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Athlete perceptions of social media benefits and challenges during major sport events

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Athlete perceptions of social media benefits and challenges during major sport events**Abstract**

Numerous studies have focused on athlete social media use by examining the content posted on social media sites, revealing an opportunity to gather firsthand experiences from athletes. Utilising uses and gratifications theory as a theoretical framework to inform an open-ended questionnaire, we examined athlete attitudes towards their social media use during a major sport event as well as the gratifications they received and the challenges experienced from this use. The study assessed a sample of 57 athletes and their social media use across 20 international major sport events. Findings revealed that social media allows athletes to communicate with family and friends. Having a connection to home through social media can make athletes feel relaxed in a high-pressure environment. The results reveal uses and gratifications not previously revealed from athlete social media research, while also underscoring opportunities for sport organisations to enhance social media education programs provided to athletes.

Keywords: social media; athletes; major sport events; uses and gratifications theory; prosumers.

Introduction

Athletes have been able to enjoy enhanced interactions with fans, increase their profile and visibility, and manage their image through the power of social media (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). However, media and practitioners continue to scrutinize athletes' time spent on social media during major sport events, with some suggesting social media use could be impacting athlete performance and calling for social media bans during competitions (Fynes-Clinton, 2012). Others have suggested athletes replicate their daily habits as much as possible when competing at a major sport event, which may also include social media use. For example, Britain's Olympic Deputy Chef de Mission for the 2012 Olympic Games, Sir Clive Woodward, suggested that if athletes suddenly stopped using social media during a competition there could be disruptions to their routines (Rowley, 2012).

Social media has had major impacts on athletes during major sport events. For instance, the 2012 London Olympics were deemed the Twitter Olympics due to the dominance of Twitter use by organisers as well as athletes (Jones, 2012). Fieldhouse media surveyed North American intercollegiate athletes on their social media use and revealed that 71% spent at least one hour per day on social media and 32% spent more than two hours per day. Another 31% checked their social media during a competition, while 8% stated they posted to social media during one of their competitions (Fieldhouse Media, 2018). Although there have been few investigations into Australian athletes' social media use, Australians are some of the most active users in the world. Recent statistics revealed that approximately 50% of Australians access Facebook at least once a day, with most users between the ages of 25 and 39 (Cowling, 2018).

Researchers have focused their attention on understanding how and why athletes use social media. Recent reviews of sport and social media research revealed existing literature

has primarily utilised secondary data and focused on athlete tweets (Abeza, O'Reilly, Séguin, & Nzindukiyimana, 2015; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). In order to understand athletes' uses of social media, uses and gratifications (U&G) theory underpinned this study. U&G theory allows researchers to examine certain populations and their use of media through the perspectives of the user (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). U&G theory is a prevalent theory among social media researchers (Filo et al., 2015), however, the gratifications sought by athletes is a key area requiring further investigation in order to understand why athletes engage in social media behaviours. Furthermore, advancements of U&G theory have revealed that media users are not only receiving gratifications from consuming content, but also from producing content (Lee, & Ma, 2012; Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006). Although this is the case, athlete content may be restricted by the Australian Olympic Committee's (AOC) Rule 40.3. The AOC's Rule 40.3 prohibits athletes from posting about non-Olympic commercial partners, and their logos, if they are selected to compete on the Australian Olympic Team (Australian Olympic Committee, 2017). The rule may influence the content athletes post during major sport events.

Reviews of social media research (e.g., Abeza et al., 2015; Filo et al., 2015) reveal opportunities for the current study to enhance athlete social media research by examining athletes' use as a whole, rather than focusing on one specific platform, and by gathering primary data that considers athlete perspectives in order to obtain more depth on what satisfaction athletes receive from using social media, particularly during major sport events. By examining Australian athletes who competed at major sport events through an open-ended questionnaire, this study sought to uncover why athletes use social media during major sport events, what satisfaction they gain from their social media use, and the perceived benefits and challenges of using social media during major sport events. The current study also advances U&G theory research by taking the approach of examining athletes as both social media

1 consumers and producers.

2 **Literature Review**

3 **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

4 Athlete use of social media during a major sport event can be examined through the
5 theoretical lens of U&G theory (Katz et al., 1973). U&G theory posits that media use is goal
6 driven by the media consumer (Katz et al., 1973). Research set within U&G theory relies on
7 the perspective of media users in order to understand their use of certain media (e.g., social
8 media) and their reasons for using it. According to Katz et al. (1973) consumers actively seek
9 out certain media to satisfy their individual needs and receive gratification. A key assumption
10 of U&G theory lies in its approach to elicit data from media users. Understanding the goals of
11 media users is commonly gained by exploring the data supplied by the users through open-
12 ended questioning. Early research on U&G theory has focused on traditional media including
13 television (e.g., Bantz, 1982; Bryant & Zillmann, 1984) and print media (e.g., Gantz &
14 Trenholm, 1979). However, it is argued that the foundations of U&G theory not only allow
15 researchers to examine traditional media, but new Internet based applications such as social
16 media (Ruggiero, 2000).

17 Ruggiero (2000) suggested that U&G theory is well suited for new media research as
18 it allows for the examination of key attributes unique to this form of media, including
19 interactivity among and between consumers, multiple content types (e.g., photos, text, audio,
20 videos), and asynchronous information. The distinguishing feature of interactivity describes
21 the ability of users to not only consume content, but also produce content (Ha & James,
22 1998). In social media, it is argued that the distinction between media consumer and producer
23 tends to blur, which has led to the terms *prosumer* and *prosumption* being introduced (Ritzer
24 & Jurgenson, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

25 The introduction of the terms *prosumer* and *prosumption* describes users' ability to

1 take more control over the distribution and production of content in new media (Ritzer &
2 Jurgenson, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) suggested that
3 *prosumption* has increasingly become central to media behaviours of various groups as
4 consumption is no longer the only reason people seek out certain media. Research outside of
5 the sport discipline has revealed that a number of gratifications can also be elicited from
6 social media users who act as content producers in addition to being consumers (e.g., Lee &
7 Ma, 2012; Nonnecke et al., 2006). For instance, Lee and Ma (2012) suggested that social
8 media users received gratifications in the form of information and status seeking, and
9 socialising as a result of sharing news on their platforms. Although not specific to athletes
10 and their use of social media, these investigations indicate that athletes could seek certain
11 gratifications from both consuming and producing content on their platforms (Lee & Ma,
12 2012). However, it appears that many examinations of athletes and social media using U&G
13 theory as a framework have been conducted through a consumer lens (e.g., Browning &
14 Sanderson, 2012; Hambrick et al., 2010) and as a result have overlooked athletes as
15 producers or prosumers (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

16 Researchers have primarily utilised content analyses methods to examine athlete
17 tweets to understand how athletes generate relationships and communicate with their
18 followers through social media. For instance, professional athletes' social media content was
19 examined and positioned within six motives: interactivity, diversion, information sharing,
20 content, promotional, and fanship (Hambrick et al., 2010). Athletes primarily used social
21 media to interact with fans and fellow athletes, and to post non-sports-related information
22 (diversion). Athletes shared insights into their team, teammates, sport, training sessions, or
23 competitive events and results of matches/competitions, while also sharing content such as
24 videos and pictures. Athletes were less inclined to post about sports other than their own or
25 promote upcoming sport events through their platforms (promotional). As the study focused

1 on professional athletes and Twitter, an opportunity exists to build on this research's
2 limitations by gathering primary data from athletes about their social media use as a whole
3 and in an open-ended way, rather than placing content into categories, as many of the tweets
4 could have been placed into multiple categories (Hambrick et al., 2010).

