

Tweeting the Olympics: Transcending national, religious and gender identities on BBC Arabic

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Abstract:

This paper examines the negotiation of identities on Twitter during the 2012 London Olympic Games. The interplays of national and transnational, gendered and religious identities in Twitter conversations generated by BBC Arabic (BBCA) are assessed and how they were contested and reconfigured during the Olympic Games. The representation of Arab women athletes is analysed and discussed. The perception and discussion of Great Britain on BBCA, particularly during the Opening and Closing ceremonies, is also examined. The paper reveals that Arabic speaking Twitter users expressed a great sense of national pride, often praising the mere participation of their own national athletes. However, users also articulated a strong sense of transnational Arab identity when athletes from any Middle Eastern or Arabic speaking country achieved only modest success. Support for female participation was often determined by religious attitudes. Those expressing stronger religious beliefs often opposed the participation of Muslim women in sport. The paper argues that the BBC's ability to promote a 'global conversation' was curtailed by the aspirations and interests of the target audience. The paper offers insights into the co-construction of national, gender and religious identities during globally mediated events, such as the Olympic Games.

Key Words: London Olympic Games; Twitter; BBC Arabic; BBCA; Gender; Religion; Patriotism and Transnational Identities.

Introduction

In recent history, social media have grown significantly in terms of user uptake and incorporation within traditional media platforms and outlets. As a result of this, the 2012 London Olympic Games was described as 'the first social media games'. This was also conveyed by Dave Gordon, the head of major events for BBC Sports: '[the BBC] are going for

this all embracing approach where it is all about what we offer on every platform and every device' (Dams 2012), making the Olympic Games available across 24 screens of sport every day, as well as multiple platforms and devices. Therefore, this paper analyses social media data, both that which was publically available and that which was harvested from BBC sources, that relates to the 2012 London Olympic Games.

This paper examines how issues of gender, nation and religion are framed and debated on BBCA's social media platforms, Twitter especially, given the limited representation of female athletes from the Middle East. It also assesses female participation in social media debates and gender differences in the themes and topics discussed.

Transcending issues of national, religious and gender identities in sport

The significance of sport for nation-states has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years (Brownell 1995; Maguire 1999; Roche 2000). Global sporting events such as the Olympic Games have become a platform for 'elite athletes [to] represent their nations to compete for physical excellence and primacy', and 'have provided nation-states with a universally legitimate way to present and promote their national identities and cultures' (Xu 2006:90-1). Hosting the Olympic Games is regarded as a route to soft power which enhances the image of city and national governments on a global stage, leading to economic empowerment. In this sense, the host broadcaster is given a unique opportunity to reflect national narratives and values and then project them to the world.

Sporting global media events have often been understood as 'spectacle' (Horne 2006), a nation building activity (Tomlinson and Young 2006) and a soft power tool (Cull 2010; Ding 2008; Xu 2006). More recently the 2012 London Olympic Games have been termed as the first global social media event (Silk 2012). The increased use of social media in everyday life and the partial integration of social media into traditional platforms such as BBC Sport has led to an extremely high social media presence during key sporting events. This has been optimised by the use and promotion of selected Twitter hashtags in the lead up to and during the games. However, in reference to BBCA's use of new media, Gillespie argues that integrating social media with the conventional platforms of radio and television 're-draws hierarchies and roles in news organizations, shifting the boundaries between producers and consumers, and blurring definitions between audiences as users, fans, citizens and publics' (2013:6) .

McLuhan (1964) argues that new communications technologies, ones that compress time and space and 'transcend national frontiers', creates a 'global village' (Rinnawi 2006:4). As such, Ang (1990) explains that, 'The transnational communication system [...] offers opportunities of new forms of bonding and solidarity, new ways of forging cultural communities' (*ibid.*). In an era of globalisation, sport is an integral ingredient in which international, national and regional identities are played out.

In the Arab world especially, 'Sport placed an important role within [the] states' policies' (2011:37). As such, Rinnawi argues that new means of information provision and the transnational media revolution in the Arab world have, in effect, undermined the nation

state and promoted 'a trend toward a new type of regionalism' or transnational Arab identities or, in the word which he coined, *McArabism* (2006:5). This kind of argument is reiterated by Philips (2012) who argues that, during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, transnational broadcasters such as Al Jazeera often addressed viewers as a common Arab audience. This paper argues that the London Olympic Games contributed to this trend towards identification with a transnational Arab identity that co-exists alongside strong national identities and even patriotic fervour during sporting events. Such forms of 'supranationalism', explains Rinnawi, are rooted in a common history, identity, culture, politics and religion, as well as a common present and future (2006:15-16).

Religion and Islam also have had a powerful impact on how athletes are represented and discussed in the media (Amra 2012; Pfister 2010; Henry *et al.* 2003). However, globalisation, transnational media and the rise of Islamism in recent decades has been, in Rinnawi's words, 'an important factor in strengthening McArabism as an imagined community in the Arab world' (2006:8). Issues of religious symbols (from the *hijab* to turbans to crosses), practices, beliefs and sentiments in sport have been a dominant research topic (Amra 2012:641). Female participation in sport, especially, has been 'used as an indicator to judge the level of progress and secularisation or conservatism in Muslim societies' (*ibid.*).

