incidents occurred due to a clash with an organisational sponsor (i.e. AOC) which resulted in an athlete not being able to promote her endorsement. It is expected that other athletes will experience similar challenges when competing at multi-sport events (e.g., Olympic Games) which may prohibit athletes from taking full advantage of social media during these times. Although not linked to failed gratifications, the benefits and challenges of promotion at major sport events may present an area for future exploration.

The final theme related to research question one was information gathering and sharing. The theme demonstrates the ability of athletes to both consume and produce content during events which appeared to be driven by achieving gratification. In this case, athletes gathered and consumed information in order to stay connected to the outside world and the event. Athletes provided insights on the events to their followers and supporters by posting images of the competition venues supporting previous research in event contexts (e.g., Clavio et al., 2013; Hayes-Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). Athletes were able to present their followers with images of the competition venue/city revealing similarities to previous research examining social media use in event contexts (Hayes-Sauder & Blaszka, 2016; Hull, 2014). Athletes also shared their thoughts on their
preparation and the day’s performances during the event. In the current study, the information gathered by athletes was specific to their event, highlighting the impact social media has had on major sport events. For instance, social media enabled athletes to receive information from their team management and event organisers indicating the adoption of the platforms has become commonplace for event organisers. However, using social media to communicate important event information among athletes and team management may cause conflict for those athletes who prefer not to use social media during events.

The promotion and information gathering and sharing themes align with social media uses identified in previous research (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), revealing similarities in how athletes adopt social media in their everyday lives and during major sport events. The themes also demonstrated how athletes undertake the role of content producer. Specifically, the information sharing and gathering theme aligned with research in other disciplines that examined social media users’ role as content producers (Lee & Ma, 2012). Yet, the promotion theme may be unique to athletes and their use of social media. Research has demonstrated that athletes pursue sponsorships in order to generate an income or increase awareness of their sport (Clavio et al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). With more attention afforded to athletes during major sport events, more opportunities to capitalise on sponsorships and endorsements exist. Olympic-sport athletes are not afforded the same coverage or publicity as professional athletes competing throughout a season or in a league (Crossman et al., 1994), further highlighting the importance of using social media for promotional activities during major sport events. However, with the challenges highlighted by some athletes in the current study, the opportunity to promote sponsors may not always be possible.

5.2.2 Research question 2. The second research question asked: what gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during major sport events? Data revealed three
themes related to the gratifications athletes receive from using social media during major sport events. The themes consisted of connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. These three themes provided an additional understanding of the gratifications athletes received which were derived from athlete perspectives. The gratifications assist in understanding the motives behind social media use.

The first theme related to research question two was connectedness. The theme represented athletes feeling connected to their support networks and to the outside world through their social media use during an event. The theme also suggested that having this connection with support networks alleviated feelings of nervousness among athletes. Connectedness has not been well established in sport or athlete social media literature. As a result, the finding of the current study presents additional information on what drives athletes to use social media during events. The current research lends support to David et al. (2018) by identifying the positive feelings and outcomes associated with maintaining connections with teammates, fans, and the general public which are fostered through social media. Further, athletes sought support from their family, friends, and coaches. These support networks have been established in sport psychology research (Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989), yet their application to social media have not been explored in depth. The current study identified that social media plays an important role of allowing athletes to stay connected with their support networks during major sport events. The feelings of connectedness to these support networks may play an important role during major sport events as they often require athletes to travel to various overseas destinations for extended periods of time, taking them away from some of their support networks.

The second gratification related to research question two was positive reinforcement which was primarily received through communication with support networks (i.e., family, friends, and followers sending athletes messages of encouragement). The way support was
manifested in the current study was dissimilar to Sanderson and Truax’s (2014) study that reported support was directed to athletes in response to an influx of negative messages. Research has primarily focused on the negative comments directed to athletes via social media due to the potential impact they can have on an athlete’s wellbeing. Yet, few have analysed the impacts positive and supportive messages elicited through social media could have on an athlete’s well-being or athletic performance. In the current research, positive and supportive messages were welcomed by athletes as this made them feel good about what they were doing at the events and a sense of connection to their family members.

Athletes did not report receiving supportive comments in response to negative commentary on their accounts. Despite this, previous research has indicated social media enables followers or fans to target athletes with negative or unwanted comments or messages (Farrington et al., 2014; Geurin, 2017; Litchfield et al., 2016; 2018). Yet, athletes in study two reported that social media made them more susceptible to unwanted commentary, including negative messages. This may present challenges to athletes who use social media to receive supportive messages. For instance, athletes may find it difficult to filter any negative messages or comments in their search for positive reinforcement, and could potentially cause athletes to stop using the platforms altogether during these times.

The current findings may vary from previous research due to the context and samples. For instance, a number of the previous studies examined professional athletes, who may find themselves more susceptible to negative commentary due to having a higher profile, competing on a more regular basis (e.g., season), or being considered a sport celebrity (David et al., 2018; Hoye et al., 2015; Summers & Morgan, 2008). Although this may be the case with professional athletes, Olympic-sport athletes are not necessarily exempt from social media abuse, which may explain why athletes in study two reported their susceptibility to unwanted commentary as an element of distraction.
Both connectedness and positive reinforcement gratifications were suggested to contribute to better performances as athletes linked these gratifications to feeling better about their performances on multiple occasions. Dale (2000) noted that athletes form a sense of camaraderie as a coping mechanism during events. The camaraderie is formed between athletes and their friends and occurs between events as a way to relax. This camaraderie was transferred to athletes using social media as they used the platforms to connect with their friends during events. Further, these strong connections to social support networks have been associated with better performances (Freeman, Rees, & Hardy, 2009). Researchers have argued that one of the reasons more successful teams meet or exceed expectations is the support from family and/or friends (Gould et al., 1999). The findings highlight that social media may provide another avenue for athletes to receive social support and thus produce better performances when compared to those who do not receive this kind of support.

The last theme related to research question two was relaxation and escape. The theme demonstrated that athletes use social media for relaxation and as a way to escape the pressures of the sport environment. Relaxation and escape appeared to represent a consumption focus for athletes and was discussed as a driver to many of the social media uses previously discussed. Athletes primarily appeared to seek this gratification during their down time and used social media as a tool to avoid thinking about the competition. The theme does not align with previous research on athlete social media use guided by U&G theory. As a result, the theme provides new information on what drives athletes to use social media, particularly during events. Relaxation strategies are an important feature of athletes’ psychological preparation for a competition or major sport event (Thomas, Murphy, & Hardy, 1999; Ungerleider, 2005). Yet, few studies have investigated the positive psychological impacts of social media for athletes. Therefore, it may be important for athletes to have access to social media during events if they feel it relaxes them before competing.
Meanwhile, the escape aspect of the theme contributes to social media research by revealing that the platforms may also be used as a diversion from stress and competition pressures. By using social media as an escape from competition pressures, athletes may experience less stress when compared with those who do not use the platforms for this same reason, supporting work by Frisby and Wanta (2018) who noted similar reasons for using the Internet. The theme identified in the current study contributes to U&G research, as few studies have established relaxation and escape as a gratification that motivates athletes to use social media. However, the finding may not be unique to athletes, as Quan-Haase and Young (2010) noted that social media users may seek an escape from daily life pressures and responsibilities.

5.2.3 Research question 3. The third research question asked: what challenges (if any) do athletes experience when using social media during major sport events? The open-ended questionnaire revealed an additional two themes related to research question three which demonstrated that athletes also face challenges related to their use of social media. The two challenges that were derived from the data included anxiousness and balancing social media use. The two themes reveal additional challenges to those already identified, such as online bullying based on athletes not meeting performance expectations (e.g., Sanderson & Truax, 2014). However, whether these challenges can lead to failed gratifications has been an underexplored area in athlete social media studies.

Athletes experienced feelings of anxiousness and had difficulties in balancing an appropriate amount of social media use. Athletes disclosed that anxiousness stemmed from deciding on what to post and comparing themselves to other athletes. Feelings of anxiety were also elicited through seeing competitors’ posts. Competitors have been noted as a distraction for athletes during events (Dale, 2000). However, Fitriana and Xin (2019) explained that some athletes are able to elicit positive emotional responses to seeing their
competitors on social media. In comparison, the current research demonstrates that emotional responses to competitors’ content vary between athletes. The varying reactions to competitor content may be due to the amount of experience athletes possess and, potentially, the timing of when athletes were exposed to the posts (i.e., preparation phase or during event). For instance, one athlete who participated in the current study posted certain content with the intention of making his competitors second guess their preparation or abilities and that his competitors would take the same action. In terms of timing, athletes who see their competitors’ content leading into an event may have time to adjust their preparation or learn from their competitors (Fitriana & Xin, 2019).

Although the presence of competitors can cause stress or a distraction, some athletes can form a sense of camaraderie among their fellow competitors which can also be used as an outlet for competition pressures (Dale, 2000). Yet, minimal work has explored whether competitors have an impact on athletes in online spaces such as social media. Researchers who have reported on social media and competitors present findings that contradict those of the current research (e.g., David et al., 2018). For instance, athletes may be proactive in monitoring their opponents’ progress as a source of motivation, whereas the current research primarily highlighted the presence of competitors as a negative influence. This may have been due to the context of the research, as major sport events are typically higher pressured environments which may cause athletes to react differently.

Certain platforms have caused a disruption of concentration for some athletes leading into a competition and stimulated sport anxiety (Encel et al., 2017). In addition, athletes can experience symptoms associated with anxiety due to a fear of failure and potential criticism based on their performance (David et al., 2018). However, that did not appear to be the case in the current research. Athletes indicated that support was more positive and was one of the reasons they enjoyed using social media during their event. Yet, athletes in study two
identified that social media made them more susceptible to unwanted commentary, which may have been elicited through the line of questioning during interviews where athletes were specifically asked whether they had encountered this kind of commentary and how this may become a distraction.

Second, athletes disclosed that balancing an appropriate amount of social media use was a challenge for them. For instance, some of the experiences at the events examined resulted in some athletes opting to minimise their use and seek alternatives that may be more efficient to escape the competition pressures discussed. Other athletes suggested they would increase their social media use for future events, with a focus on interactivity aligning with previous research in event contexts (e.g., Clavio et al., 2013; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). However, few researchers have presented balancing social media use as a key challenge for athletes. Instead, the theme lends support to findings from Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008). People often disengage from social media due to their busy schedules. The findings of Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) may be applicable to athletes, as the current research revealed some athletes would alter their use for future events in an effort to focus more on themselves and their preparation. Athletes who allocate more focus and attention on their preparation may experience better performance results during major sport events (Gould et al., 2002), suggesting the frequency of social media use should be limited during these times.

The previous three research questions identified that athletes use social media for several reasons and receive a number of gratifications as a result. Insights into the gratifications athletes seek from their use of social media have been provided. However, the findings identified two challenges associated with social media use during major sport events. The findings demonstrate areas where uses, gratifications, and challenges interrelate. First, communication with support networks was associated with all three gratifications reported by
athletes. Specifically, being able to communicate with support networks made athletes feel connected, a sense of positive reinforcement was generated through support, while allowing athletes to relax and escape the pressures of the competition. Next, information sharing and gathering was linked to the connectedness and relaxation and escape gratifications. For instance, athletes used social media to gather information about current affairs or news, which made them feel connected to what was happening at home, while also providing a diversion to competition pressures.

In addition to the links between uses and gratifications, the challenges also connected with the reasons athletes used social media. Athletes reported feelings of anxiousness upon viewing their competitors’ content. However, some athletes used social media specifically to gather information on their competitors. The findings reveal that although athletes may be interested in their competitors’ content, it may present feelings of anxiousness if they begin to make comparisons. In terms of balancing social media use, some athletes suggested they would put more effort into promotional content at future events. The connections between the uses, gratifications, and challenges are summarised in Figure 10.
It should be noted that not all uses were directly connected to gratifications, nor were the challenges associated with the gratifications. In some cases, athletes reported experiencing both gratifications and challenges when using social media. In an effort to further understand the challenges associated with social media, three research questions (four, five, and six) relate to data collected in study two. The study identified additional challenges athletes face using social media, which were perceived to be distracting during events.

5.3 Study Two

The previous section identified a number of benefits athletes receive as a result of using social media. Yet, several challenges were evident. In order to explore the challenges further, study two explored the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address these distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations.
5.3.1 Research question 4. The fourth research question asked: what elements of social media (if any) do athletes perceive to be distracting during major sport events? Five themes were prevalent: obligation to respond, susceptibility to unwanted commentary, pressures of building and maintaining a brand, competitors’ content, and avenue for escape.

The first theme related to research question four was obligation to respond. Athletes disclosed feeling an obligation to respond to the messages of support received from followers via social media. The messages were primarily supportive, while few reported receiving negative messages. Although athletes acknowledged it was nice to receive messages of support, they suggested it was time consuming to respond to all. Social media provides a tool that facilitates interaction between athletes and fans (Billings et al., 2017; Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Frederick et al., 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010), yet the current research identified that these interactions leave athletes feeling an obligation to maintain these relationships, and responding to all may take attention away from focusing on their event. Event-specific research appears to be in consensus that athletes provide insight and interact with fans and followers (Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). The current research extends these findings by suggesting athletes cultivate and maintain relationships by individually responding to personal messages of support. Athletes highlighted the difficulties of attending to each comment or message due to time constraints. As a result, athletes may not have as much of an opportunity to cultivate relationships with fans during some of the major sport events included in the current research which may be due to the pressures to succeed, performance-wise.