5 When examining the uses and gratifications of new technology, it is also important to
6 understand the needs that are not met (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Raake and Bonds-
7 Raacke (2008) referred to this as failed uses and gratifications with two key identifying
8 features: (1) lack of motivation in using the technology, and (2) needs not being met while
9 engaged with the media technology. Therefore, it is important to include both those who have
10 had their gratifications met and those who have not in order to advance research underpinned
11 by U&G theory. The current study aims to offer new insights to U&G theory by examining
12 why athletes use social media platforms during the specific context of major sport events.

13 Although research has made significant contributions to our understanding of athletes'
14 uses and gratifications for social media use, Sanderson (2013) highlighted a need for more
15 research with athletes' perspectives on their social media use. Specifically, Sanderson (2013)
16 suggested that athlete perspectives in U&G theory were highly important in identifying
17 whether athlete sentiments align with those of researchers. The gratification athletes receive
18 when using social media was highlighted as a key area requiring further investigation. The
19 advancements of U&G theory in new media spaces suggests that users can act as consumers
20 and producers. As a result, a number of studies have taken the approach of examining the
21 uses and gratifications of users as producers and consumers (Lee & Ma, 2012; Nonnecke et
22 al., 2006; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Although this is the case, sport researchers have
23 primarily examined athletes from a consumer perspective. This study aims to fill these gaps
24 within U&G theory and athlete social media research by focusing on the perspectives of
25 athletes and their use of social media. Therefore, the first three research questions were

formulated:

Research Question 1: How frequently do athletes use social media during a major sport event compared to their everyday use?

Research Question 2: Why do athletes use social media during a major sport event?

Research Question 3: What gratifications do athletes receive from using social media during a major sport event?

Athletes' Use of Social Media

Social media provides athletes with an avenue to develop relationships, particularly with fans and other athletes (Frederick, Lim, Clavio, Pedersen, & Burch, 2012). When developing these relationships, the primary topic area of communication appears to be the personal lives of the athletes (Frederick et al., 2012) whereby insights into the daily life of an athlete are provided. Similar to sport organisations, athletes can also leverage the power of social media to endorse products, mention sponsorships deals, and publicise their personal websites (Pegoraro, 2010). Geurin (2017) examined female athlete perceptions of new media through the perspectives of athletes and found that athletes use new media to achieve four main goals: sharing their personal life with fans, developing connections with fans and followers, gaining sponsorship deals, and self-promotion, revealing social media to be an effective communication tool.

While it is apparent that there are advantages afforded to athletes who use social media, there are also a number of challenges. Social media has provided an avenue for passionate fans to express opinions, positive or negative, by sending rude public messages and/or unwanted direct (private) messages to athletes (Geurin, 2017). Cyber bullying has become commonplace for athletes, particularly those with a large online presence and who may not meet the performance expectations of fans (Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Belittling, sarcasm, threats, and mocking represent the types of messages directed at athletes, presenting

potential triggers of mental health problems for athletes (Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Negative messages may represent a key challenge for athletes during major sport events where the pressure to meet performance expectations is heightened, revealing an opportunity for the current research to explore any challenges of social media use across a sample of athletes competing in a range of major sport events.

Facebook use has also been linked to sport anxiety and concentration disruption in athletes of varying levels (Encel, Mesagno, & Brown, 2017), which could be problematic for elite athletes around competition time particularly when a number of athletes access Facebook before a competition. Research revealed that of 298 athletes who participated in a study of Facebook use, 31.9% accessed Facebook during a competition, and 68.1% accessed Facebook within two hours prior to their competition (Encel et al., 2017). However, Encel et al.'s (2017) study did not examine *why* athletes used social media during these times and how this could present challenges. Further information about social media content could help to determine the impact of social media on athletes during competitions, providing more justification for the current study to examine why athletes use social media during an event and any challenges they may encounter. As a result, a third research question is advanced:

Research Question 4: What challenges do athletes experience when using social media during a major sport event?

Athlete Social Media Use During Sport Events

For many athletes, representing their country at major sport events is a highlight of their sporting career. Social media allows athletes to document and share their experiences before, during, and after these events (Hutchins, 2011). Multiple researchers have turned their focus to understanding how athletes are engaging with social media during sport events (e.g., Hayes-Sauder & Blaszk, 2016; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

Kassing and Sanderson (2010) examined fan-athlete interaction and relationships

1 during the Giro d'Italia, cycling's tour of Italy, by tracking athletes' posts. The study was one
2 of the earliest conducted with the primary focus of understanding the content athletes produce
3 via social media within sport event contexts. The research indicated that athletes' use of
4 social media enhanced the fans' experiences of the race through greater insights into the
5 event. Social media allowed cyclists to share commentary and their opinions on a variety of
6 issues, while fostering interactivity. Athletes also provided insights by revealing how the
7 day's ride was experienced and how they were recovering.

8 Twitter was also a key focus for Clavio, Walsh, and Vooris (2013), who examined how
9 professional IndyCar Drivers used the platform during a major racing series. Results from the
10 study revealed that drivers were mostly in control of their own accounts and posts, even
11 during the event (Clavio et al., 2013). Content posted during racing events was sent by public
12 relations staff. A key focus for drivers was providing both personal and professional
13 information, facilitating direct interactions with fans, and marketing themselves as well as the
14 racing series. These two studies provide an understanding of the ways in which athletes use
15 social media during sport events. However, the gratifications that athletes sought by engaging
16 in these practices require further investigation, and understanding what satisfaction athletes
17 receive from social media could help develop a better understanding of their use of social
18 media.

19 Hull (2014) examined social media content of professional golfers during a major golf
20 tournament, and suggested that golfers primarily gave fans a glimpse into the life of a
21 professional golfer through personal stories and photos. Hull's (2014) research was also
22 limited to one sport, however, called for research to examine other sports. The current study
23 can build on these limitations by taking a multi-sport event approach. The content of the U.S.
24 Women's National Soccer Team was also examined during the 2015 Women's World Cup
25 (Hayes-Sauder & Blaszk, 2016). Athletes produced informative content and acknowledged

1 that behind the scenes insight is more interesting to followers. The strategies were consistent
2 before, during, and after the event.