Muslim women have faced significant challenges in their efforts to participate in major sporting events. The *hijab* (the Muslim headscarf) has been at the forefront of the controversy, which has hindered the opportunity for many women to participate in sports (whether in IOC or FIFA organised events or those organised by other bodies). Recently, there has been much publicity over FIFA's decision to allow the *hijab*. The ban, which took place in 2007, forcing the Iranian female soccer team to withdraw from an Olympic qualifier match in 2011, was lifted in July 2012.

London 2012 was the first Olympic Games where female athletes from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Brunei were allowed to participate. This, of course, raised questions regarding the regulation of Muslim dress and whether wearing the *hijab* during competition would be allowed or prohibited. In this context, Amara argues that to some, the *hijab* in the Olympic Games is 'invasive (a threat) and runs counter to the values of female emancipation and the long history of female resistance to male hegemony. For others, the *hijab* in the Olympic Games should be celebrated as a form of cultural plurality and an example of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) openness towards diversity' (2012:648).

Such challenges are combined with the intense difficulties of qualifying for the Olympic Games, considering the high level of competition at such major sporting events, as well as more general factors, such as social and economic conditions, the culture of sports practice in society and political instability in Arab countries (Amara 2012:648-9).

BBC Arabic – fostering a 'Global Conversation'

In 2008, the BBC World Service (BBCWS) launched its first ever TV channel. It was in Arabic like their first ever foreign language radio station in 1938 but the context, of course, was

different. If the first radio station was aimed at countering Fascist propaganda in the Middle East, the TV station was part of the UK's public diplomacy strategy in the aftermath of 9/11, the war in Afghanistan and the Iraq War of 2003. The aim of the new BBCA TV channel was to reinvigorate its influence in a region where Great Britain had long been a dominant player. The BBC at that time reached 12 million radio listeners and had 1.2 million online users a month (Barkho 2008:282) but had been overtaken by the proliferation of Arabic satellite television channels (Readon 2008). The broadcaster, funded by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office until 2014 (now being funded by the UK licence fee payer), reaches anyone with a satellite or cable connection and is free of charge.

In 2011, the British government cut funding to the BBC forcing the BBCWS to further shut down its services in five languages. However, the BBC simultaneously received increased funding from the government to 'assist the BBC Arabic Service to continue their valuable work in the region' (William Hague cited in a news report on the BBC website in 2011). As Gillespie and Webb argue, strategic concerns in the Middle East 'have remained at the cutting edge of the BBC's overseas development' (2012:13). Such 'cultivation of translation and transnational completeness, and the acquisition of skills in intercultural dialogue that emerged from political, social and cultural conflict of interest', they affirm, 'were key components of the cultures of diplomacy that evolved at Bush House over the decades' (*ibid.*).

The long-term relationship of cultural harmonisation between the BBC's multilingual journalists and their global audiences has formed the basis for fostering a 'Global Conversation' by the World Service's global networks. This has led to the BBCWS being a relatively trusted news organisation in the Middle East. This is, however, set in the context of an antagonistic love-hate relationship in all three directions between Great Britain, the BBC and the Middle East.

Reaching out to global audiences in order to foster a 'global conversation', Ives (2011) argues, has become a principal value of BBC interactive services, by recognising the prospect of transnational and cosmopolitan engagements through streams of digital media platforms (Gillespie and Webb 2012). Such an understanding of the public diplomacy and soft power value of BBCA needs to be contextualised in the historical, strategic and cultural contexts in which it has operated in the Middle East over successive generations (Gillespie and Webb 2012). However, as Gillespie and Webb explain, concepts and practices of public diplomacy and soft power have become more challenging when faced with geopolitical conflicts and the rise of social media:

The diplomatic value of the World Service derives not solely through unidirectional acts of projecting Britain abroad. It now operates according to more dialogic principles through fostering interactive online debate forums in which British voices, attitudes and government policy (national interests and values) become part of a wider narrative exchange with the BBC's many audiences (2012:16).

Such forms of interactive interchanges between audiences and producers are no longer tied into an institution projecting its ethics and values onto foreign publics but encompass a move towards greater equality and reciprocity, at least in principle. This is a move in which the aspirations and interests of the audiences and producers in engendering a ‘global conversation’ are seen to be important and, at the very least, require considering when producing news for overseas audiences (Ives 2011 in *ibid.*).

Methodology

The overarching research question is how national, transnational, gender and religious identities play out in the context of the social media conversations generated within and by BBCA during the London Olympics. In responding to this question, the paper integrates content and discourse analysis in order to examine the intersections between ideological, institutional and political understandings of sport and the media.

