Racism in Social Media: Examining Athlete-Fan Interactions on Twitter

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In today’s society, social media constitutes an indispensable platform to find information, exchange opinions, and interact with others. In the area of sport, the pervasiveness of social media has facilitated and increased direct communication between athletes and the general public. The analysis of these interactions generated by technology have allowed for new insights in fan/athlete interaction. For example, Sanderson (2013) explored how rookie athletes in professional sports use Twitter, and noted more assertive expression of identity. Kim, Liu, and Chan (2017) concluded that media use has a positive influence on college athletes’ psychological wellbeing. Finally, a study on athlete and fan interaction via Twitter (Browning & Sanderson, 2012) identified twitter as a beneficial communicative tool, but also emphasized the need for athletic departments to provide athletes with strategies to cope with critical tweets.

In this study, we will extend the evaluation of interaction between fans and college athletes by taking an in-depth look at the prevalence of racism within these fan/college athlete interactions on social media. While previous research has examined reactionary behaviors based on social identity theory and impression management theory (Mudrick, Miller, & Atkin, 2016), as well as the emotional impact on athletes responding to critical tweets (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), this study will be guided by communication privacy management theory. Specifically, the authors will examine the negative interactions between players and fans with a focus on attacks based on race and ethnicity in a setting where the players are largely African-American and the fan base is overwhelming Caucasian.

Review of Literature
Communication Privacy Management Theory (CPM) will be implemented as the framework for this study. CPM theory, developed by Petronio (1991), has made significant contributions to formulate privacy boundaries that exist in communication between individuals. The five tenets of CPM theory help explain how privacy boundaries can assist individuals in regulating what information becomes public and what information should stay private. In essence, the first two tenets of CPM theory outline personal and private information and how this information provides a sense of ownership, allowing individual regulation of that information. Privacy rules and privacy boundaries are introduced in the third and fourth tenets. Finally, the fifth tenet of CPM theory explains that when shared boundaries are present, boundary coordination is utilized for communication (Petronio, 1991). Sanderson, Snyder, Hull, and Gramlich (2014) utilized CPM theory to analyze NCAA Division I athletic departments’ social media policies. The study found that issues of over-monitoring and ownership of content were present with the application of these policies. In addition, Thompson, Petronio, and Braithwaite (2012) conducted a study framed by CPM theory to determine how academic advisors in college athletics are faced with privacy management dilemmas and must keep information regarding student athletes private. This study determined that two main criteria, motivations and risk-benefit ratios, were most utilized in developing privacy rules for academic advisors in athletics.

In addition, a significant amount of research has been done on fan/athlete interaction via social media. Pegoraro (2010) conducted a study to determine which social media platform athletes utilize most frequently to communicate with fans. The authors’ findings suggested that Twitter is the most utilized platform for athletes to communicate with fans and talk about their personal lives. Another examination conducted by Browning and Sanderson (2012) analyzed how student-athletes utilize Twitter to communicate and examined how student-athletes react to critical tweets from fans. Results indicated that Twitter was utilized by student-athletes for three main reasons: (1) to keep in contact, (2) communicate with followers, (3) and access information. At the same time, because of the ease of interaction with fans, it was determined that student-athletes are also susceptible to personal attacks via Twitter, and department policies should be implemented to help college athletes cope with these negative interactions.
The sport-specific publications, along with the CPM framework, provide a platform for the current examination, in which a content analysis highlighting elements of racism in social media interactions from fans will be combined with interviews of those who received the tweets. This research is especially relevant as many happenings in the last couple of years have revolved around athletes and racism. In 2015, members of the Missouri football team united in protest of campus racism, demanding the resignation of the institution’s president (Epstein & Kisska-Schulze, 2016). Though the protest was backed by coaches and the athletic department, the athletes did receive backlash on social media, particularly demands for the student athletes participating in the protest to lose their scholarships (Tracy & Southall, 2015). In addition, in 2016, Nebraska football player Michael Rose-Ivey and two teammates kneeled during the national anthem in protest of racial injustice in the United States. The three athletes received extensive backlash on social media from fans. In one instance, a fan even expressed to Rose-Ivey that he should “be hung before the anthem” (Hinog, 2016).

Methods and Anticipated Implications
The social media, specifically Twitter, interactions of players in a highly successful and public college basketball team will be tracked for one season. A content analysis of the tweets and direct messages received will be performed. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with each player will be conducted to examine the impact the social media activity has on their well-being, performance, and experience as an amateur student-athlete.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be helpful for administrators and student-athletes as well as fans who engage in interaction with student-athletes. If the results indicate that racism is indeed present within fan/college athlete interaction on social media, administrators can use the results to adapt policies and procedures guiding student-athletes and their use of social media. Further, this will update the interesting findings from Browning and Sanderson (2012) in a time when the use of social media by college athletes and fans has grown and evolved in an increasingly volatile political environment where discussions of open racism are more prevalent.