3 The studies reviewed offer valuable insight into how athletes use social media during
4 major sport events. However, the gratifications athletes received when engaging with fans
5 through these strategies is unclear. Content analyses have also provided a valuable
6 understanding of the types of content athletes produce. Nonetheless, the firsthand
7 perspectives of athletes appear to be a key voice missing. An opportunity exists for athlete
8 social media use during major sport events to be examined through a U&G theory lens and
9 through the firsthand perspectives of athletes. Consistent with Sanderson's (2013)
10 recommendation for U&G theory research, the current study examines why athletes used
11 social media during major events through firsthand perspectives of athletes, what satisfaction
12 they gain, and any challenges they face. Additionally, the current study examines athletes as
13 both media consumers and producers, which has been previously overlooked by sport
14 communication researchers. In making this examination, qualitative data were collected from
15 athletes competing in major sport events.

16 **Method**

17 **Study Context**

18 As defined by Emery (2010), a major sport event is the "umbrella term to include
19 mega, calendar, one-off and showcase events" (p. 160). Using this definition, a number of
20 multi-sport and single sport events scheduled during a period of six months were identified in
21 order to gather a viable sample pool of athletes. A period of six months was selected to
22 ensure an appropriate number of athletes relevant to the purpose of the study could
23 participate. Past research has acknowledged the difficulties in accessing elite athletes for
24 empirical research (e.g., Geurin, 2017). The difficulties appear to consist of finding a suitable
25 number of athletes willing to take the time to partake in studies similar to this one (Geurin,

2017). Further, a period of six months allowed for a diverse sample of athletes competing in different sports competing at different times throughout the year. Major sport events included in the study were selected based on the level of competition (i.e., international), timing, and accessibility of athletes. Events that were international sports competitions were selected due to the high-pressure environment and level of expectation placed on athletes (Hull, 2014). World Championships and similar events provided an international competition component as the current study was conducted during a non-Olympic year. Some events included the Athletics World Championships and Artistic Gymnastics World Championships. For example, the Triathlon Grand Final was the final event on the international triathlon calendar. Events primarily consisted of single sport competitions with the exception of the Asian Indoor Martial Arts Games (AIMAG), the Aquatic World Championships, and the New Zealand (NZ) Winter Games. The events were primarily held in countries other than Australia (e.g., Europe and North America).

Australian athletes were chosen for the study for a number of reasons. First, Filo et al. (2015) highlighted a need for more research on social media consumers beyond North American perspectives. Second, Australian athletes have faced harsh criticism from national media for using social media during events, with some labelling their use as a competition distraction (e.g., Fynes-Clinton, 2012). The criticism emphasised athletes' overuse of social media during events, while suggesting athletes were more concerned with sharing their experiences rather than focusing on the competition. One of Australia's gold medal contenders for the 2012 London Olympics conceded her overuse of social media may have been a reason for her disappointing result (Fynes-Clinton, 2012). Concerns have also been raised on what content athletes see during these times. Some athletes reported being distressed by negative commentary directed at them during event times (Encel et al., 2017). Although these incidents are not isolated to Australian athletes, some have come forward to

say their social media use could have impacted their performance. However, few athletes have explained why they were using social media so frequently during these times, offering an opportunity to examine the uses, gratifications, and challenges of social media.

Participants

Australian elite athletes who competed in Olympic sports (e.g., archery, athletics, skiing) at international competitions comprised the population and were recruited for the study. Further details regarding participant recruitment are provided in the procedures section. The open-ended questionnaire yielded a sample of 57 usable responses. Female (57.90%) and male (40.35%) respondents who ranged from 16 to 43 years old and competed across 20 events completed the questionnaire (see Table 1 for participant demographics). Ethical clearance was provided for all participants including those under 18 years of age. Social media was used by 53 (92.98%) athletes, while four (7.02%) did not use social media. These four non-users were, in turn, not included for analysis as it was outside the scope of the current study.

--TABLE 1--

Materials

In order to obtain firsthand experiences from athletes, data were collected through an open-ended online questionnaire with a focus on why athletes used social media and the gratification they received in doing so. A qualitative research design was chosen for a number of reasons. First, a qualitative research design allowed the researchers to gather more in-depth data (Tracy, 2013) from the athletes about their social media use and the gratifications they receive during events, as directed by Sanderson (2013) who highlighted that athlete perspectives were a key voice missing from athlete social media and U&G theory literature. Second, Auerback and Silverstein (2003) indicated that qualitative research often resembles the first step in building knowledge relating to phenomena. As minimal understanding of

1 athlete's gratifications for social media is established, a qualitative research design assisted in
2 addressing this gap and was deemed more suitable than approaching the study with a
3 quantitative design (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Finally, U&G theory posits that data should be
4 collected from media consumers (Katz et al., 1973) and producers (Ha & James, 1998), in an
5 open-ended way.

6 The selection of an open-ended questionnaire allowed athletes to respond without any
7 interference from the research team, while the interpretive approach allowed the participants
8 to develop any conceptual outcomes (Siggelkow, 2007). Other approaches considered
9 included interviews and a close-ended survey. Interviews would have been difficult to
10 navigate with previous research revealing the difficulties in attracting a suitable number of
11 athletes to devote the time necessary to participate. For instance, Geurin (2017) invited 73
12 athletes to participate in an interview regarding their new media use, however, the final
13 sample was six interviewees. A close-ended survey would have also prohibited the depth
14 required to fully understand the gratifications and challenges associated with social media use
15 (Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec, & Vehovar, 2003). Further, the same difficulties in attracting a
16 suitable number of athletes to complete the questionnaire would have occurred as a much
17 larger sample would have been required in order to make any inferences from the data.
18 Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, sport, and event) as well as a profile of athlete
19 time spent on social media was obtained. Qualifying questions were embedded to ensure each
20 athlete was relevant to the purpose of the current study (Gratton & Jones, 2004). For
21 example, athletes were asked to identify the event they had most recently competed in.

22 A series of open-ended questions guided by U&G theory and gaps in the literature
23 were presented to athletes who indicated they used social media during their event. First, a
24 broad question was used to ask athletes their intentions for using social media during their
25 event. A key gap identified in the literature was the lack of information and depth on the

1 gratifications athletes obtain through social media use, although it is a focus of U&G theory
2 (Katz et al., 1973). Therefore, several questions asked athletes specifically about the
3 satisfaction obtained by using social media (e.g., what satisfaction do you intend to gain from
4 using social media during a major sport event?). In order to derive further information on
5 gratifications, additional questions focused on how using social media made athletes feel,
6 how they would react if they could not use social media, and any benefits they received. The
7 questions also sought information about any challenges encountered by athletes. Finally,
8 athletes were asked if they would alter their social media use for future events. A copy of the
9 questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

10 **Procedures**

11 After receiving ethical clearance for the study, athletes were recruited through
12 purposeful and convenience sampling approaches (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).
13 Following the advice of Creswell (2014), participants were selected in a purposeful approach
14 in order to understand the research problem and question(s). A convenience sampling
15 approach was required due, in part, to the location of the authors (Etikan et al., 2016). The
16 sampling approach was constricted as the access of athletes presented a pragmatic constraint
17 to the study (Suri, 2011). A government-funded high performance sport institute, relevant
18 sport organisations, and the researchers' university sports college were contacted for
19 assistance with recruitment. Participants were also recruited through the direct messaging
20 function of Instagram. Athletes contacted via Instagram were identified from publicly
21 available team lists. The lead researcher contacted the athletes with a brief message about the
22 project and the link to the online questionnaire.