Some athletes may feel compelled to respond to negative messages, while others believe that replying could aggravate the situation. Yet, the theme partly contrasts with previous research (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012) by revealing athletes felt a sense of guilt for not responding to positive messages, while primarily ignoring negative commentary.
Further, David et al. (2018) noted that some athletes consistently reflect on criticisms of their performance directed at them by their followers on social media. Yet, that did not appear to be the case for the current research. Instead, the current research highlights that these messages can create an attentional conflict for athletes which can be particularly problematic while competing at major sport events. Although past research has examined the content of negative commentary directed at athletes via social media (Litchfield et al., 2016; 2018; Sanderson & Truax, 2014), few have delved into how these positive messages may impact athletic performance.

The second theme related to research question four was susceptibility to unwanted commentary. Although study one respondents did not mention receiving negative comments, the current study identified that social media presented opportunities to receive both positive and negative comments from other users. Most athletes were fortunate not to receive negative comments. However, unwanted comments and messages were reported to increase the likelihood of undesirable emotions, supporting previous research (e.g., David et al., 2018; Farrington et al., 2014; Kavanagh et al., 2016; Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Geurin (2017) identified that social media made some athletes susceptible to receiving strange comments from followers, which also appeared to be the case for some athletes in the current research.

Responses to unwanted messages and comments were discussed. Similar to previous work, the responses to unwanted commentary varied among athletes. Some athletes responded to negative messages, while others disclosed that they mostly tried to ignore negative messages (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Most significantly, athletes emphasised the importance of not allowing the comments to affect them while competing which was due to the major sport event context of the current research. In contrast, Fitriana and Xin (2019) noted that some athletes can find motivation from unwanted comments and criticism, which appeared to be the case for a small group of athletes who participated in the current study.
The different reactions to unwanted commentary highlight similarities with how athletes react to competitors’ content identified in study one. These different reactions may be due to inexperience and potentially the time which athletes were exposed to the commentary. The current research highlights that the susceptibility to unwanted commentary can also cause an attentional conflict for athletes which may be particularly problematic while competing at major sport events if not supported effectively from organisations (e.g., provided with the appropriate coping mechanisms).

In addition to messages presenting distractions, athletes disclosed how branding can become problematic. The third theme related to research question four was pressures of building and maintaining an athlete brand. Athletes who participated in study one reported that one of the key reasons they used social media was to promote themselves as they saw a major sport event as a unique time to do so. Athletes also revealed that it was important to capitalise on the extra attention afforded to themselves during an event, revealing similar findings to Geurin’s (2017) examination of female Olympians. However, the theme identified in the current study demonstrated that building and maintaining a brand was considered to be time consuming during an event, which is consistent with some of the challenges Hodge and Walker (2015) have identified. Further, for some athletes, the time consuming nature of building a brand took their focus away from competing. A lack of time to put effort into building and maintaining a brand may have impacts on the types of endorsements they are able to attract as Korzynski and Paniagua (2016) emphasised the importance of having a strong level of engagement on social media in addition to sport performance.

A vast amount of literature has demonstrated that social media is beneficial for athletes in terms of branding (e.g., Arai et al., 2014; Geurin, 2017; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Some athletes highlighted that when building their brand, they prefer to let their performance speak for itself, which is a primary dimension of the
athlete brand model, encompassing an athlete’s individual sports capabilities and achievements (Arai et al., 2014; Hodge & Walker, 2015). Yet, a key finding of study two is that athletes face significant challenges when trying to build a brand due to limited time availability (after extensive training and competition commitments) to showcase their athletic abilities. The findings of previous studies combined with those of the current research present athletes with challenges associated with their brands. Specifically, some athletes may find it difficult to maintain focus on their performance while attempting to devote time to building their brands to capitalise on the increase in attention afforded by major sport events.

The fourth theme related to research question four was competitor content. The theme extends the findings from the open-ended questionnaire conducted in study one. Specifically, competitor content builds on the anxiousness theme derived in the previous study. In both studies, some athletes divulged that they were unsettled by seeing their competitors’ content on social media. For instance, athletes acknowledged they compare their performances to their competitors’ results. However, previous studies have not examined whether this distraction can be translated to online spaces. The finding of the current research provides new information regarding the distractions arising from the presence of competitors in an online space. In contrast, Fitriana and Xin (2019) demonstrated that some athletes are able to elicit positive emotional responses to seeing their competitors on social media. The differences in findings demonstrate that athletes’ abilities to harness their emotional responses to competitors’ content vary. The context of the current research may present an explanation for the contrasting findings to previous research. Major sport events present athletes with greater stress levels as these events are of higher importance than regular season matches with increases in performance expectations (Karageorghis & Terry, 2011). Therefore, it could be suggested that athletes react differently during event times while under additional stress when compared to their everyday lives.
The final theme related to research question four was avenue for escape. The theme demonstrated that not all distractions are negative for athletes. The finding builds on the relaxation and escape theme identified in study one, in that some athletes use social media as a desirable distraction during events. As a result, the current research provides additional evidence that athletes use the Internet to reduce feelings of stress, which is similar to the findings of Frisby and Wanta (2018). Further, the current research highlights new contributions to sport psychology and psychological preparation research (e.g., Thomas et al., 1999; Ungerleider, 2005). Specifically, the findings of the current research indicate that social media could be used as a tool to assist athletes in their psychological preparation for major sport events.

The elements of distractions reported by athletes could be influenced by their amateur status. For instance, as these athletes are not competing during regular seasons like their professional counterparts, the interest and interactions from the general public may increase dramatically during major sport events. Therefore, athletes may feel overwhelmed by the number of messages they receive and feel an obligation to respond to capitalise on the public interest. Similarly, as media exposure increases during major sport events (Greenleaf, 2001), athletes may also feel pressured to secure new sponsorships by building their brands during this time.

5.3.2 Research question 5. In addition to the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, study two explored the practices athletes employ to address these concerns. The fifth research question asked: what practices do athletes utilise to address social media distractions during major sport events? Two themes were identified, including: need for self-awareness and switching off and handing over control.

The first theme related to research question five was an athlete’s need for self-awareness. Although not previously explored in athlete social media research, self-awareness
relates to constructs explored in sport psychology literature. Athletes in the current research described experiences where they felt social media was affecting them and made decisions to change their habits before problems arose. The finding highlights that athletes engage in the concept of self-regulation. According to Cleary and Zimmerman (2001), self-regulation is defined as “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that are planned and cyclically adapted based on performance feedback” (p. 187). Further, self-regulation refers to an athlete’s ability to manage themselves in order to achieve their desired outcomes (Durand-Bush & DesClouds, 2018). Self-regulation appeared to be a process that athletes were engaging in to minimise the negative impacts associated with social media use. The theme demonstrates athletes’ ability to self-regulate and attempt to gain some control over the factors that may influence their performance during major sport events (e.g., unwanted commentary directed to athletes via social media) (Williams, Donovan, & Dodge, 2000).

As part of the self-awareness theme, some participants highlighted that it was important to do what works for them in terms of their social media use. The finding lends support to sport psychology literature which has identified that changing routines could interfere with an athlete’s performance (Gould et al., 1999). Further, departure from normal routine has reportedly led to negative impacts on an athlete and their performance during a major sport event (Greenleaf et al., 2001). Thus, if athletes feel as though using social media regularly during an event assists with their preparation and performance then making alterations to their behaviour could disrupt this routine. Conversely, if athletes usually minimise how often they use social media during competitions, this practice should be consistently adopted for all events. The need for self-awareness theme closely aligned with the second practice athletes used to address social media concerns. It appeared that, after engaging in self-awareness, athletes undertook additional approaches to address the social media concerns they identified.
The second theme related to research question five was switching off and handing over control. Athletes switched off from their social media or handed over control of their accounts to someone they trusted (e.g., a family member). Although minimal research has investigated how athletes address social media concerns, the finding could be explained by the coping strategies employed when dealing with traditional media stress. For instance, researchers illustrated that athletes use avoidance strategies in order to minimise media stress such as avoiding reading, seeing, or listening to anything mainstream media reported about them (Kristiansen et al., 2011a; Kristiansen et al., 2011b). By switching off social media accounts, athletes are able to avoid seeing any negative commentary directed to them, which allows them to avoid or ignore negative commentary and minimise the impact these messages may have on their performance while competing at major sport events.

Select interviewees disclosed they did not want to see anything negative that may change their mood during their event and, as a result, switched off their accounts or handed over control to a family member. Athletes who decide to switch off or hand over control of their social media may experience better psychological readiness and less sport anxiety, as researchers have identified that athletes who use social media on the day of a competition experience higher sport anxiety than those who do not (Encel et al., 2017). Therefore, it may be pertinent for athletes to utilise these practices to minimise the prevalence of sport anxiety during major sport events. An influx of messages and notifications has been noted to disrupt concentration (Encel et al., 2017). Building on Encel et al.’s (2017) work, the influx of messages and notification was suggested to be another reason athletes switched off their accounts during their events. The increase in messages could be explained by the publicity of the event itself. In addition to the practices athletes use to address social media distractions, they reported receiving assistance from their sport organisations, which is discussed in the following section.
5.3.3 Research question 6. Study two explored the support athletes receive from sport organisations. As a result, the sixth research question asked: what support do athletes report receiving to manage social media during major sport events? Three themes were identified including lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions, inconsistent training and education, and informal assistance.

The first theme identified was lack of distraction related guidelines and restrictions. Social media policies appeared to present athletes with boundaries regarding their use of the platforms, aligning with previous research (e.g., Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson et al., 2015b Sanderson, 2018; Sanderson & Browning, 2013). The theme highlights that social media policies are not limited to intercollegiate sports and student-athletes and have been adopted in Australia to combat several issues associated with the platforms. Athletes reported there were guidelines and other restrictions they needed to follow that were implemented by their NSO. Yet, athletes did not suggest they were expected to implement a social media ban as identified in previous research by Snyder (2014). Although these guidelines were acknowledged, many athletes were unaware of the specifics of the policies, but suggested they were prohibited from posting anything that could present their organisation in a negative light revealing similarities to research conducted in an intercollegiate context (e.g., Sanderson, 2011).

Many athletes stated their desire for the guidelines to be clearer and easier to follow which highlighted ambiguous language present in social media policies. Athletes appeared knowledgeable in terms of the type of content they could and could not post, but were unclear on whether there were specific event rules. This may be specific to the context of the current research. However, the confusion surrounding event-specific guidelines may be due to a limited number of organisations adopting such restrictions. The findings identified that few organisations implemented event-specific restrictions. Study three findings are discussed in
greater detail later in this chapter.

While unsure of whether their NSO implemented event-specific restrictions, athletes discussed abiding by Rule 40, and explained that they could not post content on social media during a specified blackout period during an Olympic or Commonwealth Games to protect event sponsors. Athletes did not report any problems with the blackout period, despite previous work suggesting athletes are unsupportive of social media bans during competitions (Brown, 2012; Snyder, 2014).

Sanderson (2011) reported that social media policies implemented in intercollegiate sport organisations disclose that athlete content will be monitored, yet the current research did not suggest this was the case for Australian sport organisations. Athletes did not express that they were aware their social media accounts were monitored by organisational staff. In contrast to previous work, athletes did not mention monitoring of social media which could be explained by their lack of clarity in what social media policies contained.

In addition to guidelines and restrictions set by NSOs and the AOC, athletes described team discussions before major sport events that would result in specific rules related to social media use. In the current research it appeared that senior athletes initiated discussions while the remainder of the team were able to provide input. These discussions appeared to highlight the importance of planning for potential distractions identified by Gould et al. (1999). In contrast to Brown (2012), athletes did not mention receiving complete social media bans by their organisation or coach during these competition times. Instead, athletes were encouraged to make a plan which indicates a certain level of trust coaches have for their athletes to recognise how and when social media may potentially hurt their performance during events.

The second theme related to research question six was inconsistent training and education. The theme is supportive of research that established social media training and education sessions as a management mechanism conducted by intercollegiate athletic
departments (e.g., Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015a). Yet, not all athletes experienced the same training from NSOs. Training appeared to be inconsistent across the athletes and sports. Some programs consisted of athletes receiving examples of incidents that previously occurred to demonstrate what is and is not acceptable. This strategy was also highlighted in the intercollegiate context (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Yet, athletes appeared to perceive social media training in a more positive light rather than being compliance-driven, contrasting previous research (e.g., Sanderson et al., 2015a). Instead, athletes in the current research expressed their desire to have more training focused on the benefits and drawbacks of social media based on real world examples. Receiving examples of proper and improper uses of social media through training was perceived to be a more successful method of encouraging appropriate use, aligning with the strategy identified by McAdow et al. (2017). These examples could be translated to major sport event contexts to assist athletes in managing their social media use effectively, while minimising the potential for distraction.

Athletes also received instruction from their coaches on how to manage social media during their event. The finding lends support to Sanderson et al. (2015a) who reported that student-athletes have received social media instruction from coaches during regular meetings. In addition, it appeared that coaches have emphasised planning and setting expectations to combat distractions to athletes, which supports previous research (e.g., Gould et al., 2019). Athletes who participated in the current research suggested that social media training would be beneficial for themselves and others when compared to other mechanisms (Sanderson et al., 2015a). However, some athletes reported receiving a lack of effective social media training which was similar to the findings of Geurin’s (2017) research. The findings of the current research, combined with those of Geurin’s (2017) research, reveal that Olympic and non-professional sport athletes are not receiving effective social media training. Specific to
the current context, athletes identified areas where training could be improved, with a strong focus on managing a brand while not letting it become a distraction during an event. These suggested improvements to social media training addressed concerns related to the elements of distraction athletes identified in the study. Further, the suggestions could also ensure that social media training is more consistent across athletes and the numerous Olympic sports.

