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Drivers of Trust Within the Athlete-Online Coach Relationship

Online coaching is increasingly being used by athletes to supplement their training. This study explores the nature of trust within the relationship between athlete and online coach, focusing on the contexts of Olympic Weightlifting, Powerlifting, and Crossfit within the United Kingdom. The study uses semi-structured interviews with 12 participants comprising athletes and coaches in order to analyse the drivers of trust and trustworthiness within athlete/coach online relationships. A new definition of online coaching is offered. Factors affecting an online coach's perceived trustworthiness amongst athletes include proof of concept and social media marketing. Additional factors which influence the ongoing trust an athlete has in their online coach include frequent communication, personal connection and shared sporting values. The study offers an emergent conceptual framework as a synopsis of its findings.

Keywords: trust, trustworthiness, online coaching, shared values, marketing relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Today's digital world allows coaches to offer their services to athletes online. Athletes are using online coaching as either a complete substitute for traditional face-to-face coaching, or to help supplement their face-to-face coaching. Ultimately, every athlete wants to progress within their respective sport and the use of online coaching to support athlete improvement is increasing (Laidler 2017). Traditionally, athletes were not able to choose their coach; they were likely to use the head coach at a local gym or club. If an athlete wanted to switch coach, they would have to change club or move to a location where a new coach would be accessible. Nowadays, athletes have more freedom and the option of online coaching. Athletes who compete within the sports of Weightlifting, Powerlifting, and Crossfit are often training alone, without a team or others around them. Finding a suitable gym which will provide sufficient coaching is a challenge within the UK due to the low levels of popularity of these individual sports compared to others within the UK. Physical face-to-face coaching for Weightlifting, Powerlifting and Crossfit is not as accessible as it is for other sports. Athletes therefore, often look towards an online coach, to help aid their development within their chosen sport. Due to the similarities between these sports both in terms of training and coaching, this paper

explores the drivers of trust between athlete and online coach in relation to these three sports.

Online coaching is a new and complex concept with no unified definition. Online coaches differ in what they offer, due to the varying needs of potential athletes (Takano 2018). For example, 'Weightlifting 101', offer an online coaching service which is strictly 'programme-based', offering no frequent contact with an actual coach, the coaching being provided through detailed written and video-based instructions (Weightlifting 101 ca. 2018). However, in contrast, 'California Strength' offer an 'Elite' programme which is 'for advanced lifters' who aspire to 'train like the pros' (California Strength ca. 2018); the athlete is provided with nine training sessions per week and can communicate with coaches. Finally, online coaching services such as 'Wisdom 4 Weightlifting' offer an array of services that range from 'Subscription' level, similar to 'Weightlifting 101', and also 'Bronze', 'Silver', 'Gold' and 'Platinum' levels of service. The 'Platinum' level is a fully bespoke online coaching package which is limited to only two athletes per coach at the company. The programme includes access to unlimited video feedback and 'fortnightly check-ins' (Wisdom 4 Weightlifting ca. 2018). These examples illustrate that online coaching can be provided in a spectrum of different forms.

The relationship between athlete and coach is one of great significance and has the potential to impact an athlete's training, competition performance, and personal life (Jowett 2003). Trust is imperative to relationships; Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018 p.303) claim that "trust philosophically binds us together with an intoxicating energy". Spekman (1998) argued that trust is the cornerstone of long term relationships, and this is evident within the relationship between athlete and online coach. Although there is a vast range of research and theory around the concept of trust and trustworthiness (e.g. Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sirdeshmukh et al. 2002; Sekhon et al. 2014) and the effects of trust between an athlete and coach (e.g. Jowett and Ntoumanis 2004), research on the relationship between athlete and online coach is scarce. With the continued growth of online coaching, there is an opportunity to develop our understanding of this new, unique relationship.

Therefore, the research aim of this study is to explore the nature of trust within the relationship between athlete and online coach. More specifically, the paper's objectives are to explore what drives athletes' trust during the process of selecting an online coach and the factors which influence ongoing trust between online coaches and athletes. This paper first begins with a review of the current literature and proceeds to explain the methodological approach, before analysis of the research is undertaken, providing an emerging conceptual framework. Insights are highlighted including implications for the online coaching industry and suggestions for further academic research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Trust

Trust is a vital concept within relationship marketing (Rotter 1967; Moorman et al. 1993; Morgan and Hunt 1994). However, there is no unified and agreed theory of trust (Stolle 2002). Moorman et al. (1993, p. 82) define trust as "a willingness to rely on an exchange

partner in whom one has confidence". Correspondingly, Morgan and Hunt (1994 p.23) conceptualised trust as when "one party has confidence in an exchange partner's reliability and integrity". Certainly, in the case of online coach and athlete, confidence is essential. The athlete must have confidence in the coach's ideas, programming and training philosophy and the coach must have confidence in the athlete's commitment to training and potential to progress. Trust has also been defined as a 'psychological state' which is based upon expectations, perceived motives and intentions of others (Costa et al. 2001). Trust is present when an individual believes that the exchange partner will perform an action that is either beneficial or non-detrimental to themselves and for trust to be relevant, there must be the possibility of 'exit' (Gambetta 2000). We have already seen that whilst traditionally, for an athlete to switch coach, they would have had to move location, but today athletes have access to a range of online coaches, meaning that the possibility of 'exit' is now greater.