23 The questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics and was pilot tested within the
24 research team as well as among several PhD students ranging in age, and high school students
25 of similar age to younger athletes to ensure the wording was clear, understandable, and

unambiguous (Gratton & Jones, 2004) prior to administration. The sequencing of questions was checked to ensure it was logical, and the likely completion time was also assessed. A few sequencing and wording errors were identified and fixed before the final distribution. Contact with athletes and the distribution of the questionnaire were conducted one week after the conclusion of their event in an attempt to minimise issues of recall. Athletes completed the questionnaire one to six weeks after their event. Participants took approximately 8 to 12 minutes to complete the questionnaire. A gift voucher prize draw was used to incentivise participation. Reminder emails were sent to participants and to sport organisations after one week. The questionnaire was distributed online, which provided convenience and flexibility to participants who were in various overseas locations (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003). Distributing the questionnaire online also ensured the research team did not interfere with athlete responses (Siggelkow, 2007).

Data Analysis

Descriptive and frequency analyses were used to assess demographic data. The remaining data obtained through open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis which is a “method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Thematic analysis provides a tool for sport researchers to examine people’s behaviours and their views on a specific issue or phenomena (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). As a result, thematic analysis has been proven as an effective method in sport research (Braun et al., 2016). Thematic analysis can be used across a variety of methods, while most commonly in qualitative interviewing (Braun et al., 2016). Although the current study did not utilise qualitative interviewing, the analysis process was similar. Data were analysed using the six phases proposed 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.

1 In order to become familiar with the data (phase 1), the first author read and re-read
2 the responses that were downloaded from Qualtrics and entered into an Excel spreadsheet. In
3 contrast to qualitative interviewing, the data were already written and did not need to be
4 transcribed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses ranged from one word to 131 words in
5 length, with a large amount of responses consisting of several sentences. While familiarising
6 herself with the data, the first author applied U&G theory as a guiding framework and to
7 assist the generation of initial codes and identifying features of the data (phase 2) related to
8 the three research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Responses to each individual question
9 were coded first, before combining all codes in order to see the general themes emerging
10 across the data. Similar codes were highlighted using the same colour which assisted in
11 recognising potential themes.

12 Once the initial codes and potential themes were identified, they were sorted with
13 corresponding data extracts (i.e., responses from athletes). Theme maps were used to create
14 visual representations and assist with sorting the different codes into themes. Once the themes
15 were finalised they were defined, before a review for any overlap was conducted (phases 3-
16 5). While applying U&G theory as a framework and engaging in the phases of thematic
17 analysis, eight key themes were identified. The themes consisted of communication with
18 supporters, promotion, information gathering and sharing, connectedness, positive
19 reinforcement, relaxation and escape, anxiousness, and balancing social media use.

20 Data were coded by the first author. Therefore, in order to minimise bias and
21 subjectivity in the analysis, the researcher approached the thematic analysis process
22 reflexively (Morrow, 2005). Reflexivity can be carried out in a number of ways including
23 through peer debriefing and consultation with the research team (Morrow, 2005). As a result,
24 the first author engaged in peer debriefing with her co-authors to minimise bias and to help
25 ensure the findings of the study were true and honest (Spall, 1998). Following the advice of

1 qualitative researchers, peer debriefing sessions included undertaking extensive discussions
2 about the findings that were derived from the thematic analysis process (Lincoln & Guba,
3 1985; Morrow, 2005; Spall, 1998). Morrow (2005) suggested that alternative interpretations
4 of the data can be elicited during peer debriefing sessions. Throughout the peer debriefing
5 process, a number of questions were asked about the themes and what they entail. Some of
6 the themes were renamed (e.g., positive reinforcement was originally labelled support).

7 The results and definitions of each theme are provided in the results below (phase 6).
8 The themes identified from the thematic analysis process are provided in Table 2 along with
9 an operational definition and example quote.

10 --TABLE 2--

11 As outlined by Braun et al. (2016), the quotations used in the subsequent results
12 section were chosen in order to provide rich examples and illustrate the spread of the themes
13 derived from the analysis. Numbers were assigned to protect athlete identities when
14 displaying results. Table 3 provides a list of respondent numbers that are used throughout this
15 results section.

16 --Table 3--

17 Results

18 Frequency of Social Media Use

19 The following section answers the first research question which sought to understand
20 how frequently athletes use social media during a major sport event compared to their
21 everyday use. Athletes revealed they access more than one of the main four platforms (i.e.,
22 Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) during their event, with some accessing all four
23 throughout the event period. Additional platforms included messaging apps such as
24 WhatsApp which were primarily used to communicate with team personnel. Surprisingly,
25 Twitter was the least popular platform among athletes, which could represent a shift toward

more photo predominant platforms. Athletes appeared to have the intention of decreasing the amount of time spent on social media during events when compared with their everyday life. However, their actual usage was higher than intended. Athletes still spent less time on social media during the event than they would during their everyday use outside of major event periods (see Table 4 for how often athlete accessed social media).

--Table 4--

Social Media Uses

The following section answers the second research question, which asked why athletes use social media to consume and produce content during a major sport event. Three social media uses were uncovered: communication with supporters, promotion, and information gathering and sharing. The themes demonstrate that athletes have become *prosumers* by not only using social media to consume content during an event but also to produce their own content (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012; Nonnecke et al., 2006).

Communication with Supporters. Communication with supporters was a primary use of social media and was defined as social media providing an avenue for athletes to keep in contact with key support networks. Athletes used social media to communicate with family, friends, fans, and their team. Respondent 42 (female, 20) provided an overview of how she communicated with her supporters and demonstrated that the various platforms had different uses by saying:

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.

Athletes participated in events held in overseas locations, and for this reason social media provided an avenue for them to communicate with friends and family. Many described communicating as their primary purpose for using social media during their event.

Respondent 21 (female, 21) 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.” Respondent 27 (male, 20) revealed that if he could not communicate with his support networks his positive mentality may suffer:

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.

Analysis also revealed two gratifications that were associated with athletes using social media to communicate with supporters: connectedness and positive reinforcement. These gratifications will be discussed further in subsequent result sections.

