A Critical Race Analysis of Cyber Racism in a Online Brand Community: A Case of TexAgs.com

Kristi Oshiro, Texas A&M University
Anthony Weems, Texas A&M University
John Singer (Advisor), Texas A&M University

Socio-Cultural - Other (Online Community) Saturday, June 1, 2019
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 1:55 PM
Abstract 2019-399 Room: Napoleon D1

In her 2005 Zeigler lecture, Frisby highlighted the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of sport and called for more critical research to address the bad and ugly sides of sport. In this study we answer Frisby’s (2005) call by drawing from critical race theory (CRT)—a powerful epistemological and methodological framework for conducting race-based emancipatory research (Singer, 2005)—to interrogate cyber racism against black male athletes in the TexAgs.com online brand community (OBC). TexAgs is an independently owned new media company focused on the fandom of Texas A&M University (TAMU) athletics (Bennett, 2017). Cyber racism has been described as, “the new horizons the internet and digital media have opened for expression of whiteness across national boundaries” (Daniels, 2009, p. 4). While scholars have investigated OBCs primarily from a marketing perspective, specifically pointing out the good (Bennett, 2017, Watts, 2008), there is a dearth of scholarship that has examined the bad and the ugly components of OBCs. However, sociologists have pointed to various forms of cyber racism that manifest within online spaces (Cleland, 2014, Gill, 2016). In this study, we extend this work by focusing on how the TexAgs community constructed their own form of cyber racism in relation to four former TAMU football athletes who engaged in some form of athlete activism (e.g., kneeling during national anthem) in this fourth wave of athlete activism (Edwards, 2016).

The primary purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory collective case study (Stake, 2005) of fan-generated discourse about Michael Bennett, Mike Evans, Myles Garrett, and Von Miller. In line with Patton’s (2002) purposeful criterion sampling, these particular athletes were selected because each of them were high profile athletes at TAMU and have had success as starters in the NFL. We utilized CRT and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as methodological tools to examine and uncover the racially charged language directed toward these athletes as CDA is seen as an appropriate analysis of discourses and texts (Fairclough, 2013; Liu & Guo, 2016). We uncovered three interrelated themes: 1) Good Aggie vs. Bad Aggie dichotomy, 2) Dumb/misguided, and 3) Thug. In line with the counter-narrative/storytelling tenet of CRT, we presented Michael Bennett’s (2018) personal narrative from his book, to directly counter the racialized discourse about his peers and him on TexAgs. Bennett’s counter-narrative was chosen primarily because the majority of users’ racialized language in this online forum was directed toward him. Centralizing counter-narratives, specifically those of athlete activists in contemporary times can create meaningful implications and contributions to the sport management literature in terms of both research and praxis. By supporting and valuing these individuals as holistic beings and listening to their stories we can begin to more effectively address the bad and the ugly that has remained understudied in the field. As suggested by Michael Bennett (2018), sport organizations are uniquely positioned to communicate the human side of athletes as opposed to the limited conceptualization of athletes as brands. These implications will be further elucidated in the presentation.