Trustworthiness

Zhang and Chelladurai (2013, p.117) argued that the "perceived characteristics of a trustee are important antecedents to trust". Which relates to the work of Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) where a distinction between 'trust and trustworthiness' was made. Within this context an athlete must first perceive their online coach or prospective online coach as trustworthy, before extending trusting behaviours towards that coach and being coached by the individual. Sirdeshmukh et al. (2002) found that operational competence, operational benevolence and problem-solving orientation defined a company's trustworthiness. However, Sekhon et al. (2014) furthered their work, recognising that trust operates cognitively and affectively. 'Affective trust' is based upon emotional ties in relationships and is structured around elements such as care and concern for others (Sekhon et al. 2014). It could be argued that 'care and concern' are important factors for an athlete working with an online coach, due to restrictions to the physical time the athlete and coach can spend together.

Trust and Risk

Trust can be associated with uncertainty and risk; Gambetta (2000) argued that trust becomes more relevant in conditions of uncertainty. Lewis and Weigert (1985, p.970) found that risk creates an opportunity for trust. If there is no associated risk within a relationship, then "actions could be undertaken with complete certainty", thus making the need for trust redundant. Rousseau et al. (1998) furthered this by finding that 'risk' sits alongside 'interdependence' and that both are necessary conditions for trust. Literature shows that the 'notion of vulnerability' between the athlete and coach refers to "the risk that is possible if the trustee does not live up to expectations"(Bauman and Bachmann 2017, p.68). Trust between the athlete and coach is demonstrated when the 'athletes are willing to accept the vulnerability to follow the coach's instruction [sic]' regardless of the associated risk (Zhang and Chelladurai 2013).

The perceived risk tolerance of an individual influences their purchasing decisions (Kim 2008) and is affected by a mixture of one's culture, beliefs and personality (Bontempo et al. 1997). Perceived risk complements the idea that the need for trustworthiness is key when an athlete seeks out an online coach. This may be because the uncertainty levels facing an athlete are greater when participating in online coaching. One of the reasons for this may be that because the feedback which an online client receives is not instant, the athlete is essentially by themselves whilst training, thus heightening their

vulnerability.

Trust Online

The growth of the internet has facilitated the opportunity for new relationships and has opened-up global marketing opportunities for both businesses and individuals (Mathews, Bianchi, Perks, Healy and Wickramasekera 2016). For successful online interactions to occur, trust is critical (Coppola et al. 2004) and as the internet and online usage has grown, it has developed distinct factors that influence brand trust and shopping intention (Ha 2014). Halse et al. (2017) found that trust online is based upon a three-stage model. They argued that the first stage is about understanding the beliefs of the trustee before we can then trust the data or intentions of the trustor. Finally, there must be trusting behaviours between the two parties for an online message to be determined as trustworthy.

The internet has allowed businesses to present products virtually, making it easier for companies to exaggerate a product's value and/or qualities (Bauman and Bachmann 2017). Because of this, the concept of deception within the context of trust online has arisen (Limbu et al. 2011). Deception 'occurs when the online retailer creates an impression or belief that is different from what could be expected by the consumer' (Limbu et al. 2011, p73) departing from the truth and omitting mistaken or unintended lies (Burgoon and Buller 1996). Research identifies deception as the behavior most toxic to trust (Boles et al. 2000), and for online coaches, deception could be the most detrimental behavior an online coach could participate in due to the increased vulnerability (Rousseau et al. 1998) that an athlete must manage when coached online. Deceptive behavior in this context could harm an athlete's health, progress and career.

Trust and Social Media

Today, billions of people globally are active on social media (Williams 2017), and within the UK, millions of 16-44 year olds check their social media newsfeeds daily (Elder 2017). As the clientele of an online coach is likely to fall within this age bracket, social media is an ideal place for online coaches to advertise. Because of this, it is important to understand how potential consumers will perceive the trustworthiness of messages through social media, especially when these are messages from coaches whom they may not know (Deng et al. 2017). It can be hard to distinguish what information is trustworthy on social media (Hagar 2013), and this is likely to be the case as athletes attempt to find an online coach, they must first identify a trustworthy coach.

Warner-Søderholm et al's. (2018) used five factors to measure trustworthiness within social media, integrity, competence, benevolence, concern and identification. Many online coaches push their brand on social media, with Instagram often the preferred medium, and Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018 p.310) found that Instagram users are more inclined to believe that people are "motivated to serve and act in other people's interest'. Instagram users were found to 'trust social media more than non-users in terms of all five constructs", possibly signifying that the athletes using Instagram will be more willing to trust the marketing messages of potential online coaches. Furthermore, Hansen, Saridakis and Benson (2018) found that perceived risk plays a significant role in consumer decision making within the context of social media. Finally, we must note that Warner-Søderholm et al. (2018) draw from a modest sample comprising 200 participants. Nonetheless, it is probable that social media marketing will have an impact

on the trust between athlete and potential online coach.

