Silver Lining in Winning Silver: An Exploratory Study of Supporters’ Reactions and Coping on the Social Media towards Lee Chong Wei’s London Olympics Defeat

Ying Hwa Kee, Joan Marian Fry, John Chee Keng Wang *, Yek Wei Chong (all Nanyang Technological University, Singapore), and Chunxiao Li (The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong SAR)

*Corresponding Author:

Email: john.wang@nie.edu.sg
Abstract

The experience of loss is prevalent in all sports, but research into the phenomenon is scarce. Comments related to two YouTube videos which featured interviews with Malaysian badminton player Lee Chong Wei after his narrow final defeat to Lin Dan in the 2012 London Olympics were analysed in an exploratory attempt to understand supporters’ reactions and coping of the loss on social media. Content analysis of supporters’ collective reactions suggests that most of Lee’s supporters who posted comments were able to find a ‘silver lining in the cloud’ despite this loss, i.e. signs of coping were prevalent. The following seven categories were identified: (a) providing rationalisations, (b) offering solace, (c) expressing emotion, (d) showing respect, (e) displaying solidarity, (f) injecting humour, and (g) being negative. Insights from this study based on reactions on social media offer a fresh perspective for understanding supporters’ coping strategies in response to sports losses which could serve as a catalyst for future understanding of sport losses in sport psychology.

Keywords: acceptance, defeat, Olympics, positive psychology
Introduction

In typical competitive sporting situations, the number of losers far exceeds that of winners. Given the greater likelihood of losing compared to winning, it is of paramount importance for athletes and supporters to develop healthy interpretations of loss, lest detrimental consequences of losing, such as negative mood (Gonzalez-Bono, Salvador, Serrano & Ricarte, 1999) or even suicide (“Fan kill himself over United loss”, 2013) occur. However, psychological responses following sport losses are not easily studied as elite athletes are usually less willing to participate in research following defeat (Kerr & Males, 2010). The same could be said about getting supporters to be involved in research after their team or favourite player loses. In an effort to further understand the psychology of sport-related losses in general, we undertook an exploratory study to examine how supporters of Malaysian badminton player Lee Chong Wei reacted on YouTube following his loss in the 2012 London Olympics. We deem that the analysis of supporters’ expressions on the social media could be a particularly fruitful endeavour for understanding sport losses given the difficulty in inviting those who recently experience a loss to partake in research.

Sport defeats bring about a sense of disappointment for supporters, particularly those who have high expectations of their athletes’ ability to win or to perform well. For instance, Rainey, Larsen and Yost (2009) found that fans’ disappointment was positively related to expectation of team success, effort invested in the team, and dedication to the team. Disappointment due to sport losses have been linked to a range of maladaptive behaviour such as unhealthy eating (Cornil &
Chandon, 2013), family violence (Card & Dahl, 2009), and suicide (Fernquist, 2000). These examples suggest that disappointment due to sports losses can potentially bring about intensively negative emotions for supporters, particularly when the defeat is narrow in an evenly-matched game (e.g., Card & Dahl, 2009; Cornil & Chadon, 2013).

The episode in question in the present study is the men’s singles badminton finals of the 2012 London Olympics. In this episode, Malaysian’s Lee Chong Wei lost the Olympics gold medal, arguably one of the most significant sports prizes. The match took place on 5th August 2012 and was watched worldwide by many badminton fans. It was a highly anticipated match as the two contestants were closely matched. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) player, Lin Dan, then a four-time world champion (2006, 2007, 2009 and 2011), had been victorious in the same event in the previous Olympics (Beijing 2008). Lee Chong Wei was the silver medallist then, having lost to Lin 21 - 12, and 21 - 8.

Having reached the Olympics finals four years later, Lee’s quest for gold in London in 2012 was the best ever chance for a Malaysian to win a top Olympic honour. The match between Lin and Lee transpired to be an exciting affair. The first set started with both players taking turns to lead, with Lee winning the set by 21 - 15. The second set was won 21 - 10 by Lin. The final set got underway as the anticipation amongst the respective supporters intensified. Both players displayed great skills and keen competition, and each won alternate points up to 19 - 19. The final point was eventually won by Lin after a 22-shot rally which included multiple forecourt shots, lifts, drives, and smashes over 40 seconds of excitement: the match was sealed at 21 - 19. Lin celebrated his victory by immediately dropping his racket and running to the crowd. In
contrast, Lee wore a dejected expression - a figure sitting low on the court and looking utterly devastated by his loss. This scene was witnessed by those following the televised match. (Interested readers may view the full game at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytjD4f_I0sc.)

