

ATHLETE ACTIVISM: ADVANCING SOCIO-POLITICAL CAUSES AT MEGA SPORTING EVENTS

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ABSTRACT

Highly mediated, mega-sporting events provide opportunities for elite athletes to use their prominent status to elicit social change. However, with expectations and policies in place to regulate behaviour that prevent athletes from making political statements, athlete activists face risks. An examination of the 2018 Commonwealth Games highlighted two athletes who used their personal reputation whilst at this highly mediated global sporting event to raise the visibility of societal issues. Through the lens of persona studies, this research examined how these athlete celebrities crafted individualised narratives through internetnetworked platforms of new and traditional media to demonstrate forms of athlete citizenship. This research illustrates how athletes can become co-creators of the social cause narrative demonstrating how valuable athletes can be in amplifying the core values of major sporting events by reinforcing a fluid form of intercommunication.

KEY WORDS

Athlete Activism; Self-Presentation; Persona; Mediatisation; Intercommunication

INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, the forms of communication surrounding major international Mega Sporting Events (MSEs) have been legion. MSEs, such as the Olympic Games or the array of World Championships across athletic and sporting codes, have provided pathways for nations and individuals to express themselves as well as convey strong threads of nationalism and internationalism through teams and individuals.

Media coverage of MSEs showcases the sporting elite, traditionally via controlled media coverage reaching a globalised audience through multiple communication channels (McGillivray 2014, p.99). However, as noted by McGillivray (2014, p.101), new technology has created opportunities for alternate content creators or “citizen media” to use the global attention directed toward the MSE to draw attention to under-voiced social issues. Citizen media, and the resultant ‘hybrid media environment’ (McGillivray 2014), has altered traditional media gatekeeping with multiple, uncensored narratives. Increasingly, MSE organisers have contributed to the social narrative, by demonstrating inclusivity and equality and acknowledging the need to leave a positive social and environmental footprint. For example, planning and investment to achieve sustainability for the London 2012 Olympic Games resulted in the creation of a 45-hectare biodiverse habitat and affordable housing from the conversion of

the Olympic Village accommodation (International Olympic Committee 2022). While athletes are intrinsic to MSEs and the social narrative, they are governed by activism-adverse regulations. Yet, athletes are uniquely positioned as citizen journalists crafting their personalised narrative with their deep connections to social causes.

Using persona studies as a lens, this article identifies how the shifted persona of the athlete, and their use of social media, re-personalises the potential and real pathways to express socio-political positions and sentiments. Although there is an inherent value associated with an athlete's visibility and reach, few amateur athletes have notably tested the flexibility of the policies in place by using social media during MSEs for athlete activism.

The Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia was the destination for the MSE, the 21st Commonwealth Games (CG2018), in April 2018. This event involved 71 nations assembling 6600 athletes (GOLDOC 2018a). Through CG2018, we examine how publicly prominent individual athletes contribute to, and extend, the social cause narrative (a form of athlete activism) through their personal communicative activities on social media platforms. A real-time approach (Vardaman et al. 2012) was adapted to monitor and identify celebrity athletes who entered into discourse regarding socio-political causes during this MSE. Only two athletes met this criterion during the 2018 event: England diver Tom Daley, and Australian para-athlete Kurt Fearnley AO. Both athletes used social media to reach their "micro-publics" – a technique to "draw together their own audiences" beyond the past pathways of legacy media and directly aligned to "their own self-publicity" and formations of "self-promotion" (Marshall 2014a, p.164; Marshall et al. 2020, p.89): this social-media connection cultivated and worked to visibly champion a human rights cause. Both athletes championed inclusivity and equality; Daley focusing on LGBTI+ advocacy and Fearnley, on disability advocacy.

The approach taken in this work is focussed on deciphering how athletes share this activist public identity through these individualised techniques of extending both their ideas and their image. The study is informed by the extensive research on mediatisation (Lundby 2014), its relationship to individualised mediatisation (Hjarvard 2013), and the valuable work by Frandsen (2019) that extends how mediatisation is personalised through the online transformations of sport. To fully investigate this transformed way that elite athletes negotiate personalised and public roles during MSEs, this study integrates how these athletes are negotiating their heightened capacity to use both legacy media and their person-to-person social media platforms that Castells (2009, pp.4, 58-71) describes as a new "mass self-communication" in a networked society. We investigate the fluidity or movement between legacy media and personal communication.

Athlete activism, through active and engaged athlete citizenship, potentially advances important social change (Kaufman and Wolff 2010, Butterworth 2014, Smith et al. 2016). This research addresses the gap identified by Cooper et al. (2019) and Cunningham et al. (2021) to identify evolving forms of situational sports activism through an interdisciplinary lens. Persona studies, in its reading of online identity formation and public sharing, provides the theoretical tools for an analysis of how celebrity-athletes negotiate the movement of their ideas through online platforms. The analysis considers how celebrity athletes work to shape the stories that are generated about them within a social cause-related community and into wider flows of media stories and an equally wider public.