Interpersonal Trust

It is important to recognise that most definitions of trust have been constructed in the context of marketing research with a focus on services. Whilst the 'online coach' is essentially a business providing a service, this relationship is more personal and proximate, and the definitions of trust must be considered within the 'interpersonal context', implying a two-way reciprocal set of interactions (Poczwadowski et al. 2002). Giffin (1967, p.105) defined interpersonal trust as the "reliance upon the communication behaviour of another person to achieve a desired but uncertain objective in a risky situation". Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004, p.247) defined this interpersonal relationship as the "situation in which coaches' and athletes' emotions, thoughts, and behaviours are mutually and causally interconnected". From this, constructs such as closeness and co-orientation were utilised to expand their definition. Closeness refers to the extent that athlete-coach feel emotionally close with one another (Jowett and Ntoumanis 2004). Berscheid and Regan (2005) added that closeness is based upon emotional factors such as stability, care, and attachment. Co-orientation represents the alignment of shared 'goals, values and beliefs' (Jowett and Ntoumanis 2004) between athlete and coach. This definition of co-orientation links closely to Morgan and Hunt's (1994) definition of 'shared values', which was found to directly influence trust, thus shared values could be a driver of trust between an athlete and coach.

La Voi (2007) explored closeness within athlete-coach relationships and found the relationship to be based upon several dimensions including approachability, communication, empowerment, honesty, boundary maintenance. La Voi (2007) concluded that athletes believed that communication and feeling cared about, were the most salient aspects of a close athlete-coach relationship. When an athlete self-defines as being 'close' with their coach they often subsequently express that they both respect and trust their coach. La Voi's (2007) key findings regarding the importance of communication and care within athlete-coach relationships, correspond with Sekhon et al.'s. (2014) identification of communication and benevolence as factors influencing trustworthiness within the financial services context. Lynch (2001) also claims that trust flourishes in environments with good communication and that problems around the issue of trust between athlete and coach are often the result of a lack of communication. Finally, Jowett (2003) also concludes that communication is the key building block in the relationship between athlete and coach. These complementary but distinct studies strongly indicate that athletes value a personal connection with their coach, which is based upon communication and benevolence.

Generalized Trust, Credibility and Skepticism

Trust in strangers, also known as generalized trust (Freitag and Bauer 2016) refers to an 'focal overall expectation of the benevolence of others whom the focal person has no relationship' (Yao et al. 2017). Stolle (2002) extends this by claiming that generalized trust extends the boundaries of both face-to-face interactions and even beyond the boundaries of acquaintance, highlighting that generalized trust often involves distance between parties (Stolle 2002). Athletes who are seeking online coaching won't often know their prospective coach and thus are placing their trust in a stranger online. As online information can be easily manipulated, it is not always perceived as trustworthy (Pan and Chiou 2011). Trust is an essential prerequisite of co-operation (Freitag and

Bauer 2016), reinforcing the need for an athlete to find an online coach whom they perceive as trustworthy. One way which individuals often overcome the issue of generalized trust is through identity-based trust and the categorization of others (Stolle 2002). Tajfel and Turner (1985) found that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based upon positive and negative connotations allowing the development of trust in others. In more general terms, people tend to trust those whom they believe are similar to them and with whom they are familiar (Staub 1978). Considering these theories, athletes are likely to have preconceptions of online coaches and this could influence who they are willing to trust.

Credibility, which has been defined as "the believability and impartiality of information" (Johnson et al. 2015, p.1247), of online information has become increasingly hard to distinguish due to the vast quantity and accessibility of it. This has prompted concerns of the veracity and quality of information online (Metzger and Flanagin 2013). Credibility of information has been found to be strongly mediated by both the credibility and familiarity of information sources (Seo and Lee 2014). This reinforces Staub's (1978) findings that people trust those with whom they are familiar. Applying this to online coaching, it appears that athletes are likely to perceive an online coach as more credible when they are familiar and have prior knowledge of the coach. However, this is merely an assumption as Staub's findings were from 1978, and the nature of the way people view credibility will have changed over the last forty years. Due to the difficulty of determining the expertise and trustworthiness (Johnson et al. 2015) of an online coach, online coaches and athletes are likely to be faced with skepticism, a "consumer's attitude of doubt, questioning, or suspended judgement" (Connors et al. 2015, p.600). Individuals are approaching marketing claims presented to them with increased skepticism (Deneçli 2016), largely due to increased competition, prevalent within online coaching. If a business's communication is to be effective, it must create trust, highlighting the need for online coaches to be perceived as trustworthy.