A detailed account of the methodology of the wider study of which this research is a part can be found in Dennis, Gillespie and O’Loughlin (this issue). The quantitative content analysis examined the overall profile of the tweets, which consisted of a thorough assessment of the actors, type of tweets types of reactions, as well as tweets identified as having national, religious, and gender-related content via key word searches. The intention was to examine how these themes surface in the Twittersphere (also known as the Twitterverse) and whether such themes are used to construct news stories. From this quantitative analysis, we identified the most prominent themes for further qualitative analysis. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as outlined by Fairclough (2004), was used to analyse five of the most prominent themes, identified in the content analysis (for more details see paper on the overall methodology of this research project). The researchers were then able to compile data from key Twitter accounts (including athletes, news agencies, sports clubs, agents etc.) selected by the BBC during the Olympic Games (July 27 – August 12) for further in-depth qualitative analysis:

1. Opening Ceremony
2. Closing Ceremony
3. The participation of Arab women in the Olympic Games
4. The weak performance of Arab athletes
5. The celebration of Arab performance

This procedure of extracting tweets from a number of sources defined by the BBC produced a definite number of tweets, which meant that, in some cases, the scope of the conversations tended to be limited to news feeds, official statements, questions and answers. This also meant that more explicit, perhaps even exaggerated, tweets were missed. In total, the sample analysed for this paper consisted of 1,686 tweets posted by 577 different users.

A crucial stage in this method is deciding what to count; therefore, the coding frame developed for this research was piloted with a sample of 100 tweets and refined to fit the purposes of the study. Certain keywords and hashtags were incorporated and retweets were eliminated to improve the validity of the study. The data collected were analysed using Excel. The tables and charts compiled were then typically aggregated to present an overview of the data pertinent to the research. This entails the exercise of judgement by the researchers regarding the relative significance of certain data. Again, please refer to the methods article in this journal for a detailed analysis of the methodology employed in this paper.

Twitter Module (TM)

Employing the London 2012 Olympic Games as a case study, the research examined the use of Twitter by BBCA. To date, the London Olympic Games was the biggest event that the BBC had ever covered. For that reason, the BBCWS introduced an interactive Twitter Module (TM) that enabled users to observe and obtain up-to-date information, as well as engage with Arab athletes, journalists and fan bases amongst other groups. The module also sought to inform editorial decisions, encouraging the use of User Generated Content (UGC), as well as the distribution of UGC created by the UGC hub. The module ran live for more than three weeks during which the BBC editors were encouraged to promote it on the main website pages, as well as across all SEO including Twitter.

The frequencies of tweets posted through the Twitter Module (TM) during a three-week sample period of the Olympic Games are shown in **Figure 1** below. It shows that, in total, 6,634 tweets were captured during the sample period but only 1,686 were related to the 5 most prominent events examined.

Almost 39 percent of tweets were posted on the 31st of July alone. This coincided with the day that the Qatari skeet shooter Al-Attiyah won the first Arab Olympic medal. This bronze medal was only the third Olympic Games medal in the history of Qatar and their first in 12 years bringing huge cheers, support and encouragement from a big fan base in the tiny Gulf nation. As will be demonstrated later, such a finding generated many patriotic tweets as defined by our coding frame – ‘praising an athlete’s performance’ and ‘celebrating one’s own nation’.

Using Sysomos Map, the social media and monitoring tool used by the BBCWS to which privileged access was given, the study analysed 589 mentions of BBCA in relation to the Olympic Games across SM platforms (including blogs, forums, news and Twitter). Of these, 284 (49 percent) came from Twitter. Geographically, the majority of tweets came from Egypt (23 percent), followed by Saudi Arabia (20.5 percent) and finally the UK (17.9 percent). This indicated that diaspora Arabic speakers were a significant voice in the BBCA Twittersphere.

The majority of the debate (77 percent) was dominated by male users with only 8 female users voicing their opinions. Such tweets were able to reach almost 882,000 users (this includes retweets, as well as the number of followers and by extension followers of

followers and so on). In general, the majority of conversations tended to cluster around neutral reporting and factual commentary on events and the sharing of links back to the site around the coverage of the Olympic Games. Only a small number of tweets commented on the BBCA coverage itself.