Persona Studies

Persona studies encapsulates the representations individuals are constructing, how these are being exhibited in the public sphere, and the power and influence personalised narratives can

have. This compilation of imagery that is exhibited through various forms of media and curated for external audiences is known as the production of the public self. The collective accumulation of this personal information dispersed across what can be called the *presentational* media forms of online culture which include websites and social media that create opportunities for individuals to represent themselves and present their own narrative (or a version of themselves) (Marshall 2010, pp.35-48; Marshall et al. 2020, pp.32-34). Some individuals, particularly those that have a wider public presence, have created opportunities for their personally produced and curated information to flow from their presentational media activities on social media into traditional *representational* media or what is now often called legacy media, such as, television, radio, magazines and newspapers (Marshall 2010). Social media platforms facilitate information intersections; blending our interpersonal, media, communication and profoundly “intercommunication” (Marshall et al. 2020, pp.39-55) worlds. Other related research has identified how greater aspects of our cultures are now ‘mediatised’. For Lundby (2014, pp.3-35), Couldry and Hepp (2013, pp.191-202) and, specifically in the domain of sport, Frandsen (2019), mediatisation has transformed both our regular forms of personalised engagement and even our politics. In persona studies, mediatisation refers directly to the way our public identities via online culture reshape us through text, image and the sharing of other media forms at a level that is relatively new because of its pervasive deployment by billions. Mediatisation represents one of the key dimensions of persona as the personal is reconstructed through this now complex individualised mediatisation as we curate our online identities on social media platforms (Moore et al. 2017, p.3; Marshall et al. 2020, p.69). Our analysis that follows explores this specific process of self-mediatisation by elite athletes as they shape their personal narratives into political and social causes. We integrate into the analysis how these activist athletes negotiate a horizontal “mass-self-communication” (Castells 2009, pp.65-66) by managing “social power” now represented by social media platform persona work with the top-down or “vertical” power (Castells 2009, p.70) of traditional media to move their ideas, opinions and stories. Our study investigates how elite athletes work to make these forms of mediatisation and communication intersect in valuable and potentially powerfully influential ways.

From a persona studies analysis, intentional value identifies one of the dimensions of analysing contemporary persona where an individual works through the personal mediatisation of social media platforms for specific objectives and ends (Marshall et al. 2020, pp.72-74). Persona studies provides a lens to explore this intentional value through a mapping of the kind of value, agency, reputation and prestige, that athletes display through online presentation of the self. This aligns to the earlier work of Goffman (1959) and the presentation of self. Goffman’s model considers the staged performance, which in the case of the sporting event/arena, provides the opportunity and setting for athletes to demonstrate their sporting excellence. Yet when not competing, the athletes as actors can craft an alternative narrative which audiences can engage with through social media. Intentional value of athletes/actors can be examined through mapping online personal presentation. Value identifies the relative worth cultivated by an individual through online representation. Agency pertains to active and engaged individuals who works towards wider cultural transformations. Reputation and prestige are interlinked and incorporate the reach, visibility, influence and power individuals can utilise.

Through different connections and constellations of collective identity, athlete activists can leverage their value, agency, reputation and prestige to influence or disrupt a narrative. By focusing on elite athletes at MSEs, we examined how they blend traditional narratives of their athletic performance with personal narratives with socio-political underpinnings. Athletes demonstrate how it is possible to cultivate parallel and alternative identities or multiple personas when the platforms of forming publics – what current persona research has called

'micro-publics' - have moved into and through the networks of personalised online cultures with equal or greater impact than traditional and legacy media formations of cultural influence.

Athlete Celebrities

As much as we all construct personas, elite athletes move into a different realm of mediated visibility as their performances appear across media platforms, and they become essentially celebrified (Driessens 2013). From one perspective, traditional media helped construct highly visible athlete celebrities by providing audiences with news about on and off field behaviours (Summers & Johnson Morgan 2008, Fields 2016). The portrayal of athlete celebrities was once dominated by the sports media narratives (Lines 2001); however, with the introduction of social media, we have subsequently seen an emergence of athletes taking ownership of their own narrative by actively using social media to enhance their visibility and attain recognition. Toffoletti and Thorpe (2018, pp.305-6) see personalised social media as an opportunity for "athletes to craft their brand" and self-disclose multiple aspects of their authentic self. This individualised activity can be explained by the term, 'micro-celebrity' (Senft 2008, Marwick & boyd 2010) as it moves into collectives that are no longer defined comprehensively as a unified public sphere. Individuals can amplify their popularity through their online performance (Senft 2008, p.25) and respond to their communities (p.116). Rather than rely on the visibility afforded by traditional media, athletes resourcefully use social media platforms to cultivate their own narrative and generate micro-public followings. Sports athletes have become another type of social media "influencer", as individuals that work to maintain both their significance and connection to their core followers through a key shared interest (see Abidin 2015, Duffy & Hund 2015).