METHOD

The goal of this research is to develop understanding in an interactive and co-operative manner. The research is informed by an interpretivist philosophy reflecting the need for a deep understanding of participants' perspectives to facilitate accurate interpretation of data (Goldkuhl 2012). Much of the extant research examined around the athlete/coach relationship has taken a positivist approach (e.g. Jowett et al. 2013). It is critical to look at relationships from different perspectives to fully understand them (Hennink et al. 2011) thus taking an interpretivist approach may contribute new knowledge. The study adopts an abductive approach (Blaikie 2009) allowing engagement with both theory and data to develop an emerging conceptual framework explaining trust within online coaching. The research population comprises two groups: 1) Athletes who have been coached online within the last two years and compete within their respective sport (Weightlifting, Powerlifting, Crossfit); 2) Coaches who currently coach online a minimum of five athletes.

The sample of participants comprised seven athletes and five coaches. Seven participants were male; five were female allowing a variety of perspectives to potentially emerge.

Sampling was an ongoing process, as designating individuals for the study was "tentative, provisional and sometimes even spontaneous" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995, p.78). For example, some participants were identified through the recommendations of past participants. The sampling technique used for the study was, 'purposeful, maximum variation sampling' (Wengraf 2001) to facilitate a diverse sample which would provide as much insight as possible into the world of online coaching. Variation was achieved through the split of athletes and coaches in the sample. Athletes were amateur (competing at regional competitions) and elite (competing at World Championships, Commonwealth and Olympic Games). Coaches ranged from those who were responsible for five online clients, to those responsible for over 280 online clients. Due to this variation, a range of opinions, experiences and challenges relating to online coaching were captured. The sample was a strength of this study as it included a spectrum of athletes and coaches including those operating at the elite end of sport (further details provided in Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Profiles

Participant	Coach or Athlete	Gender	Experience	Interview Duration Min:sec
1	Coach 'C1'	M	As an athlete, competitor at multiple English and British Championships. Medalist at the English Championships. Coaches numerous athletes and is an online coach for five clients.	46:23
2	Athlete 'A1'	F	Athlete at regional competitions and at national competitions, British Students and British u20s. Has been online coached by two different coaches, but is now physically coached.	31:45
3	Athlete 'A2'	M	Athlete at regional competitions and at national competitions, British Students and British u20s and u23s. Has been online coached once for 12 weeks, but is now physically coached instead.	33:14
4	Athlete 'A3'	M	Both an elite athlete and online coach. Competes at a national level and international level, been to multiple world championships. Was online coached for over a year, however now self-coaches for the time being. Also has experience as a coach and online coach. Coaches over five online clients.	42:27
5	Athlete 'A4'	F	Athlete at regional competitions and at national competitions, British and English Championships. Been to international competitions also. Switched online coaches, currently online coached.	33:02
6	Athlete 'A5'	F	Ex British record holder. English and British Championship medalist, internationally capped. Currently online coached.	42:47
7	Athlete 'A6'	F	Competes at a regional and national level within Powerlifting. Currently online coached.	31:13
8	Athlete 'A7'	F	Athlete at regional competitions and at national competitions, British and English Championships. Is online coached in the lead up to national competitions.	34:57
9	Coach 'C2'	M	Olympian, ex-British, English Champion. Elite athlete who has competed internationally for GB multiple times. As an online coach, responsible for over 60 individuals on their	45:40

			programme.	
10	Coach 'C3'	M	Olympian, ex-competitor. Over 30 years of experience in a range of multiple sports and coaching elite athletes in different disciplines. Was themselves online coached at a young age and now online coaches a range of high level athletes who compete at national and international competitions.	57:40
11	Coach 'C4'	M	Ex-athlete, coaches face to face and online to multiple British champions and international lifters.	46:42
12	Coach 'C5'	M	Athlete at the Crossfit Games, coached a team to the Crossfit games team event. Now has over 250 clients on their online coaching service.	33:46

All participants were contactable through Instagram and prospective participants were willingly interviewed. This was possibly due to the researcher’s connections within the sporting community which facilitated access to even elite level athletes.

A qualitative research method was chosen, as it is argued that ‘qualitative researchers can get closer to the actor’s perspective through detailed interviewing’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, p16). Furthermore, qualitative research allows for ‘rich descriptions of the social world’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, p16), crucial to exploring the relationship between athlete and online coach. Key underpinning literature has taken a quantitative approach (e.g. Morgan and Hunt 1994; Jowett and Ntoumais 2004; Zhang and Chelladurai 2013), however, qualitative research can add new insights and knowledge. A semi-structured interview approach was used. A pilot study informed the development of the research tool and interviewing style. The research tool tailored questions to coaches and athletes to capitalise on unique perspectives and experiences. Rapport was important to allow participants to express their thoughts and feelings in a relaxed and engaging atmosphere (Whiting 2007). Rapport was created during the ‘apprehension phase’ of all interviews through the first question: “Can you tell me about your experiences within sport and what role has sport played in your life?” This question successfully created rapport allowing the interviewer to follow up on participants’ unique stories, subsequently encouraging the interviewee to engage in in-depth descriptive answers (Whiting 2007). This set the tone for each interview and enabled effective use of open ended questions. It is important to recognise that some people are not used to expressing their thoughts and feelings in detail (Di Cicco-Bloom and Crahtree 2006) and this question created the potential for free and natural discussion in following questions. All twelve interviews were carried out either through Skype or Facetime allowing nationwide access to participants.

