

ABSTRACT

Social media and inspiring physical activity during COVID-19 and beyond..

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted sport and events greatly with a shutdown of leagues and the postponement of events like the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. However, new media technologies, such as social media platforms, have provided an avenue for sport organisations and athletes to continue to engage with their consumers and promote physical activity during the absence of live sport. New media technologies allow organisations and individuals to share user-generated content and facilitate interactivity. This commentary intends to stimulate discussion, interest and research on whether social media could be used as a platform to inspire physical activity and sport participation and what strategies may be successful in engaging with consumers. Olympic sport and the campaigns National Olympic Committees have engaged in during lockdown are the focus of this piece. It is hoped that this piece provides a starting point for future research focusing on the adoption of new media technologies, like social media, to engage with and inspire people to become more active and involved in sport.

Introduction

In late 2019, the novel coronavirus disease emerged and by 2020, the pandemic had swept most of the globe. The impact of the disease led to the declaration of a public health emergency by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020). Global restrictions on public gathering and social distancing led the sport industry to grind to a sudden halt. Sport and events have been majorly affected due to their ability to spread the disease through attracting mass gatherings (Parnell et al., 2020). As people have been forced to stay at home as the pandemic sweeps the globe, many have been looking for ways to alleviate boredom and stay fit and healthy. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had major impacts on physical health behaviours (Hamami et al., 2020), particularly with the closures of businesses such as gyms and other fitness centres.

Due to this impact, at home workouts became the new normal due to the lack of other options and to minimise the spread of the disease (Hamami et al., 2020). Early indications from a study conducted with Belgian residents suggested that some maintained the same level of exercise, while others reported small increases, and others decreased their level (Constandt et al., 2020). These findings were dependent on demographics. For instance, older residents reported less exercise for a variety of reasons including the disruption of familiar exercise routines and lack of experience using online tools for exercise.

As athletes are typically seen as role models, the presence of athletes on social media sites and the positive videos they publicise could be socially influential (Koh & Lox, 2017) and assist in the promotion of positive healthy living message. Despite the absence of live sport during the COVID-19 pandemic, sport bodies have utilised this time to innovate and promote positive messaging through their social media channels. After the announcement by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to postpone the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games due to the pandemic, National Olympic Committees (NOCs) initiated campaigns to continue to engage with their respective communities and promote Olympism. For instance, the Australian Olympic Committee launched the #TeamAUS and #LikeAnOlympian campaign focused on inspiring Australians to "train like an Olympian at home" and aimed to encourage the community to stay fit, healthy and inspired through home workouts, home skills sessions and healthy living tips (Australian Olympic Committee, 2020). Athletes from a range of sports contributed to the campaign by creating and disseminating a series of positive videos providing insights to their home workouts, skills training, and challenges against other athletes. The videos are being posted across several social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube.

Similar concepts have been evident across the wider Olympic community. For example, the British Olympic Association initiated the #IsolationGames. Marketed as a way to stay entertained at home and encouraging support of the British Red Cross, the campaign attracted millions of views on the social media platform TikTok (British Olympic Association, 2020). The campaign showcased that any sport can be adapted to home settings and encouraged viewers to get involved by filming and uploading their participation. Many countries have also continued their engagement by showcasing a range of content via social media platforms including instructional workout videos presented by athletes, insights on how Olympians are continuing to train and prepare for the postponed Tokyo Olympic Games, and providing flashbacks to great historic Olympic moments of their respective teams and athletes. These campaigns have been timely as the IOC strengthens ties with the World Health Organisation to advocate healthy lifestyles, especially during the pandemic, and as the world hopes to recover and return to some form of normality (IOC, 2020).

Inspirational effect and impact on physical activity and sport participation

Hosting mega-sport events is often linked to increases in participation in sport and other physical activities (Frawley & Cusk, 2011). Participation in sport or physical activity can have follow-on effects for other areas such as community health and well-being. As a result, a key focus of event legacy research has focused on mass participation legacies, including participation at the grassroots level of organised sport and/or physical activity, and the structural developments required to cater for and/or encourage increased participation (Thomson et al., 2019).

However, non-host countries may also see rises in community involvement in sport or physical activity as participation legacies are often suggested to be influenced by athletes who are viewed as role models (Wicker & Frick, 2016). Although positive messaging regarding physical activity can be delivered by a range of stakeholders (e.g. personal trainers, life coaches, school physical education teachers), athletes have a unique platform due to the exposure they receive from media (Giuliano et al., 2007). The inspirational effect of athlete role models is engrained in the trickle-down effect which presumes that people are inspired to participate in sport or physical activity by elite sport, sportspeople or sports events (Hogan & Norton, 2000). According to the trickle-down (or demonstration) effect, a causal relationship between the elite sport level and amateur sport participation should exist. Specifically, grassroots participation should be influenced by three aspects of elite sport: sporting success, athletes as role models, and hosting major sport events (Wicker & Frick, 2016). However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether athletes should be role models and whether they have an impact on sport participation.

