

The Social Media Response from Athletes and Sport Organizations to COVID-19: An

Altruistic Tone

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### **Abstract**

The global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in restrictions on gatherings of large crowds, the suspension of live sport events across the globe and the relegation of topical televised sport to broadcasts of past events and competitions. Consequently, there has been a shift in focus from the entertainment aspect of sport to the health and well-being aspects of sport. As athletes, teams and sport organizations have become subject to government legislation concerning physical distancing, self-isolation, and lockdowns, the resultant spare time has presented the opportunity for individual athletes and sport organizations to pursue an approach to social media that includes viral challenges, fundraising, and socializing online. This paper provides a commentary on select high profile athletes' and sport organizations' social media behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic which has adopted an altruistic tone.

*Keywords:* Altruism; COVID-19; health; social media; sport

## **The Social Media Response from Athletes and Sport Organizations to COVID-19: An Altruistic Tone**

Save for the world wars in the twentieth century, the impact of COVID-19 on global affairs is unprecedented. Its effect has been felt in all areas of human endeavor which includes a pronounced impact on the world of sport. The Tokyo Olympic Games, originally scheduled for July and August 2020, were postponed for the first time in modern history. Across the globe, sport of every kind, from grassroots community sport to the professional levels, has been cancelled or rescheduled. This has not, however, deterred sport organizations, teams, and athletes from connecting with fans. Much of this engagement has been through social media, which has had a significant influence on the connection between sport brands, including high-profile athletes, and their fans. As part of this connection, public campaigns, including advocating the need for better health awareness and hygiene practices, have influenced some of the messages conveyed by athletes to their fans.

This article provides a short opinion-based commentary principally informed by observations of the authors obtained through social media usage and news reporting. This commentary commences with a brief review of social media literature to establish grounds for the claim that a shift is occurring in how sport organizations and athletes alike are using social media. Next, the article provides several examples of altruistic social media posts organized into three categories. Finally, there is a discussion and future research direction section, followed by a conclusion to the commentary.

### **Social Media and Sport**

Williams and Chinn (2010) state that social media are the “tools, platforms, and applications that enable consumers to connect, communicate, and collaborate with others” (p. 422). Social media is a unique form of communication that transcends geographic and social borders via instantaneous information communication (Filo et al., 2015; Perloff, 2010). Filo

et al. (2015) include user co-creation in their definition, while also highlighting the relationship between consumers and organizations or athletes. Moreover, there is the prospect of improving the relationship between consumers and organizations through the effective use of social media facilitated two-way communication (Campos et al., 2013). Indeed, these mediums have transformed how consumers and businesses interact with each other so much that Abeza et al. (2013) label consumers as both “producers” and “distributors” of information (p. 123). Meraz (2009) points out that social media are “architected by design to readily support participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration, and community” (p. 682). To this end, social media is being embraced by consumers to form part of their communication mix (Abeza et al., 2013; Mangold & Faulds, 2009) that extends to interacting with their favorite athletes, teams, and sport brands as well as other fans (Stavros et al., 2014; Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Athletes, teams, and sport organizations have been using social media as part of their public relations and communication efforts (Filo et al., 2015; Pegoraro, 2010). Athletes have been encouraged to adopt a more active approach in their public presentation via social media (e.g., Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012; Smith & Sanderson, 2015) and that their “away from the game” presentation should focus on authenticity (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 355). Sport marketing literature has also revealed social media as aiding organizations and athletes in increasing fan identification (e.g., Meng et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2014) and brand awareness (e.g., Na et al., 2020; Pegoraro et al., 2017). Social media can create unique and powerful opportunities for high-profile athletes to capitalize on through increased athlete-fan interaction (Pegoraro, 2010) in a cost-effective manner (Filo et al., 2015). There is the potential for amplifying these opportunities further through proactive measures taken by sport organizations (Campos et al., 2013), opportunities that can translate to commercial gain. For example, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Brumbies Super Rugby Club re-post their

athletes' social media activities to drive fans to the Brumbies' official social media accounts (Sharpe et al., 2017). This represented a commercial consideration of the former media manager for the club who stated that “the difference between you having 200,000 followers on Facebook and 100,000 can be \$100,000. It's a huge business, ... and we are trying to sell ourselves all the time” (Scott et al., 2017, p. 228).