The final theme related to research question six was informal assistance. Athletes sought assistance from sport management personnel if they needed help with anything related to social media. The personnel athletes would seek for assistance varied from sport psychologists to media managers. Yet, research outside of the athlete social media discipline revealed that athletes prefer to seek assistance for performance-related problems from their coach before sport administrators (Maniar, Curry, Sommers-Flanagan, & Walsh, 2001). The theme extends research that has examined the management and support of athlete social media use (e.g., Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015a) by presenting an additional mechanism used by sport organisations. Although a less formalised mechanism, the ability to seek assistance may be an effective strategy to address potential performance issues associated with social media during major sport events due to the immediate response needed.

The previous three research questions identified the elements of social media that athletes perceive to be distracting during events, the practices they undertake to minimise distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations which appeared to be inconsistent and mostly informal. Notably, the findings reiterate some of the challenges highlighted from study one. In particular, the findings restated that athletes experience negative feelings toward seeing their competitor content on social media. The notion that social media provides an escape from competition pressures was highlighted further, suggesting not all distractions associated with the platforms have negative consequences on
athletes. The following section discusses the results derived from study three.

5.4 Study Three

Study three examined how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. The study answers research questions seven and eight through the perspectives of sport administrators working in Australian NSOs.

5.4.1 Research question 7. The first four themes from study three answered the seventh research question: how do national sport organisations assist athletes in managing their social media use during major sport events? These themes consisted of policy and guidelines, social media training, providing suggestions and assistance, and monitoring athlete social media.

The first theme related to research question seven was policy and guidelines, highlighting similarities from research conducted in overseas contexts including student-athlete social media policies (Blohm 2012; McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson, 2018; Sanderson et al., 2015b). Specifically, sport administrators reported having guidelines primarily to protect the organisation. These policies assisted NSOs in establishing boundaries with athlete social media use. In doing so, sport administrators acknowledged the potential for dialectical tensions in their organisation’s social media policies as athletes are allowed to use social media, yet they are bound by certain rules and regulations, which supports early research by Sanderson (2011). Sport administrators emphasised the importance of athletes being respectful online through social media policies, which encompassed inappropriate images, comments, and offensive or derogatory language, demonstrating similarities to research conducted in intercollegiate contexts (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017). The findings of the current research, combined with those of previous research, demonstrate that administrators acknowledge the impacts an offensive athlete social media post can have on
their organisation’s reputation and that combating these incidents are crucial.

Few NSOs implemented specific event restrictions for athletes’ use of social media which may have contributed to the lack of clarity athletes reported in study two. Organisations, also, did not enforce complete social media bans, contrasting findings from Snyder (2014). Instead, time limits were enforced with social media use restricted before and after athletes competed. It appears that Australian NSOs have not taken the steps to ban social media altogether, as some administrators indicated the platforms can provide an avenue to escape from the competition pressure, potentially eliciting positive effects for athletes. The avenue for escape is discussed in further detail later in this chapter. Sport administrators built social media guidelines into contracts which are required to be signed by athletes, building on previous research by Gabison (2017). By incorporating social media guidelines into athlete contracts, administrators have the ability to take action if athletes are in breach of the policy in order to preserve the image of the organisation.

The second theme related to research question seven was social media training. Supporting previous research, social media training appears to be a more appealing method of managing athlete social media for organisations (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015a). Some athletes appeared to receive insufficient social media training as several organisations did not have training mechanisms in place at the time of the interviews. Specifically, some administrators disclosed that their organisation conducted social media training, others highlighted there were gaps in which athletes received training, while some received no training at all. For those who discussed the content of social media training sessions, a common component was using examples of positive and negative incidences. Using real world examples of proper and improper uses appears to be a successful method when enforcing appropriate use of social media for athletes and has been acknowledged by previous researchers (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017). Sport administrators
involved in study three included examples of athletes who used social media inappropriately in the past to highlight best practice. The findings echo the sentiments made by the athletes who participated in study two, suggesting that both stakeholders desire training that contains examples of both appropriate and inappropriate social media use.

Some organisations utilised training to highlight the need for athletes to create plans for dealing with distractions through social media training. The finding highlights the impact social media may have on performance, as previous researchers have acknowledged the importance of planning for distractions during major events (e.g., Gould et al., 1999; Gould et al., 2002). Creating these plans for dealing with distractions was advanced as one variable that assisted in minimising the impact on athlete performance. Meanwhile, administrators who did not conduct social media training proposed they would need to consult with athletes on what it should entail. These consultations reinforce the suggestion that sport organisations and athletes should work together to ensure the success of any training programs (Sanderson et al., 2015a). By engaging in these consultations with athletes training could become more effective and the amount of issues related to social media use at major sport events reduced.

The third theme related to research question seven was providing suggestions and assistance. Sport administrators emphasised that providing suggestions and assistance was less formalised than social media training. The finding is similar to the available assistance theme expressed by athletes in study two, demonstrating that both stakeholders acknowledge the importance of additional support for athletes during major sport events. Sport psychology research highlighted that athletes report seeking assistance for performance-related problems from their coach and sport administrators. However, athletes are more inclined to approach their coach first (Maniar et al., 2001). Similar to the results identified from study two, the current study has shown that sport administrators provide suggestions and assistance to athletes when approached, yet appear to be a last resort as athletes would approach either
their coach or team manager first. Sport administrators would facilitate interactions with sport psychologists depending on the nature of assistance required by athletes.

The finding presents a relatively new support mechanism sport organisations engage with that adds to previous literature on athlete social media management (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015a). Providing additional assistance and suggestions as required can complement training and result in a more direct impact on athlete social media use during major sport events when compared with policies or guidelines. For instance, athletes who competed in study two indicated that the AOC integrates social media guidelines into a handbook which consists of a large amount of material related to other aspects of competing at an Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games. Athletes expressed difficulty in retaining all of the information contained in the handbook, particularly social media-related content, which could create issues for organisations when athletes may breach the guidelines during event times.

The final theme related to research question seven was monitoring athlete social media. Monitoring athlete social media use is a common mechanism among intercollegiate organisations (Hopkins et al., 2012; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Yet, in contrast to previous work, sport administrators did not reveal that monitoring was conducted using specified technology and/or outsourced companies. Instead, monitoring was conducted by administrators by following athlete accounts and using alerts which may have been a more effective process during short event periods. Social media monitoring was primarily used to ensure athletes do not infringe on a sport organisation’s interest and image, and to ensure athletes are not in breach of the organisation’s social media policy. The finding demonstrates that administrators are tasked with protecting the organisation’s reputation through a number of mechanisms designed to complement each other.

Further, sport administrators did not report whether monitoring of athlete social media
was disclosed in policies, contrasting intercollegiate athletics research (e.g., Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson et al., 2015b). Moreover, athletes who participated in study two did not appear to have any knowledge about the monitoring of their social media accounts, suggesting that monitoring was not noted in these policies. A majority of sport administrators did not appear to use monitoring to observe the potential for social media distraction among athletes (e.g., posting late at night before a competition) which may help explain why athletes did not report the mechanism in study two.

**5.4.2 Research question 8.** In addition to the support and management mechanisms identified, study three also sought to gather sport administrator perspectives on what aspects of social media impact athletes. The eighth research question asked: what aspects of social media (if any) do sport administrators perceive to impact on athletes during major sport events? Three themes were identified from the analysis process including negative commentary, loss of focus, and connection and escape. The aspects of social media were reported to have both positive and negative impacts on athletes.

The first theme related to research question eight was negative commentary. The theme was identified by participants as having a negative impact on athletes. An increasing amount of research has focused on the content of negative commentary directed at athletes (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2016; Litchfield et al., 2016; 2018; Sanderson & Truax, 2014). It is evident that athletes can fall victim to online bullying if their performance does not meet their followers’ expectations. Although past research has examined the content of negative commentary directed at athletes via social media (Litchfield et al., 2016; 2018; Sanderson & Truax, 2014), few have delved into how athletes respond performance-wise. In the current research, sport administrators believed that athletes may find it difficult to compete after reading negative commentary about themselves. Athletes who experience cyber bullying may be more prone to experiencing negative feelings (Kavanagh et al., 2016; Sanderson & Truax,
2014). Yet, the current research identified that sport administrators recommended athletes ignore these comments or switch their social media platforms off to avoid seeing negative messages prior to competing. The findings provide an additional perspective to previous research that has suggested some athletes choose to ignore critical content (e.g., Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson et al., 2015a), highlighting similarities to study two. For instance, both athletes and sport administrators acknowledged the practice of switching off to avoid experiencing negative feelings associated with comments or messages they may receive. Therefore, the practices athletes utilise to address social media distractions, particularly those related to negative or unwanted commentary, may have been influenced by the assistance received from sport administrators.

The mechanisms sport administrators provide to athletes present an attempt to address the concerns surrounding negative commentary. For instance, informal training consisting of suggestions and assistance aimed to provide athletes with immediate, less formal support if an issue related to social media arose during a major sport event. David et al. (2018) highlighted that negative criticism can distract athletes during training, and the current research extends this finding as sport administrators indicated negative commentary was more impactful during a competition than previously reported.

The second theme related to research question eight was loss of focus. Sport administrators proposed that social media can cause athletes to lose focus on the appropriate activities at certain times (e.g., recovery). Maintaining focus is crucial to better performance (Gould et al., 1999). Encel et al. (2017) highlighted that specific applications of social media, such as push notifications, can cause concentration disruptions in athletes and that mental preparation for events may be harmed if they experience concentration disruptions before and during a competition. In contrast to previous studies, the current research reported that sport administrators find athletes lose focus on other aspects of competing such as recovery. The
inability to focus after distractions could also interfere with athletic performance as noted by Gould et al. (1999). Further, sport administrators indicated that some athletes extend their social media use into the night and may possibly disrupt others around them. Although not a major finding associated with the development of the theme, sleep has been reported to be impacted by social media (e.g., late night tweeting) which has performance implications for athletes (Jones et al., 2018a; Jones et al., 2018b).

The final theme related to research question eight was connection and escape. Similar to findings of the previous two studies associated with the current research, administrators suggested athletes can be positively impacted by using social media to stay connected to their family and friends (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), while also escaping the pressures of the competition environment in their down time. Further, the theme demonstrates that social media presents another avenue for athletes to seek support from their family, friends, and coaches. Support from family and friends can lead to positive performance implications for athletes (Rosenfeld et al., 1989). Therefore, the current research highlights important implications for athlete support network research by demonstrating that social media can assist facilitation of these interactions during events.

Administrators described social media as a good way for athletes to calm themselves and escape the pressures of a sport event. Engaging in relaxation strategies is an important feature of athletes’ psychological preparation for a competition or major sport event (Thomas et al., 1999; Ungerleider, 2005). Appropriate social media use during events may assist an athlete’s psychological preparation and potentially lead to better performances. Extending on Frisby and Wanta’s (2018) study, the current research indicates that social media may also be used as a diversion from stress and competition pressures by athletes during major sport events. This may be important for athletes who experience higher rates of stress during major sport events. By using social media to escape certain pressures or manage stress, athlete
performances could be enhanced as they may feel more relaxed.

Overall, study three demonstrated that NSOs employ various management mechanisms to support athletes’ use of social media, including policies and guidelines, training, suggestions and assistance, and monitoring. In addition, the support and management mechanisms identified in the current study reiterate some of the findings reported in study two, specifically, the support athletes reported receiving from NSOs. For instance, both athletes and administrators described policy, while primarily desiring social media training. Less formalised training was also reported by athletes and administrators, through assistance and suggestions. However, there were few similarities between the elements and aspects of social media that athletes and sport administrators perceived to be distracting. These differences suggest a disconnect between the distractions sport organisations attempt to manage and what athletes are actually experiencing. Sport administrators acknowledged the importance for athletes to build and maintain brands for themselves and the organisation, however, they did not report this as an element of distraction. Athletes explained that they were also encouraged by sport administrators to build their personal brand. Yet, the time required to build and maintain a brand appeared to be an issue, while athletes believed more support from organisations was necessary.

Training resources offered by sport administrators did not appear to have a large emphasis on dealing with negative commentary even though it was an issue highlighted by both stakeholders. Instead, sport administrators suggested athletes switch off their social media accounts if experiencing issues related to the platforms. Additional assistance, such as directing athletes to consult with sport psychologists, appeared to occur after incidents related to negative commentary had been brought to their attention. Athletes appeared to seek specified training from sport organisations in order to better deal with negative or unwanted commentary. The informal assistance themes appeared to demonstrate that social media
support within Australian elite sports organisations is not a key priority and is not provided in a structured manner despite both stakeholders highlighting key issues that could lead to performance implications. The differences in findings across the stakeholder groups emphasise a need for athletes and administrators to communicate the issues affecting athletes and what support is required related to their social media use. By communicating these requirements, administrators can take a more proactive approach when compared to the current informal reactive strategies to minimising issues related to athlete social media use. The inconsistencies of training and other support mechanisms may be due to the amateur status of the sports. As NSOs operate as non-profit entities in Australia, majority of the profits are returned to members through improved service delivery such as creating sport development opportunities to encourage participation at the grassroots level (Hoye et al., 2015). Therefore, NSOs may have limited resources to develop structured social media training mechanisms for athletes.

More encouraging, both sport administrators and athletes acknowledged that social media may provide a desired distraction that could be more helpful than detrimental to performance if used appropriately.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings from the current research contributed to theory in a number of ways. The current research was underpinned by three theoretical frameworks including U&G theory which directed study one, DCT which underpinned study two, and CPM which guided study three. This section describes the implications and contributions to each of the three theories, beginning with U&G theory.

5.5.1 Uses and gratifications theory. The current research contributes to U&G theory in two ways. First, it does so through the examination of athletes as both content consumers and producers. Sanderson (2013) highlighted that much of the work integrating
U&G theory and athlete social media has primarily focused on consumption, while work has begun to explore the production side. The findings of the current research begin to fill the gap identified by Sanderson (2013). Thus, the current research contributes to U&G theory and athlete social media research through an examination of both the content consumer and producer perspectives which has received attention in other disciplines (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). The promotion theme demonstrated athletes as content producers, which offers a new variable that may be unique to athletes and other public figures, and their pursuit of sponsorship.

