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## NCAA Athletes and Facebook

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### ABSTRACT

The use of Facebook and other social networks by a majority of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes has come under intense scrutiny from college officials in recent months. The current level of monitoring by athletic departments ranges from mere advisories as to what athletes should post, to a complete ban on the use of any social networks (Brady & Libit, 2007). The findings of this study of 522 NCAA athletes representing Division I, II, and III indicate that NCAA II athletes project the least positive image on their Facebooks. Female athletes in general reported projecting a better image, while male athletes expressed the greatest resistance to being monitored.

### NCAA ATHLETES AND FACEBOOK

The use of Facebook and other social networks, accessed regularly by the majority of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) athletes has come under intense scrutiny from college officials in recent months. The scrutiny has been prompted by athletic department administrators and coaches as they have become increasingly concerned about both the university image projected on Facebook and the well-being of the student-athlete. The current level of monitoring by athletic departments ranges from advisories as to what athletes should post, such as the ultimatums on type of use issued by the University of Kentucky and Florida State University, to a complete ban on the use of Facebook by athletes, as seen at Loyola University (Brady & Libit, 2007). For purposes of this article, it should be noted that the social network Facebook is a word frequently used by university administrators and athletic directors as an all-encompassing term that describes not only Facebook, but MySpace and other forums such as SportsGist.com, MyStack.com, and Badjocks.com. Such will be the case in this paper, as Facebook is the most prevalent social network utilized by college students today.

The focus of this article is to address the image and monitoring concerns associated with Facebook usage among college athletes. The secondary issue examined is the host institution's concern over the image projected on the athlete's social network accounts. Additionally, the battle between the university monitoring of student-athletes' Facebook accounts and First Amendment privileges related to freedom of speech and expression will be addressed.

When a student creates a Facebook profile, he or she has the freedom to share uncensored photos and personal information with friends and other network members among the 40 million users (Lemeul, 2006). Facebook has evolved from a single-university communication tool into a public domain, accessible to anyone with a Facebook account. Facebook has certainly become a vehicle for self-expression and communication among students.

The NCAA has not taken a formal stand on how much a university can monitor or restrict accounts. Instead, the NCAA has left it up to the host institution to determine its own Facebook policies at this time. Universities have traditionally supported the 1972 Supreme Court ruling in *Healy v. James* wherein the Court found that state colleges and universities are not enclaves immune from the sweep of the First Amendment (Lukianoff & Creely, 2007). However, the recent trend is for universities to make specific policy statements related to expression on Facebook. The growing trend in athletic departments, as well, is to monitor the social network accounts of athletes. For example, Roper (2007) noted that the entire Catholic University lacrosse team was suspended from school after posting hazing photographs of new athletes on their personal Facebook accounts. Four female soccer players at San Diego State University were penalized for alcohol- and partying-related pictures they posted (Schrotenboer, 2006). Two athletes at the University of Colorado were issued tickets for harassment by the campus police for racially offensive messages they posted (Brady & Libit, 2006). In May of 2006, two athletes were dismissed from the Louisiana State University swim team for posting degrading comments about the swim coaches (Brady & Libit, 2006). Recent photos on Badjocks.com resulted in an increased scrutiny of athletes from Elon University and Northwestern University, as these postings projected an embarrassing image for the respective universities (Anderson, 2007). Laing Kennedy, the athletic director at Kent State University, made headlines when he forbade

student-athletes there from using Facebook (Read & Young, 2006). Mr. Kennedy has recently revised his statement and simply requires all Kent State University athletes to keep their profiles private (Read & Young, 2006). Even though athletes seem to be at risk, Schrottenboer (2006) noted that coaches may be the ones who have even more to lose, as damaging pictures and statements on Facebook can hurt recruiting, team morale, and image.

Excessive access to information can put the athlete at risk by giving gamblers personal information about the injuries of marquee players, who are the most likely to be approached with point-shaving opportunities. There is also concern that a Facebook "friend" may turn out to be a professional gambler or agent and thus compromise an athlete's eligibility by his or her affiliation with that person (Strickland, 2006). Agents or bookies may pose as a friend on a social networking site and solicit illegal contact with a student. Some students use Facebook as an alternative to a paper diary. However, these students need to be aware that any material posted on Facebook may be retained by Google's online cache, even after the material is deleted, according to Tracy Mitrano, director of information-technology policy at Cornell University (Read & Young, 2006). A cache allows material to be viewed through a search engine, even after deletion from sites such as Facebook (Mitrano, 2006). According to Mitrano, this online cache proved deadly for one student who applied for a full-time position after graduation. Even with experience and a high grade point average, the applicant was refused employment when the employer found an inappropriate remark made by the applicant in an on-line cache. Not only can students impair themselves professionally with questionable pictures, but they can also incite legal action with libelous comments about professors or fellow classmates (Mitrano, 2006).