In the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, sport organizations should shift their focus to fostering long-term relationships with fans, while understanding that their needs, wants, and values, have changed (Abeza et al., 2013; Bee & Kahle, 2006). Social media, itself a rapidly evolving technological platform (Abeza et al., 2015), facilitates the opportunity for organizations and athletes to engage with their consumer base in an innovative and evolving manner. For athletes, however, the opportunities afforded by social media have seemingly taken on additional meaning. Across a range of sports, the social media responses from athletes impacted by COVID-19 are varied and are, *prima facie*, somewhat removed from commercial objectives. Instead, they appear to have a more altruistic intent – reflecting the human tendency to help others (Dougherty, 2017; Hoffman, 1981) - with the collective concerns of the public and fans in mind. To this end, the following sections provide categorization of the use of social media during the global COVID-19 pandemic by elite level sport organizations and individual athletes.

### **Observations**

This section outlines examples gathered through observations of the authors' social media use as well as reports in news outlets, of sport organizations and athletes' social media responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sport organizations, teams, and owners have demonstrated a willingness to contribute positively to the COVID-19 pandemic, often through measures of financial goodwill and information dissemination. Meanwhile, individual athletes have displayed a range of social media activity including fundraising and

messages of support for national health services at the frontline of the battle against COVID-19. Of note is the effort some high-profile athletes put forth concerning health messaging and exercise promotion, social distancing, and good hygiene practices. The following examples, which are limited to those posted in the English language, are categorized into: (a) social and civic responsibility messaging; (b) fundraising and physical activity challenges; and (c) financial generosity.

### **Social and Civic Responsibility Messaging**

Several organizations and athletes have been employing social media during the COVID-19 pandemic to advocate for, and encourage, socially responsible behavior among followers. The social and civic responsibility messaging category refers to organizations and athletes making posts that reinforce or champion the requests and requirements of medical professionals in response to the pandemic. These demands encourage every member of society to assist in reducing the spread of COVID-19 by practicing physical/social distancing and handwashing procedures. Further, social and civic responsibility messages may simply entail disseminating information or becoming involved directly while using their platform to champion messages in line with medical professionals.

With over 200 million followers on Instagram and over 80 million followers on Twitter, Cristiano Ronaldo (@Cristiano) shared pictures of him teaching his children about handwashing. In rugby, former All Black Tabai Matson has been promoting the need for handwashing (@Skysportnz, 2020). Kenyan long-distance runner and marathon world record holder Eliud Kipchoge has been promoting, via Twitter, health messages including handwashing practices and social distancing protocols (@EliudKipchoge, 2020). Former 100M record holder Asafa Powell has been promoting improved hygiene practice in Jamaica (@officialasafa). Bellator women's featherweight champion Cris Cyborg has promoted the importance of handwashing through her Twitter posts (@criscyborg).

Philip Doyle, an Irish rower who originally put his medical career on hold to focus on his Olympic preparation, has now reversed that decision and will return to medicine. Doyle has posted pictures of himself in medical scrubs on his Instagram page (@philipdoyle2) along with another photo of him standing in front of Daisy Hill Hospital in his uniform. Likewise, Welsh rugby player and qualified medical doctor, Jamie Roberts, has volunteered for the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board and posted several frontline experiences and health messages on his Twitter account (@Jamiehuwroberts).

The Australian Institute of Sport, the nation's peak high-performance sport organization, has established a dedicated COVID-19 webpage with the intent of providing up-to-date information for the nation's sport governing bodies. The webpage includes items such as mental health, well-being, funding assistance, and a collection of government advice on restrictions (Australian Institute of Sport, 2020). Canadian ice hockey star Hayley Wickenheiser, a four-time Olympian who works in player development for the Toronto Maple Leafs while juggling medical school, is working to disseminate information about COVID-19 directly to her 73,000 Twitter followers (@wick\_22). In basketball, U.S. athlete Steph Curry has been urging fans to practice social distancing and has also been hosting online quizzes. Curry then teamed up with Dr Anthony Fauci, the head of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, for an interview on Instagram to discuss the impact of COVID-19 and the steps the public can take to stay safe (Curry, 2020). NBA Together, a social engagement campaign involving a variety of professional players, has been launched to "share the latest health and safety information and use digital tools and virtual events to help keep communities connected during this time of social distancing" (NBA, 2020, para 2).

Collectively, the examples listed above demonstrate that athletes and sport organizations are utilizing the tools afforded by social media to educate their followers about

how individuals can do their part to stop the spread of COVID-19. This education has occurred via demonstrations, interviews, and active involvement in the response. This category is particularly notable as most of the messaging and initiatives assume no relation to an athlete's physical ability and a sport organization's professional competency.