Promotion. The second social media use identified was promotion. The promotion theme was defined as an avenue for athletes to increase their personal profile and the profile of their sponsors during the event. The theme represents one of the reasons athletes produce content on social media, not necessarily a reason for consumption. Of the athletes that did have sponsors, not all were required to promote his or her respective sponsor(s) during the event. Respondent 5 (female, 25) 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.” For other athletes, there was a requirement to promote

sponsors, however, many athletes were not given any specifications for their social media profiles and it was left up to the athlete to decide when and how to post. For instance, Respondent 33 (male, 17) 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.”

The pressure for promoting sponsors was suggested to increase for larger events such as an Olympic Games or Commonwealth Games, which provide a greater platform for increased exposure to a brand. Respondent 13 (male, 24) 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 [international sport event] Ambassador for [my sport] for the [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 most of my posts get shares through their social media platforms as well.

Athletes who were required to promote their sponsors during their event revealed the strategies they used. Respondent 21 (female, 21) summarised her strategies:

Yes [I am required to promote sponsors], by posting daily updates whilst wearing or using sponsor’s 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 scale.

Athletes identified that using social media during their event was also an opportunity

1 to promote themselves by attempting to develop their personal brand. Respondent 14 (female,
2 19) provided insight on how she would promote her personal brand by saying “to promote
3 myself as an individual and an athlete in order to gain more sponsors in Australia by doing
4 interviews, uploading photos, stories.”

5 **Information Gathering and Sharing.** The final use identified was information
6 gathering and sharing. Athletes used social media to share and gather information related to
7 their event. The theme was defined as the sharing and gathering of information related to the
8 event such as competition times and information on competitors. Similar to the promotion
9 theme, information sharing and gathering presents athletes in the role of both the consumer
10 and producer. For some, social media were useful in sourcing information about current
11 affairs outside of the event environment. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were
12 primarily used for “looking at the news and other current trending issues” as described by
13 Respondent 7 (male, 26). Other athletes sourced information about their team and fellow
14 competitors. Respondent 13 (male, 24) summarised how he used social media to source
15 competition related information:

16 Researching competitors in my division. To distract myself from the games’
17 atmosphere. Finding the schedule for competition and monitoring for changes
18 to schedule. Checking medal count and how other sports within the team are
19 performing.

20 Respondent 22 (female, 35) shared a similar synopsis:

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

24 Athletes also provided event insight to followers and found social media was a
25 quicker way to disseminate important information that followers (e.g., fans, family and

1 friends) wanted to know. Respondent 42 (female, 20) revealed, “I was able to do one post
2 about when the game was or how we went instead of people messaging me for information.”
3 Followers were also able to see how athletes prepared for the event and receive injury
4 updates from athletes via their social media platforms. For instance, Respondent 38 (male,
5 26) revealed he used social media to provide insight into his preparation and to “inform my
6 fans about preparation or days before the event.”

7 **Social Media Gratifications**

8 The third research question focused on what gratifications athletes receive from social
9 media during a major sport event. Three gratifications were uncovered including
10 connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape.

11 **Connectedness.** A key gratification that resulted from communicating with
12 supporters was the feeling of connectedness. This theme was defined as athletes striving to
13 feel connected to the outside world, support networks, and the event. Respondent 24 (female,
14 31) highlighted that she was able to stay connected to various people and stay up to date on
15 news throughout her event:

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

19 Athletes also highlighted that staying connected with family and friends made them
20 feel less isolated while away from home competing at their events, particularly in their
21 downtime, with Respondent 53 (female, 18) describing her experience:

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

When asked about what impacts not having access to social media would have on her, Respondent 12 (female, 21) revealed the importance of staying connected to her support networks and home life in order to stay calm during major events. Respondent 12 (female, 21) said she “would feel disconnected from home and therefore stressed.” Respondent 52 (male, 20) also suggested that he would struggle to keep his support networks up to date if he was disconnected from social media 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.” Social media allowed athletes to feel connected to the event they were competing at and develop connections with competitors. Respondent 37 (male, 17) highlighted the ability to connect so easily with other athletes was 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.”

Positive Reinforcement. The positive reinforcement theme was defined as athletes receiving satisfaction through supportive messages from followers and support networks (e.g., family and friends). Social media allowed athletes to receive messages of support during their major sport event, which was suggested to increase their confidence in their performance and overall satisfaction with the event as the messages were overwhelmingly positive. Respondent 26 (female, 30) found that using social media made her realise how much support she had by saying “it makes you realise that there is a lot of support out there. So, it made me feel good about what I was doing.”

The importance of receiving messages of support was also highlighted by Respondent 19 (female, 20) who explained not having access to the support messages presented via social media could potentially impact her performance during the event by saying, “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.” Respondent 44 (male, 29) summarised how receiving ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ on his social media content could provide 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.

Respondent 50 (female, 22) alluded to support in a different way and found using social media enabled her to see other athletes’ experiences and made her feel better about her own emotions during the event: “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.”

Relaxation and Escape. The final theme related to social media gratifications was relaxation and escape. This theme was defined as athletes seeking an escape from their sport or the pressures associated with competing. Athletes found social media to be an escape during the event as it was beneficial or relaxing for them to take their mind off competing. Respondent 32 (male, 20) found social media as a way 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 on to athletics while at championships because it mentally fatigues me.

Other athletes found social media was a tool that enabled them to disconnect from the competition in their downtime, with Respondent 29 (male, 25) saying 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.” Relaxing through using social media was also linked to having a communication channel with supporters. Respondent 12 (female, 21) suggested social media was a way to enhance her performance and ensure she competes to the best of her ability: “being able to switch off during competition mode is important for me to be able to perform at my best.”

The benefits of using social media as an escape from the highly competitive environment were further highlighted by Respondent 3 (female, 21), who had implemented a personal social media ban at previous events. She suggested that a social media ban could potentially lead to negative impacts on her performance rather than keeping her social media use consistent with their everyday use outside of competition times:

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.

Challenges of Social Media Use

The third research question sought to uncover potential challenges associated with social media use during major sport events. Two challenges were evident: anxiousness and balancing social media use.

Anxiousness. Although social media appeared to be mostly positive for athletes, some also felt that using the platforms made them feel anxious. This theme was defined as athletes feeling uneasy through the content they were exposed to and posting on their social

media pages. The ability to see information on competitors in the lead up to her event provided additional stress for Respondent 4 (female, 25), who revealed “it 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.”

Deciding what to post was a cause for concern among athletes. For instance, Respondent 21 (female, 21) 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.” Respondent 51 (female, 33) found that she was feeling anxious about her content on social media, particularly when she compared her content with 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, Respondent 22 (female, 35) shared her experience with an incident involving a fellow member of the team following a photo she shared via social media. Although this incident appeared to be isolated among the sample, it demonstrates the impact that a photo could cause for an individual athlete and/or a team if not managed appropriately:

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.