Athletes can leverage their influence to channel positive and professional behaviour into a form of athlete citizenship, potentially leading to constructive societal outcomes. Athletes utilise the visibility of their sport or MSE, as platforms or sites "to engage in political activism in hopes of shedding light on societal issues" (Agyemang et al. 2020, p.954). This form of "affective power" (Marshall 2014a, pp.51-61) amplifies and legitimises the athlete's significant voice. Affective power cannot be measured by the number of followers a person has, but we can use follower data to get a sense of the athlete's potential influence. For example, when contrasted against the average Twitter or Instagram account, which ranges between 180 – 240 followers (Statista 2018), amateur athletes with between 47000 and 2.2 million followers begin to illustrate the potential influence they could assert within their audience. However, the affective power of professional athlete celebrities currently in the public sphere who can amass followings in excess of 70 million (Statista 2022) would be significantly higher.

Prominent athlete activism for social change has been witnessed at MSEs, such as the 1968 Olympic Games podium protest (see Hartmann 2003, Abdul-Jabbar 2015, Boykoff, 2017, Cooper et al. 2019) and Kaepernick's 2016 Anthem kneel (see Schmidt et al. 2019). In their discussion and classification of sports activism, Cooper et al. (2019, p.155) state that:

"all activism is socio-political in nature whereby actions can range from specific policy and legislative reforms to more broad based calls for change including a critical analysis and reconstruction of taken-for-granted norms and attitudes within hegemonic systems".

MSEs present an opportunity for activism yet they are highly politically controlled and some forms of activism, such as podium protests, are in direct conflict with some MSEs policies. For example, the Olympic Charter states, "no kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas" (International Olympic

Committee 2018, p.91). The Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF) constitution, outlines similar behavioural expectations, governed through clear policies (Commonwealth Games Federation 2017).

The Commonwealth Games, through the CGF, seek to demonstrate integrity, global impact, and to champion athlete, citizen and community engagement (Commonwealth Games Federation 2018, p.32). As such, these MSEs reconstruct this idealised conception of individual to cultural value through their mission statements. In this way, the sporting event's mission works to subsume the individual into these high ethics. Competing athletes sign a 'Membership Agreement' outlining various terms and conditions when accepting their place on a team. One clause for Australian athletes is: "No Demonstration" whereby athletes agree to the following statement:

I agree I will not throughout the Games Period make statements or demonstrations (whether verbally, in writing or by any act or omission) regarding political, religious or racial matters and acknowledge these are contrary to the objects and purposes of CGA, CGF and the spirit of the Games (Commonwealth Games Australia 2018, p.9).

Despite this clause, the CGF regard athletes as change enablers. The significance of the athletes' role is addressed by the CGF's strategic plan which "seeks to change the world for the better by upholding and living its values of humanity, equality and destiny' and encourages athletes to use 'actions, words and deeds' to 'inspire fairness, inclusion and respect for the individual regardless of gender, ability, faith, sexuality or colour'" (Commonwealth Games Federation 2018, p.39). It is important to also realise that the traditional athlete persona at the Commonwealth Games, with their performance and relative silence of self on behalf of their country, is actually an implicit political persona that represents the ideal of the nation and their constitution of a model citizen as a sports hero.

Working within the bounds of the CGF constitution, conflict has the potential to arise when an athlete seeks to become an ambassador for social change. Athletes participating in MSEs are reconfigured into a different persona that goes beyond athletic prowess into a territory that links the athlete to all sorts of representative collective configurations. Their link to their home country shifts the athlete's public identity into something resembling a diplomatic persona. Their personal views may be in contrast to their nation-state limiting freedom of expression. Prospective athlete citizens are thereby constrained by policies and silenced by the passive-competitive national politics of games.

Like their entertainment celebrity activist counterparts (see Brockington 2009, 2014, Tsaliki et al. 2011, Totman 2017), athlete celebrities are embracing the reach they have through social media platforms, and they too are drawing attention to socio-political issues. "Soft activism" is a term introduced by Palmer (2019, p.2) whereby athlete-celebrities use non-confrontational social narratives to influence social change. Societal issues are amplified through athlete-celebrity online personas whilst leveraging the MSE's international media exposure (Kaufman & Wolff 2010, Hartmann 2016, Boykoff 2017). However, there are factors that could convince an athlete to approach athlete activism with caution. Elite athletes are projected as role models (Lines 2001, Bardocz-Bencsik et al. 2021, Cunningham et al. 2021) carrying expectations of "high standards of behaviour and moral conduct" (Summers & Johnson Morgan 2008, p.179). As such, athlete activists have additional levels of stakeholder scrutiny.