The transferability of this study is limited by the comparatively small sample size and the interpretivist philosophy. However, the study is focused on an exploration of antecedents rather than creating a study that is generalisable. Therefore, the findings aim to contribute to academic research and to create new avenues for future research through a larger empirical study. Credibility was ensured through the triangulation of multiple participant perspectives (Kirk and Miller 1986) to create trustworthy themes. Dependability was ensured through the creation of an interview guide and lastly, confirmability was sought through the detailed use of extended quotes in the analysis,

which assured that the interpretations of the findings were clearly derived from data (Korstjens and Moser 2017).

Reflecting on the limitations of the method, it was evident that interviews with coaches lasted longer than those with athletes. This could be due to the nature of the role of the participants within the relationship, with coaches having experienced more within their respective sports, having greater life experience due to their age and more confidence in articulating their views. Ethical processes were followed. Denzin and Lincoln (2008, p.193) claim that the most likely source of harm in a social science study "is the disclosure of private knowledge considered damaging by experimental subjects". Due to the nature of these sporting communities, it was critical that people's identities were safeguarded; this was achieved through the removal of all names of participants and those of whom they spoke about within the interview. The context of the quotes used for analysis may possibly reveal the identity of those interviewed, and thus these were necessary steps to ensure that the necessary privacy and confidentiality was ensured.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We start by using the data to define online coaching; a definition allows us to grasp the concept and analysis with greater clarity and detail. Through understanding athletes' motives for undertaking online coaching the focus on trust becomes clear (Lewis and Weigert 1985). Online coaching is possible through today's technology and allows athletes and experts in the field to be accessible to people globally, without a physical presence. Athletes have begun to seek out online coaching due to logistical reasons, as they may not have a coach within miles of their residence. Furthermore, online coaching allows athletes to have access to expert knowledge at a relatively low cost, thus making it an appealing service for many.

Drawing from participants' views, we define online coaching as:

A form of distance learning, where athletes receive their training programme through online media and are instructed on what they should do on a given day through their programme or online communication. Online coaching relies heavily on communication and video feedback from the coach as it operates without the real-time feedback loop that takes place with traditional face to face coaching.

Drivers of Trust

The literature review identified the need for athletes to distinguish credibility amongst online coaches (Zhang and Chelladurai 2013). Due to increased potential for deception online (Limbu et al. 2011), an athlete must perceive their potential online coach to be trustworthy. Antecedents drawn from literature and data are proposed to drive athletes' trust when seeking online coaching.

Social Media Marketing

Social media appears to be the most popular method for online coaches to advertise their services and brand to prospective clients. With social media arguably being the conduit in facilitating online coaching, it may be seen that the way online coaches market on social media will influence their level of perceived trustworthiness, aligning with

Warner-Søderholm et al.'s. (2018) findings. Participant C2 argues that athletes will often pick an online coach based purely through social media following: "I think a lot of the time, it will just go on whoever has the most followers on Instagram...They see the imagery on their Instagram account and say, well this person must know what they're doing, and that gives them a sense of trust." However, athletes who undertake a more vigorous approach in their search for an online coach are likely to consider additional factors as well as social media.

Proof of Concept

'Proof of concept' that is, the portfolio of success that an online coach can boast, through either their own success as an ex-athlete or through the success of their clients, is another factor which was identified to drive athletes' trust during in their choice of online coach. Participant C3 comments:

"The athlete will look for, I like to call it 'proof of concept', essentially, someone who's delivered, and if you speak to someone who's delivered on a scale, with lots of different athletes, over a long period of time, and some of that is online, that is evidence based practice that they're likely to be able to help you."

Relating to Sirdeshmukh et al.'s. (2002) construct of operational competence, participant C3 believes that if you are a coach who has worked effectively with numerous athletes across a range of sports, athletes will perceive you to have the necessary knowledge to be able to help them succeed. Another way in which an online coach may be able show 'proof of concept' is through what they have achieved during their career as an athlete themselves. Participant C1 comments, "if you want to build that trust online you have to have your own portfolio of success. So, for example, if you're [a coach], you can go: 'I went to the Olympics, I've been to X amount of World Championships, I know what I'm doing.' So straight away there's trust because you've got a whole laundry list of things you can fall back on."

Word-of-Mouth

Word-of-mouth was another trust-building antecedent that participants cited regarding their decision-making process. Participant C2 referred to the power that word-of-mouth may have on the perceived trustworthiness of his service:

"I try to let a lot of the advertisement, go from word of mouth. At the end of the day, a good product speaks for itself. I think that's also important, that people think it's good enough that they actually want to talk about it and share it with their friends and fellow lifters. The weightlifting community is such a small community, that people do talk and will chat about their training and what they're doing. So, I think that's also very important in the way of gaining people's trust online."