While receiving supportive messages from followers was primarily considered positive, Respondent 31 (male, 23) revealed that constant encouragement may provide

1 athletes with more pressure than intended. He found that if he could not access social media
2 during events he would not be able to relieve such pressures:

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

7 **Balancing social media use.** This theme was defined as athletes finding it difficult to
8 balance an appropriate level of social media use. Respondent 31 (male, 23) found that there
9 were both positives and negatives in the ways he used social media:

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

15 Some athletes indicated that they would minimise their use for future events, while
16 others suggested increasing the amount of content and posting would assist them to achieve
17 their goals (e.g., attracting sponsors). Although athletes were able to use social media as an
18 escape and as a tool to relax, some found they used social media more than they intended to,
19 with some also saying they could find better alternatives for future events. Respondent 50
20 (female, 22) stated, "I could use my time better i.e. by doing something a bit more productive
21 where I can still switch off, do more mindfulness." Other athletes found that they would also
22 minimise their use in order to stay focused on themselves and not others during the
23 competition. Respondent 23 (male, 20) found he was able to maintain a good balance through
24 a social media plan:

25 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.

The positives and negatives of social media use were also relayed by Respondent 37 (male, 17) who found if he couldn't access social media as often then meeting other athletes competing at the event would be difficult. Conversely, he suggested having minimal access would have made him more focused on competing, recovery, and his own teammates:

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.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine why athletes use social media during a major sport event as well as the gratifications they receive and the challenges they experience from this use. The current study has contributed to athlete social media research and U&G theory by addressing three research questions. Each of the three research questions examined athlete's use of social media as a whole, rather than focusing on one particular platform. Although some athletes reported using particular platforms for particular things at times, the results overall reflect the gratifications and challenges associated with a range of platforms. The approach builds on previous research that has focused on individual platforms, such as Twitter (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). The first question asked

1 “why do athletes consume and produce social media content during a major sport event?” and
2 revealed three uses, including: communication with supporters, promotion, and information
3 gathering and sharing. The themes align with previous research (e.g., Geurin, 2017;
4 Hambrick et al., 2010; Pegoraro, 2010), while also offering new insights into athlete social
5 media use during events.

6 Communication with supporters resonates with Hambrick et al.’s (2010) diversion
7 category which revealed professional athletes shared stories of family and friends. However,
8 in the current study athletes did not reveal they were sharing stories, instead they were
9 communicating personal matters with family and friends who were unable to attend the event.
10 The theme represents an important finding that was elicited through firsthand perspectives
11 lacking from U&G theory literature (Sanderson, 2013) as private communication would not
12 typically be available for content analyses studies. Further, athletes did not mention they were
13 directly responding to fans through replies on comments (Clavio et al., 2013; Hull, 2014).
14 Communicating with family and friends was linked to a number of gratifications including
15 connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape, which was also suggested
16 to have positive impacts on their athletic performance.

17 Insights into the events were also provided to followers or supporters of the athlete,
18 extending previous professional athlete research (Hambrick et al., 2010) and aligning with
19 event specific research that suggested athletes shared commentary on the events (Clavio et
20 al., 2013; Hayes-Sauder & Blaszk, 2016; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010). In
21 addition, athletes in the current study were able to present their followers with images of the
22 competition venue/city revealing similarities to previous research (Hayes-Sauder & Blaszk,
23 2016; Hull, 2014), while also sharing their thoughts on their preparation and performances
24 during the event. Social media also provided another avenue for athletes to gather
25 information. In the current study, the information gathered was specific to the event, with

1 athletes receiving information from their team management and event organisers,
2 demonstrating that various sport stakeholders have adopted social media as a primary
3 communication platform.

4 The promotion and information gathering and sharing themes align with uses
5 previously identified in professional athlete social media research (Hambrick et al., 2010;
6 Pegoraro, 2010), revealing similarities in how athletes adopt social media in their everyday
7 lives and during major sport events. Athletes promoted personal sponsors and engaged in
8 self-promotion, aligning with previous research in the context of sport events (Clavio et al.,
9 2013; Hull, 2014). Athletes also used social media to market themselves to sponsors and
10 manage their own brand supporting previous work on athlete branding (Clavio et al., 2013;
11 Geurin, 2017; Pegoraro, 2010). Some athletes preferred to manage their brand by posting
12 about their achievements at the competition, suggesting that major sport events provide a
13 unique opportunity for athletes to enhance their brand.

14 Athletes who use social media as a form of promotion may be impacted by the
15 Australian Olympic Committee's Rule 40.3. As outlined previously, the rule focuses on how
16 an athlete's name and image is used in marketing, sponsorship, and other promotional
17 activities for those selected on the Australian Olympic Team. The AOC suggested athletes
18 may post content about their personal experiences, share AOC digital content, and obtain
19 permission of teammates or competitors if they post a photo containing them. However,
20 athletes are prohibited from posting any content related to their personal sponsors who are not
21 Olympic commercial partners. As the rule only applies during an Olympic Games, the
22 impacts on the athletes who participated in the current study are minimal (Australian
23 Olympic Committee, 2017). Yet, this may cause issues for some athletes who suggested they
24 have more pressure to promote their sponsors during larger events and continue to represent
25 Australia during an Olympic Games.

1 The promotion and information gathering and sharing themes demonstrated athletes
2 undertaking the role of content producers. Specifically, the information sharing theme aligned
3 with research in other disciplines that examined social media users' role as content producers
4 (e.g., Lee & Ma, 2012). Meanwhile, the promotion theme may be unique to athletes in their
5 pursuit of sponsorships in order to generate an income or awareness of their sport (Clavio et
6 al., 2013; Parmentier & Fischer, 2012).

7 The second research question asked "what gratifications do athletes receive from
8 using social media during a major sport event?" Athletes obtained several types of
9 gratifications from using social media which were represented in three themes:
10 connectedness, positive reinforcement, and relaxation and escape. These findings provided a
11 deeper understanding of the gratification athletes receive when using social media derived
12 from athlete perspectives (Sanderson, 2013). Athletes felt connected to their support
13 networks and to the outside world through their social media use, suggesting this alleviated
14 some feelings of nervousness. Further, the positive reinforcement gratification was also
15 received from family, friends, and followers sending athletes messages of encouragement.
16 The positive reinforcement theme builds on previous work that found athletes receive
17 positive messages of support in competition contexts (Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Notably,
18 athletes in the current study did not disclose any negative messages they received. Therefore,
19 the way support was manifested in the current study was dissimilar to Sanderson and Truax's
20 (2014) study that revealed support was directed to athletes in response to an influx of
21 negative messages.

22 Both connectedness and positive reinforcement could contribute to better
23 performances as athletes linked these gratifications to feeling better about their performances
24 on multiple occasions. Strong connections to social support networks have been associated
25 with better performances in literature outside of the social media realm (Freeman, Rees, &

Hardy, 2009). The finding reveals that social media may provide another avenue for athletes to receive social support. The remaining gratification theme was relaxation and escaping the pressures of the sport environment. Athletes appeared to seek this gratification during their down time. The theme does not align with previous research on athlete social media use underpinned by U&G theory.