Meanwhile, the communication with support networks and information gathering and sharing themes suggested athletes adopt a prosumer approach. The findings lend support to Lee and Ma (2012), who indicated that social media users elicit gratifications in the form of information and status seeking, and socialising, from sharing news on their platforms. Lee and Ma (2012) highlighted that sharing news or information via social media may present opportunities to create relationships. By sharing news or information on their social media platforms, athletes could cultivate new relationships with their followers and maintain connections to family and friends. The finding contributes to U&G theory research by identifying the gratifications athletes receive from using social media to gather information and communicate with family members. More specifically, athletes experienced feelings of connectedness which could promote positive performance implications.

The current research also contributes to U&G theory through the identification of two key challenges athletes revealed to be associated with social media use. Athletes reported feelings of anxiousness and achieving balance with social media use as challenges associated with social media. Few studies have examined the challenges athletes face and whether these can impact their use of social media in the future through the lens of U&G theory. Instead, examinations have focused attention on the reasons athletes use social media (e.g., Hambrick
et al., 2010). While these studies have made valuable contributions to U&G theory and athlete social media literature, the challenges identified in the current research could represent the reasons why athletes may decide not to use social media during events, and possibly become non-users. Although few researchers have examined the challenges athletes face, previous social media research has identified key aspects of the platforms that are dissatisfying to users and cause them to disengage, becoming non-users (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

As athletes in study one were not classified as non-users and did not suggest they would stop using social media altogether, the challenges reported align with previous research on the reasons why people may choose to disengage from social media as a result of failed gratifications. For instance, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008), who examined the failed gratifications of Facebook users, found that failed gratifications were evident for a number of reasons including a lack of desire to create an account, being too busy, and the aspiration to keep their information private. The current research builds upon Raacke and Bonds-Raacke’s (2008) study by revealing athletes experienced feelings of anxiousness for a number of reasons including seeing their competitors’ content. According to Raacke and Bonds-Raacke’s (2008) research, the finding could mean that athletes may decide to minimise their social media use based on negative feelings. The finding contributes to U&G theory by identifying another factor (i.e., anxiousness) which could lead to failed gratifications derived from social media. Therefore, social media users who experience anxiousness when using the platforms may seek other mediums for gratification.

Further, Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) reported one of the key reasons non-users opted out of using social media was because they were too busy. However, feelings of intimidation were reported as failed gratifications by those who used the platforms. The finding may have applications to athletes, as the current research revealed some would alter
their use for future events in an effort to focus more on themselves and their performance at the event. However, the authors also reported that some of the non-users did not feel pressure to have a social media account. In contrast, the current research reported that athletes may feel pressure to maintain a social media or online presence in order to build an athlete brand, something that may attract additional income through sponsorships (David et al., 2018; Geurin, 2017; Lobpries et al., 2018; Parris et al., 2014). Again, the theme identified in study one contributes to U&G theory by suggesting another factor which could lead to failed gratifications of social media from an athlete’s perspective. By experiencing challenges associated with balancing an appropriate amount of use, athletes may seek alternatives in order to obtain gratifications. A deeper understanding of these challenges in terms of distraction was explored further using DCT.

5.5.2 Distraction-conflict theory. The current research also contributes to DCT. Previous work began to examine the effects of social media distractions on different audiences and contexts through DCT, such as employee productivity in workplaces (e.g., Brooks, 2015; Gupta, Li, & Sharda, 2013). The current research extends DCT by examining the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting while competing at major sport events. Previous work has tested whether social media use can cause interruptions and impact work productivity and well-being (Brooks, 2015; Gupta et al., 2013). The current study explored the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting and the practices they undertake to address distractions. These identified elements may be unique to athletes competing at major sport events. DCT can be broken down into three steps (Baron, 1986). The findings of the current research contribute to the theory’s three step process.

Step one of DCT posits that others are distracting. The current research contributes to DCT by identifying the ‘others’ that can cause attentional conflicts through social media for athletes during major sport events. Athletes reported a number of people (or ‘others’)


associated with increasing the chances of a distraction during major sport events via social media. Specifically, athletes noted their followers and their competitors as key people that can lead to distraction during events, aligning with previous research (Dale, 2000; David et al., 2018). Further, prospective sponsors may also inadvertently lead to distraction in athletes as one of the key themes identified from the current research was the pressure to build and maintain an athlete brand.

Step two of DCT posits that distractions can lead to attentional conflict in individuals (Baron, 1986; Brooks, 2015). The current research identified that although the messages received were predominately positive, athletes felt an obligation to respond and struggled with finding time while engaged in a competition developing an attentional conflict. Previous work has highlighted that negative messages may have psychological impacts on athletes (e.g., David et al., 2018; Sanderson & Truax, 2014; Smith et al., 2018). Further, the influx of messages has been considered as an immediate interruption and attentional conflict in previous research (Gupta et al., 2013). Building on Gupta et al. (2013), athletes highlighted that they receive an influx of messages during events when compared to their everyday life, however, they expressed that the obligation to respond to some of these messages was creating the attentional conflict. In addition, athletes disclosed that social media made them susceptible to unwanted commentary with negative connotations from followers or other users. Unwanted commentary has been suggested to have a psychological impact on athletes, with some becoming distracted by thinking about the messages during important times (e.g., training or competing) (David et al., 2018; Fitriana & Xin, 2019). Therefore, the current research contributes to DCT by identifying the attentional conflicts athletes experience through social media during major sport events.

In terms of competitor content, athletes indicated they would make comparisons between their own preparation and abilities due to content they saw on social media, which
was suggested to cause an attentional conflict. In addition to the application to DCT, the finding builds on Dale’s (2000) work which highlighted that athletes can be distracted by seeing their competitors during events, and reveals this can be transferred to online spaces. The finding of study two contributes to DCT by demonstrating that an athlete’s competitor can present an attentional conflict through online domains.

Further, findings of the current research revealed that in addition to others being distracting (i.e., follower messages and competitor content) athletes may experience an attentional conflict related to the pressures of building and maintaining a brand. The findings may also have implications for athlete branding literature. Research has reported that athletes pursue sponsorships in order to generate an income or awareness of their sport (Clavio et al., 2013; Geurin, 2017; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012). Adding to this area of literature, the current research demonstrated it was challenging to find time to balance a brand while focusing on competing, while some athletes put more focus into their brands, which may cause their performance to suffer. From this, it could be suggested that DCT can provide researchers with a different lens and perspective to continue to explore the challenges of athlete branding. Arai et al. (2014) demonstrated that athlete performance was a primary dimension of the athlete brand model. The dimension of athletic performance and expertise encompasses an athlete’s individual sports capabilities and achievements (Arai et al., 2014).

Finally, step three of DCT posits that the attentional conflict created in step two will lead to an elevated drive, increasing the occurrence of impaired performance (Baron, 1986; Brooks, 2015). Some athletes highlighted that the elements of social media could potentially impact their athletic performance. However, more research is required, through the lens of DCT, to fully interpret the impact social media may have on athletic performance. In order to address these concerns athletes adopted two practices including a need for self-awareness and switching off and handing over control of their social media accounts. Athletes have adopted
a similar approach to minimising social media distractions to those previously utilised for traditional media (Kristiansen et al., 2011a; Kristiansen et al., 2011b). The practices contribute to DCT by revealing that athletes experiencing distractions can take approaches to minimise the level of impaired performance, which has had little attention. The application of the findings to the three-step DCT model is presented in Figure 11 through a proposed conceptual model.

Figure 11 illustrates three key groups as the ‘others’ who present distractions to athletes including their followers, competitors, and prospective sponsors which have been discussed in previous paragraphs. Each group of people created some form of attentional conflict in athletes via social media during major sport events. The findings of study two and underpinnings of DCT suggest that the distractions and attention conflict could lead to impaired performance during sport events. However, athletes undertook approaches to address these concerns including switching off and handing over control of their social media accounts and being self-aware.

Figure 11. Conceptual DCT model

Athletes reported receiving support from NSOs in managing their social media use in
addition to the two practices utilised to address distraction concerns. However, as study three revealed, administrators utilised four mechanisms to primarily protect the image of the organisation. As a result, the current research contributes to CPM.

5.5.3 Communication privacy management theory. The current research contributes to CPM in three ways. First, the current research contributes to CPM and athlete social media management efforts by examining how NSOs appear to apply privacy management restrictions and boundaries to all social media platforms, rather than focusing on one or two specific platforms which has been a point of emphasis of previous research (Pulido et al., 2017). Second, the current research contributes through a multi-stakeholder approach by including both athletes and NSO administrators as the theory allows researchers to understand the ways people personally manage private information and how they manage private information in conjunction with others (Child et al., 2009). Third, the current research contributes to CPM contextually, through the application to major sport events.

Despite several studies examining social media privacy management between athletes and sport organisations (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Pulido et al., 2017; Sanderson, 2011), few have collected data from both stakeholders. The current research builds on previous work that has utilised the theory to understand the social media policies sport organisations have implemented in order to minimise issues that may result from an athlete’s use of the platforms (e.g., McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson, 2011). Studies two and three examined the support and management mechanisms provided to athletes. As a result, the findings have provided a multi-stakeholder perspective to CPM and sport communication research. The findings present important implications to CPM and athlete social media management research as a partial disconnect between the two stakeholders was identified (Child et al., 2009). For instance, athletes were unsure of what rules existed. Some athletes also reported the rules they had knowledge about were difficult to understand and that there was a lack of
distraction-related guiding principles. Athletes argued that if guidelines and restrictions were clearer, some issues would be alleviated. A similar issue has existed in previous research, whereby, rules and regulations are presented ambiguously (Sanderson, 2011).

The research further contributes to CPM through a multi-stakeholder approach by revealing guidelines may be difficult to understand due to the minimal input athletes have on designing such restrictions. The findings suggest propositions five and six of CPM are not being met. Specifically, a breakdown in communication appears to be present in regard to the guidelines implemented by NSOs. Snyder (2014) revealed that athletes have minimal input on restrictions and guidelines implemented by sport organisations. However, some administrators who participated in the current research reported that they needed to consult with athletes in order to develop better practices. Engaging in more consultation with athletes may prevent the occurrence of communication breakdowns (proposition six of CPM). The current research also found sport administrators monitor social media content in line with policies and guidelines (Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Sanderson et al., 2015b; Snyder 2014), yet, athletes did not report monitoring when interviewed. This finding may demonstrate that athletes are not aware of monitoring, or do not perceive it to be a supportive approach to their social media use. Athletes being unaware of their social media being monitored can present more boundary turbulence for organisations (Child et al., 2009; Petronio, 2002). For instance, organisations could experience resistance from athletes who were not initially informed that their social media content was being monitored.

In addition to policy and restrictions, both athletes and administrators suggested other mechanisms used to assist and minimise issues associated with social media use. In terms of CPM, multiple strategies that teach responsible social media use can relieve tensions between athletes and organisations in response to restrictions of communication (McAdow et al., 2017). The findings build on this research by revealing that Australian NSOs are addressing
communication restrictions through more than one mechanism. By adopting multiple mechanisms, the risks of boundary turbulence (proposition six) related to social media use by athletes could be reduced. However, inconsistencies in social media training were identified. These inconsistencies would need to be addressed to ensure less boundary turbulence among the stakeholders.

The current research contributes to CPM through an application to a major sport event context, and how social media use is managed during these times. The findings support previous research that examined social media policies through the lens of CPM and the notion that sport organisations utilise policy to restrict what athlete content is broadcasted publicly, primarily to protect the image of the entities (McAdow et al., 2017; Sanderson, 2011). Few NSOs provided additional requirements or guidelines for athletes during event times.

According to the propositions underpinning CPM, the findings suggest the boundaries between NSOs and athletes are, to an extent, being broken or there is tension over these restrictions (Petronio, 2002). More specifically, the sixth proposition of CPM represents the possibility of boundary turbulence due to a breakdown in communication between the co-owners of information (Child et al., 2009). It could be suggested that there is a breakdown in communication between athletes and NSOs over event specific boundaries, as enforcement did not appear to be a priority according the administrator. Although this was the case, both athletes and administrators reported additional mechanisms to assist with social media use during events. The finding aligns with McAdow et al. (2017), who encouraged the use of multiple strategies when teaching responsible social media use. Utilising multiple strategies could relieve tensions over restrictions of communication (McAdow et al., 2017). Again, athletes appeared to have minimal input into how these mechanisms were designed and delivered, demonstrating breakdown in communication between the co-owners of
Further contributing to the major sport event context, athletes who competed at an Olympic Games appeared to be more knowledgeable about Rule 40 when compared with their NSOs’ guidelines. Rule 40 presented an additional restriction athletes were expected to follow for those competing at an IOC sanctioned event (i.e., 2018 Winter Olympic Games). The guidelines and restrictions were provided to athletes via the AOC through Rule 40.3. The findings of the current research suggest that communication boundaries are clearer and more established between athletes and the AOC. In terms of CPM, athletes were required to sign a team agreement acknowledging their acceptance of the policy. The fifth proposition of CPM contends that rules are negotiated between the two stakeholders. However, in the case of the current research it appears that negotiation did not occur, and athletes were expected to accept restrictions, which could further create boundary turbulence (Child et al., 2009; Petronio, 2002). Overall, documenting and sharing the experience of participating in a major sport event has become common practice for athletes. Competing at a major sport event is often the pinnacle of an athlete’s sporting career. However, it appears that organisations attempting to manage athlete social media during these events may experience issues, as athletes are provided with additional restrictions and given minimal opportunities for input. In line with CPM, the findings suggest management mechanisms should be negotiated between both athletes and NSOs in order to achieve more positive outcomes (Child et al., 2009; Petronio, 2002; Sanderson, 2011). In addition to the theoretical contributions discussed in this section, the findings also have implications for sport managers and sport organisations. The following section discusses the managerial implications.

