Role model or quitter? Social media’s response to Simone Biles at Tokyo 2020

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Role model or quitter?

Social media’s response to Simone Biles at Tokyo 2020

Steph Doehler,
The Open University (UK)

@StephDoehler_OU
Context

‘I truly do feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times’ – Biles on July 26 2021

The response?

‘Biggest quitter in sports’ – Ben Maller

‘National embarrassment’ – Aaron Reitz

‘Selfish decision’ – Piers Morgan

‘One of the most courageous athletes of her generation’ - William Rhoden
Theoretical grounding

- **Framing** = a framework into which experiences are organised that facilitate the processing of information in our everyday lives (Goffman, 1974). Extended by Entman (2007).

- Research into framing in sport – Olympics (Dashper, 2018), FIFA World Cup (Bell & Coche, 2020), race and nationality (Eagleman, 2011), athlete scandal (Allison et al., 2020) and athlete activism (Doehler, 2021).

- **Bottom-up framing** - framing takes place by individual users (usually through social media) as opposed to conventional media framing (Nisbet, 2010).

- More limited in research – National Anthem protests (Schmidt et al., 2019), perception of the US Women’s soccer team (Pegoraro et al., 2017).

- Focus on media framing and athlete mental health is an emerging field (Cassilo, 2020; Cassilo & Kluch, 2021; Parrott et al., 2019), whereas research into athlete mental health through bottom-up framing is extremely limited – perceptions of eating disorders on (Mitchell et al., 2018).

**RQ:** How did Facebook users frame Simone Biles’ withdrawal from several events at the Olympic Games?
Methodology

Comments collection from four Facebook posts – Simone Biles, CNN, Fox News and Bleacher Report.

Comments screened

The final dataset comprised of 40,122 comments.

Fed into Leximancer software to text mine the content. Produces dominant themes and their relationship to one another, plus concepts (sub-topics).
Findings

Nine primary themes:
- Public support
- Mental health
- Judgement on decision
- Impact on team
- Performance
- Athletes
- Country
- Inspiration
- GOAT
## Findings

### Primary themes, concepts and explanation

| Public support | Positive reaction to Biles – a role model for young people facing mental health challenges.  
Some acknowledgement of race.  
Not just support, but a general outpouring of gratitude.  
‘All RESPECT to you for showing Black girls how a Black woman prioritizes and prevails’. |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mental health  | Generally supportive comments.  
Offshoot of discussion – pressure on elite athletes.  
‘In one day you achieved more for mental health awareness globally than any person before you’.  
‘It is in no way praiseworthy to withdraw…because you invoke the untouchable mental health card’. |
| Judgement on decision | Bidirectional response – both commended and condemned.  
‘You owe us nothing and yourself everything’. Many users treated Biles like family or friend.  
Unsubstantiated claims used to criticise, e.g. ‘She is worth 90 million and has been rewarded for all her efforts, quitting because she didn’t like her landing on the vault is ridiculous’. Perceived high income and status as reasons why her action was unacceptable. |
| Impact on team & Performance | More critical narrative than other themes, with less frequent positive comments.  
Biles to blame for USA failing to win gold in Team event.  
Ubiquitous notion of Biles being a quitter inc. comparison to other athletes, e.g. Kerri Strug, Kurt Angle.  
‘That’s actually pretty on par with the weak USA we now live in. Maybe she’ll get a gold participation medal for pain and suffering’. |
Discussion

- Users engaged in debate, taking sides to deliver polarising opinions of the situation.
- Parasocial interaction on social platforms can afford users the opportunity to frame situations both positively and negatively.
- Overarching theme of gratitude for addressing mental health issues supports the work of Sanderson & Emmons (2014) who suggest that some individuals will offer support when athletes transgress.
- More supportive themes attributed to Biles post, whereas others tended to be more critical. Challenge to Schmidt et al. (2019).
- Narrative of mental health tended to focus on the action to withdraw rather than the pressures on elite athletes, in keeping with other research which examines framing of athletes (Coombs et al., 2019; Doehler, 2021; Graber, Figueroa and Vasudevan, 2020).
- Did the arena impact the response? Did feelings of nationalism play a role in her detractor’s criticism? Precedence set for athletes who challenge nationalism (Frederick, Pegoraro and Sanderson, 2019).
- Limitations – 53% of comments came from Biles post, all four posts came from US based outlets, discussion only taken from Facebook, and only included comments before it was announced she would return to competition for the beam final.
Conclusion

• There is little doubt that this situation raised questions and debate surrounding mental health and elite athletes.

• However, the notion that those in the spotlight shouldn’t exhibit perceived ‘weaknesses’ still appears prevalent.

• Encourage scholars to continue to utilise bottom-up framing to ascertain how sports fans respond to controversial incidents on social media.

• Future research may also benefit from comparing the responses to similar incidents. Intersectional approach?
Want to discuss further?

✉️ Steph.Doehler@open.ac.uk

🐦 @StephDoehler_OU


References