The third research question asked “what challenges do athletes experience when using social media during a major sport event?” Although a large body of research has focused on the positive aspects of social media use, this study found that athletes faced two key challenges: 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 (Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Athletes revealed that anxiousness stemmed from deciding what to post and comparing themselves to other athletes. Athletes also felt a sense of anxiety through seeing competitors’ posts. However, previous work revealed that Facebook caused a disruption of concentration for some athletes leading into a competition and stimulated sport anxiety (Encel et al., 2017).

Finally, athletes indicated balancing the appropriate amount of social media use was challenging. 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 pressures. Others suggested they would increase their social media use for future events, with a focus on interactivity aligning with previous research suggesting a primary reason for athletes using social media is to interact with followers and promotional purposes (Clavio et al., 2013; Hull, 2014; Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

The findings reveal areas where uses, gratifications, and challenges interrelate. Communication with supporters was associated with all three gratifications revealed. Specifically, communication with supporters made athletes feel connected, a sense of positive

reinforcement, and relaxed during events. Information sharing and gathering was also linked to connectedness and relaxation and escape. 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 providing a diversion to competition pressures.

The challenges also connect with the reasons athletes used social media. Athletes reported feelings of anxiousness upon viewing their competitor's 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 competitor's 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.

Theoretical Implications

The findings from this study have contributed in two ways. First, the study offered new information for athlete social media research and U&G theory by providing a deeper understanding of the gratifications received from social media use. Although social media use appeared to be viewed as primarily positive, the study was also one of the first to examine the challenges associated with social media use through the lens of U&G theory. Few studies have examined the challenges athletes face and whether these can impact their use of social media in the future through U&G theory. Instead, examinations have focused attention on the reasons athletes use social media (e.g., Hambrick et al., 2010). Although these studies have made valuable contributions to U&G theory and athlete social media literature, the challenges identified in this study could represent the reasons why athletes may decide not to use social media during future events. Athletes in the current study suggested they may alter or minimise their social media use in the future.

Although athletes in the current study were not classified as *non-users*, the challenges

that became evident align with previous research. Raake and Bonds-Raake (2008) examined the failed gratifications of Facebook users. The authors found that failed gratifications were evident for a number of reasons including feelings of intimidation, which was caused by the content they viewed. Similarly, the current study builds upon Raake and Bonds-Raake's (2008) study by revealing athletes experienced feelings of anxiousness for a number of reasons including seeing their competitor's content. The finding suggests that athletes may not only decide to minimise their social media use based on negative feelings, but also that other social media users may experience similar emotions. Further, Raake and Bonds-Raake (2008) reported *non-users* opted out of using social media as they were too busy. The finding has applications to athletes, as the current study revealed some would alter their use for future events in an effort to focus more on themselves and their performance at the event.

Second, 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 avenue. Thus, the current study contributes to U&G theory and athlete social media research efforts 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). Specifically, the study offers a new variable in the form of promotion that may be unique to athletes taking the content producer approach in their pursuit of sponsorship.

Managerial Implications

The findings of the current study have implications for practitioners. First, 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), with the current study revealing athletes may experience similar feelings. Research outside of the sport context also suggested that social

media addiction and lack of mindfulness can lead to emotional exhaustion (Sriwilai & Charoensukmongkol, 2016). 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 bolster their performances and may assist athletes in finding balance with their social media use (Birrer, Röthlin, & Morgan, 2012; Goodman, Kashdan, Mallard, & Schumann, 2014).

Second, the findings also reveal the need for sport organisations to educate athletes in ways that may help them manage challenges and negative feelings related to social media use if athletes need to continue using social media to promote sponsors or connect with family during events (Sanderson, Browning, & Schmittl, 2015). Again, current education resources that promote appropriate use could be improved by acknowledging the challenges athletes face with social media (Sanderson et al., 2015). Sport organisations may benefit by providing athletes with 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. Education resources could also 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. By improving practice, the reputation of sport organisations could be improved, as the amount of issues related to athlete social media use may decrease, while criticism of organisational practices related to performance may be alleviated.

Limitations

While the current study offered new insight into athletes' uses and gratifications for social media use during major sport events, there were a number of limitations. As social media use among athletes (and in general) has recently received a lot of media criticism,

1 while sport organisations have threatened to ban the platforms during competitions in the
2 past, participants may have demonstrated social desirability bias when recording their
3 answers to the questionnaire (Grimm, 2010). Participants may have wanted to demonstrate
4 that social media is more of a positive resource rather than harmful in an effort to overcome
5 the negative connotations that currently exist, as well as to portray healthier behaviors.

6 Limitations also exist in the sampling procedure. As the authors of the study were
7 based in Australia, a convenience and purposeful sampling approach was used to obtain
8 access to Australian athletes. By using this approach, the findings of the study are not
9 generalizable and may not be applicable to all athletes and their experiences with using social
10 media during major sport events (Etikan et al., 2016). Although not an ideal approach, the
11 pragmatic constraints of accessing athletes prohibited the authors from using other sampling
12 procedures (Suri, 2011). Accessibility was also limited following the conclusion of the major
13 event. Therefore, respondents were asked to recall how they used social media during their
14 selected event. This is a common problem for research that utilises the questionnaire method
15 with respondents often unable to recount the required information (Wimmer & Dominick,
16 2003). In order to address this limitation, we contacted the majority of athletes within a week
17 after their competition and although this was the case, not all participants completed the
18 open-ended questionnaire within this time frame. Questionnaires were completed between
19 one and six weeks after events. Therefore, recall may be affected due to the time lapse since
20 the event occurred.

21 **Future Research**

22 A number of areas for future research arise from the findings and limitations. First, as
23 the study only revealed four athletes who did not use social media during their event, future
24 research could seek to further explore reasons for other athletes choosing to disengage from
25 social media in the preparation and event phases, and the potential positive or negative

1 impacts this may have on them personally and professionally. U&G theory provides an
2 appropriate lens to examine this phenomenon as it allows researchers to investigate failed
3 gratifications (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008). This research would benefit from the
4 perspectives of athletes through interviews. Interviews would enable more in-depth
5 information to be collected, whereas athletes may only provide some brief responses to open-
6 ended questionnaires as experienced with this study. Further, a number of additional
7 questions could be explored using U&G theory that were beyond the scope of the current
8 study. For instance, researchers could examine the differences between the gratifications
9 sought versus those that were obtained when using social media. As the current study
10 revealed athletes use social media for both private and public communication, an examination
11 could investigate any differences between the gratifications or challenges associated with
12 both of the areas. Researchers should also continue to explore whether athletes have
13 strategies while using social media. For instance, athletes in the current study reported
14 different uses for different platforms.