The sport persona, and particularly those derived from athletics and international games competitions, faces different risks and disincentives than other public personalities in presenting their cause(s). Hartmann (2016, para. 4, no. 1) and Smith et al. (2016, p.145) discuss

the multiple barriers faced by athletes seeking to advocate for social awareness including navigating the formal and informal rules, pressures and norms surrounding organising bodies, clubs, sponsors, other athletes and audiences. In considering why many athletes remain silent, Cunningham and Regan (2011, p.658) expect that athletes consider whether it is their responsibility to be advocates for social change, and the potential monetary loss associated with activism.

Olympic or Commonwealth Games athletes do not have the same financial rewards as professional athletes, e.g. professional golfers. Amateur athletes self-fund to reach the level necessary to represent their country which then provides potential access to commercial opportunities (Jeffery 2017). It could be argued that the commercial incentive is the only lucrative path for amateur athletes, and this is reliant on representation and successful performances at MSEs. To risk exclusion or expulsion from MSEs, by participating in athlete activism, could be financially damaging.

MSE policies seek to limit opportunities for athletes to express politically charged comments by providing strict guidelines on acceptable content. Athletes reduce reputational risk if they only comment on their sporting performance and experience. Athletes must be mindful that personal opinions published in the public sphere have the potential to be accessed and unfavourably repurposed for journalistic materials (Hutchins 2011, Hutchins & Rowe 2012). Authors documenting risk associated with athlete activism note that athletes are “expected to play and not protest” (Kaufman and Wolff 2010, p.156), however, this past assumption is being challenged as athlete-online-identity-agency has altered how we view athlete value. Social media technologies have provided athletes with a vehicle to “present more aspects of their identity” and advocate “for political and social causes” (Schmittel & Sanderson 2015, p.333).

Close examination of the GC2018 media coverage revealed alignment between athletes and social issues. This article takes a focused look at how two athletes used the CG2018 as a stage to leverage their social impact value, something that is distinctively differentiated from other social media influencers’ persistent push to economic value and promotion.

METHOD

Content analysis of traditional media – television and print – were used to identify socio-political causes arising at the CG2018 and to identify amateur athletes competing in the Commonwealth Games who are championing these causes. This took place in real-time by monitoring major Australian print news, such as, *The Courier Mail*, *The Australian*, and the local paper of the host city, the *Gold Coast Bulletin*, plus Channel Seven’s television coverage of the CG2018. As a supplementary search, the database Newsbank was also used. News media was monitored during April 2018 for socio-political causes raised at the MSE and any connections linking the MSE and competing athletes. One researcher monitored the named channels for any stories that focused on key socio-political causes as identified by Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games Corporation (GOLDOC) including cultural awareness, accessibility, inclusivity and gender equality.

The real-time approach was adapted from Vardaman et al. (2012) whereby the researchers examined the themes that emerged from traditional representational media during the MSE. This reflects a similar approach by Finlay (2018, p.137) who selected case studies based on elite athletes pushing “their messages directly into social media” and major media organisations “pulling a select few into the spotlight”.

When a socio-political cause was identified, the issue was examined closely to see if there was a connection made to any athletes by traditional media. Themes connecting societal issues with

specific celebrity athletes were monitored across traditional news media and social media as the stories unfolded. The public social media accounts of those athletes identified were then examined to determine if the athletes themselves supported these causes and how they personally joined the narrative. This included all publicly available social media used by the respective athletes. Only participating athletes, publicly supporting a socio-political cause through social media were included in the sample.

Once the athletes were identified, an examination of their public social media was conducted. Our analysis was guided by previous research examining athletes' use of Twitter (Hambrick et al. 2010, Pegoraro 2010), self-presentation techniques using Twitter (Lebel and Danylchuk 2012, Hull 2014, Agyemang and Williams 2016) and the emerging examination of the use of Instagram (Highfield & Leaver 2015, Reichart Smith & Sanderson 2015). Unlike previous research where a larger number of athlete profiles were included (Hambrick et al. 2010, Hull 2014), or a limited number of posts examined (Agyemang & Williams 2016), all content that was posted by the selected athletes during April 2018 was included in the data set.

Athletes' *presentational* media were classified according to self-presentation descriptions of front stage and backstage (Goffman 1959). To investigate online representation, this research adapted Hull's (2014) adaptation of Goffman's model. Front stage coding included engagement with fans, the promotion of stakeholders and the reposting or reproduction of information created by the mass media (Hull 2014, p.250). Backstage coding incorporated observations that the athlete made about their sport, fan behaviour that the athlete exhibited and behind-the-scenes insights (Hull 2014, p.251). A second coder independently applied the coding frame and agreement was reached (Smith & McGannon 2017). Once data was sorted according to front and backstage classifications, we focused on how posts articulating a social cause narrative flowed between *presentational* and *representational* media and how they articulated value, agency, reputation and prestige as core dimensions of persona studies analysis.