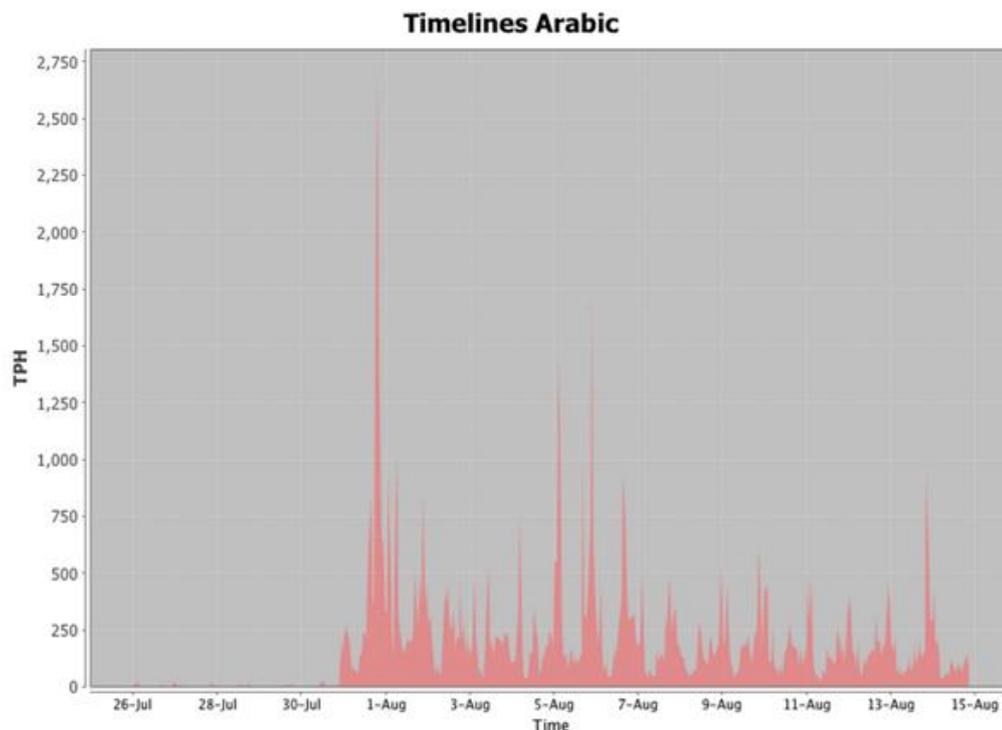


Figure 1: Timeline of the number of tweets from 26 July to 15 August 2012

Themes discussed

Examining the conversations over the 17-day period, BBCA Olympic Games- related stories peaked on Friday August 3rd and Wednesday August 8th when Wojdan Shaherkani and Sarah Attar, two Saudi athletes, competed for the first time. Themes relating to gender, religion and nation dominated the debate. A diversity of views was presented regarding the participation of Muslim women in international sporting events and attracted much attention on Twitter. While SM networks, such as Twitter, play a crucial role in the spread of information regarding a specific subject matter (such as the gender gap in sports participation among Muslim or Middle Eastern women), embedded social structures also affect the dynamics of information flow.

Broadcasting adaptations to maximize engagement and participation: the 'Global Conversation'

The analysis shows that BBCA social media practices had a huge impact on user interactivity. One setback that relates to the TM used during the Games concerns the limited number of tweets posted each day by the BBCA editorial team. Also the Twitter accounts selected for the TM Top Ten tweets of the day by the BBCA editorial team were not enough to

encourage any kind of dialogue or deliberation. The BBCWS claims that this ‘new strategy’ is based on carefully selected lists of people and topics. However, there was a clear imbalance in the selection of staff assigned to tweet for the Arabic service and to be included in the TM. The selected athletes, sports journalists and Arab team fan pages, although numerous, were not among the most active. Some were not even active at all. This also meant that debate often shifted to include the crisis in Syria and the Egyptian Parliamentary elections.

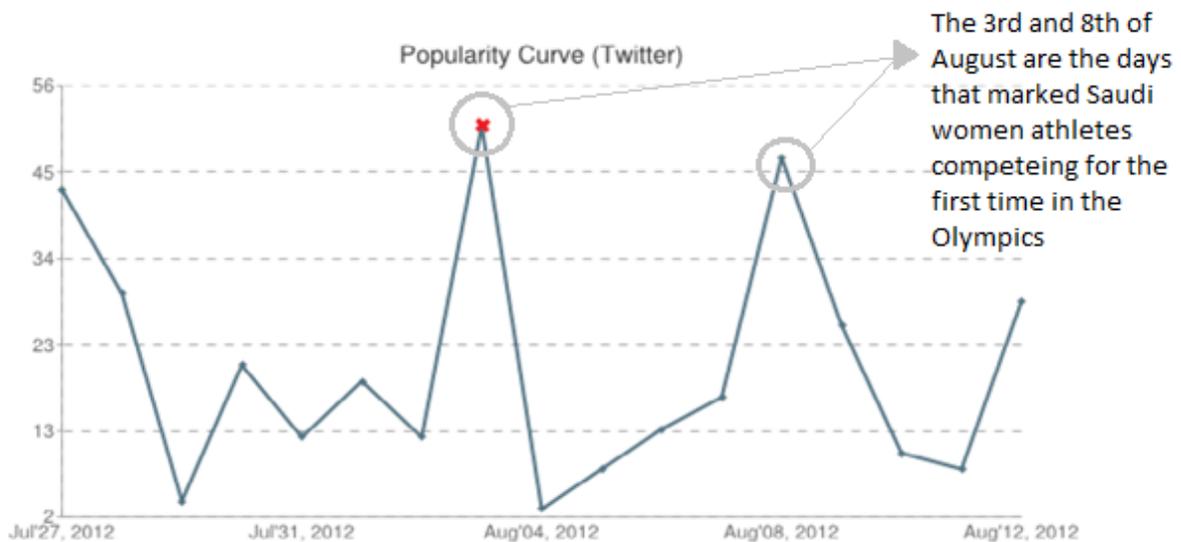


Figure 2: The number of Tweets that mentioned BBCA and the Olympic Games each day

On average, 17 tweets were posted by the editorial team every day on the BBCA’s Twitter page, mostly discussing the situation in Syria and occasionally reporting on the events of the London 2012 Olympic Games. By the end of the Olympic Games, the BBCA’s Twitter page had acquired 36,112 followers.