Ironically, at the same time many athletic departments are restricting the use of social networks, some tout the benefits; some claim that these networks may reduce the new-roommate anxiety experienced by incoming freshmen, open doors for conversation with their intended roommates even before arriving to campus, and aid in the completion of academic assignments (Farrell, 2006). Facebook can also aid students in meeting other people who share the same interests or dormitory. With the instant opening of an account, Facebook lists all of the people in a network who have a common interest. Students can also specify the networks to which they belong and even join networks based on characteristics such as metropolitan location or where they graduated from high school (Zuckerberg, 2006). Barbara Walker, senior associate athletic director at Wake Forest University, touted the positive attributes of Facebook when used innocently and suggested that administrators be careful about restrictive policies (Dougherty, 2007).

Politicians have even created accounts on social networking sites such as Facebook to spark interest among college-age voters (Vascellaro, 2006). This can be advantageous if the politician garners overwhelming support and positive comments from young voters. However, the political strategy of creating a Facebook profile can have the same negative consequences as for an athlete, when negative comments are posted on the profile of a politician.

While there are numerous benefits to creating a Facebook profile, there are concerns, not only about NCAA athletes but about the general student body, as well as in regard to projecting negative images (Read & Young, 2006). According to Pablo Malavenda, associate dean of students at Purdue University at West Lafayette, some students have little or no concern about the image they project to the public through Facebook (Read & Young, 2006). Malavenda noted that students tend to embellish profiles with exaggerated pictures of rebellion that most commonly involve underage alcohol consumption. Facebook furthermore has been used to taunt and physically threaten opponents in high school sports (Dougherty, 2007).

While student-athletes are to be treated as general college students, they are frequently subject to additional behavioral guidelines as a condition for scholarship renewal. These guidelines are presented in the form of a code of conduct, which usually requires that athletes represent the university in a positive manner. Ian McCaw, the director of athletics at Baylor University, issued a formal memo to all student-athletes and student trainers that explained that material which other students often post on Facebook pages may be inappropriate for student-athletes' pages (Brady & Libit, 2006). Wake Forest's athletic department instructs athletes that no comments or pictures administrators deem inappropriate may be used on Facebook (Dougherty, 2007). Furthermore, Kermit L. Hall, president at the University of Albany in New York, says that students give up some freedom and become subject to regulations when they join an athletic team.

There is concern about the impact that social networking sites might have on grade point averages. One UCLA student realized that he was spending too much time on Facebook when his grade point average dropped a point and a half (Reed & Riley, 2005). One concerned parent of a high school student noticed that his daughter's involvement with Facebook made two hours' worth of academic work take eight hours to complete (Duffy & August, 2006). This is likely due to the distraction that social networking sites create. Student-athletes

already must be more effective time managers than the average student. The student-athlete cannot afford to spend eight hours on a two-hour assignment because of time lost to Facebook. Logistically speaking, student-athletes have little time in their schedules for the abyss of Facebook, without incurring academic consequences.

Student-athletes are in a different situation than typical students, as they are much more visible in the public domain representing the university. Athletic departments, at their core, operate like businesses (Strickland, 2006). Athletes are the products that create the funds for the businesses. Coaches are always trying to market the athletic department and the university to prospective recruits and donors. Prospective recruits can often find mostly uncensored information about their future teammates on Facebook. Pablo Malavenda, the associate dean of students at Purdue, knows of several instances when athletes backed out of oral commitments because of what their future teammates had posted on Facebook (Read & Young, 2006). This could have devastating consequences for athletic programs. When recruiting high school athletes, college coaches spend time, energy, and money in order to sell the program to the athlete. Prospective athletes may become dissatisfied with a program after seeing Facebook pictures of their future teammates engaging in drinking, drug use, or other undesirable activities. Even though the NCAA has not developed specific policies for athletes about Facebook and other social networking sites, such sites are becoming an area of concern; the issue was on the agenda at an August 2006 NCAA meeting.