### **Fundraising and Physical Activity Challenges**

The fundraising and physical activity challenges category highlights how organizations and athletes have participated in, or instigated, challenges through social media to raise funds for a charitable cause or to inspire their followers and communities to be physically active during periods of isolation. Former Wales rugby captain Ryan Jones completed a charity garden marathon – he ran the full twenty-six miles in his back garden – to raise money for the nation's health service (NHS), but also to encourage his followers to stay active (Jones, 2020). Similar to Jones' efforts, Scottish javelin record holder James Campbell completed a garden marathon, raising over £29,000 for the NHS and inspiring similar efforts from the public (Campbell, 2020).

Soccer stars like Lionel Messi and Marcus Rashford participated in and promoted the #StayAtHomeChallenge. Based on people videoing themselves doing as many 'keepy-ups' as possible with a roll of toilet paper, the challenge encouraged people to challenge friends, resulting in an abundance of activity on social media. Zlatan Ibrahimović is promoting exercise with the 'Kick the Virus Away' through a GoFundMe page (@GoFundMe, 2020). On April 2, 2020, the International Hockey Federation (FIH) launched a campaign titled #StayHomeStayStrong designed to "keep our wonderful hockey community united and focused on what we all need to do to stay fit, healthy and protect others" (FIH, 2020). The FIH campaign was launched by Team Great Britain (GB) athlete Sam Ward who has been posting #IsolationOlympics videos on his platforms.

In Canberra, Australia, players from the ACT Brumbies (Super Rugby) and Canberra Capitals (Women's National Basketball League) have taken to social media and joined in the Canberra Hospital Foundation's Paediatric Easter Juggling Challenge (Bertoldo, 2020). These online initiatives were positioned as ways to overcome the fact that representatives from each club are not able to visit the hospital due to social distancing restrictions. As with other sports, golfers are adopting different approaches to keep themselves and their fans entertained and active. Former world No. 1 golfer Brooks Koepka (@BKoepka) has been encouraging physical exercise through indoor golf to the public.

In the United Kingdom, the Team GB gymnastics team have been promoting an indoor high intensity interval training (HIIT) workout to the public. Olympian Katarina Johnson-Thompson (@JohnsonThompson) shared a video of an at-home heptathlon she completed. Athlete Jaide Stepter (@Jaidesteps) shared a video of a #SistaCircuit whereby her sister formed part of a cardio and core circuit. Hockey Australia (HA) has engaged national team athletes to post several videos explaining and demonstrating skill-based drills that can be performed at home. HA have also engaged national team strength and conditioning, health and well-being, and nutrition staff to create instructional videos for all hockey fans. These examples illustrate how, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, athletes and sport organizations have utilized social media to initiate a collection of challenges to encourage their followers to make financial contributions to the crisis and/or to remain physically active despite social distancing measures. These initiatives often align with sport, or the specific sport in which the athlete or team is involved but remain broadly focused on employing social media to promote a positive and healthy response to the pandemic.

### **Financial Generosity**

The category of financial generosity reflects social media posts from athletes and sport organizations that demonstrate direct contributions in response to the COVID-19

pandemic. In soccer, Chelsea Football Club has offered NHS staff temporary accommodation at the club's Millennium Hotel to help in the fight against COVID-19 (Harvey, 2020). This offer was replicated by Manchester United legends Ryan Giggs and Gary Neville who have offered their hotels as temporary accommodation for NHS workers (Harvey, 2020). Both of these generous offers have been promoted on Twitter by @ChelseaFC and @hotelfootballuk. Tweets and re-tweets of supportive initiatives to assist health care workers staying at the hotel, from both the public and the hotel, have dominated The Hotel Football UK Twitter page. In a similarly altruistic fashion, hotel co-owner and billionaire Peter Lim covered the cost of \$1million worth of meals for hospital staff in Singapore (@hotelfootballuk, 2020).

In the United States, NBA franchises and players were some of the first to use social media to announce financial contributions to non-playing staff. They have taken an altruistic approach to the outbreak with monetary contributions for non-playing staff (Harvey, 2020). Major League Baseball (MLB) donated U.S.\$1 million to the charity Feeding America, a move publicized on social media (@MLB, 2020). England World Cup cricketer Jos Buttler raised £65,100 by auctioning his World Cup playing shirt with funds going to the Royal Brompton & Harefield Hospitals Charity. Buttler promoted this auction through many tweets, the initial one receiving more than 15,600 likes and 2,600 re-tweets (@josbuttler, 2020). In tennis, Australia's Nick Kyrgios made a generous offer on Instagram, saying he did not want anyone sleeping on an empty stomach. He asked followers to send him a private message if they needed some food and he would personally deliver it to their door (Dutton, 2020). Similarly, British world boxing champion Amir Khan has promoted the work of his charitable foundation which is distributing food and drinks to people in need (@amirkingkhan, 2020). The instances outlined above demonstrate the successful application of social media as a tool to announce donations and contributions made to those impacted by the pandemic.