Lee’s loss to Lin brought about huge disappointment amongst his presumably predominantly Malaysian supporters. The disappointment experienced could have been particularly intense for a number of reasons. First, the prize that had been lost was, after all, the Olympic gold medal. This perceived to be greatly valued as such an Olympic honour has never been won by any Malaysian. Secondly, the match was closely fought and exciting with the two players almost point-to-point throughout the match and Lee winning the first set, and Lin the second. In this regard, Lee appeared to have had an equal chance of winning. Thirdly, although the match ended with a narrow margin in the final set, the difference in prestige tied to the medals awarded (gold and silver respectively) was significantly wider. To Lee’s supporters, it would be natural to deliberate on why victory had not gone to their favourite.

Following Lee’s loss, there was an outpouring of comments on social media regarding this episode. For example, it has been reported on the Forbes website (http://www.forbes.com/sites/limyunghui/2012/08/06/almost-half-a-million-twitter-mentions-of-malaysian-olympic-badminton-player/) that almost half a million Twitter comments mentioned Lee Chong Wei shortly after his loss. The article also described the episode as ‘… a nation’s heartbreak and consolation expressed fervently, in real time, on Twitter’ (Lim, 2012). To this end, Lee’s narrow defeat in the London Olympics finals, coupled with his supporters’ reaction to this episode evidenced in their posting relatively immediate comments online, offered us an
excellent opportunity to examine supporters’ reactions and their coping in an ecologically valid fashion.

Method
This study was undertaken using qualitative analysis (constant comparison, Glaser & Strauss, 1967). A total of 635 comments linked online to two YouTube video postings were analysed through grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as elaborated by Miles and Huberman (1994). The two videos featured recorded interviews with Lee Chong Wei responding to his loss in the men’s badminton singles gold medal match at the London 2012 Olympic Games. In the following sub-sections, we first provide a short synopsis of each of these video postings, in order to give context to the data, and second outline the procedures undertaken for this study.

YouTube videos
The two video clips were hosted on YouTube when the study was conceived. The first clip featured Lee Chong Wei’s interview with the Chinese media shortly after his loss, and was accessible at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4lgZ0SNitI. Originally entitled, ‘Badminton News - LEE Chong Wei’s Crying [2012 London Olympic]”, herein it is referred to as the ‘interview video’. Posted on 5 August 2012 by arkazlive, it is of 2 minutes 24 seconds duration, with the dialogue in Mandarin Chinese. The second video clip, originally entitled “CHONG WEI APOLOGY”, was almost certainly recorded at a London airport prior to his return flight to Malaysia. It has been referred to as the ‘apology video’. This 43 second clip was accessible at
Synopsis of the ‘interview video’.

In this clip, the reporter first asked Lee to speak about his own assessment of the game. Lee’s face clearly expressed sadness as he spoke about the loss. After releasing an audible sigh, he began by saying that in playing sports, there are only two possible outcomes: either winning or losing. There was a sense of fatalism here in that he stated that he had accepted his lot to lose in successive Olympics finals. Lee said that he tried his best and he was satisfied with his performance. He also noted that he had been suffering from an injury while preparing for and competing in the Olympics. He said he had to rely on painkiller injections to ‘keep going’ for the five matches played. He lamented that, although he was leading at certain times during the game, he lost it at the most critical moment. He reiterated that he accepted the loss.

When the reporter reminded Lee that he was well-supported and well-liked by a lot of fans, Lee expressed gratitude to them, regardless of whether they were from Malaysia or China. He further added that he judged his performance as satisfactory because he had given his best. He revealed that he had had only two weeks to prepare for the London Games and that his ankle had been (and, then, still was) swollen from injuries sustained during training and competing. He said it had not been easy for him as he had had to rely on painkillers in order to reach the final. He also expressed surprise that he had reached that stage in such a state. He explained that not being in the competitive mode for about two months had made the transition to the Olympics very challenging. Due to his injuries, he had been also very concerned about his court mobility. In
closing the interview, he stated that he accepted the outcome of coming in second in this competition.

**Synopsis of the ‘apology video’**

In this video, Lee (clearly not a native English speaker) could be heard and seen apologizing profusely to his supporters for not bringing back the gold medal, an outcome which he knew his fellow countrymen had been expecting. He said that he had already tried his best. He also assured the viewers that he would try his best at the next world championships to be held the following year (2013) because it was also his dream to win there. Finally, he thanked his followers for their long-term support.