While the use of social networking sites has garnered significant media attention, research documenting student usage and image projected is sparse. The research into the motivations for social network usage by students comprises a study conducted by Michigan State University (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). This study gathered data on Facebook usage through the administering of a survey to the entire student body (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). One key finding from this study was that the amount of time spent on the Internet did not differ between those who were not members of Facebook versus those who were members (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). Grade point averages also did not differ significantly between Facebook members and non-members (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006). While these results are revealing, one must remember that they are only representative of the Michigan State University student body, not of all college students. Additional research is needed on the habits of college students using social networking sites. Because of the high-visibility situations facing NCAA student-athletes, their use of social networking sites needs extensive study. As athletic departments increasingly monitor their athletes' accounts, knowledge of usage, attitudes, and motives is of growing importance.

The research questions pursued in the present study were related to examining frequency of use, image projected, and attitude toward being monitored on Facebook, by gender and NCAA classification. The study examined NCAA athletes' (a) responses related to perceived personal image projected; (b) responses related to the athletic department image projected by individual student-athletes on Facebook; and (c) desired level of athletic department monitoring of social network accounts. The problem of this study was to generate an updated, cross-sectional view of athletes' stances on issues of image and responsibility related to social networks.

#### METHODOLOGY

This study examined college athletes' usage of and attitudes toward Facebook. To obtain a representative sample of NCAA student-athletes, the subject pool was selected from six different NCAA Division I, II, and III universities.

The data was collected from athletes at each of the schools, with assurance of anonymity to the participants. Athletes completed the survey privately. Athletes were told that the word Facebook should be taken to mean all social networks including MySpace and Badjocks.com. The total number of subjects responding was 522. This consisted of 148 NCAA Division I athletes representing the Southeastern Conference, 146 NCAA Division II athletes from the Gulf South Conference and the Northern Sun Intercollegiate Athletic Conference, and 126 NCAA Division III athletes from the Southern Independent Athletic Conference. There were 308 male and 214 female respondents.

The data collected were analyzed using a Kruskal-Wallis test (Green & Salkind, 2003) to determine if the population mean responses differed based on gender or categorization as NCAA I, II, or III level. The respondents were asked to answer written survey questions about (a) their personal image projected on Facebook, (b) the image of their athletic department based on their personal Facebook account, and (c) the level of athletic department monitoring of Facebook they desired. The 0.05 level of confidence was set as the significance level.

The questionnaire utilized for this study was modeled after the Carnegie Mellon University survey of freshmen reported in 2006 (Tabreez & Pashley). Slight adaptations of the questionnaire were made to more appropriately reflect the present athlete-dominated subject pool.

RESULTS

Looking at the responses of the male NCAA athletes as contrasted to the female NCAA athletes, there was a significant difference (at the 0.05 level of confidence) for all items examined in this study, when using the Kruskal-Wallis test of significance. As seen in Table 1, these items included athlete's perception of personal image projected on Facebook accounts, athlete's athletic department image as influenced by personal Facebook accounts, and athlete's recommended level of athletic department monitoring.

Table 1

NCAA Athletes Facebook Image and Recommended Level of Monitoring (N=522)

Gender difference NCAA I, II, III

Asymp. Sig.  $\chi^2$  Asymp. Sig.  $\chi^2$

Personal image projected .032 4.612\* .045 6.221\*

Athletic department image .018 5.618\* .479 1.472

Monitoring level recommended .022 5.281\* .133 4.036

Kruskal-Wallis test  $p^* < .05$ .

Also presented in Table 1, NCAA classification was associated with significant differences in athlete's personal image presented on Facebook. No significant difference was observed, however, in responses related to athletic department image projected or recommended level of Facebook monitoring, when examined by NCAA classification.

Table 2

NCAA Athletes Self-Report of Personal Image on Facebook (N=522)

very positive positive neutral negative very negative

Female athletes 26.3% 58.8% 14.9% 0.9% 0.0%

Male athletes 22.3% 42.7% 30.1% 3.9% 1.0%

NCAA I athletes 14.9% 48.9% 34.0% 0.0% 0.0%

NCAA II athletes 23.8% 48.4% 23.8% 3.2% 0.8%

NCAA III athletes 38.5% 42.3% 11.5% 7.7% 0.0%

female n=214, male n=308, NCAA I n=148, NCAA II n=146, NCAA III n=126

When examining aspects of personal image presented on Facebook, some significant differences were found. As Table 2 shows, 85.1% of the female athletes, as contrasted to 65% of the male athletes, leaned toward a positive image projection on Facebook. No female athletes appraised their accounts as projecting a very negative image. Also, 74.6% of the female athletes reported that their accounts projected a positive athletic department image, as contrasted to 56.1% of male athletes (Table 3). The male athletes were more likely than the female athletes to recommend "definitely" no athletic department monitoring, or monitoring on a limited basis. Additionally, as seen in Table 4, 66.8% of the male athletes recommended no monitoring or limited monitoring, as contrasted to 58.3% of female athletes.