The Commonwealth Games 2018

The Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia was the destination for the CG2018, which took place 4 – 15 April, 2018. This two-week MSE involved multiple sports and participation from 71 Commonwealth nations. The organisers, Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games Corporation (GOLDOC), were responsible for assembling 6600 athletes (Jones 2018) and 15,000 volunteers (GOLDOC 2018c). It was promoted as the "largest sporting event to be staged in Australia this decade" and "featuring the largest integrated sports program in Commonwealth Games history, comprising 18 sports and seven para-sports" (GOLDOC 2018a). Para-sport facilitates inclusion of athletes with a disability and allows athletes to compete with other athletes that have been classified as having similar impairment (International Paralympic Committee n.d.).

Attendance across the CG2018 can be represented by the 1.21 million tickets sold (Jones 2018). Extended audiences could view events via television or broadcast apps which further identifies a potential 1.5 billion viewers of the CG2018 (Jones 2018). GOLDOC also reported 113 million Web page views of the designated CG2018 website and when combined with "social media channels (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram) had around 733,600 followers and more than 108.3 million impressions" (Jones 2018). A Newsbank database search revealed over 7,500 newspaper articles reporting on aspects of the CG2018 during April 2018.

GOLDOC implemented a comprehensive approach towards the promotion of human rights which aligned to the CGF constitution. Key issues included cultural awareness, accessibility, inclusivity and gender equality. Humanity, equality and destiny were showcased through GOLDOC's commitment to ensure the para-sports program was extensive and integrated.

Building on the success of the inclusive 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games, CG2018 expanded the para-sport program by hosting approximately “300 para-sport athletes across 38 medal events in seven sports” (GOLDOC 2018b, p.22).

A responsibility towards fairness and non-discrimination was exhibited through GOLDOC’s commitment towards inclusivity and safety for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) individuals demonstrating best practice initiatives for LGBTI+ athletes, volunteers and spectators. Through collaboration with GOLDOC and the local LGBTI+ community, several engagement activities facilitated a safe and inclusive environment including the provision of a Pride House (O’Halloran 2018).

The Athletes

Utilising a real-time approach (Vardaman et al. 2012), we examined *representational* media for newsworthy articles that aligned to the core values articulated by the Commonwealth Games Constitution; humanity, equality and destiny. There were five prominent human rights stories appearing in news media during the CG2018: the LGBTI+ community and inclusivity; disability and inclusivity; indigenous rights/protests; gender equality and, homelessness. All social cause issues were examined closely to identify connections and communication flows between *representational* media and the athletes’ *presentational media*. Athletes identified as part of the social cause narrative were delimited to two: Tom Daley advocating for the LGBTI+ community and Kurt Fearnley AO, a disability advocate.

The social cause narrative involved a two-way flow between the athletes, who crafted their connection to, and support for, the cause via self-presentation through social media and this was amplified by traditional and new media who shared or re-purposed athlete posts. As such, this demonstrated intercommunication whereby traditional media drew from presentational media constructed by the athletes and conversely the athletes repurposed news items created about themselves or their socio-political cause. Representations of intercommunication, whereby social media posts, generated by athletes, were repurposed in traditional media, will be discussed for each athlete pre, during and post-CG2018. Twitter and Instagram were the two dominant platforms used by the athletes; Table 1 represents the number of posts made by both athletes during the month of April 2018. Table 1 is divided into three date periods, pre, during and post-games.

	Tom Daley			Kurt Fearnley AO		
	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Facebook
1 st – 3 rd (Pre-Games)	2	1	1	0	4	0
4 th – 15 th (CG2018)	7	8	2	10	46	5
16 th – 30 th (Post Games)	12	9	2	6	48	3
Total	21	18	5	16	98	8

Table 1: Number of social media posts made by athletes during April 2018

Persona analysis – Tom Daley

Tom Daley, emerged as a celebritised athlete at the age of 13 when he won the 2009 European Championships 10m Platform diving event and the following year “became Great Britain’s first individual World Championship gold medallist” (British Swimming n.d.). Since that public debut, he has achieved an impressive list of sporting accomplishments and has become a media personality, brand ambassador, author of a healthy lifestyle book and built a substantial fan base. In 2018, Daley had over 2 million followers on three social media channels. In 2023, he has 3.2 million followers on Instagram, 2.5 million Facebook followers, 2.2 million Twitter followers and, 1.18 million YouTube subscribers (Biograhymask 2023). Daley’s influencer status was previously recognised in 2017 when Daley and his husband won the British LGBT Independent Influencer Award (British LGBT Awards n.d.). Traditional media reporting on personal milestones included the announcement that Daley and his husband were expecting a baby through a surrogate (BBC News 2018).

In the three days leading up to the Opening ceremony, Daley posted material that celebrated the build-up to the CG2018. Twitter, Instagram and Facebook were used as platforms to engage with fans which included thanking followers for their support and promoting meet and greet times. Daley created connectivity between his social media channels by drawing people back to his bio/vlog which is hosted on YouTube. In the pre-game period, Daley posted a vlog (see Daley 2023) which gave followers a behind-the-scenes view of the diving venue and the athletes’ village. In 2018, the athlete village video (2 April 2018) received 380,485 views and 11,000 thumbs up (see Daley 2023).