National and transnational Arab identities: ‘Team Arab’

Axes of identification were fluid, oscillating between expressions of national pride and transnational affinity. These fluctuations made for a potent, excited and animated debate across BBCA platforms. For the most part, BBCA sought a mode of address online that would appeal to transnational Arab identities, emphasising the commonality between the Arab athletes and the wider Arabic-speaking audience from different states and the diaspora, by means of reporting Arab nations’ victories as a common Arab victory. Positioning transnational Arab sports news on a higher pedestal than non-Arab news was also reflected in BBCA’s series of interviews with Arab athletes which were available online and proved to be very popular. Medallists, qualifiers and participants were given the opportunity to discuss their experiences on BBCA screens. Such short clip interviews were also popular amongst Twitter users with numerous tweets posting links back to the website and informing followers of BBCA’s upcoming interviewees.

This sense of Arab-nationalism was echoed on SM platforms. An Egyptian medal was perceived by Twitter users as an Arab medal and generated Arab pride. During global events, mass media representations, as well as audience expectations, contribute to the formation of national narratives. For instance, Nasser Attieh, the Qatari athlete, became known on Twitter as the first ‘Arab athlete’ to win a medal. This achievement went viral on Twitter with some users going even further to say Attieh has ‘held *our* heads up high’ or was ‘every Arab’s pride’. The pressing issue of the participation for the first time by Saudi and Qatari women in the Olympic Games was also tweeted as a transnational Arab controversy.

In relation to the content analysis, two of the selected five events reflect the oscillation between patriotism and transnational pride: these are the celebration of Arab achievements and the weak performance of Arab athletes. With regards to the former, the majority of tweets came from the ‘general public’, mostly seeking to interact directly with athletes, often praising their performance and physical prowess. Moreover, as shown in **Figure 3**, while praising an athlete was mostly celebrated as a national success, it was also regarded as a transnational Arab success.

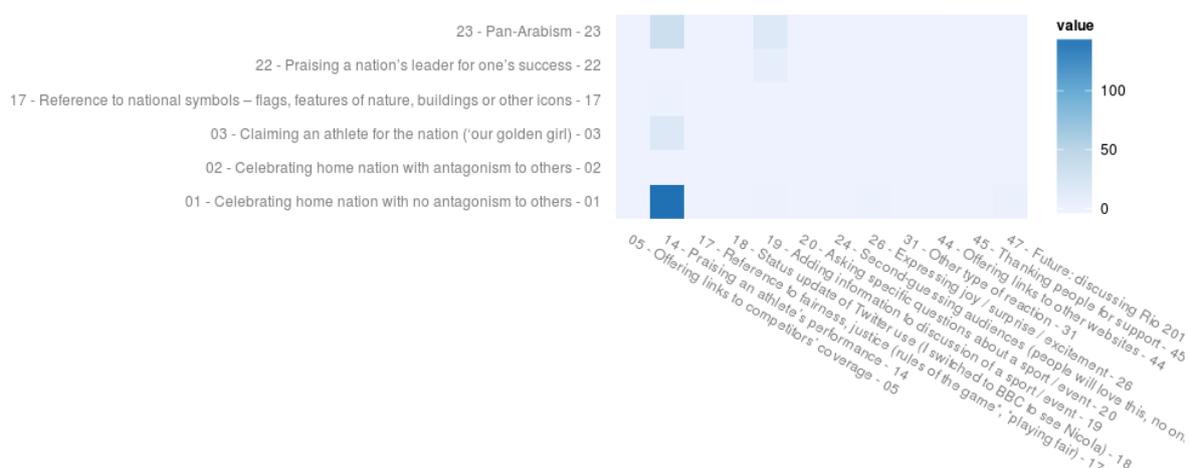


Figure 3: Heat map displaying the correlation between user reactions and national sentiment

However, when broken down further, **Figure 4** below shows that celebrating athletic performance as a national achievement comes largely from members of the public. In contrast, those tweets celebrating the success as a transnational Arab achievement were mostly posted by sports clubs and companies. In other words, whereas members of the public tended to express patriotic sentiments (claiming strong affection and affinity to one’s own nation), members of sports clubs and company staff tended to celebrate such achievements as a transnational phenomenon, presumably because it is in their interest to do so.