This participant recognises that these sporting communities are internally vocal and that his clients will talk about his service if he provides a good job. This view was echoed by participant C1, whom labelled the weightlifting community as an 'incestuous community' that comprises small, densely populated clubs.

Shared Sporting Values

The concept of 'shared values' identified in the literature (Morgan and Hunt 1994) has

been adapted. Hence, 'Shared sporting values' is defined as: the extent to which athlete and online coach have beliefs in common about what behaviors, goals, and policies are important or unimportant, within the context of their respective shared sport (adapted from Morgan and Hunt 1994). Participant A7 saw shared sporting values as the key driver in his decision in his choice of online coach:

"With [coach], the reason I picked him was exactly that. His methodology of training...I'm quite an emotional lifter in a way, I like to thrive off big numbers. So, I sort of paired up, with what I felt like paired up with my training philosophy."

This participant wanted a coach with whom they could share a sporting ideology. It is the shared 'sporting' values that are important, as outside values may not hold the same influence. Participant C3 highlighted the challenges of not sharing these values:

"If you're in a situation where someone doesn't have the same values, morals, ethics, then you have to make a choice. Do you want to try and work with them, which essentially means modify your behaviour to suit theirs and they try to modify their behaviour to suit yours and meet somewhere in the middle? Or do you just decide to not work with the person?"

Beugelsdijk and Klasing (2015) identified that when values are not shared, trust can be hard to sustain. This was relevant to participant C3 who argues that if the athlete and coach do decide to work together, one of the two may have to sacrifice their values to suit the other. This has the potential to increase the risk within the relationship, highlighting the importance of shared sporting values as a trust-building factor.

Sustaining Trust *Frequent Communication*

Frequent communication could be argued to be the glue that holds the relationship of online coach and athlete together, as participant A5 recognises:

"I think it's just about communicating, the more you put out there the more you're going to get back. I message [coach] every day, if it's going to work, they need to know what's going on. You don't see them very often so if you want to get the best relationship and the best from the coaching, then you need to tell them what's going on. Whether that's through videos, or just speaking to them. You can't build a relationship with somebody who isn't speaking to you."

Thus, we can see that frequently communicating with the online coach is something that must take place to overcome absence of frequent face-to-face contact. Moreover, a lack of communication could reduce the trust that an athlete has in their online coach:

"[Coach] wasn't the greatest with replying to messages, or with the communication side of things... He seemed to be busy all the time, didn't reply to messages, so I just got to the point where I stopped sending videos for feedback, because it was pointless. I think it completely ruined the trust and it was probably what resulted in me leaving [coach] really." (Participant A4)

Participant A4's comments correspond with Lynch's (2001) claim that distrust can

emerge from a lack of communication between athlete and coach. The effect of poor communication appeared to extend beyond a deterioration in trust, as the athlete linked this event with a decline in their performance and self-confidence.

Progress

Participants claimed that progress was a key driver to ensuring the ongoing trust of an athlete. Although progress is subjective, it is defined as the positive development of an athlete that leads to achieving new personal bests, physical improvement or technical improvement. Participant A7 equates progress with success, commenting, "I think, success is a big thing, as a coach it's hard to determine that. It's like the golden ticket of coaching, right? I think performance, equals trust in this sport. I think if you're doing well and adding kilos to your total every competition, why would you leave, because you're improving." So, if an athlete continues to make progress they will remain in the relationship. However, ongoing progress is 'hard to determine' and doesn't just happen instantly. Thus, it may be how an online coach deals with issues relating to a lack of progress or how they seek to maximise progress, that influences trust more than the actual progress itself.

Personal Connection

The personal connection between an athlete and coach refers to the level of friendship that athlete and online coach have outside of their working relationship. Personal connection was cited as a factor which influenced the ongoing trust of the athlete participants within the study, for example participant A5 comments "She's your friend, rather than just your coach. I think that's nice and it does make you trust them a lot more. If you don't have that connection, then for me, it wouldn't be as easy, it's not easy to go up to someone and say, 'I had a really s*** session, I didn't do anything on the programme', so having that connection there makes it easier. For me, that's what's helped and I think that's what's made it a great relationship." Similar to the findings of La Voi (2007), the personal connection between athlete and online coach increases the trust participant A5 has in her coach; as it allows the athlete to confide and depend on her online coach during tough times. It could be argued that by having a personal connection with an online coach, trust becomes less dependent on uncertain factors such as 'progress', where an athlete may be more willing to trust the process and plans of a coach during times where progress slows.

Expectations Meets Service

Participants highlighted the need for expectations to align with the service provided. Participant A5 highlighted the importance of this:

"You have your expectations so if they tell you that they'll get back to you within a certain time in regard to your video feedback, that's what they signed up to do, so that's what they should do. And the same with your programme, if you're expecting it, on a Sunday evening, ready for the week so that you can then plan the week ahead, you should be getting that programme at a reasonable hour."