Table 3

NCAA Athletes Self-Report of Athletic Department Image on Facebook (N=522)

very positive positive neutral negative very negative

Female athletes 24.1% 50.5% 24.5% 0.0% 0.9%

Male athletes 16.2% 42.9% 37.5% 2.9% 0.5%

NCAA I athletes 21.7% 30.4% 45.7% 0.0% 2.2%

NCAA II athletes 17.8% 48.2% 31.2% 2.4% 0.4%

NCAA III athletes 24.0% 48.0% 28.0% 0.0% 0.0%

Table 4

NCAA Athletes Recommended Level of Facebook Monitoring by Athletic Department (N=522)

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	strongly limited	monitor	monitor	unsure	monitor	not monitor
Female athletes	1.8%	19.5%	19.5%	38.1%	21.2%	
Male athletes	4.4%	9.8%	19.0%	30.7%	36.1%	
NCAA I athletes	4.3%	13.0%	34.8%	26.1%	21.7%	
NCAA II athletes	3.2%	14.1%	17.7%	31.9%	33.1%	
NCAA III athletes	3.8%	3.8%	7.7%	57.7%	26.9%	

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female n=214, male n=308, NCAA I n=148, NCAA II n=146, NCAA III n=126

Among NCAA Division I athletes, no respondents indicated a perception of any negative image of their personal accounts, whereas NCAA Division II and III respondents did report negative images, at rates of 4% and 7.7%, respectively. NCAA Division I athletes were most likely to say their accounts projected a neutral image, with 34.0% choosing this response. Also, as noted in Table 2, the NCAA Division III athletes had the highest percentage for positive personal image, 80.8%. They were followed by the NCAA Division II athletes, with 72.1%, and NCAA Division I athletes, with 63.8%.

DISCUSSION

The first Harvard University Facebook, distributed annually, was initially a simple, pictorial directory of all incoming freshmen. Along with pictures, the Harvard Facebook also included the majors and hometowns of freshman students. In 2005, Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg decided to launch an online version of the Facebook (Hoover's, 2006). It started as a simple communication tool; then, Zuckerberg decided to extend online service to the entire Harvard student body and several other universities. It was after this point that Facebook exploded into the communication vehicle currently used by over two-thirds of American college students (Schrotenboer, 2006). Unlike the original Harvard Facebook, it has become a way for students to communicate and express their individuality, creating concern in collegiate athletic departments, particularly when individuality projects a negative self-image, team image, or university image. Facebook has become a medium through which student-athletes sometimes offer less-than-desirable information to the public.

Pop culture is created when (as on Facebook) users are allowed to share information with others exactly as they wish, uncensored, without regard for image and without fear of reprisal. The current trend, however, is for athletic departments and universities to restrict this free flow of expression, even, in a growing number of cases, to ban totally athletes' use of social networks. Currently, the courts have not charged colleges and universities with violation of the First Amendment related to censoring social networks or restricting freedom of speech in student accounts. The issue will be interesting to follow.

As the present study found, female athletes generally claim to project a more positive image on social networks than their male counterparts. This finding alone might generate increased athletic department monitoring of male athletes' Facebook accounts. Male athletes, furthermore, expressed more resistance to athletic department monitoring than did female athletes. This is another indication of the need to monitor male athletes' accounts, since males seem to seek relatively more opportunities to exhibit a less-than-desirable image on Facebook.

The findings of this study for the various NCAA classifications suggest that NCAA II athletes are least educated about or least aware of the implications of the image issue associated with public accounts. This might have been expected, as these schools generally have less staff to work with athletes on image issues. The greater perception of a positive image projected on Facebook reported by NCAA Division III athletes is perplexing and deserves both accolades and further study. With the relative visibility of NCAA Division I athletics, it is to be expected that these athletes' accounts would project a positive image, and they did, according to the athletes.

After investigating the issue of image and monitoring of college athletes' personal Facebook accounts, it appears that several related matters need investigation. These are (a) whom athletes allow to access their accounts, (b) the privacy levels or protection levels athletes use with their accounts, (c) the motives of athletes for the images projected, (d) the steps athletic departments take to educate student-athletes and monitor their accounts, and (e) female athletes' apparently greater concern about image on Facebook accounts, as contrasted to their male counterparts. Lastly, with the growing athletics-related abuse of Facebook in high schools, as seen recently at Medfield High School in Massachusetts and McCutcheon High School in Louisiana (Doughtery, 2007), study of high school policy is also merited.

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