Weed et al. (2009) highlighted that there is some evidence for the trickle-down effect on sport participation immediately following events, yet, it is not applicable to all groups and is difficult to sustain. Specifically, the trickle-down effect cannot inspire those who have not previously engaged in sport to initiate new behaviours such as taking up physical activity or joining a sport team or club. Instead, the trickle-down effect can encourage those who already participate to increase their participation levels, reignite those who lapsed their participation, and potentially lead to switching activities or trying new sports. Furthermore, Weed et al. (2009) noted that insights on target groups can be identified using the trickle-down effect and assist organisations to target messages and engage target groups more efficiently. Further evidence demonstrates that hosting events is not sufficient to increase participation. Rather, organisations need to direct strategic marketing efforts to aid sport participation outcomes of events (Misener et al., 2015).

Despite the ongoing debate, Lenskyj (2020) noted that the Olympic role model rhetoric has long been targeted at youth and that "among the intangible and unquantifiable aspects of the Olympic legacy - civic pride, community engagement, and group cohesion - is the claim that homegrown "role models" will inspire children and youth to follow their example and play more sport" (p. 127). Importantly, those who have role models during childhood are more likely to play sport at higher levels, suggesting that these role models could have an impact on consumers engagement in sport (Giuliano et al., 2007). Further, the experience of attending mega-sport events can inspire increased participation in sport or physical activity, with one of the key influential factors being the athletes (Ramchandani & Coleman, 2012). There is also an expectation that increased media presence and attention during mega-events will lead to sport participation legacies (Misener et al., 2015).

However, with the inability to host the Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2020 due to bans on public gatherings and the resulting postponement of the event, NOCs and other sport organisations have had to look at other options to showcase athlete role models, their achievements, and maintain interest in their sports. One of those options has been the creation of inspiring social media campaigns. Given that young adults have also been affected by the pandemic (e.g. school closures and cancellation of community sport events and leagues), an opportunity for sport organisations to inspire young adults to increase their physical activity by providing encouraging social media content exists. Campaigns have thus far appeared to focus on home workouts and staying active, while also showcasing how some athletes are engaging in training exercises relevant to their sport. However, as consumers have not had the opportunity to sign up for sports they may have been exposed to in these campaigns due to the lockdown, sport organisations face the challenge of maintaining interest and engagement when local sport activities recommence. Due to the absence of the Olympic Games in 2020 and the traditional media coverage that is relied on to showcase the event and sports, social media could be used to continue engagement and the promotion of sports (Ramon, 2018).

Role of social media

Social media use is one of the most popular online activities, with approximately 2.95 billion people using the various platforms in 2019 and an average consumption time of 136 min per day (Statista, 2019). These numbers have dramatically increased during COVID-19 across many countries with people utilising social media platforms to connect with each other and keep themselves informed (Hatchinson, 2020).

With a large proportion of people using these platforms, social media have enabled closer fan-athlete interaction than ever before (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). The proliferation of social media means consumers and fans can engage with their favourite athletes (or their role models) and receive an insight to their personal and professional lives. Leng and Phua (2020) suggested that athlete role models can leverage the power of social media to spread positive messaging and encourage appropriate behaviours. Further, sport organisations have accepted social media platforms and have recognised the need to share quality and relevant content to engage and develop connections with fans (Eagleman, 2013; Thompson et al., 2014).

Behnoosh et al. (2017) noted that engaging in promotional techniques, like celebrity endorsement, can be used to attract attention and increase the impact of social campaigns, such as those focused on increasing physical activity and sport participation. Importantly, attitude, intention and perception of physical activity campaigns are more positively influenced when endorsed by an athlete (Behnoosh et al., 2017). This may be extended into the social media realm, as an athlete's influence on the platforms has been suggested to impact participation rates in sport. Chmait et al. (2020) noted that consumers can discover sports through social media, and in particular, certain athletes with an influence on the platforms. Therefore, young individuals may be incentivised to commence playing the sports they are exposed to on social media (Chmait et al., 2020).

Athletes have adopted social media platforms for a variety of reasons which has resulted in a large amount of attention from researchers. Studies have found that athletes use social media for self-promotion, communicating with friends, family, and fans, and to manage their own image (Gearin, 2017; Hayes et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2017). Yet, little is known about whether athletes are promoting health messages related to physical activity in online spaces, and if so, what these messages contain. A more traditional approach consists of athletes engaging with school students through school visits to promote the benefits of physical activity, which was impacted during the lockdown with the closure of schools and social distancing requirements. To address this issue, some organisations have turned to digital spaces. For example, the Victorian Institute of Sport in Australia partnered with School Sport Victoria to continue the school speaker program, "Be Fit. Be Well", in an online environment (Victoria Institute of Sport, 2020). The program consisted of Olympic hopefuls engaging with students to promote the benefits of being active on their mental well-being and how this can assist in other aspects of their life. The messaging appears to be consistent with Government initiatives and other leading bodies, such as the United Nations, regarding the benefits of physical activity for mental well-being and overall health (United Nations, 2020).