**Procedure**

On 24 August, 2012 (20 days after the match), the first author of this paper downloaded the 182 comments entered below the ‘interview video’ and the 453 comments below the ‘apology video’ from the YouTube website. He then arranged them for ease of data analysis in a Microsoft word Excel file. After deleting eight comments that were flagged as spam and seven indicated as ‘contents removed’, 167 comments remained for the ‘interview video’. For the ‘apology video’, 15 comments flagged as spam were deleted, leaving 438 comments. Subsequently, a total of 605 comments were analysed. Most were in English. Translations were made for comments posted in Bahasa Malaysian and Chinese. Although we might have expected that Malaysians would have made most of the postings about their countryman, Lee, some posters claimed a non-Malaysian nationality in making their comments. By and large, the comments were directed specifically at the content of the video and/or a previous posting.
**Data reduction and analysis**

Data were processed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby no formal theory was tested through the data analysis. Instead, the raw data were read and during subsequent re-readings, a process of constant comparison was applied to the reactions expressed online. This enabled them to be coded in terms of what was clearly emerging as the supporters’ reactions towards Lee’s loss. Later the comments were categorised as positive, negative, or neutral in tone. Trustworthiness (Guba, 1981) in the findings was established through clearly maintaining an audit trail (Merriam et al, 2002), reducing bias through peer debriefing on the emerging analysis, and demonstrating credibility through drawing on rich data in the write-up (Saldana, 2014).

Essentially the analysis process was as follows. Firstly, the second author, who had neither watched the London 2012 badminton nor any related interview and who was not a frequent social media user, undertook the preliminary analysis. The initial concepts were refined in discussion with the first author, who had also undertaken an independent analysis of the Excel file. Agreed concepts were given labels (codes) which were written directly on to a printout of each data set. This process of open-coding involved breaking up, or ‘fracturing’, the posted comments into salient concepts that might have been expressed in a word, a phrase, or a sentence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Separate concepts were compared with each other to note similarities or differences. It quickly became evident that a few broad categories could be applied to most of the data. Secondly, the authors drew up an analysis system of key categories, most of which had several dimensions or characteristics. Again, the
second author discussed the emergent conceptual framework with the first author. They agreed upon the structure which guided the cutting and pasting of data into a Microsoft word file, and once saturation of a category or subcategory was achieved (i.e. when no new dimensions could be identified), only the comment number was added to the analysis. After this level of analysis was complete, core categories (dominant concepts) were further refined through more clearly defining their properties and identifying interrelationships of ideas. Next, the third author, who also had experience in applied sports psychology work, acted as a debriefing peer to critique the emerging findings. The first author wrote up the analysis around these themes and a first draft was produced for other team members to independently read the manuscript and exchange comments. Agreement was generally reached on interpretation, and where this was not possible, qualifications were made in either the analysis or the discussion (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999). All the comments were categorized independently according to whether the individual comment was positive, negative, or irrelevant/neutral. The results of the refined analysis of the themes are reported in the section that follows.

**Results**

Given that the data were collected from comments posted on YouTube websites, the posters would have known that there was no certainty that Lee would ever read them. Rather, it may be that the comments were posted as candid expressions of their own thoughts related to the episode. Most of the comments were characterised by spelling mistakes, incomplete sentences, informal sentence construction, and the use of emoticons\(^3\). To a large extent, the process of commenting seemed interactive in nature, in that comments were read by many others visiting the website and were posted with the intention of communicating feelings and thoughts. The
comments predominantly surrounded the sporting episode in question, and thus we construed them as supporters’ reactions to Lee’s loss and to his interview. Processing these comments conjured up a rich picture of how supporters were responding to Lee’s loss and to his expressions of apology and disappointment.

**Data summary**

A total of 605 comments were eventually analysed. Only two commenters left remarks for both videos. Of the 167 comments analysed for the ‘interview video’, 117 posters left only one comment, Sixteen made two comments, three made three, and two separate commenters made four and five comments respectively. Fifty-one comments were made in response to a previous comment, and 116 comments were single initial posts. As for the 438 comments analysed for the ‘apology video’, 385 were made by individual posters. Fifteen made two comments each, six made three comments, and one made six.

**Interpretive summary**

It was evident that the tone of the postings was primarily positive, albeit with some posts being clearly negative although seldom neutral. Two overarching purpose-related themes emerged. The online posters seemingly had a target audience in that their comments were (a) directed at Lee, and/or (b) directed at self or other supporters at-large. These two themes could be viewed as higher order motives for posting the comments. By and large, they are not independent of each other, but are rather interwoven within the identifiable types of comments which we later identified and categorized into six distinct positive classifications and one negative. These seven identifiable types of comments are the core categories - (a) providing rationalisations, (b)
offering solace, (c) expressing emotion, (d) showing respect, (e) displaying solidarity, (f) injecting humour, and (g) being negative. Comments on both videos comprised all seven of these core categories. The first six can be generally considered as positive reactions to the episode, while the seventh core category comprised of a very small proportion of posts (less than 5%) that were negative in nature, such as those expressing disdain and anger towards a previous poster rather than either the sporting event or the posted YouTube clips.