5.5.4 Social media and sport. In addition to the contributions to the three theoretical frameworks, additional implications for social media and sport research exist. Social media appeared to be predominately used for private communication which was directly related to
several gratifications. This finding was uncovered by conducting research using methods that elicit data directly from social media users (i.e., athletes). These findings would not have been elicited from social media content (e.g., tweets) which has been a focus of previous research (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Hull, 2014). Thus, qualitative methods should be considered by researchers investigating similar topics related to social media and sport.

Next, by combining the findings of all three studies several overlaps were prevalent. These overlaps predominately highlight the disconnection between the support and management mechanisms NSOs and other sport organisations (e.g., AOC) provide and what athletes are experiencing through their social media use. For instance, athletes acknowledged that major sport events provide an opportunity for self-promotion, yet feel pressured to maintain this profile due to the time consuming nature of branding. As athlete branding could assist amateur athletes in subsidising their salary, sport organisations provide little assistance in this area. Similarly, organisations appear to be managing the content athletes post on their social media platforms, rather than providing guidelines related to social media distractions. Another challenge associated with social media use was feelings of anxiousness from viewing competitor content. Again, NSOs do not seem to provide any specific report to athletes on how best to address these issues.

Issues relating to negative and unwanted commentary were raised by both athletes and NSO administrators. The finding demonstrates a key challenge associated with social media’s presence in sport. Administrators acknowledged this problem, yet they only addressed this reactively when issues arose through the delivery of informal support to athletes. Although there were several of disconnections between the support provided to athletes and the support that is required, both stakeholders acknowledged that social media can provide an escape and a tool to facilitate relaxation in athletes. This theme may help explain why there are a lack of distraction related guidelines incorporated in policies. The connections and
The findings of the current research also highlight the role social media may play in additional areas of elite sport performance such as facilitating support networks. To date, support network research appears to have minimal connection to social media. Instead, recent focuses of athlete support network research have included their role as social facilitators in doping in sport (e.g., Vakhitova & Bell, 2018) and career transitions (e.g., Park & Lavallee, 2015). The nexus between social media, sport, and athlete support networks opens an area of research that should be explored further by researchers and practitioners.

5.6 Managerial Implications

The findings of the current research have practical implications for sport
administrators, organisations, and athletes. Research has highlighted that sport organisations can easily face public relations issues as a result of poor social media use on behalf of an athlete, as these issues directly impact on the entity (Sanderson, 2011). By improving practice, the reputation of sport organisations could be enhanced (Hopwood et al., 2012) as the amount of public relations issues related to athlete social media use may decrease, while criticism of organisational practices related to performance may be alleviated.

First, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, departure from a normal routine has been suggested to negatively impact an athlete and their performance during a major sport event (Greenleaf et al., 2001). The finding may deter sport administrators from banning athletes from using social media during events. Instead, organisations have the opportunity to incorporate performance-related guidelines into social media policies. For example, organisations that provide guidelines on when to switch off from social media including time specifications before competing. This practice is already implemented within some sport organisations (Campaign Creators, n.d.), but could be bolstered based on the findings of the current research. Organisations could include instructions on how to filter certain content that might be distracting (i.e., competitors’ posts), which could help athletes manage social media use. However, it would be important for organisations to conduct training alongside the policy to ensure athletes are aware and educated on why these guidelines are in place (McAdow et al., 2017).

Second, the findings may also have implications for the implementation and governance of Rule 40. Recent developments of the guidelines included changes to By-law 3 of Rule 40 which sets out the principles that permit Games’ athletes to promote their sponsors. In addition, By-law 3 provides principles for sponsors wanting to use athlete images during the Games period (Around the Rings, 2019). The boundaries appear to have been slightly reduced for future events opening improved marketing and sponsorship
opportunities for athletes and NSOs. The AOC sought feedback from the AOC Athlete’s Commission which approved the new changes (Around the Rings, 2019; Pavitt, 2019). These changes may alleviate some of the pressure athletes experience in terms of maximising their social media use prior to a major or mega sport event due to reduced restrictions on brands during event time, while NSOs can also benefit commercially. The changes also highlight the importance of organisations consulting athletes on regulations associated with social media use.

Third, the findings underscore opportunities for further development of social media training initiatives implemented by NSOs. Supporting the recommendation by Geurin (2017), organisations can advance training content by working beyond the basics of what athletes should and should not post. Further, Sanderson et al. (2015a) highlighted that it was crucial for athletes and sport administrators to work together toward solutions that are mutually beneficial. As a result of current research providing both perspectives, it is important for athletes and sport organisations to work together to ensure social media training programs benefit both the athletes and organisations. The findings reveal the need for sport organisations to educate athletes in ways that may help them manage challenges and negative feelings related to social media (Sanderson et al., 2015a). Sport organisations may also benefit by including strategies on how to filter competitors’ posts so they are not visible in the athlete’s social media feeds, as this was a source of anxiety for some athletes. Training or education resources could include developing social media plans to minimise the challenges faced by athletes. The plan may include athletes choosing to unfollow competitors’ feeds before competitions to minimise content showing event-related information and reduce the potential to cause anxiousness.

Athletes who participated in the current research made several additional suggestions on how social media training could be improved and what would be beneficial for them. As
noted by Arai et al. 2014, athlete performance is a primary dimension of the athlete brand model. In order to maintain this dimension, it is important for athletes to find a balance between branding and event preparation and focus. Therefore, training initiatives could be improved by including strategies on how athletes could effectively build their brand while minimising issues arising from distraction. As administrators who participated in study three mentioned the need for athletes to build their brand and the reputation of the organisation, this component of training would benefit both parties.

Branding support for amateur athletes, such as those investigated in the current research, should become a priority for NSOs and other Olympic sport organisations due to the limited amount of coverage and sponsorship opportunities when compared to professional sport (Crossman et al., 1994; Hoye et al., 2015). Administrators could seek the assistance of some of their commercial partners to develop a program designed for amateur athletes. This program could consist of suggestions or plans on how to maintain a brand during periods in which major sport events are not held. By enhancing the educational programs offered to athletes, sport organisations can be afforded benefits such as potential joint commercial opportunities between the two stakeholders. These commercial opportunities could benefit athletes through supplemental income, while organisations could utilise any monetary funding for other initiatives (e.g., sport development programs) due to their non-profit nature (Hoye et al., 2015).

Fourth, the Time Well Spent movement, which aims to minimise the impact technology has on society and individuals, highlighted that social media can increase stress and anxiety amongst users (Centre for Humane Technology, n.d). The research conducted in this thesis supports this finding, with studies one and two revealing some athletes experience feelings of stress and anxiousness due to social media use. Research outside of the sport context also indicated that social media addiction and lack of mindfulness can lead to
emotional exhaustion (Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). A number of athletes disclosed that although they used social media to relax they could find alternative activities that allow for relaxation. Therefore, sport organisations may seek to promote techniques that can enhance athlete wellbeing and minimise stress and anxiety such as mindfulness training. Mindfulness training has been suggested to reduce stress in some athletes and potentially strengthen their performances and may assist athletes in finding balance with their social media use (Birrer, Röthlin, & Morgan, 2012; Goodman, Kashdan, Mallard, & Schumann, 2014).

Finally, the findings present an opportunity for sport organisations and sport psychologists to assist athletes in developing appropriate coping and psychological skills to deal with any negative feelings related to, and beyond, social media use through improved personal development programs. As emphasised by athletes, organisations could benefit from focusing on these coping skills in personal development programs. Mental training has been beneficial, especially when it was related to dealing with personal issues, and managing anxiety and emotions during events (Wrisberg, Simpson, Loberg, Withycombe, & Reed, 2009). As the feeling of anxiousness was one of the key findings of the current research, sport organisations may benefit from providing athletes with training on how to cope with these feelings during an event. Further, previous research has revealed that athletes have the ability to improve regulation of focus and emotional control with an enhanced understanding of these psychological skills (Dohme, Bloom, Piggott, & Backhouse, 2019).

5.7 Limitations

There were a number of limitations associated with the current research that need to be acknowledged. The following section outlines five limitations. These limitations primarily relate to the research design and samples employed across the three studies. First, accessibility to athletes was limited to the conclusion of a major event. Therefore,
participants were asked to recall how they used social media and how it impacted them during events. This is a common problem for researchers, particularly those that utilise a questionnaire method with respondents often unable to recount the required information (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). In order to address this limitation, a majority of athletes were contacted within a week after their competition of study one. Although this was the case, not all participants completed the open-ended questionnaire within this time frame. Questionnaires were completed between one and six weeks after events. Recall may be affected due to the time lapse since the event occurred.

Second, study one identified that four athletes chose not to use social media during a major sport event. Although the challenges identified from study one and the elements of social media perceived to be distracting may present information on why some athletes choose to disengage from social media, the current research did not explore the reasons the four athletes made this decision. These athletes were asked why they did not use social media; however, the use of a questionnaire restricted any further follow-up questions to obtain more in-depth information.

Third, due to the exploratory design of the current research and focus on athletes and sport administrators, the role of support networks was not discussed in depth. Athletes from both study one and study two acknowledged the importance of support networks such as their family and friends. These support networks played an important role by taking control of athletes’ social media profiles during events to alleviate distractions. Researchers have acknowledged the importance of support networks providing athletes with emotional support, as this support can lead to better performances (Freeman et al., 2009; Rees & Hardy, 2000). Yet, few have explored the role of support networks in social media contexts.

Fourth, while best efforts were made to interview the most appropriate person regarding the management and support of athlete social media use, a number of participants
of study three reported that coaches and/or team managers have additional control over how athletes use social media during events. Further, sport administrators disclosed that they receive additional guidelines from NOCs in preparation for mega events like the Olympic Games. Athletes also reported receiving assistance from government-funded state sport academies. These organisations represent additional stakeholders that were not included in the current research.

Fifth, limitations exist within the sampling procedure. As the researcher was based in Australia, purposeful and convenience sampling approaches were used to obtain access to Australian athletes and sport administrators. By using this approach, the findings of the current research are not generalisable and may not be applicable to all athletes and their experiences using social media during major sport events (Etikan et al., 2016). However, Auerback and Silverstein (2003) explained that qualitative research is not focused on generalising findings, but often constitutes the first step in building knowledge of a particular area. Although the purposeful and convenience sampling approaches were not ideal, the pragmatic constraints of accessing athletes prohibited the use of other sampling procedures (Suri, 2011). Convenience sampling is also used based on the assumption that the researcher wants to understand and/or gain insight to a specific topic (Merriam, 1998). As Australian athletes have been criticised over their use of social media at past major sport events with the suggestion that the platforms presented distractions to athletes, the group provided a valuable sample.

Next, the sample of athletes who participated in studies one and two competed in both team and individual sports. Previous research has noted contrasts in the ways individual and team sport athletes use social media for promotional purposes (Taniyev, Ishaq, & Gordon, 2018). As a result, there may be behaviours unique to individual and team sport athletes. The differences in behaviours may influence an athlete’s social media uses and gratifications,
particularly around motives, brand building, self-promotion, and dealing with other teammates’ comments. However, it was beyond the scope of the current research to determine whether these differences exist, which presents an area for future research.

Finally, the current research did not include a gendered analysis of social media use, the challenges faced, and the elements of distraction experienced by athletes due to a focus on understanding these topics more broadly. Researchers have previously conducted gendered analyses of athlete social media content and found some differences in the content produced (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012). Therefore, the elements of distractions may also vary among male and female athletes, and if this is the case, the practices they undertake may also vary.

Overall, there were a number of limitations associated with the current research. However, addressing these limitations represents areas for future research and avenues to build on the findings from the current research. The following section details these areas for future research according to the limitations associated with the current research.

5.8 Future Research

The following section outlines four areas for future research based on the limitations previously addressed. First, researchers might consider adopting a mixed methods approach to examine the uses and gratifications for social media and/or the content of the comments (positive and negative) directed at athletes in order to address the issues of recall which were present in the current research. Utilising a mixed methods approach may assist by including a content analysis of social media posts during events and interviews with athletes. A research design including a content analysis and interviews would need to be approached with caution by researchers, as the confidentiality of athletes may easily be breached in the presentation of the results.

Second, as the current research only attracted four athletes who did not use social
media during their event, future research could seek to further explore reasons for choosing to
disengage from social media in the preparation and event phases, and the potential positive or
negative impacts this may have on them personally and professionally. The current research
also noted a number of challenges encountered by athletes who continue to use social media
during events. However, by including non-users in a study, researchers could further
determine the additional reasons that lead to failed gratifications of social media. This
research would benefit from the perspectives of athletes through interviews. Interviews would
enable more in-depth information to be collected, whereas athletes may only provide some
brief responses to open-ended questionnaires as experienced in study one of the current
research. U&G theory provides an appropriate lens to examine this phenomenon as it allows
researchers to investigate failed gratifications (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Third, to further explore the role of athlete support networks in addressing social
media distractions researchers could utilise a qualitative research design including interviews.
Interviews should be conducted with those that assist athletes with their social media during
major sport events (e.g., family or friends). Interviews could explore how and why these
groups take control of athlete social media profiles and if there are any additional strategies
they adopt during events to minimise the impact social media distractions may have on
performance. Such a study would also extend support network research to a social media
context.

