

2018 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVI)

Social Media Engagement as a Metric for Ranking U.S. Olympic Athletes as Brand Endorsers

Natasha Brison, *Texas A&M University*
Andrea Geurin, *New York University*

Thursday, October 25, 2018
3:30-3:55 PM, Ballroom D1

25-minute oral presentation
(including questions)

Associating with the Olympic Games remains attractive to multi-national companies due to the broad access the Games can provide to a global audience (Abeza, Pegoraro, Naraine, Séguin, & O'Reilly, 2014). Previous brand strategies have ranged from television commercials to on-site activations. However, recent trends have focused on social media as a more direct method for reaching consumers. Brands understand the connection between social media use and the access fans want with their favorite brands and athletes, and Olympic athletes are no different. For example, alpine skier and Olympic gold medalist Mikaela Shiffrin has over 140,000 followers on Twitter (@MikaelaShiffrin) and has endorsements from Red Bull and Longines (Michaels, 2018). Sprinter Usain Bolt has over 19 million likes on Facebook (@usainbolt, 2018) and boasts endorsements with Puma, Gatorade, and Virgin Media (Farrow, 2018).

These endorsements can be lucrative for both the athlete and the brands, as these partnerships can allow brands access to a single Olympic athlete's thousands, and potentially millions, of followers on social media. However, the reality is that not all social media influencers are the same. A study conducted by influencer marketer platform Markerly revealed Instagram influencers with less than 1,000 followers possessed a higher engagement rate than those with 1,000 to 10,000 followers (Chen, 2016). Mainly, this study determined that a large number of followers is not always the best strategy for brand advertisements through an athlete's social media account.

Research on athlete endorsements through social media has focused on effectiveness from a consumer perspective (Cunningham & Bright, 2012), the advertising practitioner's perspective (Desmarais, 2017), and the athlete's perspective related to social media content (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2017; Cork & Eddy, 2017). However, there is a dearth of research on the level of engagement as a method of determining endorser effectiveness through social media. As brands gear up for the 2020 Summer Games in Tokyo, Japan and the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, China, they must examine the best ways to maximize their endorsements of Olympic athletes. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine which Olympic athletes have the highest levels of engagement through social media in order to identify the top influencers.

Using endorsers to promote products/services is a common practice in marketing. An endorser is an individual who is recognizable by the public and uses this recognition in advertisements for products/services (Brooks & Harris, 1998). Athletes are often used as endorsers, as they "are some of the most recognizable, revered, and imitated celebrities of all" (Shanklin & Miciak, 1997, p. 1). Athlete endorsers also can increase brand awareness (Keller, 1998), product recall (Misra & Beatty, 1990), attitudes toward the brand (Till & Busler, 2000), and purchase decisions for consumers (Friedman & Friedman, 1979) across a broad range of channels. For consumers, athletes "represent an association with a symbolic aspirational reference group," and these groups serve "as a point of comparison to assess their own attitudes and behaviors" (Carlson & Donovan, 2008, p. 155). In the case of a fan's association with an Olympic athlete, the tie may be more than just a connection to the athlete; it may be symbolic of their own patriotism for their country. Thus, Olympic athletes may be more desirable as endorsers or social media influencers for brands.

Recently, social media-based influencer marketing has developed as a widespread tactic for brands to engage with consumers online (Evans, Phua, Lim, & Jun, 2017), and "athletes have unmatched influence and trust on social media" (Desmarais, 2017, p. 13). However, effective social media marketing is not just about how many followers/likes an athlete has; it is about the level of engagement he/she has with fans and followers. Engagement through social media is defined as the average number of retweets, shares, and comments a social media user receives per post. In particular, brands are no longer focusing on followers but on actual engagement with

2018 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVI)

consumers (El-Qudsi, 2018). Accordingly, brands should utilize social network analysis to identify key influencers through social media platforms (Fan & Gordon, 2014).

Given this study's purpose of determining which Olympic athletes have the highest levels of social media engagement in order to identify top influencers, the following research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ1: Who are the top U.S. social media influencers in each Winter Olympic sport based on engagement?

RQ2: Do differences in social media engagement exist based on an athlete's age, gender, and/or sport?

RQ3: Do significant differences exist in engagement levels between brand-related posts and non-brand related posts?

RQ4: Do significant differences exist in engagement levels for posts focused on sport products/services and those focused on non-sport products/services?