In visualising the data structure, the comments from the seven core categories fall into one or both of the overarching themes of motives for posting. Table 1 (see Appendix) shows the outline of our findings by situating the higher themes, core categories and some example comments to provide an overview of the results. We further examined the core categories underpinning the higher order themes in detail in order to reveal possible interpretations of the episode by the supporters, which may be useful for increasing our overall understanding of supporters’ ways of coping with sports-related losses.

Core category 1: Providing rationalisations

There were comments showing various forms of rationalisation linked to different aspects of the episode. Generally, there were rationalisations for why Lee had lost, why there was no need for him to feel apologetic, and why/how the episode could be viewed differently. In essence, we can infer that the supporters who posted these comments were making sense of the episode in their own ways - akin to making attributions regarding the loss, yet including justifications. It also
appeared that comments were made with the intention of explaining to Lee, as well as to his supporters at large, alternative perspectives on the episode. These comments seemed to be associated with a respondent’s desire account for the outcome, as outlined by Smith and Lazarus (1993).

*Why Lee lost?*

Rationalisations related to why Lee lost typically made reference to luck, pressure, or injuries. The following comments, ‘… You did not get it, it is okay, it’s not meant to be yours this time round…’, and ‘both you and Lin Dan are awesome players, it is just a matter of luck i guess’ were intended to highlight to Lee that there was an element of fatalism surrounding the outcome. Another poster rationalised that there was undue pressure on Lee to win (which indirectly caused his loss), ‘Anyway, I think we're the ones who should owe you an apology, for putting so much pressure on your shoulders to win that gold. Sorry.....’. One supporter framed the outcome more positively by identifying that there had been intense pressure and injury confronting Lee but yet the result was still commendable, ‘Despite the pressure and the injured ankle, you brought us back a silver medal and that is why we are proud of you’. Another similar post read, ‘You gave us your most and also came out with an injury to bring it to an amazing and thrilling 3 set decider’. In essence, these comments were largely aimed at consoling Lee while also providing rationalisations for his loss. In addition, there were comments posted as an expression of supporters’ own rationalisation of the outcome, and clearly not directed to Lee. Two noteworthy examples were: ‘He lost because he has a very tough opponent and his leg was injured….’ and ‘He could have won cause his [sic] good but at the end it was a mistake..’, thereby making reference perhaps to the unfortunate unforced error in the final rally.
**Why there was no need for Lee to feel apologetic?**

As Lee was seen apologizing to his supporters in the videos, some responses suggested that there was no need for him to do so. One such comment produced numerical information and logical reasoning to highlight the rarity of Lee’s achievements and refute the need for his apology, ‘Dato' Lee! You shouldn't apologize. Malaysia's population isn't 10k, 100k…We have a population of 28 million. You're a 1 in 28 million talent, if you can achieve something that the rest of us can’t achieve as of now, you should be proud! Apologize only when someone else from Malaysia achieves a gold medal. You've done nothing wrong to need to apologize to us’.

**Why/how the episode could be viewed differently?**

Related to the previous comment is the rationalization of why/how the episode can be assessed differently. First, the impact of losing the Olympic gold was downplayed, such as ‘u get silver in the world, that's awesome and hard to get it. Yu need to said sorry??? We r proud becuz u make malaysia get a silver in olympics, dun think negative pls !!!!!’, and ‘Gold or no gold, it's just a stupid medal. You won our hearts, now I am very proud to be Malaysian~’, and “no need to apology --fr me you done a good job gold or silver, its just a medal.for us, MALAYSIAN we so proud of you.’, and, finally, “Skill wins medals but ATTITUDE wins heart’. Another post even touched on the universal goal of sport to downplay the value of the medal: ‘sorry for what, u did your best. Sport activity isn't designed aim to to Champion, all sport's main purpose is to entertain human life. Olympic isn't for Gold medal, same as exam isn't for marks’. In short, through the process of rationalising the outcome, the loss of the Olympic gold medal seemed to
be downplayed, as seen in one fitting comment that illustrates the acknowledgement that a meaningful silver medal had been won: ‘The silver medal has its own history now’.