Thus, the online coach must deliver what they've 'signed up for'. If an expectation amongst a client is not being delivered upon, for example if a training programme is received later than promised, it can not only frustrate the client but potentially cause distrust and decline in the athlete's performance. Supporting this claim, Costa et al.

(2001) argue that the whole concept of trust is based upon expectations being met.

Community

One of the issues of online coaching identified from the data was that athletes often train alone, without a team environment. To mitigate this problem some online coaches, attempt to create both an online and physical community amongst their clients, as identified by participant A3:

“He makes a group chat, with all the lifters going to nationals with him. During the week he’ll say stuff like, ‘all of you are smashing it’, ‘you’re all doing so well’, just positive encouragement...you don’t feel so alone in it, because you’ve got people there, that you’ve made a connection with...which is nice.”

The creation of this online community, connects athletes and creates a team spirit, helping to mitigate the issue of training alone. Similarly, coaches will also attempt to create a physical community:

“We normally do training camps together, so he’ll set up a weekend where we all go up to [location] and train. Last time we were there for a whole day. It’ll be like training and food, a whole social event. It’s a positive experience being invited by him, ‘come and lift with us’, you feel looked after.” (Participant A3)

These ‘training camps’, attempt to emulate the physical community that clubs boast, being included in events such as these, helps to create a stronger bond, not just between athlete and online coach, but also between athletes. According to A3, these events make ‘you feel looked after’, and help the online coach to express care. Although the impact physical community has on trust cannot be determined by the views of a few participants, participant A4 recalls the impact that the lack of community had on her:

“Had I have been allowed to have joined in, in more sessions there would have been more of a community. The fact that I was restricted with who I could train with and what times I could train, it ended up being difficult to feel like I was part of the community.”

This participant (A4) felt that she was alienated by the physical community she was supposed to be part of, and this damaged her morale and trust.

Athlete Social Media Exposure

Coaches regularly post the success of their lifters onto their social media profiles. Participant A1 reflected upon the affect this had on her: “There’d be times when I PB’d my clean and jerk and he’d post it on his Instagram, and just write a really nice message. It just makes you feel good as an athlete, that you’re being acknowledge and shared. It reinforces the fact that he cares about you”. Social media can be used as a method of reinforcing the benevolence a coach has towards their athlete, which as identified by Sekhon et al. (2014) is important in developing affective trust. However participant C3 recognises that social media can have negative effects if used in the wrong ways: “Even a totally logical, professional person can get carried away with social media and you could become very narcissistic and lose sight of what you’re trying to achieve. That can then change the interactions with your athletes, your coaching style, your driver; where you

become less task driven and more ego driven. Which may cause distrust amongst your athletes”.

Coach's Personal Gain

If an athlete perceives a coach to be using them to achieve higher status and for personal gain, trust from an athlete can be lost. The opinion of one coach, participant C3 (an ex-athlete) recalled upon an experience with one of his coaches which deteriorated the trust he had in him.

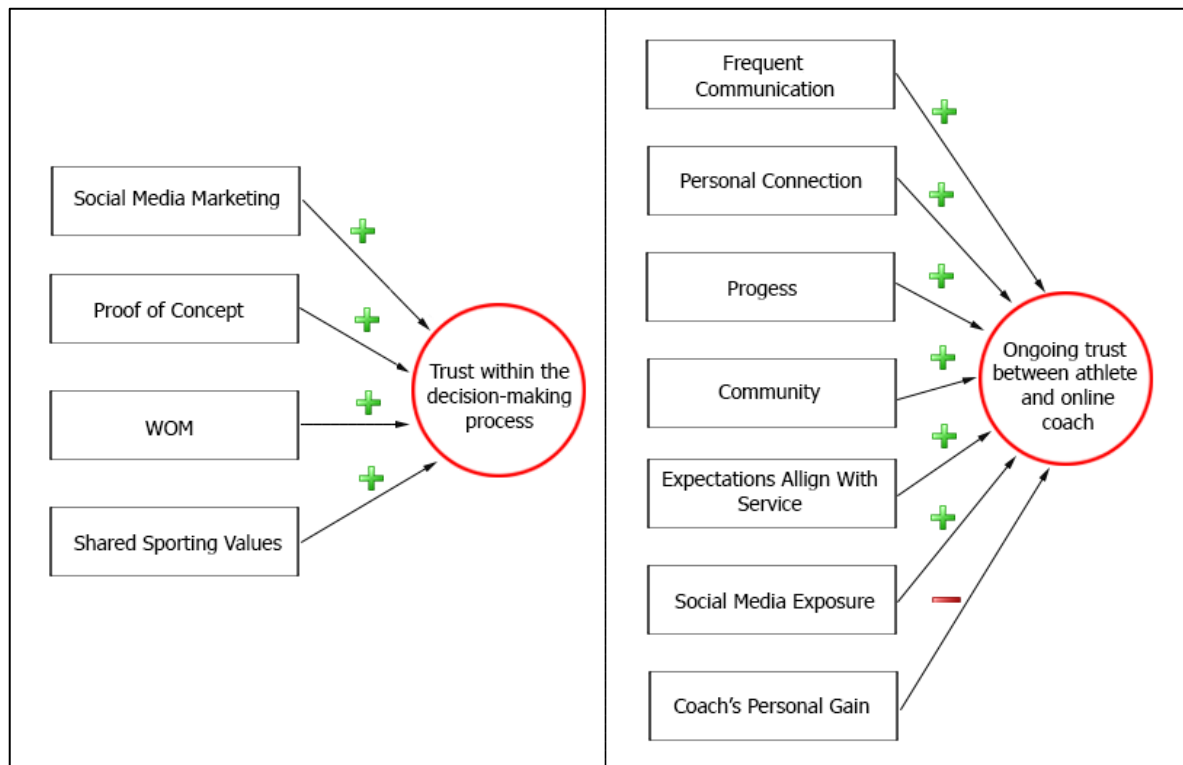
“I got third in the European Championships...my coach put the video on, and showed it to everyone before I had the opportunity to share it. So, he was very ego-driven and wanted to take the credit for it. I think it's very important for any athlete you work with. When they get the results, that they share their videos first. And, the other thing is, if they fail, or don't do as well, they might feel judged or insecure, which is terrible isn't it. I had old-school coaches, that were coach-led, not athlete-led, and I would win a championship and they would say, 'well done you didn't let me down'. You think about that, as a 14-year-old, 'well done you didn't let me down', and I got to 16 and thought...'well you don't own me, we're just working together'.”