Fourth, although effort was made to interview the most appropriate person regarding
the management and support of athlete social media use, the findings demonstrate that
additional personnel were involved in assisting athletes manage their use of the platforms.
Therefore, future research could attempt to interview coaches and/or team managers to gather
a more holistic picture of how athlete social media is managed and perceived. For instance,
Gould et al. (2019) indicated that coaches have begun to emphasise setting expectations,
particularly with younger athletes, around mobile phone and social media use to combat distractions. However, coaches were not included in the current research. In order to address the limitation, additional stakeholders that could form part of such a study include administrators working within NOCs (e.g., AOC and CGF) and government funded academies. However, researchers may find it difficult to access these samples without the support of an industry partner. If researchers were to overcome access difficulties, the findings from such a study could facilitate better integrated support provided to athletes from all levels of sport governance.

Next, future research may attempt to investigate the differences in gratifications sought and obtained between individual and team sport athletes. Research has identified that personality characteristics vary for individual and team sports athletes (Nia & Besharat, 2010). Further, a recent examination adopted a content analysis approach in order to understand whether there were differences between individual and team sport Twitter content (Taniyev et al., 2018). However, future research that attempts to distinguish any differences between the gratifications sought and obtained by individual and team sport athletes would benefit from a qualitative approach either through surveys or interviews. U&G theory provides an appropriate lens to examine this.

Finally, there have been several examples of female athletes experiencing social media abuse. For example, Australian Football League (AFL) athlete Tayla Harris was subject to a substantial amount of online abuse based on a photo or her competing in the AFLW league (Symons, 2019). Therefore, future research should consist of a gendered analysis to investigate any differences or similarities in the uses and gratifications, challenges, and distractions experienced by female and male athletes in relation to their social media use during major sport events. Both U&G theory and DCT would assist in understanding any available differences or similarities.
5.9 Conclusion

The purpose of this research was threefold: (1) to investigate why athletes use social media, the gratifications they receive, and the challenges they experience during a major sport event, (2) to explore the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address distractions, and the support they receive from sport organisations, and (3) to examine how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. Three studies employing qualitative methods were conducted in order to achieve these aims. These studies were conducted in the context of major sport events due to increased attention and pressure on elite athletes.

Study one consisted of an open-ended questionnaire which yielded 53 responses from Australian elite athletes that were included for analysis. The questionnaire identified three key reasons why athletes consume and produce content on social media including communication with support networks, promotion, and information sharing and gathering. The questionnaire also presented three gratifications athletes received from their social media use including connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. Finally, two challenges were associated with athlete use of social media: anxiousness and balancing social media use.

Interview data collected from 15 athletes for study two identified the elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting, the practices they undertake to address these concerns, and the support they receive from sport organisations. Study two identified five elements of social media athletes perceive to be distracting in both negative and positive ways: obligation to respond, susceptibility to unwanted commentary, pressures to build and maintain a brand, competitors’ content, and escape. Two practices undertaken to address social media distractions were found including need for self-awareness and switching off and
handing over control. Finally, athletes reported receiving support in three ways including guidelines and restrictions, training and education, and available assistance. Collectively, the findings of both study one and two suggest that athletes experience both benefits and challenges associated with social media use.

Interview data collected from seven sport administrators for study three examined how national sport organisations manage athlete social media use and their perceptions of social media as a distraction. The study revealed NSOs utilise four formal and informal mechanisms including policy and guidelines, social media training, providing suggestions and assistance, and monitoring athlete social media. Three aspects of social media were found to have both negative and positive impacts on athletes during events including negative commentary, loss of focus, and connection and escape.

Taken together, the findings of the three studies demonstrate that athletes experience both unwanted and welcomed distractions during major sport events through social media, making it difficult for sport organisations to manage. Although distractions were primarily considered to have a negative impact on athletes, both stakeholders acknowledged that social media can also provide an escape from the pressures of a competition. Importantly, the findings from the three studies highlighted a disconnect between the distractions sport organisations attempt to manage and what athletes are actually experiencing. It appears that organisations are striving to minimise negative impacts of social media on athletes and their entities through a number of strategies, however, there are areas where these mechanisms (e.g., training) can be improved with input from athletes.

Overall, the collective findings from the current research suggest that social media use can be both beneficial and challenging for athletes, while highlighting the importance of education. The findings from the current research contribute to the theoretical understanding of athlete use of social media and organisational support. Consequently, the findings also
have implications for sport managers tasked with enforcing social media management strategies. It is hoped that the findings of this research will assist sport organisations in developing or improving training provided to athletes to ensure social media is used effectively and to minimise any potential for negative outcomes.
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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Calendar of Targeted Major Sport Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event Name</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>End</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>FIVB Men’s World Championships Qualification Tournament (Volleyball)</td>
<td>12 – 16 July</td>
<td>1 – 5 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Squash Doubles Championships</td>
<td>1 – 5 August</td>
<td>1 – 5 August</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>September</td>
<td>UCI Mountain Bike World Championships</td>
<td>5 – 10 September</td>
<td>5 – 10 September</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October</td>
<td>Oceania Cup (Hockey)</td>
<td>11 – 15 October</td>
<td>11 – 15 October</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November</td>
<td>Pacific-Asia Curling Championships</td>
<td>2 – 9 November</td>
<td>2 – 9 November</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FIVB World Championships</td>
<td>14 – 30 July</td>
<td>14 – 30 July</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FIBA Asia Cup (Basketball)</td>
<td>8 – 20 August</td>
<td>8 – 20 August</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ITU World Triathlon Grand Final</td>
<td>14 – 17 September</td>
<td>14 – 17 September</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>World Archery Championships</td>
<td>15 – 22 October</td>
<td>15 – 22 October</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>UCI Urban World Championships</td>
<td>8 – 12 November</td>
<td>8 – 12 November</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>U23s Rowing World Championships</td>
<td>19 – 23 July</td>
<td>19 – 23 July</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Volleyball Championship</td>
<td>9 – 17 August</td>
<td>9 – 17 August</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>UCI Road World Championships</td>
<td>17 – 24 September</td>
<td>17 – 24 September</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>World Cup Final Rifle/Pistol/Shotgun</td>
<td>23 – 30 October</td>
<td>23 – 30 October</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>IBSF Bobsleigh World Cup</td>
<td>9 – 11 November</td>
<td>9 – 11 November</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FIVB World Grand Prix (Volleyball)</td>
<td>22 – 23 July</td>
<td>22 – 23 July</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Women’s Rugby World Cup</td>
<td>9 – 26 August</td>
<td>9 – 26 August</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games</td>
<td>17 – 27 September</td>
<td>17 – 27 September</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Fast 5 Netball World Series</td>
<td>28 – 29 October</td>
<td>28 – 29 October</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Trampoline Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>9 – 12 November</td>
<td>9 – 12 November</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FIBA Asia Cup (Basketball)</td>
<td>23 – 29 July</td>
<td>23 – 29 July</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Badminton World Championships</td>
<td>21 – 27 August</td>
<td>21 – 27 August</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rowing World Championships</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FINA Diving Grand Prix</td>
<td>9 – 12 November</td>
<td>9 – 12 November</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asian Volleyball Championship</td>
<td>24 July – 1 August</td>
<td>24 July – 1 August</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Canoe Slalom World Championships</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2017 Tournament of Nations (Women’s Soccer)</td>
<td>27 July – 3 August</td>
<td>27 July – 3 August</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Wildwater Canoeing World Championships</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
<td>23 September – 1 October</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Beach Volleyball World Champs</td>
<td>28 July – 6 August</td>
<td>28 July – 6 August</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Artistic Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>27 September – 9 October</td>
<td>27 September – 9 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Dates</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior World Championships (Wrestling)</td>
<td>21 – 26 August</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISU World Cups of Short Track Speed Skating</td>
<td>28 September – 1 October &amp; 5 – 8 October</td>
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<tr>
<td>Finn Gold Cup (Sailing)</td>
<td>1 – 10 September</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Japan Cup (Softball)</td>
<td>25 – 27 August</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Audi Quatro Winter Games</td>
<td>25 August – 10 September</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>AIBA World Championships Boxing</td>
<td>26 August – 3 September</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>World Roller Games</td>
<td>26 August – 10 September</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships</td>
<td>30 August – 3 September</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISSF World Championship Shotgun (Shooting Sports)</td>
<td>30 August – 11 September</td>
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<tr>
<td>NACRA 17 World Championships</td>
<td>5 – 10 September</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Laser World Championships (Sailing)</td>
<td>12 – 19 September</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2018 Winter Olympic Games</td>
<td>9 – 25 February</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018 Commonwealth Games</td>
<td>4 – 15 April</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018 Commonwealth Games</td>
<td>4 – 15 April</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix B: Study One Open-Ended Questionnaire

#### Section 1: Demographics

Q1: Which of the following major sport events have you recently competing in?

- [ ] 2017 Artistic Gymnastics World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games
- [ ] 2017 Asian Men’s Volleyball Championships
- [ ] 2017 Asian Women’s Volleyball Championships
- [ ] 2017 Audi Quattro Winter Games (NZ)
- [ ] 2017 Badminton BWF World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Beach Volleyball World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Commonwealth and Oceania Weightlifting Championships
- [ ] 2017 Fast 5 Netball World Series
- [ ] 2017 FINA Diving Grand Prix (Gold Coast)
- [ ] 2017 FINA World Championships
- [ ] 2017 FINA World Junior Swimming Championships
- [ ] 2017 IAAF World Athletics Championships
- [ ] 2017 ICF Sprint Canoe World Championships
- [ ] 2017 ICF Canoe Slalom World Championships
- [ ] 2017 ITU World Triathlon Grand Final
- [ ] 2017 Ocean Cup (Hockey)
- [ ] 2017 Oktoberfest 7s
- [ ] 2017 Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Short Track Speed Skating World Cup
- [ ] 2017 Trampoline Gymnastics World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Tournament of Nations
- [ ] 2017 U23s Rowing World Championships
- [ ] 2017 UCI MTB World Championships
- [ ] 2017 Women’s Rugby World Cup
- [ ] 2017 World Rowing Championships
- [ ] 2017 World Archery Championships
- [ ] 2017 World Roller Games
- [ ] 2017 WSF World Doubles Squash Championships
- [ ] None of the above
- [ ] Other (please provide) __________

Q2: Are you:

- [ ] Male
- [ ] Female
- [ ] Prefer not to disclose

Q3: Please record your age

#### Section 2: Social Media Platforms & Access

Q4: Do you have a social media account/s?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Q5: Do you intend to access your social media accounts during your selected major sports event?

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Q6: Please select which of the following platforms you **planned** to access during your selected major sports event: (You may select more
Q7: How often do you access each of the following social media accounts for everyday use? Please provide an answer for every platform. (If you do not use a certain platform, please select never).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Several times daily</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q8: How often did you plan to access each of the following social media accounts during your selected major sports event? Please provide an answer for every platform. (If you do not use a certain platform, please select never).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Several times daily</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Section 3: Purposes for Social Media Use

U&G theory assumptions (motivations, gratifications sought & potential for failed gratification)

Q9: For what purposes will you use social media during your selected major sports event? Please describe.

Q10: Are you required to promote sponsors during your selected major sports event via your social media accounts? If so, how did you plan to do this?

Q11: If you could not use social media during your selected major sports events, how would it impact you? Please describe in as much detail as possible.

Q12: How does using social media during a major sports event benefit you? Please describe in as much detail as possible.

Q13: What satisfaction did you intend to gain from using social media during your selected major sport event?

Q14: How often did you access each of the following social media accounts?
accounts during your selected major sports event? Please provide an answer for every platform. (If you do not use a certain platform, please select never).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Several times daily</th>
<th>Daily</th>
<th>Several times a week</th>
<th>Once a week</th>
<th>Once a month</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
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<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

U&G theory assumptions (motivations, gratifications sought & potential for failed gratification)

Q15: For what purposes did you use social media during your selected major sports event? Please describe.
Q16: How did using social media during your selected major sports event benefit you? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
Q17: How were your goals for social media use at your selected major sports event achieved? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
Q18: How did using social media at your selected major sports event make you feel (e.g., relaxed, happy, anxious). Please describe in as much detail as possible.
Q19: Would you change the way you use social media for future major sport events? Please describe in as much detail as possible.
Appendix C: Study Two Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Research Project: Social media usage among elite athletes:
An exploration of athlete usage during major events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To be completed by Interviewer:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Date, Time and Location:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Participant:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and talk about your thoughts on athlete social media usage. Before we begin I just want to make sure that you are comfortable with the procedure that was outlined in the initial request for your involvement.

**Why is the research being conducted?** Social media has had profound impacts on sport, particularly athletes. Due to the increase use of social media, criticisms have been made about the habits of Australian athletes constantly updating their accounts during major competitive events and whether this is becoming a distraction, and resulting in poorer than expected performances. This research aims to investigate how and why athletes use social media during major events. The research also proposes to provide an understanding on whether or not athletes’ usage of social media is perceived to be distracting during the event. Perspectives will be obtained from athletes and managers of sport organisations.

**What you will be asked to do.** You have been asked to participate in a semi-structured interview (with open-ended questions) to investigate, and understand how social media is perceived to potential impact athletic performance during a major event. The interview is planned to run approximately 30 to 60 minutes, and with your consent, the interview will be audio recorded for analysis. However should there be any time where you do not want...
things recorded, we can turn off the recording device for a period.

**The expected benefits of the research.** The outcomes of this research will develop a better understanding of how and why athletes use social media during major events. Additionally, the research will also evaluate the effectiveness of social media education resources Australian sport organisations provide athletes. The results could create an opportunity for Australian sport organisations to further develop social media educational resources that promote appropriate social media usage during major events.

**Risks to you.** There are no risks involved in your participation in this research. Any information you provide will be closely guarded. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not need to answer every question unless you wish to do so. You are also fine to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Do you have any questions before we start?