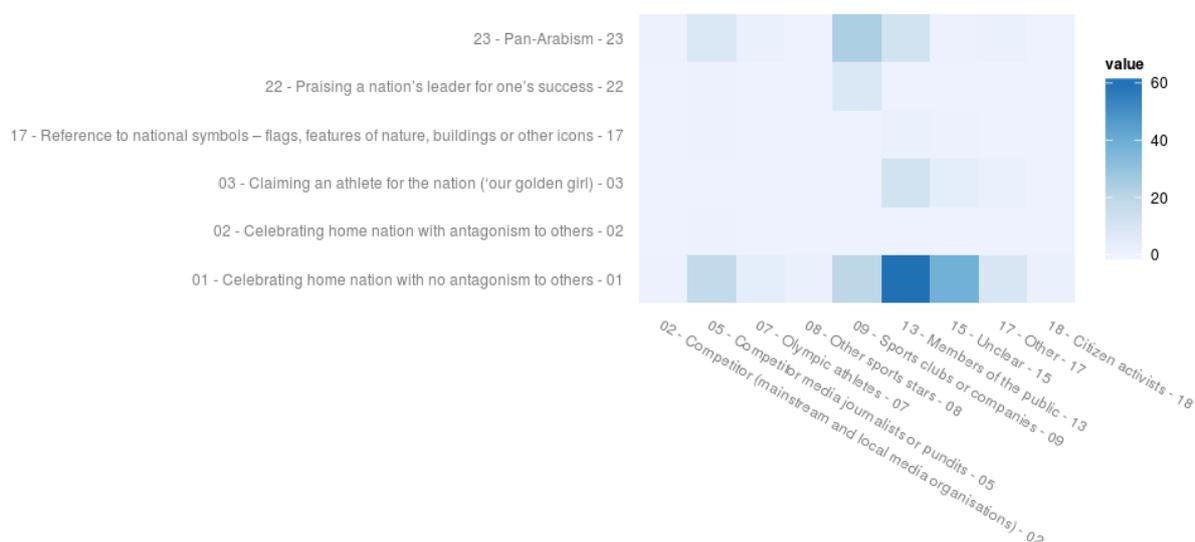


Figure 4: Heat map displaying the correlation between the type of actor and national sentiment

Transnational Arab affinities were also reflected in discussions around the poor performance of Arab athletes that attracted much attention on SM. The very modest success of Arab athletes was a focus of interest for BBCA’s interactive daily political talk show programme, *Nuqtat Hewar*. The tri-platform programme investigated the reasons for the ‘modest’ Arab achievements in the Olympic Games despite media attention and the widespread public interest in the event. It raised questions about how Arab athletes could improve their outcomes in future international sporting events. The debate dominated Twitter and Facebook conversations with users showing concern about such disappointing results. As one Twitter user stated, ‘it’s day three and Arabs haven’t won a single medal’. Facebook conversations generalised this Olympic underachievement as a transnational issue. For instance, one user stated: ‘Arabs are hypocrites, sports is not really their thing. Sports require effort and perseverance and Arabs prefer sleeping until noon’. Meanwhile, other users blamed the region’s political unrest for the results, indicating that Arabs ‘are busy protesting against their corrupt, failed and criminal regimes’. Twitter users also urged sports administrators and citizens alike to reflect on the poor outcome of the Olympic Games and provide the necessary financial and moral support required for the next Olympic Games. The poor performance was regarded as the result of a lack of policy, investment and infrastructure for sports. This topic elicited the most deliberative style of debate and illustrates the significance of the Olympic Games as an event that not only generates negotiations of national and transnational identities but also public policy debates and reflections on how Arab nation states compare with other nations in the global sporting world. This generates a relativizing assessment of one’s nation and the region’s place in the world.

Nevertheless, as **Table 1** and **Figure 5** below demonstrate, the majority of tweets celebrated Arab performance. Users appreciated the athletic prowess of players,

continuously referring to their strength, commitment and determination. Failing to achieve a medal often generated celebratory tweets, arguing that participation in a global sporting event was, in itself, an achievement.

Arab nation/weak performance	Number	Percentage (%)
Celebrating home nation with no antagonism to others	122	60%
Pan Arabism	33	16%
Praising a nation's leader for individual success	19	9%
Claiming an athlete for the nation ('our golden girl')	16	8%
Using failure of your nation's athlete to point to a negative attribute of your nation	4	2%
Reference to national symbols	3	1%
Celebrating home nation with antagonism to others	3	1%
Supporting or enjoying the success of another nation	2	1%
Total	202	100%

Table 1: Percentage of patriotic sentiment tweets correlated with Arab athletes' weak performance

Also a large proportion of tweets examined (28 percent) highlighted the role of national state leaders (see **Figure 4** above). The winning of medals was either credited to or dedicated to that nation's leader: 'Al Attiyah dedicates his medal to Qatar and its leaders'. Other tweets emphasised the significant role that leaders play in the Arab region:

His Highness toured #BaytQatar (the Qatar National Olympic Committee Headquarters at the Olympic Games) where he met with the QOC delegation; congratulated Qatari Olympic Champions medalists.

This may correlate with what Rinnawi calls tribal media, in which traditional media in Arab states often reflect the world and news through the actions of its leaders. Moreover, in parallel, state leaders may be employing armies of Twitter users to promote their image, status and loyalty.