During CG2018, Daley utilised Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Twitter was the platform where the greatest intercommunication occurred whereby Daley utilised his posts to highlight inclusivity and the LGBTI+ community and the current status of homosexuality within some Commonwealth nations. A message exposing current inequality and discrimination experienced by the LGBTI+ community in some nations emerged from the Peter Tatchell Foundation (PTF) (2018) (see Figure 1). Daley retweeted and personalised this tweet, through his personal social media and, subsequently leveraged this during representational media interviews (18 and 21 April 2018).



Figure 1: Screenshot PTF tweet (Peter Tatchell Foundation 2018)

The PTF retweet was shared 155 times and liked by 863 people; however, the LGBTI+ message achieved greater prominence after Daley won gold in the synchronised diving event (13 April 2018). Daley personalised the original PTF message adding how lucky he felt to be able to compete “without worry” (see Craw 2018, Staton 2018). The use of a rainbow emoji, signifies a connection to the LGBTI+ community, further reinforces Daley’s connection to the issue (see Staton 2018). Daley simultaneously communicates with his social media followers and with *representational* media. On this occasion, Daley’s tweet (see Staton 2018) had been shared 10,000 times, was liked by 65,000 followers, and the interconnected YouTube video/narration (16 April 2018) had accrued 545 520 views (see Daley 2023). In addition, several Australian and United Kingdom publications reported on Daley’s successful athletic achievement, and the significance of his social cause message (for example, see BBC Sport 2018, Craw 2018, Staton 2018).

Through his shared experiences in the lead-up to the CG2018, Daley was already positioned as a valuable advocate for inclusivity messages. The PTF provided the initial connection, yet Daley’s response to retweet and personalise the message allowed him to integrate the issue into his personal narrative and create an opportunity for greater awareness of the issue. Queensland Police (2018) also seized the opportunity to promote their message of inclusivity tweeting a photo of a LGBTI+ liaison officer with Daley. Inclusion in the narrative of these two external organisations illustrates Daley’s perceived prestige.

Upon the conclusion of GC2018, Daley posted another four cause-related retweets. In two posts, Daley enhanced the visibility of a real-time movement occurring in the United Kingdom and directly linked the role of the Commonwealth to human rights. Daley re-posted two messages drawing attention to an LGBT+ protest in London: one by the PTF, the other by entertainment celebrity, Stephen Fry (see Craw 2018).

Daley leveraged his celebrity athlete status to further the discussion with British politician, Boris Johnson. A *BBC News* report was shared via his Twitter feed featuring Johnson who had promised to build on Daley’s recent advocacy (Connolly 2018). Daley shared a second media article where he discussed his message on the *BBC’s The Andrew Marr Show*, justifying the timing of his protest (Robinson 2018). Daley indicated that as an openly LGBTI+ athlete, he had an opportunity to share his personal story and speak with LGBTI+ movement leaders from other nations to encourage positive change (Robinson 2018). Through these two examples, Daley demonstrates a blend of front stage and backstage performances according to Hull’s (2014) definitions. Through interviews with representational media, Daley shares personal, behind-the-scenes insights that can be classified as backstage; however, by reposting the interviews, this represents front stage. Through sharing his personal story Daley builds connections with the cause which enhances his message.

Daley’s sense of duty surrounding this cause was surrounded by risk. His protest messaging was opposed by several participating Commonwealth nations and his next sporting competition was in Russia. With Russia banning “LGBT propaganda” by law (ABC News 2022), advocating for inclusivity would be considered a major risk. In 2014, Daley had deemed competing in Russia unsafe, but he was determined to compete in the May 2018 Diving World Series (Mandle 2018). Daley participated and used subtle messaging by wearing a rainbow pin badge on the medal podium thus being seen “as an out and proud gay man” in Russia (Mandle 2018) amidst this country’s antigay laws; the messaging was captured through representational media with the reproduction of Daley’s Instagram content (Manzella 2018). This example highlighted the fluidity of content between representational and presentational content thus illustrating a

further expansion of intercommunication. In addition, this acknowledges Daley's agency as he acted as a communication intermediary for the socio-political cause.

Daley's articulation of the social-political message during April 2018 drew predominantly from the PTF message. Intercommunication was more prominent between the networks Daley had established and linked directly to his personal social media. As an extension of the concept of intercommunication, there were communication flows between Daley's personal posts and media platforms of other organisations, particularly with the PTF and the BBC. Based on the PTF retweets during the CG2018, there was evidence to suggest Daley was aware of his capacity to influence the social cause narrative. Additionally, external organisations leveraged Daley's authenticity and success, further amplifying the LGBTI+ message and building his reputation.