*Switch on audio device*

**Athlete Profile and Background Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>Gender:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Event:</td>
<td>Sport:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of representative years at international level:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest level of educational attainment (please circle the best option):</th>
<th>Completed High school</th>
<th>Vocational training / course</th>
<th>Undergraduate university degree</th>
<th>Postgraduate university degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
### Interview Questions

These questions will focus on your perspectives of social media and the potential for distraction during major sport events.

1. Do you think using social media is distracting during the preparation phase of a major sport event? *Please elaborate on why you think this.*
2. Do you think using social media is distracting during the major sport event? *Please elaborate on why or why not you think this.*
3. Did you have a plan for using social media during `<insert event>`?
   a. *If yes, please describe what this plan consisted of.*
   b. *Please describe what made this plan effective/ineffective.*
   c. *If no, would you consider implementing a plan in future?*
4. How often did you access social media during the event? *Hourly, couple of times a day, once a day etc.?*
5. Did you feel pressured to post or be on social media during the event? *Please elaborate.*
   a. *If so, who provided this pressure?*
6. When accessing your social media accounts, did you read messages and posts that followers sent you via social media during `<insert event>`?
   a. *If yes, how did you react to or treat positive messages or messages of support?*
   b. *If yes, how did you react to or treat unwanted and negative messages?*
   c. *If no, why did you choose not to read any messages?*
7. How do you perceive these messages in terms of distraction during a major event? *Do you find them distracting or part of everyday life?*
8. Do you read every comment or reply made on a post of yours?
9. How do you perceive the pressure to perform through social media when compared with traditional media?
10. Did you ever feel a little separation anxiety from your phone or social media while you were warming up or getting ready to compete?
11. Was there a time when or where your attention was focused on social media rather than the event you were competing in? *Please describe*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic 2B</th>
<th>DCT Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>social media as a negative distraction</td>
<td>this experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. How did this time potentially impact your performance?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. How could a reliance or time spent on social media affect athletic performance levels? Please elaborate on your thoughts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. How do you think you could minimise social media distractions for future events? Would you consider doing this?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 2B</td>
<td>DCT Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>----------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>social media as a positive distraction</td>
<td>14. How did you manage your social media use during the event so it did not cause a distraction to you? Please elaborate on your strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Do you use social media as a positive/or escape? (e.g., read content unrelated to your sport/event). If so, how?</td>
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<td>16. Do you think using social media as a positive resource can benefit your performance? If so, how and please elaborate on why you think this.</td>
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<td>17. Why do you think social media is distracting for some athletes and not others?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topic 3</td>
<td>Organisation policy/ Education/ support</td>
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<tr>
<td>The remainder of the questions will focus on the support you receive from support networks in managing your social media use.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Are you aware of any support available to you that aims to help manage your social media use effectively? If so, what are these forms of support?</td>
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<td>19. Are you aware of any policies/guidelines implemented by your support network? If so, what do they entail?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Probe: who are the policies distributed by: Coaches? NSO’s? SIS/SAS?</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. How are you made aware of any policies or guidelines your organisation has implemented? Please describe this process.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Probe: who makes you aware: Coaches? NSO’s? SIS/SAS?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Are you aware of any consequences if you do not follow the guidelines? If so, please describe.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Does this policy influence your social media usage? If so, how?</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. Please describe any recommendations you have to ensure sport organisations are transparent for athletes in the communication of these policies.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. What components would be more effective to you as an</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
athlete?

24. Have you attended social media training? If so, how has it helped you?

25. Are you required to attend social media training provided by your support network? If so, what does this training entail?
   - **Probe:** who presents this training: Coaches? NSO’s? SIS/SAS?
   - **Follow-up:** How does this training influence your social media usage?

26. What makes this training effective or ineffective?

27. What can sport organisations do for athletes to minimise social media distractions during major sport events?

---

**Final Thoughts**

Those were all the questions I wanted to ask today.

28. Do you have any final thoughts about your social media usage during a major sport event or around distractions/support? Please feel free to comment.

   Thank you for participating in this interview process.
Appendix D: Study Three Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Research Project: Social media usage among elite athletes:
An exploration of athlete usage during major events

To be completed by Interviewer:
Interview Date, Time and Location: __________________________________________
Interview Participant: ______________________________________________________

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me and talk about your thoughts on athlete social media usage. Before we begin I just want to make sure that you are comfortable with procedure that was outlined in the initial request for your involvement.

Why is the research being conducted?

Social media has had profound impacts on sport, particularly athletes. Due to the increase use of social media, criticisms have been made about the habits of Australian athletes constantly updating their accounts during major competitive events and whether this is becoming a distraction, and resulting in poorer than expected performances. This research aims to investigate how and why athletes use social media during major events. The research also proposes to provide an understanding on whether or not athletes’ usage of social media is perceived to be distracting during the event. Perspectives will be obtained from athletes and managers of sport organisations.

What you will be asked to do

You have been asked to participate in a semi-structured interview (with open-ended questions) to investigate, and understand how social media is perceived to potentially impact athletic performance during a major event. The interview is planned to run approximately 30 to 60 minutes, and with your consent, the interview will be audio recorded for analysis. However should there be any time where you do not want things recorded, we can turn off the recording device for a period.

The expected benefits of the research

The outcomes of this research will develop a better understanding of how and why athletes
use social media during major events. Additionally, the research will also evaluate the
effectiveness of social media education resources Australian sport organisations provide
athletes. The results could create an opportunity for Australian sport organisations to further
develop social media educational resources that promote appropriate social media usage
during major events.

**Risks to you**

There are no risks involved in your participation in this research. Any information you
provide will be closely guarded. Your participation is completely voluntary. You do not need
to answer every question unless you wish to do so. You are also fine to withdraw from the
study at any time without penalty. Do you have any questions before we start?

*Switch on audio device*

**Participant Profile and Background Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age:</th>
<th>18 – 24</th>
<th>25 – 34</th>
<th>35 – 44</th>
<th>45 – 54</th>
<th>55+</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender:</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sport:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job Title:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Years in role:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of educational attainment (please circle the best option):</td>
<td>Completed High school</td>
<td>Vocational training / course</td>
<td>Undergraduate university degree</td>
<td>Postgraduate university degree</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General</th>
<th>1. In your opinion, how should athletes use social media during major sport events? (Please describe in as much detail as possible).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Social Media Policy | **Social Media Policy**
(CPM boundaries and previous social media policy literature) | 2. Does your sport have a social media policy to guide athletes?  
   a. Yes  
   b. No → Would you consider implementing a social media policy for your athletes? Why/why not? (Please describe in as much detail as possible). |
| 3. What do you feel is most important about the policy? (Please describe in as much detail as possible). |
| 4. Can you provide an example of having to enforce this policy? How did this unfold? (Please describe in as much detail as possible) |
| 5. How is the policy communicated to athletes?  
   a. Email  
   b. Face to face  
   c. Other (please specify) |
| 6. Can you provide an example of a time that you believe the social media policy was effective? (Please describe in as much detail as possible) |
| 7. Can you provide an example of when the social media policy was breached/violated? (Please describe in as much detail as possible). |
| 8. Please detail how you/your sport responds if athletes are in breach of the policy. (Please describe the steps taken in as much detail as possible). |
| Social Media Education | **Social Media Education**
(CPM boundaries and previous social media education) | 9. Does your sport educate athletes on appropriate social media use?  
   a. Yes  
   b. No → Would you consider implementing social media education sessions for your athletes? Why/why not? (Please describe). |
| 10. Can you please provide an example of how you/your sport educates athletes on appropriate social media use? (Please describe in as |
11. How do you perceive social media education in terms of effectiveness (e.g., does it assist athletes in minimising social media distractions?) Why/Why not?

12. How are educational resources communicated to athletes?
   a. Email
   b. Face to face
   c. Other (please specify)

13. How often are athletes given the opportunity to participate in social media education?
   a. Once a month
   b. Once every 6 months
   c. Once a year
   d. Other (please specify)

14. Do your athletes receive social media education elsewhere? If so, where and what does it contain? (Please describe in as much detail as possible).

15. Are your athletes provided with social media education before a major sport event? Why/Why not? (Please describe in as much detail as possible).

16. Do you or someone within your organization monitor your athletes' social media accounts?
   a. Yes
   b. No → Would you consider implementing some form of social media monitoring strategy for athletes? Why/Why not?

17. How and why is social media monitoring conducted? (Please be as detailed as possible).

18. Do you perceive social media as a distraction for athletes when competing at major sport events? Why/Why not? (Please describe in as much detail as possible).

19. Have you ever experienced an incident whereby an athlete has been
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>How has social media changed the way your sport prepares athletes who are competing at major sport events? (Please describe in as much detail as possible).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In your opinion is social media a good thing or a bad thing for athletes in 2018?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Ethical Clearance Letter

GRIFFITH UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Dear Miss Hayes 15 May 2017

I write in relation to your application for ethical clearance for your project "Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events" (GU Ref No: 2017/285). The research ethics reviewers resolved to grant your application a clearance status of "Fully Approved".

This is to confirm receipt of the remaining required information, assurances or amendments to this protocol.

Consequently, I reconfirm my earlier advice that you are authorised to immediately commence this research on this basis.

The standard conditions of approval attached to our previous correspondence about this protocol continue to apply.

Regards

Kim Madison | Human Research Ethics
Office for Research
Griffith University | Nathan | QLD 4111 | Level 0, Bray Centre (N54)
T +61 7 373 58043 | email k.madison@griffith.edu.au
Appendix F: Informed Consent (Study One)

PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

GU Ref. number: 2017/285

Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Michelle Hayes</th>
<th>Dr Caroline Riot</th>
<th>Dr Kevin Filo</th>
<th>Dr Andrea Geurin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PhD Student</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>External Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griffith Business School</td>
<td>Griffith Business School</td>
<td>Griffith Business School</td>
<td>New York University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="mailto:michelle.hayes3@griffithuni.edu.au">michelle.hayes3@griffithuni.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:c.riot@griffith.edu.au">c.riot@griffith.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:k.filo@griffith.edu.au">k.filo@griffith.edu.au</a></td>
<td><a href="mailto:andrea.geurin@nyu.edu">andrea.geurin@nyu.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0450 674 563</td>
<td>(07) 3735 6663</td>
<td>(07) 5552 8719</td>
<td>+1 212-912-3673</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why is the research being conducted? Social media has had profound effects on sport, particularly athletes. Some sport stakeholders have criticised how much time athletes spend on social media during a competitive event, even suggesting it to be a distraction to athletes that could diminish performance. Therefore, the proposed research aims to understand how and why athletes use social media during major events, while also gaining their perspectives on whether they believe social media has become a distraction. The research will examine athlete social media usage in the context of major sports events from mid to late 2017. The larger project will also gain the perspectives of coaches and potentially managers within the relevant sport organisations. The research project is a component of Ms. Michelle Hayes’ academic program (Doctor of Philosophy).

What you will be asked to do. Individuals selected for this project will be asked to participate in an online questionnaire. The first section of the questionnaire aims to understand how athletes plan to use social media during the event. The second section of the questionnaire aims to understand how athletes actually used social media during the event.
The questionnaire will provide an understanding of: (1) how and why athletes use social media during major events and (2) what gratification they receive when doing so. The questionnaire consists of multiple choice and open-ended questions and should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened.** This study hopes to gain a range of athletes, across a variety of sports, to participate in the project. Athletes who have social media accounts are being approached as subjects for the study. As the primary objective is to understand how and why athletes use social media during major events and the potential impact it could have on athletic performance, athletes who are active during competitions will be recruited to participate in the questionnaire.

Information will be coded so that the identity of participants is protected. You will not be personally identified in any reports and publications resulting from this research.

**The expected benefits of the research.** The insights obtained from this research will create an opportunity for NSOs to further develop and/or implement social media educational resources for athletes that promote appropriate usage during major events to minimise distraction.

**Risks to you.** Possible risks and discomforts for all research participants will be no greater than that in daily life.

**Your participation is voluntary.** Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can exit the study at any time.

**Your confidentiality.** Questionnaire data will remain anonymous and confidential.

**Ethical conduct.** Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research project, you should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.
Feedback to you. A research summary will be compiled containing the key findings of the research. If you wish to view the final report, it can be obtained from the researchers through the contact information given. The results will be reported in a PhD thesis as well as conferences presentations and academic journals.

Data storage. All research data (questionnaire responses and analysis) will be retained in an electronic password protected file at Griffith University for a period of 5 years before being destroyed.

Consent. Completion of this questionnaire will be taken as your consent to participate in the research.

Prize draw terms & conditions

1. The prize draw is being run by researchers from Griffith University to encourage participation in the ‘Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events’ research project questionnaire.

2. By electing to participate, you accept these terms and conditions as governing the prize draw. Instructions on how to enter the prize draw and details advertising the questionnaire form part of the conditions. Any personal information you provide to us in the course of entering the prize draw will be dealt with by us in accordance with our privacy policy (published at: http://www.griffith.edu.au/aboutgriffith/governance/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan).

3. Two prizes will be awarded in prize draw, each prize being a gift card and being worth $100 and $50. Should the advertised prize become unavailable as a result of circumstances beyond our control, we are free (at our sole discretion) to substitute a cash prize equivalent to the value of the prize advertised.

4. Entry is free (other than the cost of accessing the website, which is your responsibility).

Entry is open between 1 June 2017 and 30 November 2017. Entries received after the closing
date will not be accepted.

5. To enter the prize draw, you must: (a) complete the questionnaire in full, and (b) provide a valid email address.

6. You may not enter the prize draw if you are an employee of ours or an immediate family member of an employee of ours or otherwise associated with the competition.

7. You may only submit one entry in the prize draw.

8. All questionnaire and other materials provided by you become our property. No responsibility is taken for late, lost or misdirected questionnaires or entries.

9. Following the closing date, the prize winners will be selected randomly from valid entries received. Each entry can only be drawn once.