Secondly, besides rationalising the outcome, there were comments about the closeness of the abilities of the two players. Supporters, who were expressing their reactions to the final outcome by appreciating the level of competition, were perhaps focusing on the match as a whole, and were in awe of the sporting event. A typical comment read ‘it will be quite some time before the world sees another Lee Chong Wei and Lin Dan...you 2 made the sport so much more interesting.’. Another likened the duel between the two players to the legendary rivalry between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu in ancient China, “WHY APOLOGY? 瑜亮之争 [translated: it’s a fight between Zhuge Liang and Zhou Yu], both equally competent personalities who were made to compete with each other in the same domain’. Another Chinese language post was, “林丹和李宗伟 英雄相惜 伟大的对手 [translated: Lin Dan and Lee Chong Wei, one hero appreciating the other hero, great opponents]’. In all, it can be said that these supporters were commenting in order to appreciate the close competition they had watched, and were expressing a mild sense of helplessness in the face of a sporting situation in which there could only be one winner even though both opponents were equally competent.

Core category 2: Offering solace

Given the nature of the two posted videos, which featured Lee’s disappointment about his loss and his profuse apologies, it is not surprising that supporters would post messages of comfort for Lee. Some were written to console him directly, characterised by the use of phrases such as ‘Cheer up! :D’, ‘Don’t be sad champion. : ’, ‘gambate ne dato lee’ (Japanese version of ‘do your
best’) and ‘come stop your crying it'll be alright’. Several other posts denied the need for Lee’s apology in addition to consoling Lee, particularly in response to the ‘apology’ video. For example, ‘stop saying sorry!!! we're proud of you already!! cheer up!!’, and ‘how many times did he apologize? No need to be sorry! We are proud of you! Skills win you medal but attitude wins hearts’. While denying the need for Lee’s apology, the posters were also clearly justifying why there was no need for an apology (such as by stating that they were proud of him). Indeed, some left comments to express their continued support for Lee: ‘We support you and no need to say sorry. Salute, congratulations and thank you’. To summarize, solace was offered through direct consolation, denying any need for apology, and expressing support.

Core category 3: Expressing emotion

The opportunity to comment on the website also allowed supporters to vent their feelings. The types of emotions ranged from sadness, fear, and love. An example that illustrates sadness reads as follows: “you know what chong wei. When you lost 19-21, you were very frustrated and upset, made me upset as well. When you cry, I also cry”. One supporter left the following comment, expressing sadness with great emotion: “I cry for him : ’(we love u LCW~”, while another highlighted crying differently by making actual reference to tears: “*tears rolling down* You are still our HERO, DLCW! We always support you ;)” Another post which also expressed sadness about the loss was “It's a heart-breaking scene that seeing you crying after the match,…”. It appears that seeing Lee cry also elicited emotions from the supporters, as this comment suggests “It's so sad to see him cry. Da”. Thus, we can infer that there are expressions
of sadness behind these posts and individuals are using the platform to express personal emotional responses.

There were also several cases of explicit expressions of love for Lee among the comments. Examples are as follows: “awwwwww... we love you LEE CHONG WEI!”, “…Keep going! You have all of our support and love!!! Don't be hard on yourself at all. Much love, L”, “…We love you and will always do”, “I Love You DLCW!”, “I love you LEE CHONG WEI :)”, and “I LOVE YOU LEE CHONG WEI!!!!!!!!!!!”. Common to all these comments was the use of the word ‘love’. The capitalisation of parts of the comments suggests that fans were expressing their feelings of love very strongly, as capitalisation denotes shouting in the cyberspace convention.

**Core category 4: Showing respect**

There were many comments that referred to respecting and acknowledging Lee and his achievements. Some were directed at him, such as “Don't be sorry! You've already done very well! We were so proud to see so much perseverance in the competition even though your injury has not fully recovered”. Another way of expressing respect was to focus on the quality of play during the match, as illustrated in the following quotes: “the final was the greatest show by far. u did ur best and all ur hard works really inspires us to make our dreams more possible. malaysia boleh [translated: Malaysians can do it].”; and “LCW has saved the face long time before the last point was played. This finale was godlike. I believe a lot of people will remember it for all the little perfections, the high quality gameplay, the emotions both players went through. I will remember it for the fight, not the outcome.”. The emphasis placed on remembering the athletes’
contest rather than the match outcome is especially noteworthy, suggesting a shift of the supporter’s perspective away from the agonising loss itself to something positive as a way of coping with the loss.