Persona analysis – Kurt Fearnley AO

Kurt Fearnley AO is an Australian para-athlete participating in wheelchair sports since the age of 14 and who now holds national and Paralympic records in track and marathon events (Fearnley 2018a). Fearnley is a qualified Physical Education teacher, charity ambassador, self-proclaimed "passionate disability advocate" and "member of the Independent Advisory Council of the National Disability Insurance Scheme..." (Fearnley 2022). In 2004, Fearnley was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia and, in 2009, he was named NSW Young Australian of the Year (McGarry 2018). In 2018, Fearnley had 20 thousand followers on Instagram, 47 thousand Twitter followers and a Webpage showcasing his achievements. His social media channels, accessed via his website, reveal followers have subsequently increased by over 7000 (Fearnley 2022).

Fearnley's visibility was enhanced during April 2018 across Australian media as he was selected as an official Games ambassador. As one of only five athletes selected as an ambassador, Fearnley helped promote CG2018 inclusivity, appearing in promotional material, and was part of the Queen's Baton Relay. This prestigious representation acknowledges Fearnley's value and agency. In a similar pre-celebratory style to Daley, Fearnley tweeted to encourage followers to support the CG2018 and acknowledged the inclusivity that would be shown to athletes with a disability. Fearnley contributed a prominent narrative through *AthletesVoice*, positioning disability as an important issue for the CG2018 (Fearnley 2018a). *AthletesVoice* provides an alternate platform for athletes to narrate their own, real-time news; Fearnley connected fans to his *AthletesVoice* contribution through Twitter.

Fearnley used his own successful sporting performance as an entry point to alert audiences for the need to be inclusive. Building support for people with a disability, Fearnley shared personal stories, embraced humour, team camaraderie and celebratory pictures with friends and family thus providing examples of personal, behind-the-scenes insights. Twitter was Fearnley's main communication platform during CG2018; over 70% of Fearnley's 46 tweets/retweets represented backstage presentation.

Fearnley's final event, and subsequent success, occurred on the last day of the CG2018 with the announcement that he would be the Australian Flag Bearer during the closing ceremony. Media attention shifted towards the broadcasters, who were criticised for not televising the athletes' stadium parade as per previous MSEs. Fans, followers and commentators felt deprived of witnessing Fearnley's moment; carrying the nation's flag on behalf of able-bodied and para-athletes signified the prestige Fearnley had accumulated. Notably, Fearnley used Twitter (Figure 2), and a connection to a second article in *AthletesVoice* (Figure 3), to reframe the narrative and remind followers of the inclusivity of the CG2018.



Figure 2: Screenshot of Fearnley's inclusivity tweet (Fearnley 2018c).



Figure 3: Screenshot of Fearnley's tweet/link to *AthletesVoice* (Fearnley 2018b; Fearnley 2018d).

In a very real sense, Fearnley's narrative constructs a persona that heightens awareness of disability to a wider public via broadcast media and the Games administration itself. This represents Fearnley's wider visibility and extended reach that he had generated through his authentic representation during the CG2018.

As the CG2018 concluded, Fearnley adopted a stronger presence in the cause-related space and shifted the narrative towards the larger disability discussion in Australia by sharing an ABC interview (ABC News 2018) via his Twitter account. This is an example of the intercommunicative strategy through its increasing presentational prestige through the agency of selective sharing. The timing may have deliberately avoided the restraints on raising socio-political issues but may also have been a leveraging opportunity given his athletic success and that of the CG2018. Fearnley self-branded himself an advocate, raised further awareness of the limited funding for people with a disability and sought to acknowledge various forms of disability in society. His work was recognised in June 2018 with an Officer of the Order of Australia for "distinguished service to people with a disability, as a supporter of, and fundraiser for, Indigenous athletics and charitable organisations, and as a Paralympic athlete" (Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia 2018, p.17).

Fearnley's social media communication contained personalised and positive imagery and messages to support para-sport, yet it also provided a connection to traditional media which facilitated more extensive conversations and provided a more comprehensive platform to

advocate for disability. Twitter was the main social media platform used by Fearnley. Of the five Facebook posts, two provided links to *AthletesVoice* which demonstrated intercommunication and allowed Fearnley to remain clear with his messaging surrounding disability advocacy.

Self-presentation and the social cause narrative

CG2018 provided an opportunity to demonstrate how two athletes, with perceived high value because of their past success in their sports and their associated visibility across media and cultures, strategically leveraged their appeal to convey socio-political messages within a constrained environment. Overall, Daley and Fearnley provided evidential support to Agyemang's (2014) athlete citizenship definition as they each took an approach to channel their influence to create a positive impact on society without breaching the CGF constitution bylaws. Both athletes have sought to create representations and construction of the self by sharing controlled details about their private lives. Although carefully curated, the details revealed via their social media accounts have helped both athletes build credibility and demonstrate authority when advocating for important societal issues. In doing so, they both demonstrated a strategic public alignment to issues pertinent to their personal lives. The genuine relationship between the athlete and the social cause is reinforced by the history of the athlete. As such, this supports Agyemang's (2014) discussion on athlete citizenship, whereby stakeholders, view and accept congruency. The need for audiences to see athlete behaviour as congruent with expectations links also to Goffman (1959). In addition, this extends Hutchins and Rowe's (2012) discussion regarding the use of social media at MSEs and, begins to address Cunningham and Regan's (2011) question as to whether athletes are willing to advocate for social change.