### **Discussion and Future Research Direction**

The examples provided in this article reveal that the use of social media by sport organizations and athletes has, for many, evolved in response to the impact of COVID-19. This change is illustrated by evidence that during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media content has been driven by altruism with little to no focus on the commercial aspects of sport. Of course, one could argue that there is likely to be a positive brand association derived from the altruistic posts highlighted above that can translate to longer-term commercial benefits. The position adopted in this article is that these unprecedented times have provided athletes and sport organizations with a unique opportunity to create and share content that is more focused on demonstrating and promoting altruism. Notably, athletes and organizations are engaging with the public on topics and issues not directly related to their sporting capabilities and competencies.

The social and civic responsibility advocates have put aside, or leveraged, their sporting pursuits to highlight health messages and promote behavioral changes that will assist in a global defense against COVID-19. The fundraising and physical activity challenges have actively encouraged their followers and the general community to remain active, while also creating fundraising initiatives to support individuals and communities impacted by the pandemic. Collated via hashtags such as #StayAtHomeChallenge, there have been challenges to take part in viral activities or innovate home-based workouts and skill development. The examples of financial generosity, as promoted through social media, showcase altruism amongst sport organizations and athletes as they try to monetarily assist the less fortunate and those directly impacted by the pandemic. In all these cases, social media has been capitalized on for the opportunities it provides athletes and organizations to interact with their followers and communities. The tone of the content, we purport, can be attributed to an altruistic motivation (Dougherty, 2017; Hoffman, 1981) that transcends the usual commercial

orientation of public relations and marketing efforts initiated via social media. In this sense, there is a recognition that the priorities of consumers, and indeed athletes and sport organizations, have changed in response to the pandemic. As outlined by Abeza et al. (2013), it is vital that organizations and athletes recognize changing needs, wants, and values of their fans to establish, and maintain, long term relationships.

While this article's foci are on sport organizations and athletes, it would be remiss to not comment on consumer response. It is our observation that followers of sport organizations and athletes have responded positively to the aforementioned examples on social media. In some cases, fans have been able to interact with and pursue their sporting interests on a more personal level. To this end, health messages have been 'liked' and re-tweeted through Twitter. Fundraising campaigns have received tremendous financial and moral support. Consumers have participated in viral challenges and competitions. Athletes have presented a different aspect of their "away from the game" selves (Smith & Sanderson, 2015, p. 355), emerging with a sense of authenticity attached to the messages they have delivered. Of course, consumers are potentially missing the more customary social media content from athletes, leagues, and organizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the content appears to have engaged consumers in a manner that may become a more common expectation.

As sport organizations work hard to construct plans and timelines for the return of competition, it is likely that the production and delivery of these competitions will be significantly different. This may involve not allowing fans to attend, significant limitations on the number of fans who can attend, temperature testing, ticket price restructuring, and modified season format and timing, among other potential changes. With these changes in mind, fans will need to remain engaged. In these challenging times, many organizations and athletes may be placing increased emphasis on their social media activities in recognition that

these are the primary means to connect with their fans in the absence of competition. To this end, opportunities exist for further academic research on athlete and social media usage in the context of COVID-19. This can include investigation of consumer responses as well as consumer expectations moving forward. In addition, longitudinal work examining athlete and sport organization response and strategy whilst society's response and responsibilities evolve could make a contribution.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic brings with it a collective responsibility to adhere to government guidelines and provisions. Athletes, teams and sport organizations have embraced some of the challenges inherent to the situation and put human health and safety ahead of revenue. From the sport consumer's perspective, an opportunity exists to engage with their sporting interests through social media commentary, media co-creation, following the advice shared by athletes and teams, engagement with challenges, and fundraising contributions. This article has provided a collection of examples that illustrate an altruistic tone from athletes and sport organizations on social media in response to COVID-19. The examples provided demonstrate a level of concern for the well-being of communities. While it is not suggested that social media content focused on social responsibility and altruistic behavior commenced only in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis has provided an unprecedented and unique setting for athletes to display altruism via social media. In particular, messages on social media promoting hygiene, social distancing and exercise provide a simple yet productive way for athletes and sport organizations to connect with sports fans and contribute to the global effort to slow the spread of COVID-19.

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