To address the research questions, researchers will conduct a quantitative content analysis in which both in-competition and out-of-competition posts are examined from the 244 U.S. athletes who participated in the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympic Winter Games. For each athlete, researchers will code the number of followers for each platform (Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter), along with the athlete's posts from one month before the Olympics, during the Olympics, and one month after the Olympics. Posts will be organized into two categories: 1) those that mention a brand and 2) those that do not. Lastly, taking into account the athlete's number of followers, researchers will calculate the average number of likes, retweets/shares, and comments for each post in order to create an overall engagement score for each athlete.

Athletes will be ranked according to level of engagement (highest to lowest). Researchers will also examine whether there are statistically significant differences in the levels of social media engagement based on age, gender, and/or sport.

Academically, the results of this study add to the growing body of literature on social media marketing strategies by brands and services who partner with athletes. Practically, the results will provide guidance for companies/brands who are interested in partnering with Olympic athletes. Specifically, this study can help marketers select an appropriate Olympic endorser who will facilitate their marketing objectives through the use of social media.

References

Abeza, G., O'Reilly, N., Séguin, B., & Nzindukiyimana, O. (2017). The world's highest-paid athletes, product endorsement, and Twitter. *Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*, 7(3), 332-355.

Abeza, G., Pegoraro, A., Naraine, M. L., Séguin, B., & O'Reilly, N. (2014). Activating a global sport sponsorship with social media: An analysis of TOP sponsors, Twitter, and the 2014 Olympic Games. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 15(3-4), 184-213.

Brooks, C., & Harris, K. (1998). Celebrity athlete endorsement: An overview of the key theoretical issues. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 7, 34-44.

Carlson, B. D., & Donovan, D. T. (2008). Concerning the effect of athlete endorsements on brand and team-related intentions. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 17(3), 154-162.

Chen, Y. (2016, April 27). The rise of 'micro-influencers' on Instagram. Retrieved from <https://digiday.com/marketing/micro-influencers/>

Cork, B. C., & Eddy, T. (2017). The Retweet as a Function of Electronic Word-of-Mouth Marketing: A Study of Athlete Endorsement Activity on Twitter. *International Journal of Sport Communication*, 10(1), 1-16.

Cunningham, N., & Bright, L. F. (2012). The Tweet Is in Your Court: Measuring Attitude Towards Athlete Endorsements in Social Media. *International Journal of Integrated Marketing Communications*, 4(2), 73-87.

2018 Sport Marketing Association Conference (SMA XVI)

Desmarais, F. (2017). Who is the Athlete Endorser? A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Advertising Practitioners' Views. *Journal of Global Marketing*, 30(1), 12-30.

El-Qudsi, I. (2018, January 11). The five top trends that will shape influencer marketing in 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.marketingprofs.com/articles/2018/33412/the-five-top-trends-that-will-shape-influencer-marketing-in-2018>

Evans, N. J., Phua, J., Lim, J., & Jun, H. (2017). Disclosing Instagram influencer advertising: The effects of disclosure language on advertising recognition, attitudes, and behavioral intent. *Journal of Interactive Advertising*, 17(2), 138-149.

Fan, W., & Gordon, M. D. (2014). The power of social media analytics. *Communications of the ACM*, 57(6), 74-81.

Farrow, R. (2018, February 10). 15 highest-paid Olympic athletes, from Shaun White to Michael Phelps. Retrieved from <https://www.gobankingrates.com/net-worth/highest-paid-olympic-athletes/>

Keller, K. L. (1998). *Strategic brand management: Building, managing and measuring brand equity*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Li, Y. M., Lee, Y. L., & Lien, N. J. (2012). Online social advertising via influential endorsers. *International Journal of Electronic Commerce*, 16(3), 119-154.

Michaels, M. (2018, February 2). Meet the richest American athletes competing in the Winter Olympics. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/winter-olympics-richest-american-athletes-net-worth-2018-2>

Misra, S., & Beatty, S. E. (1990). Celebrity spokesperson and brand congruence: An assessment of recall and affect. *Journal of business research*, 21(2), 159-173.

Shanklin, W. L., & Miciak, A. R. (1997). Selecting sports personalities as celebrity endorsers. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 4(1), 1-11.

Turner, J. C. (1991). *Social Influence*. In Brooks/Cole Mapping Social Psychology Series. Maidenhead: Open University Press.