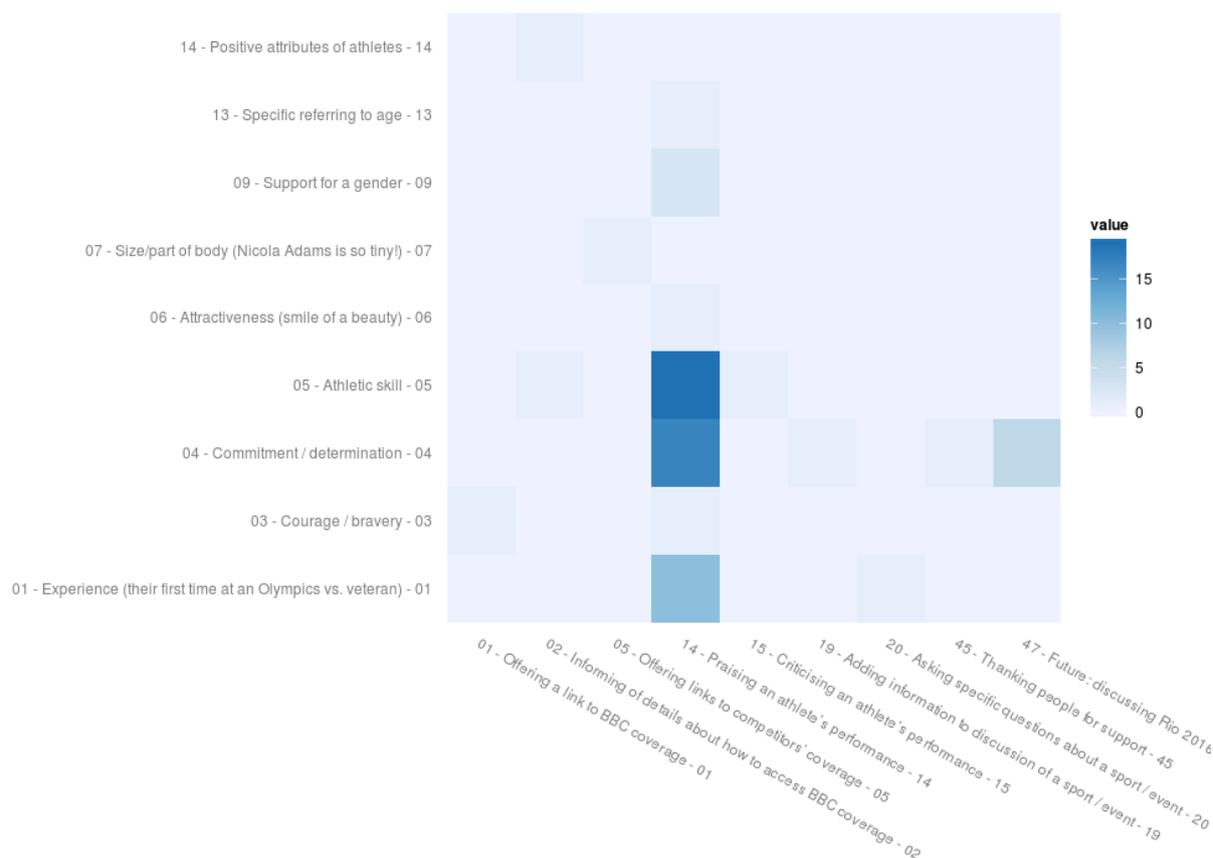


Figure 5: Heat map displaying the correlation between actor reactions and religious sentiments

Gender and religion

On 31 July, the International Judo Federation allowed Wojdan Shaherkani—a Saudi Arabian woman, to compete in the Olympic Games wearing the *hijab* after being banned from wearing the traditional Muslim headscarf. Wojdan’s participation in the Olympic Games has attracted much attention from all over the world, making headlines on global news media platforms.

The content analysis showed that 32 percent of gender-related tweets were supportive of female participation in the Olympic Game (see **Table 2**). A big proportion of the sample referred to female athletic skills (26 percent), as well as commitment and determination (21 percent) in the competition. In total only 2 percent of the sample data had negative perceptions of female participation.

However, when we break these figures down further and consider tweets expressing religious-sentiments in relation to the participation of women, expressions against female participation become more visible. The majority of such tweets (36 percent) stated that sports have a negative influence on religion. Criticising an athlete’s performance was also often justified by references to sport conflicting with religious values. Such criticisms were mostly directed towards female participation as being against ‘our’ Islamic values and morals but stated that women were allegedly less able to succeed in sports than their male counterparts.

Gender-related comments	Number	Percentage (%)
Support for gender	162	32%
Athletic skill	134	26%
Commitment / determination	110	21%
Experience	47	9%
Anti-female participation	12	2%
Specific reference to age	10	2%
Positive attributes	6	1%
Extroverted ("Great personality")	6	1%
Courage / bravery	6	1%
Attractiveness	6	1%
Humour	2	0%
Discrimination against a gender in sport	2	0%
Size/part of body	2	0%
Total	513	100%

Table 2: Number and percentage of gender related comments across the whole sample period

However, to put things into perspective, in relation to the entire sample of data, only 5 percent of tweets touched upon religion and its role in sport. **Table 3** below shows that the majority of religious citations (according to the ur coding frame) had references to religious behaviour – including ‘looking to heaven’, ‘offering religious blessings’, ‘thanking God for sporting success’ and ‘praying’. Also significant were references to religious practices, mainly referring to Ramadan and fasting, given Ramadan took place during the London Olympic Games. Again, sport was alleged to have a negative effect on religion. Such references mostly referred to female participation being against Muslim religious values. Less often but prominent were references to the athlete’s religion, religion as a positive force for an athlete, references to a religion’s symbols, as well as references to the secular values of the Olympic Games that are held sacrosanct or sacred.