There were other posters who focused on the inspiration that could be taken from the episode. For example, a quote in Chinese highlighted the inspiration that Lee had given to future generations, making specific reference to the Olympic spirit:

... You let our children saw and understood what is meant by pursuit of success, perseverance, honour in defeat, and Olympic spirit. Do not weep, Datuk Lee, your effort epitomizes the London Olympics slogan – Inspire a Generation, and the true meaning of the Olympics, no regrets.

Another statement emphasised national inspiration:

DLCW, you definitely no need to apologize. You are the one who brings Malaysians hope. We dare to dream of the Olympic Gold Medal because of you. Even the dream had not been achieved, you are the one who brings the HOPE!! You are the one who really makes One Malaysia. You are the one who really makes us believe that we Boleh (translated: ‘can’). You definitely is the hero of Malaysia. I am so proud of you and thank you for bringing us hope, dream and such a great game!

Another person, presumably a minor, wrote “You did your best Lee :) Im happy that you tried your best! Note: Im just 12 and when I grow up, I will compete in Olympics and win gold for Lee Chong Wei!” Collectively, these were expressions of respect for Lee’s inspirational example. Focusing on the rousing aspects of the episode may have served to alleviate the agony
of losing, and could well be considered as a natural process which people undertake to share and celebrate inspiration.

Core category 5: Displaying solidarity

As the Olympic Games are a platform for international competition, it is not surprising that Malaysian supporters were explicit in revealing a sense of national pride in solidarity with Lee’s achievements. An example was, “Dato Lee Chong Wei, no matter what we malaysians love you very much! keep your head up high because you make your people so proud of you <3”. Interestingly, reasons for feeling proud about Lee were not restricted his having played well or having won a silver medal. One comment suggested that the overall display of exemplary character was what had made the supporters proud, “You make us proud to be Malaysians! Might not have got the gold but you've got our hearts. A lesson in dignity and humility. Thank you. We stand tall.”

It is also worth mentioning that Lee’s effort also attracted a response from the international community which also expressed solidarity as several comments, presumably written by non-Malaysians, were posted. A Filipino supporter wrote: “dont cry lee it makes us sad... You guys made badminton this famous uh peter gade, taufik hidayat, lee chong wei, lin dan. You four are a legend singles player here in the philippines so dont be sad you have gained something that even a gold medal couldnt give... You have gained our respect....”. Supporters from neighbouring Singapore also commented, for example, “I am a Singapore. He deserves a Hero's welcome when he goes back. :) Respect.”, and “nah, even singaporeans are proud of you”.
Core category 6: Injecting humour

There were some comments that were deemed to be injections of humour. For example, Lee’s English-speaking language skills and voice were commented on respectively as follows: “Haha, didn't know his English is like that, nonetheless still a Malaysian gift!”, and “Aww, his voice is so adorable.”. Another comment that was irrelevant to the match itself was, “Lee Chongwei should marry Lin Dan. They are the best couple”. In addition, there were also comments that were peppered with light sarcasm in addition to being funny. For example, “we dont want ur sorry , we want ur money only ~ AHAHAHAHAHAHA ~”, perhaps making the point that Lee would still be financially rewarded by the Malaysian government and sponsors despite the loss. Another comment made reference to the free ice cream treats a company would offer to the Malaysian fans if Lee won, “Got Baskin Robins FREE? even through [sic] u never win”.

By and large, these comments can still be regarded as harmless while exuding some humour on the commenters’ part. In short, supporters were arguably using the platform to show others they had different view of the episode by injecting humour into the ongoing conversation on the social media platform.

Core category 7: Being negative

In addition to the largely supportive comments, there were some postings from both videos that were somewhat derogatory as they appeared to ridicule Lee and his loss. For example, “u failed”, “you have no match with lin dan.accept it”, “..only 1 silver for malaysia”, “LEE Chong Wei give UP....”, “Win a silver medal but awarded 500 thousand ringgit..a bit too much, should have used the money to train more good players.” and “silver medal = 2nd best”. However, considering that
the proportion of negative comments that were directed at Lee was relatively small, we can conclude that supporters and fans were largely supportive. Having said that, there were other types of negative statements arising from unfriendly exchanges between a small numbers of commenters on irrelevant issues ranging from politics to Lee’s English, but again, they were in the minority and not representative of the community’s general behaviour.

Discussion

Lee’s loss at the London Olympics was clearly a significant event that prompted emotions of loss and disappointment among his supporters. As expected, the online comments and reactions posted by his supporters in relation to the two YouTube videos provided rich data for us to understand how they were trying to make sense of the significant loss. Regardless of whether they were directed at Lee or otherwise, we can draw several inferences from the content analysis of the comments, and offer some suggestions to further develop our understanding of supporters’ coping of sports losses.