Daley and Fearnley shifted the gaze of fans, followers and media coverage from their own performance towards socio-political causes during a time of heightened media visibility. Using their own narratives, an element in their identity moves back and forth from traditional media to social media. This research expands on previous notions of intercommunication (Marshall 2013) by recognising a complex form of mediatisation through blending personal and professional persona and fluidity between *presentational* and *representational* media and exemplary of how "mass self-communication" (Castells 2009) reforms traditional legacy media's vertical power towards certain political ends. As such, the athletes' use of social media provided a mechanism for their personalised content to move "through layers of media and communication" (Marshall 2014b, p.163), respond and intersect with various stakeholders who are themselves, drawing meaning, making connections and engaging with emerging forms of public activism. Intercommunication, as defined here, intersects or traverses a range of media, provides connections and expands narratives and engages collective publics.

It is important to further identify the collective dimension of persona that shapes these athletes' public identities: each of their personas by the very definition of persona is already working and engaged in a collective space and thereby identifies the core audience that is already perceived as connected to and, in some way, aligned to the persona. It is through the collective that we can identify that the athlete persona is not audience or nation-specific. As demonstrated by Fearnley and Daley, the athlete persona could push other national cultures to respond to the needs of their particular cause/communities. Further studies in this area could explore how celebrity athlete self-presentation is transferred into other MSEs that are located in destinations with distinctly different cultures', for example, where homosexuality is still criminalised. Recognising the limitations of this research (that this study concerns two Caucasian males representing democratic nations) suggests the need to examine how activism, through persona, may be constrained by gender, ethnicity or representation of marginalised communities. Further

research could also examine the interpretation of messages by diverse audiences and, in particular, examining sentiment and how the social issue is framed by followers.

CONCLUSION

MSEs provide platforms for athletes with a strong desire to exhibit citizenship to raise awareness of their cause, however, they must navigate athlete agreements and policies. The visibility of an MSE presents a timely opportunity to further social or political discussions, and yet the rules at play call for a strategic approach. Intercommunication is providing complementary, alternate and shifting platforms that may assist forms of athlete activism to advance important social change as a form of “soft activism” (Palmer 2019). What we have identified is an interesting change in value that augments athlete authenticity whilst representing a cause in its movement between a personal social media and a much wider legacy media platform.

While only two athletes at the GC2018 were observed clearly integrating social cause narratives through intercommunication, they demonstrated the unique position athletes can assume as athlete-citizen journalists. As intermediaries and celebrities, they can leverage their influence and reach further contributing to McGillivray’s (2014) discussion of transforming, accelerating and integrating alternative narratives at MSEs. Followers see the constant depiction of the athletes’ self-presentation which, by the very nature of their everyday lives, display and document the barriers that they encounter. *Presentational* media, and the ability to leverage already established value, reputation and prestige have all contributed to a narrative that peaked organically at the CG2018. Athletic success and meaningful personal narratives attract *representational* media, which are subsequently interwoven back into personal narratives and thereby leveraging a greater platform. Building on the previous work of Castells (2009) and Frandsen (2019), these athletes are moving through different networks, and forms of presentation as they build a strategic persona around citizenship.

Athletes, like Daley and Fearnley, with authentic alignment to a cause, shared through social media over a period of time, may be in a stronger political position to advocate without risking their sporting careers. Their differentiated agency from their nations, sporting bodies and their rules of etiquette had been built through what could be described as a relatively independent *online identity agency* that employs a shifted construction of public identity. The personas these particular athletes have cultivated online, with their different construction of *publics* and *collectives*, reformation of their *mediatisation* through their individually curated social media platforms, and an integrated *performative* dimension that is both linked to and transcends their athletic achievements/visibility, allow them to develop a nuanced, politically inflected public and shared identity that redefines their cultural value, agency, reputation and prestige. This active cross-cultivation across media and social media forms of representation and presentation allowed these particular athletes to advance a sophisticated, individualised, politically and cause-related bespoke athlete persona during and after the CG2018.

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END NOTES

This research was conducted prior to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Daley's successful performances and his LGBTI+ message at the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games was captured in global news media (see Harris 2021, Ronay 2021). Fearnley had retired from competition in 2018 but was on the commentary team for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games and continues to advocate for disability as a presenter on several television series and via podcasts. Fearnley was appointed 'Chairman of the Board of the National Disability Insurance Agency' in 2022 (Shorten 2022).

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