10. Subject to system malfunction, the draw will occur on 10 January 2018. If the systems supporting the draw are not functioning as they should when the draw is due, the draw will be held as soon as possible once the systems become functional again. Prize winners do not need to be present at the time of the draw.

11. Prize winner names will not be published.

12. The relevant prize will be sent to each prize winner at the postal address captured within the questionnaire instrument. If an address has not been supplied, the entry will be treated in accordance with clause 14. The majority of prizes will be mailed within two weeks of the draw.

13. The right to a prize is not transferable or assignable to another person.

14. If any prize winner cannot be contacted within three (3) months of the draw, then that person’s right to the prize is forfeited and the prize will be treated as an unclaimed prize.

15. Only one redraw of unclaimed prizes will take place, and other existing prizes are not affected. The redraw prize winner(s) will be randomly selected from remaining valid entries and notified within two (2) weeks of the redraw. If the redraw prize winner(s) cannot be
contacted within three (3) months of the redraw, then we may determine that the relevant prize(s) will not be awarded.

16. Prizes cannot be substituted for another prize at the election of the prize-winner.

17. We are not liable for any loss, expense, damage or injury sustained by any entrant in connection with this prize draw, the prize or redemption of the prize, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law (in which case, that liability is limited to the minimum allowable by law).

18. We may suspend the promotion if we determine that the integrity or administration of the promotion has been adversely affected due to circumstances beyond its control. We may disqualify any individual who tampers with the entry process.
Appendix G: Informed Consent (Study Two)

PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

GU Ref. number: 2017/285

Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events

Michelle Hayes
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(07) 5552 8719

Dr Andrea Geurin
External Supervisor
New York University
andrea.geurin@nyu.edu
212-912-3673

Why is the research being conducted? Social media has had profound effects on sport, particularly athletes. Some sport stakeholders have criticised how much time athletes spend on social media during a competitive event, even suggesting it to be a distraction to athletes that could diminish performance. Therefore, the proposed research aims to understand how and why athletes use social media during major events, while also gaining their perspectives on whether they believe social media has become a distraction. The research will examine athlete social media usage in the context of major sports events throughout 2017 and early 2018. The project will also gain the perspectives of coaches and potentially managers within the relevant sport organisations. The research project is a component of Ms. Michelle Hayes’ academic program (Doctor of Philosophy).

What you will be asked to do. Individuals selected for this project will be asked to participate in a semi-structured face-to-face interview. The interviews will be conducted in order to understand how key sport stakeholders (athletes and managers of sport organisations) perceive social media and its potential impact on athletic performance during a major sport event. The interviews are planned to run for approximately 30 to 60 minutes, and will be held
in a location that is comfortable and convenient for you. With your consent, interviews will be audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis and coding.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened.** This study hopes to gain a range of athletes, across a variety of sports, to participate in the project. The primary objective of this study is to understand the potential impact social media could have on athletic performance in the context of major sport events.

The investigators will not allow anyone who is not involved with the research project to access any of the participants’ personal details. Information will be coded so that the identity of participants is protected. You will not be personally identified in any reports and publications resulting from this research.

**The expected benefits of the research.** The insights obtained from this research will create an opportunity for NSOs to further develop and/or implement social media educational resources for athletes that promote appropriate usage during major events to minimise distraction.

**Risks to you.** Possible risks and discomforts for all research participants will be no greater than that in daily life.

**Your participation is voluntary.** Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can exit the study at any time.

**Your confidentiality.** Interviews will remain anonymous and data will remain confidential.

**Ethical conduct.** Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research project, you should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

**Feedback to you.** A research summary will be compiled containing the key findings of the research. If you wish to view the final report, it can be obtained from the researchers through
the contact information given. The results will be reported in a PhD thesis as well as conferences presentations and academic journals.

**Data storage.** All audio recordings will be erased after transcription has taken place. However, other data (interview transcripts and analysis) will be retained in a locked cabinet and password protected electronic file at Griffith University for a period of 5 years before being destroyed.

**Privacy statement.** The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/ or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University's Privacy Plan at [http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan) or telephone (07) 3735 4375.

**Prize draw terms & conditions**

1. The prize draw is being run by researchers from Griffith University to encourage participation in the ‘Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events’ research project interview.

2. By electing to participate, you accept these terms and conditions as governing the prize draw. Instructions on how to enter the prize draw and details advertising the interview form part of the conditions. Any personal information you provide to us in the course of entering the prize draw will be dealt with by us in accordance with our privacy policy (published at: [http://www.griffith.edu.au/aboutgriffith/governance/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/aboutgriffith/governance/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan)).

3. Two prizes will be awarded in prize draw, each prize being a gift card and being worth $100 and $50. Should the advertised prize become unavailable as a result of circumstances
beyond our control, we are free (at our sole discretion) to substitute a cash prize equivalent to the value of the prize advertised.

4. Entry is free (other than the cost of accessing the website, which is your responsibility). Entry is open between 1 January 2018 and 30 June 2018. Entries received after the closing date will not be accepted.

5. To enter the prize draw, you must: (a) complete the interview, and (b) provide a valid email address.

6. You may not enter the prize draw if you are an employee of ours or an immediate family member of an employee of ours or otherwise associated with the competition.

7. You may only submit one entry in the prize draw.

8. Following the closing date, the prize winners will be selected randomly from valid entries received. Each entry can only be drawn once.

9. Subject to system malfunction, the draw will occur on 10 July 2018. If the systems supporting the draw are not functioning as they should when the draw is due, the draw will be held as soon as possible once the systems become functional again. Prize winners do not need to be present at the time of the draw.

10. Prize winner names will not be published.

11. The relevant prize will be sent to each prize winner at the postal address. If an address has not been supplied, the entry will be treated in accordance with clause 13. The majority of prizes will be mailed within two weeks of the draw.

12. The right to a prize is not transferable or assignable to another person.

13. If any prize winner cannot be contacted within three (3) months of the draw, then that person’s right to the prize is forfeited and the prize will be treated as an unclaimed prize.

14. Only one redraw of unclaimed prizes will take place, and other existing prizes are not affected. The redraw prize winner(s) will be randomly selected from remaining valid entries
and notified within two (2) weeks of the redraw. If the redraw prize winner(s) cannot be contacted within three (3) months of the redraw, then we may determine that the relevant prize(s) will not be awarded.

15. Prizes cannot be substituted for another prize at the election of the prize-winner.

16. We are not liable for any loss, expense, damage or injury sustained by any entrant in connection with this prize draw, the prize or redemption of the prize, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law (in which case, that liability is limited to the minimum allowable by law).

17. We may suspend the promotion if we determine that the integrity or administration of the promotion has been adversely affected due to circumstances beyond its control. We may disqualify any individual who tampers with the entry process.
By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- If I am under 18 years of age I have discussed my involvement in this project with a parent or a guardian;
- My involvement in this research will include participation in an interview;
- My identity will not be disclosed to any third party;
- My participation in this research is voluntary;
- If I have any additional questions, I can contact the research team;
- I understand and accept that interviews will be recorded;
- I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I can access the results of this research by contacting the researchers named above;
- I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 07 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
- I agree to participate in the project.

Name: ___________________________ Signature: ___________________________

Participant: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Participant’s guardian/parent (Only for those under 18 years): ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Investigator(s): ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix H: Informed Consent (Study Three)

PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET
GU Ref. number: 2017/285
Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events

Why is the research being conducted? Social media has had profound effects on sport, particularly athletes. Some sport stakeholders have criticised how much time athletes spend on social media during a competitive event, even suggesting it to be a distraction to athletes that could diminish performance. Therefore, the research aims to understand how and why athletes use social media during major events, while also gaining their perspectives on whether they believe social media has become a distraction. The project will also gain the perspectives of sport administrators within National Sport Organisations (NSOs). The research project is a component of Ms. Michelle Hayes’ academic program (Doctor of Philosophy).

What you will be asked to do. Individuals selected for this project will be asked to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interviews will be conducted in order to understand how key sport stakeholders (athletes and sports administrators) perceive social media and its potential impact on athletic performance during a major sport event. The interviews are planned to run for approximately 30 to 45 minutes, and will be held in a location that is comfortable and convenient for you. With your consent, interviews will be...
audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis and coding.

**The basis by which participants will be selected or screened.** This study hopes to gain a range of sport administrators (e.g., media managers, communications and PR coordinators), across a variety of sports, to participate. The primary objective of this study is to understand the potential impact social media could have on athletic performance in the context of major sport events and how this is managed. The investigators will not allow anyone who is not involved with the research project to access any of the participants’ personal details. Information will be coded so that the identity of participants is protected. You will not be personally identified in any reports and publications resulting from this research.

**The expected benefits of the research.** The insights obtained from this research will create an opportunity for NSOs to further develop and/or implement social media educational resources for athletes that promote appropriate usage during major events to minimise distractions.

**Risks to you.** Possible risks and discomforts for all research participants will be no greater than that in daily life.

**Your participation is voluntary.** Your participation is completely voluntary, and you can exit the study at any time.

**Your confidentiality.** Interview data will remain anonymous and data will remain confidential.

**Ethical conduct.** Griffith University conducts research in accordance with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*. If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of this research project, you should contact the Manager, Research Ethics on 3735 4375 or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au.

**Feedback to you.** A research summary will be compiled containing the key findings of the research. If you wish to view the final report, it can be obtained from the researchers through
the contact information given. The results will be reported in a PhD thesis as well as conferences presentations and academic journals.

**Data storage.** All audio recordings will be erased after transcription has taken place. However, other data (interview transcripts and analysis) will be retained in a locked cabinet and password protected electronic file at Griffith University for a period of 5 years before being destroyed.

**Privacy statement.** The conduct of this research involves the collection, access and/or use of your identified personal information. The information collected is confidential and will not be disclosed to third parties without your consent, except to meet government, legal or other regulatory authority requirements. A de-identified copy of this data may be used for other research purposes. However, your anonymity will at all times be safeguarded. For further information consult the University's Privacy Plan at [http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/about-griffith/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan) or telephone (07) 3735 4375.

**Prize draw terms & conditions**

1. The prize draw is being run by researchers from Griffith University to encourage participation in the ‘Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events’ research project interview.

2. By electing to participate, you accept these terms and conditions as governing the prize draw. Instructions on how to enter the prize draw and details advertising the interview form part of the conditions. Any personal information you provide to us in the course of entering the prize draw will be dealt with by us in accordance with our privacy policy (published at: [http://www.griffith.edu.au/aboutgriffith/governance/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan](http://www.griffith.edu.au/aboutgriffith/governance/plans-publications/griffith-university-privacy-plan)).

3. Two prizes will be awarded in prize draw, each prize being a gift card and being worth $100 and $50. Should the advertised prize become unavailable as a result of circumstances beyond our control, we are free (at our sole discretion) to substitute a cash prize equivalent to
the value of the prize advertised.

4. Entry is free (other than the cost of accessing the website, which is your responsibility).

Entry is open between 1 July 2018 and 1 November 2018. Entries received after the closing date will not be accepted.

5. To enter the prize draw, you must: (a) complete the interview, and (b) provide a valid email address.

6. You may not enter the prize draw if you are an employee of ours or an immediate family member of an employee of ours or otherwise associated with the competition.

7. You may only submit one entry in the prize draw.

8. Following the closing date, the prize winners will be selected randomly from valid entries received. Each entry can only be drawn once.

9. Subject to system malfunction, the draw will occur on 10 November 2018. If the systems supporting the draw are not functioning as they should when the draw is due, the draw will be held as soon as possible once the systems become functional again. Prize winners do not need to be present at the time of the draw.

10. Prize winner names will not be published.

11. The relevant prize will be sent to each prize winner at the postal address. If an address has not been supplied, the entry will be treated in accordance with clause 13. The majority of prizes will be mailed within two weeks of the draw.

12. The right to a prize is not transferable or assignable to another person.

13. If any prize winner cannot be contacted within three (3) months of the draw, then that person’s right to the prize is forfeited and the prize will be treated as an unclaimed prize.

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contacted within three (3) months of the redraw, then we may determine that the relevant prize(s) will not be awarded.

15. Prizes cannot be substituted for another prize at the election of the prize-winner.

16. We are not liable for any loss, expense, damage or injury sustained by any entrant in connection with this prize draw, the prize or redemption of the prize, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law (in which case, that liability is limited to the minimum allowable by law).

17. We may suspend the promotion if we determine that the integrity or administration of the promotion has been adversely affected due to circumstances beyond its control. We may disqualify any individual who tampers with the entry process.
PROJECT CONSENT FORM

GU Ref. number: 2017/285

Social media usage among elite athletes: An exploration of athlete usage during major events

Michelle Hayes  
PhD Candidate  
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0450 674 563

Dr Caroline Riot  
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Dr Kevin Filo  
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(07) 5552 8719

Dr Andrea Geurin  
External Supervisor  
New York University  
andrea.geurin@nyu.edu  
212-912-3673

By signing below, I confirm that I have read and understood the information package and in particular have noted that:

- If I am under 18 years of age I have discussed my involvement in this project with a parent or a guardian;
- My involvement in this research will include participation in an interview;
- My identity will not be disclosed to any third party;
- My participation in this research is voluntary;
- If I have any additional questions, I can contact the research team;
- I understand and accept that interviews will be recorded;
- I am free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty;
- I can access the results of this research by contacting the researchers named above;
- I can contact the Manager, Research Ethics, at Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee on 07 3735 4375 (or research-ethics@griffith.edu.au) if I have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the project; and
- I agree to participate in the project.

Name:  
Signature:

------------------------------------------  ------------------------------------------  -----------------
Participant  
Date

------------------------------------------  ------------------------------------------  -----------------
Participant’s guardian/parent (Only for those under 18 years)  
Date

------------------------------------------  ------------------------------------------  -----------------
Investigator(s)  
Date