Supporters’ reactions and coping

We found six core categories that can be largely considered to be positive, namely (a) providing rationalisation, (b) offering solace, (c) expressing emotions, (d) showing respect, (e) displaying solidarity, and (f) injecting humour. Since fewer than 5% of comments could be deemed to be ‘negative’, we focus our discussion on the categories that were construed as positive in this study.
Of all the categories, comments serving to provide rationalisations suggest evidence of secondary appraisals – the evaluation of the controllability of the stressor and personal resources and options (see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In contrast with the largely automatic primary appraisals, secondary appraisals usually involve conscious reasoning, conceptual processing and intentional thoughts (Lazarus, 1991). To this end, the questioning of why the episode happened and evaluation of alternative actions or perspectives facilitates coping. Similar to findings by Wann and Schrader (2000), the current results showed that some sports fans were inclined to attribute the loss to external factors such as injury, bad luck, and a strong opponent. When Lee’s supporters offered rationalisations for his loss, this can also be seen as a form of meaning-making on the supporters’ part as they attempted to cope with the loss (e.g., Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Park, Riley, & Snyder, 2012). Furthermore, there were comments which featured relatively complex arguments, possibly signifying that the commenters had thought deeply about the episode. Understandably, some deep thinking could be important for one to reframe the meaning of the loss, such as leading one to conclude that the silver medal won or the episode itself were meaningful. Supporters who followed this line of secondary appraisal may have felt less personally affected by the loss.

Besides providing rationalisations, there was a prevalence of comments associated with offering solace, showing respect, and displaying solidarity. We can summarise the essence of supporters’ comments under these headings with this fabricated comment: Don’t be sad and don’t say sorry. We are proud of you and we support you. Clearly, such a comment is comforting and supportive, and considerably prosocial in the given context. Such prosocial behaviour may be a result of the general acceptance of collectivism among Lee’s presumably predominantly Asian supporters.
Since Asian cultures place great value on the harmony of the community (Kwan, 2000; Wong & Wong, 2006), commenting in such a way as to offer solace, respect, and display solidarity could be identified as socially desirable behaviour that serves to maintain harmony and cohesion during difficult periods, such as when experiencing a major sport loss. In this regard, perceiving and contributing to group cohesion and social harmony may help one another to deal better with stress stemming from sport losses (Yeh, Arora, & Wu, 2006). However, these comments may also have been the result of the very interactive nature of social media, and may have had little to do with cultural collectivism, since past studies have shown that the formation of online communities in general creates a sense of camaraderie serving to alleviate people’s sense of loss (e.g. Feigelman, Gorman, Beal, & Jordan, 2008; Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). Nevertheless, the presence of such comments, whether or not associated with cultural collectivism, suggests that the display of prosocial behaviours can be linked to some extent to coping behaviours. In this regard, the ease of engaging in social media communication may have enhanced supporters’ perceptions of emotional-focused coping resources during the secondary appraisal stage when partaking in offering solace, showing respect, and displaying solidarity, and reading about them more readily online.

Next, the expression of emotions by supporters may also be considered as a form of coping behaviour. The active processing and expressing of emotions as a coping strategy has long been advocated by clinicians (e.g. Horowitz, 1976), and its psychological benefits had been supported in some studies (e.g. Staton et al., 2000). A possible explanation for the effectiveness of emotionally expressive coping is that repeated expression may help decrease negative emotions and physiological arousal (due to habituation), leading one to conclude that negative emotions do
diminish and the situation can be reappraised as less dire (Staton et al, 2000). For example, supporters who expressed that they felt like crying upon seeing Lee lose could potentially have felt better after commenting. There were several who left declaration of love and support for Lee; such expressions can also be thought of as a form of coping as they had focused on the positives and overtly expressed these. Since the Internet has become a space for people to express loss-related grief in a more immediate fashion (Brubaker, Hayes, & Dourish, 2013), there is scope for sport psychologists to further examine the possibility of coping through expressing one’s emotions online after sport-related losses. Here, the opportunity to express freely could lead one to appraise one’s emotional-focused coping more favourably.