It appears important that an athlete doesn't perceive a coach as 'ego driven', which seems to negatively impact the trust of an athlete. Online coaches should perhaps allow their athletes to share their success first, before the coach uses the athlete's success as a platform to increase their status or as a marketing tool to generate more business.

CONCLUSION

The emerging conceptual framework (figure 1) provides a possible explanation of drivers of trust within the athlete-coach relationship in this sector. The framework has been constructed based on the themes derived from both the data and literature. Although the use of a conceptual framework can be seen as reductionist, especially when studying complex subject matter, a conceptual framework has many benefits. It allows for a clear explanation of the findings from both the data and literature; the framework aids the description of concepts, due to the requirement for conceptual clarity (Oliver, Rees, Clarke-Jones, Milne, Oakley, Gabbay, Stein, Buchanan and Gyte 2008). Exploratory studies can lack directness (Yeation, Langenbrunner, Smyth and Wortman 1995), but the conceptual framework helps to mitigate this through clear mapping of findings, offering value to this study and future research.

Figure 1: Emerging Conceptual Framework



The aim of this study was to explore the nature and drivers of trust within the athlete-online coach relationship. The research objectives were created to help fulfil this aim. We now have a greater understanding of what online coaching is and why there is a need for it in today’s world. Objective one explored how trust impacts the decision-making stage of the athlete who is seeking out an online coach and objective two explored what factors influence the ongoing trust of an athlete. This study has therefore explored trust within the online coaching landscape, explained through the creation of the conceptual framework (figure 1). Antecedents within the framework comprised themes found from the literature and new concepts uncovered from data collection, highlighting the success of the exploration. However, as an interpretivist study, it must be recognised that there will be differing perspectives of online coaching, and although the sample was varied and contained a wide range of opinions, there is an opportunity to investigate further the role of trust within online coaching.

Implications

The online coaching industry is still in its infancy and this study has sought to highlight implications that could benefit online coaches’ practice. Building a trustworthy presence as an online coach is imperative in client generation and although many online coaches may not be able to boast the same ‘proof of concept’ as successful ex-athletes, they can build trustworthiness from successful social media marketing and by providing a good service, due to the role that word-of-mouth plays within the UK. Athletes within these sporting communities are all very close and communicate amongst each other frequently, whether face-to-face or through social media. Furthermore, one of the drawbacks of online coaching identified by the data, was that athletes who work with an

online coach do not have access to the same atmosphere and team environment that a weightlifting club may offer, for example. Creating a strong community amongst online clients is an under-utilised tool that online coaches could use to gain a competitive advantage. Building a strong community through interlinking athletes on social media, and holding regularly training camps appears to consolidate the trust of athletes.

Future Research

The interpretivist approach and small scale of this study means that further research is needed to test the emergent conceptual framework. Similar to methods chosen by Morgan and Hunt (1994) and Jowett and Ntoumanis (2004), successful testing would be facilitated by quantitative studies which examine the significance of the antecedents and relationships in the conceptual framework. This would in turn create a conceptual framework crafted through multiple research approaches, adding to the credibility to the framework, and creating further implications for the online coaching industry. Social media affected the perceived trustworthiness of an online coach and the ongoing trust between an athlete and online coach. Due to the strong involvement that social media plays within this relationship, we suggest that future research investigates the role that social media has on commitment and gratitude within the online coaching context (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Palmatier et al. 2009). It is important to examine relationships from a variety of perspectives (Payne and Frow 2017), therefore exploring these closely related concepts could further our understanding of the complex partnership between athlete and online coach.

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