15 Second, the open-ended questionnaire primarily focused on the positive aspects of
16 social media use for athletes in order to gauge any satisfaction athletes received. It was
17 revealed that athletes appeared to enjoy receiving positive messages from followers,
18 however, there was minimal mention of negative messages. Future research could seek to
19 examine any negative messages athletes may receive and how this could impact them
20 personally or professionally during events. Researchers may seek a mixed methods approach
21 involving interviewing or surveying athletes about these messages in order to gain in-depth
22 data and analysing message content. These methods will allow researchers to delve deeper
23 into how messages are managed by athletes or where athletes may seek external support (e.g.,
24 coach, sport psychologist, family) in order to minimise any negative impact during
25 competition.

1 Lastly, future research could also gather the perspectives of athlete support networks
2 such as family and friends. A study could include questioning whether family and friends
3 interact with athletes in similar ways during non-event and event times, or attempt to provide
4 more support during competition times, why this would be the case, and how this is achieved.
5 A qualitative research design including interviews or an open-ended questionnaire could be
6 employed. Gaining these additional perspectives would also help address the limitations of
7 this study.

8

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Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

Respondent profile (N = 53)

Variable		<i>n</i>	(%)
Gender			
	Female	31	58.49
	Male	21	39.62
	Prefer not to disclose	1	1.89
Age			
	15-24	32	60.37
	25-34	17	32.08
	35-44	4	7.55
Event			
	Artistic Gymnastics World Championships	1	1.89
	Archery World Championships	1	1.89
	Asian Indoor Martial Arts Games	5	9.43
	Athletics World Championships	10	18.87
	Aquatic (FINA) World Championships	3	5.66
	Beach Volleyball World Championships	2	3.77
	Canoe Sprint World Championships	1	1.89
	Hockey Oceania Cup	2	3.77
	Mountain Bike World Championships	4	7.55
	Oceania Continental Climbing Championships	1	1.89
	Rhythmic Gymnastics World Championships	2	3.77
	Road Cycling World Championships	2	3.77
	Rowing World Championships	5	9.43
	Short Track Speed Skating World Cup	1	1.89
	Squash World Doubles Championships	1	1.89
	Trampoline Gymnastics World Championships	2	3.77
	Triathlon Grand Final	4	7.55
	Winter Games (New Zealand)	3	5.66
	Women's Rugby World Cup	2	3.77
	World Roller Games	1	1.89

Table 2

Study One Themes, Operational Definitions, and Example Quote

Theme	Operational Definition	Example Quote
Communication with Supporters	Social media providing an avenue for athletes to keep in contact with key support networks	“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.”
Promotion	An avenue for athletes to increase their personal profile and the profile of their sponsors during the event	“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.”
Information Gathering and Sharing	The sharing and gathering of information related to the event such as competition times and information on competitors	“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.”
Connectedness	Athletes striving to feel connected to the outside world, support networks, and the event	“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.”
Positive Reinforcement	Athletes receiving satisfaction through supportive messages from followers and support networks (e.g., family and friends)	“It [using social media] allowed me to receive numerous kind messages of support which improved my confidence.”

Relaxation and Escape	Athletes seeking an escape from their sport or the pressures associated with competing	“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.”
Anxiousness	Athletes feeling uneasy through the content they were exposed to and posting on their social media pages	“It 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.”
Balancing social media use	Athletes finding it difficult to balance an appropriate level of social media use	“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.”

Table 3

Respondent Breakdown (N = 53)

Female			Male		
Number	Sport	Age	Number	Sport	Age
1	Synchronised Swimming	22	7	Cross-country skiing	26
2	Synchronised Swimming	19	13	Wrestling	24
3	Synchronised Swimming	21	15	Weightlifting	23
4	Rhythmic Gymnastics	25	17	Weightlifting	22
5	Squash	25	23	Mountain Bike	20
6	Cross-country skiing	21	25	Triathlon	19
8	Roller Derby	27	27	Triathlon	20
9	Cross-country skiing	30	28	Athletics	24
10	Rugby	38	29	Athletics	25
12	Beach Volleyball	21	30	Triathlon	22
14	Taekwondo	19	31	Athletics	23
16	Wrestling	23	32	Athletics	20
18	Rugby	39	33	Triathlon	17
19	Mountain Bike	20	34	Athletics	20
20	Athletics	25	37	Speed Skating	17
21	Mountain Bike	21	38	Road Cycling	26
22	Athletics	35	44	Beach Volleyball	29
24	Road Cycling	31	46	Rowing	25
26	Athletics	30	48	Rowing	25
35	Canoe Sprint	20	49	Rowing	24
36	Athletics	24	52	Trampoline Gymnastics	20
39	Artistic Gymnastics	16			
40	Mountain Bike	33			
41	Hockey	31			
42	Hockey	20			
43	Archery	43			
45	Athletics	20			
47	Rowing	30			
50	Rowing	22			
51	Climbing	33			
53	Trampoline Gymnastics	18			

Note. Respondent 11 did not disclose a gender, however, was a 17-year-old rhythmic gymnastics athlete.

Table 4

Time Spent on Social Media

	Several times a day	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once a month	Never
Everyday Use						
Twitter	7.55%	13.21%	5.66%	9.43%	9.43%	54.72%
Facebook	62.26%	24.53%	7.55%	3.77%	0.00%	1.89%
Instagram	73.58%	16.98%	3.77%	1.89%	0.00%	3.77%
Snapchat	43.40%	16.98%	5.66%	5.66%	0.00%	28.30%
Others	5.66%	3.77%	5.66%	3.77%	0.00%	81.13%
Intended Event Use						
Twitter	3.77%	16.98%	3.77%	9.43%	3.77%	62.26%
Facebook	41.51%	37.74%	9.43%	5.66%	0.00%	5.66%
Instagram	49.06%	32.08%	9.43%	5.66%	0.00%	3.77%
Snapchat	28.30%	26.42%	5.66%	3.77%	0.00%	35.85%
Others	3.77%	9.43%	1.89%	5.66%	0.00%	79.25%
Actual Event Use						
Twitter	7.55%	13.21%	7.55%	1.89%	0.00%	69.81%
Facebook	54.72%	24.53%	11.32%	3.77%	0.00%	5.66%
Instagram	64.15%	26.42%	5.66%	0.00%	0.00%	3.77%
Snapchat	35.85%	24.53%	7.55%	3.77%	0.00%	28.30%
Others	7.55%	7.55%	5.66%	3.77%	0.00%	75.47%

Appendix B: 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 than one).

- ☐ Twitter
☐ Facebook
☐ Instagram
☐ Snapchat
☐ Other (please specify)

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).

	Several times daily	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once a month	Never
Twitter						
Facebook						
Instagram						
Snapchat						
Others						

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).

	Several times daily	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once a month	Never
Twitter						
Facebook						
Instagram						
Snapchat						
Others						

Section 3: Purposes for Social Media Use

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 ***during your selected major sports event?*** Please provide an answer for every platform. (If you do not use a certain platform, please select never).

	Several times daily	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Once a month	Never
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			week			
Twitter						
Facebook						
Instagram						
Snapchat						
Others						

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.