Finally, we also noted that some supporters were attempting to inject humour into the situation. We identified using humour as a possible coping strategy used by some supporters. Humour has long been considered as a useful and healthy coping strategy because it is a powerful antidote to negative emotions (Vaillant, 2000). In the current context, the posting of humorous comments probably served to distract from the agony of Lee’s loss, and is in line with the suggestion that humour produces the cognitive-affective shift as the cognitive appraisal of stress was undertaken (Abel, 2002). Indeed, the prevalence of social media may have offered the setting for a person to inject humour more freely into this situation, as it allows for leaving anonymous comments that are funny. By reading about others’ light-hearted comments and partaking in the social media communication, one’s appraisal of emotional-focused coping potentials may be favourably altered.
To summarise, in this exploratory study of supporters’ reactions and coping after Lee’s loss, we discovered other categories of reactions besides those that are clearly aimed at accounting for the outcome. The interactivity of social media seems to predispose some unique or “new” coping strategies such as offering solace, expressing emotions, showing respect, displaying solidarity and injecting humour. As this is an exploratory study, readers must be mindful of the potential issues inherent in a study that limits its generalisability, particularly related to the uniqueness of the episode and data. The episode in question, a narrow loss by Lee in the Olympics, although intensely experienced by some supporters might not be perceived similarly by those experiencing losses in a separate context. As such, the categories derived from the comments may not be representative of coping behaviour in general. Those who chose to post comments could have been from a unique group of social media users who tend to be more expressive, and more socially collectivist. Furthermore, while some of these comments may well be considered as typical supporters’ behaviour toward losses, they are not necessary so overt in the world outside of the virtual space (Branthwaite & Patterson, 2011).

In conclusion, this exploratory study suggests that most comments from the supporters were generally positive despite the disappointment at Lee’s loss. This is a study with strong ecological validity as it was based on an actual episode arising from the London Olympic finals, and should offer some fresh perspectives on how loss is psychologically experienced in a real world situation (Mathison, 1988). More importantly, it shows that supporters could come together within the confines of social media to find the ‘silver lining in the silver medal’ that Lee had earned them. The lessons learned from understanding this episode of loss through systematic inquiry should hopefully be beneficial for the development of sport psychology.
References

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Notes

1 We made the assumption that those who left comments are Lee’s supporters even though some may just be fans who had merely followed the game and not his supporter per se. In this paper, we refer to them as supporters.

2 Lee Chong Wei was given a Malaysian honorary title Datuk for winning the silver medal in the Beijing Games, as such he is addressed as Datuk Lee Chong Wei by the Malaysian. Throughout the manuscript, the terms DLCW, Dato, Datuk, and LCW were referring to Lee.

3 We presented the comments in its original form in the results section to retain the tone of expression. Although there are spelling mistakes and incomplete sentences, they are intelligible.
Appendix
Table 1

Overall Outline of the Results and Some Example Comments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core categories</th>
<th>Directed to Lee</th>
<th>Higher order themes</th>
<th>Directed to self or other supporters at-large</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Providing rationalisations</td>
<td><em>Anyway, I think we're the one who should owe you an apology, for putting so much pressure on your shoulder to win that gold. Sorry..... :'(</em></td>
<td><em>He lost because he has a very tough opponent and his leg was injured....</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Offering solace</td>
<td><em>Don’t be sad champion.. :/</em></td>
<td><em>Nil</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Expressing emotion</td>
<td><em>you know what chong wei. When you lost 19-21, you were very frustrated and upset, made me upset as well. When you cry, I also cry.</em></td>
<td><em>OMG I don't even dare to watch :'(</em>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Showing respect</td>
<td><em>Don’t be sorry! You've already done very well! We were so proud to see so much perseverance in the competition even though your injury has not fully recovered.</em></td>
<td><em>LCW has saved the face long time before the last point was played. This finale was godlike. I beleive a lot of people will remember it for all the little perfections, the high quality gameplay, the emotions both players went through. I will remember it for the fight, not the outcome.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Displaying solidarity</td>
<td><em>Dato Lee Chong Wei, no matter what we malaysians love you very much! keep your head up high because you make your people so proud of you &lt;3</em></td>
<td><em>dont cry lee it makes us sad... You guys made badminton this famous uh peter gade, taufik hidayat, lee chong wei, lin dan. You four are a legend singles player here in the philippines so dont be sad you have gained something that even a gold medal couldnt give... You have gained our respect....</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Injecting humour</td>
<td><em>we dont want ur sorry , we want ur money only ~ AHAHAHAHAHAHA ~</em></td>
<td><em>Hey, u guys realized something or not? Chong Wei never throw away his jersey like Lin Dan whenever he wins any games.. But Lin Dan, must open &amp; throw jersey every time he wins against LCW, although he won during All England '12 bcoz our Datuk had shoulder pain maa..</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Being negative</td>
<td><em>you have no match with lin dan.accept it</em></td>
<td><em>Win a silver medal but awarded 500 thousand ringgit..a bit too much,should have used the money to train more good players.</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>