The BBCA displayed a deep interest in the question of female participation, publishing various news articles on the website discussing the controversy behind Wojdan Shaherkani’s participation in the Olympic Games and asking audiences to engage in the debate. As part of their Olympic Games coverage, BBCA also dedicated a TV programme to the examination of public perceptions of Arab female participation in international sporting events. Nuqtat Hewar or Talking Point, BBCA’s interactive political talk show programme, engaged audiences in discussions about a range of related issues including: the duties of women participating in the Olympic Committee, the reasons behind the lack of female participation in some nations, the issue of the *hijab*, and the obstacles that Arab women

Religion	Number	Percentage (%)
Reference to religious behaviour	35	38%
References to religious practices	32	34%
Sport as a negative influence on religion	12	13%
Religion as a positive force for an athlete	4	4%
Reference to an athlete's religion	2	2%
Religion as a positive force for an athlete	2	2%
Reference to a religion's symbols	2	2%
Reference to the religion of an athlete's country	2	2%
Reference to values or rules of game that are held as sacrosanct or sacred	2	2%
Total	93	100%

Table 3: Number and percentage of religion-related tweets across the whole sample period

face at international sporting events. Although the topic generated a number of SM conversations, the programme received minimal Twitter engagement (2 tweets), some Facebook engagement (50 likes and 45 comments) and a handful of comments on the website. This was a reflection of its largely male viewership and social media participation (Gillespie et al 2015)



Image 1: Images of Arab women participating in Olympics

Generally speaking, the participation of Saudi Arabian women in the Olympic Games generated a substantial number of Twitter conversations. In relation to BBKA, two of the most retweeted posts by BBKA throughout the duration of the Olympic Games discussed the participation of Wojdan Shahrakhi and Sarah Attar.

The participation of Arab Muslim women athletes was perceived by some users as embracing Western sport practices and opposing Muslim tradition and as one Twitter user suggested ‘Wojdan’s losses are twofold: firstly, breaking the privacy enjoyed by conservative Muslim athletes, and secondly, participation and defeat’. The conditions issued by the International Olympic Committee obliging participating nations to send female athletes to the Games were seen as ‘absurd, vain and inciting hatred against Islam’. Participants also questioned whether women should participate in the games, as one Facebook user put it:

Guys, before we say anything, religion simply forbids it. Arab Muslim women should know better, if they are true to their religion they won’t allow it or consider it in the first place. We are against women participating in sporting events.

This line of thought was then challenged by another user who stated that:

mixing religion with other aspects of life was wrong. I personally believe that sports are sports and the Olympic Committee did take into account the Gulf mentality and approved wearing the Hijab’.

Another user responded by explaining that ‘Religion is the basis of life and if you don’t like it then it is simple, don’t be a Muslim! There are other religions to choose from like Buddhism and Hinduism’.

In contrast, the deliberation about women’s rights was visible across SM platforms. The ‘beauty’ of the *hijab* was frequently debated, as one tweeter stated:

Qatar folks were are doing it with the *hijab*. So beautiful! *Masha’Allah*.

Another tweeter argued that ‘Saudi women showed the world that their commitment to the Muslim headscarf is not an obstacle but a pride’. Similarly Amara, reflecting on the 2008 Beijing Games, explained that while the veil ‘was seen as an accepted innovation or compromise’, others saw it as serving ‘commercial interests and not necessarily representative of the genuine Islamic hijab’ (2012:648).

Conclusion

This article set out to determine the extent to which social media platforms are capable of widening (or not) user participation and enabling audiences to shape and engage in the ‘global conversation’ at BBCA during the Olympic Games in 2012. It focused on how gender, national, transnational and religious identities are framed and debated on the BBCA social media platforms.

The nation, as Benedict Anderson (1991) has argued, is an ‘imagined community’ whose members perceive it to be unified and worthy of sacrifice (Breuille 1996). However,

when a nation's conflicts around gender and religion are brought to the fore during globally mediated events, such as the London Olympic Games, discourses of 'unity' are challenged. Questions of power, the body politic and the human body, its force and purity are narrativised in ways that create hierarchical relations between national citizens and transnational communities. Twitter users in this study oscillated between expressing a great deal of national pride and unity on the one hand, and transnational affinities and sentiments on the other. This sense of patriotism was also extended to incorporate a greater sense of regionalism, especially when Arab athletes performed well. Twitter users identified not only with winners and their achievements and but also with losers, invoking structures of blame to explain defeat. Sentiments regarding female participation were often shaped by religion. Those expressing stronger religious beliefs often opposed the participation of Muslim women in sport.

That said, BBCA needs to achieve a much better understanding of the needs and expectations of their audiences but should also ensure that interactivity and engagement are not just part of BBC rhetoric but are actually meaningfully achieved. There is also a need for a greater SM activity by BBCA staff, especially on Twitter. Journalists' twitter accounts were not promoted, referenced or represented on the BBCA website during the Olympic Games. Without a social media strategy, the promises of widening participation will not be achieved. Limitations on participation are therefore, in part, due to the tensions between traditional BBC journalism and the new rules of engagement required by social media.

Three main findings are woven across this paper: firstly, regardless of the weak performance demonstrated by Arab athletes throughout the duration of the London Olympic Games, Twitter users celebrated victory with great national pride. Secondly, tweets oscillate between expressions of patriotism and transnational Arab affinities, whether athletes performed well or demonstrated only modest achievement; and finally, support for female participation was shaped by religion. Tweets expressing negative sentiments towards female participation also saw sports as having a negative influence on religion.

Biographical note:

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