Social media also plays a role in providing a platform for athletes who have typically been overlooked by traditional media coverage, such as female and para-athletes, which could result in a wider range of role models available to the community. Recently, growth in participation among women and girls has been linked to the increased visibility and success of elite female athletes who are now acting as role models to children (Hinds, 2020). Social media has afforded female and para-athletes opportunities to increase their coverage that has not been typically afforded to them by traditional media outlets (Gearin, 2017; Gearin-Eagleman & Barok, 2016; Pate et al., 2014). The introduction of social media has enabled female athletes and para-athletes to take control of their own narratives, choose how they are presented, provide insights, and promote their sporting journeys. With people spending more time using social media during the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of these role models having an online presence may result in the attraction of different groups to sports and physical activity.

When selecting athletes for physical activity campaigns sport organisations need to acknowledge that the more a role model and a consumer are similar, the more likely that the athlete's behaviour is relevant which could lead to imitation. If a role model is not both relevant and their behaviour reasonable, demotivating effects may occur (Meier, 2015). For example, sport organisations may utilise female athletes if they are attempting to engage young women or girls in physical activity or involvement in their sport. However, sport organisations need to be cautious of the potential negative impacts of promoting athletes in online spaces. Although social media allow organisations to promote messages to a wide audience, the platforms can result in adverse effects such as cyber bullying and harassment (Sanderson & Traax, 2014) which could overshadow the positive messages originally desired. This means that organisations will need to be cautious of the toll on the athletes they are promoting by leveraging them in online spaces and provide support should bullying or harassment occur. Sport organisations may also need to consider how they respond to athlete transgressions if they are involved in physical activity promotional campaigns. For example, a doping violation could contradict the messaging delivered through physical activity campaigns and alter public opinion in a negative way (Solberg et al., 2010).

These issues aside, sport organisations appeared to have recognised an opportunity to capitalise on a range of athlete role models and present powerful and inspirational images and videos in an attempt to help people become more physically active during the COVID-19 lockdown and the absence of live and community sport. The challenge for sport organisations moving forward is identifying how to convert those engaging with these social media campaigns to definitive increases in participation of such activities long-term.

Summary

It is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic has forced sport organisations to adapt and find innovative ways to promote their sport and maintain interest among consumers. Social media appears to be a key avenue that can help disseminate powerful messages to a larger audience and attempt to inspire people to participate in physical activity and potentially sport in the future. As social media appears to be strongly engrained in the sport industry, opportunities for sport organisations and athletes to continue this type of engagement will exist when the pandemic finally ends.

It will be interesting to see whether campaigns such as #LikeAnOlympian and those similar have an impact on physical activity or sport participation rates among communities during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Naturally, the measurable impact of social media campaigns aimed at inspiring physical activity will take some time, and if there are any increases whether this is sustained over time or if people lose interest once their lives return to some form of normality. It will also be challenging for sport organisations to develop measurable goals and evaluate whether these are met for these campaigns. Annual participation surveys carried out by sport governing bodies (e.g. the Active Lives survey in England and the AusPlay survey in Australia) could aid in the evaluation of these campaigns if the appropriate data is collected to reflect the use of social media.

Individual sport organisations may adopt similar approaches to those used in other mass media physical activity promotions to evaluate the success of their campaigns. For instance, after reviewing the evaluation strategies of mass media campaigns aimed at physical activity, Leary et al. (2011) recommended several components for optimal evaluation design. These components consisted of formative research to inform theory and/or conceptual frameworks, campaign content, and evaluation design choice (e.g. use of a cohort study design with multiple collection points, use of valid measures, and dedicated sufficient evaluation resources).

However, if strategic social media content incorporating athletes could facilitate increased interest in physical activity and potentially sport beyond the pandemic, the implications for the sport and event industries could be influential. For instance, if athletes are able to engage with those not typically interested in physical activity or sport by using digital spaces during the postponement of mega-events, governing bodies may seek to utilise these strategies during non-Olympic years when traditional media coverage is often non-existent or very minimal. Furthermore, if social media proves to be an effective avenue for inspiring or encouraging increases in sport and physical activity among the population, mega-event host cities or potential hosts may seek to incorporate more focus on developing strategic social media campaigns in their legacy planning and community engagement when mega-events are able to recommence.

As we have noticed in the past months, the limited ability to engage in different sport activities due to the social distancing needed to slow the spread of COVID-19 has posed some challenges for many sports organisations. Nevertheless, this could present an interesting area of future enquiry by researchers due to the potential positive implications of social media on physical activity among the community during the COVID-19 pandemic.