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PERCEPTIONS AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING ACTIVITY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENT-ATHLETES AND NON-STUDENT-ATHLETES

Editor's Choice Award

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Abstract

The current study investigated differences between student-athletes and non-student-athletes regarding online social networking (OSN) usage. In particular, types of usage, perceptions of monitoring, and knowledge and perceptions of inappropriate online behavior were examined. Participants were student-athletes and non-student-athletes at a mid-sized university in the Rocky Mountain Region, who were asked their perceptions regarding OSN. Results of independent samples t-tests revealed student-athletes felt that students in general were more knowledgeable of the dangers associated with OSN than were non-student-athletes. Further, student-athletes found provocative pictures posted on OSN profiles to be more acceptable than did non-student-athletes. Also, monitoring of online profiles by supervisory figures was considered less acceptable to student-athletes than non-student-athletes. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: online social networking, Facebook, student-athletes, online social networking education, online social networking usage, athletic administration, online profile monitoring, social capital.

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Of all the forms of media present in today's society, one avenue that has increased recently is online social networking (OSN) (Aboujaoude, 2011). Facebook and Twitter are just two of the web sites that have emerged as OSN tools. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social networking sites are defined as:

Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

Virtually every age demographic is using OSN sites to communicate with others, and the medium is extremely popular and widely used to exchange social capital by college students and student-athletes (Pempek et al, 2009).



With the growth of OSN web sites, college students, including athletes, have begun to use the sites to keep up with social contacts, post personal information, or simply to pass time (Aboujaoude, 2011). However, there are inherent risks in using OSN sites that can result in issues for student-athletes and their respective institutions. To illustrate this point, the following incidents have occurred over the past several years involving student-athletes and Facebook:

- In February 2010, Oregon wide-receiver Jamere Holland was dismissed from the team after posting a racially insensitive and expletive-filled post on his Facebook page (Goe, 2010).
- Wake Forest football player Luke Caparelli was dismissed when he threatened to blow up campus on his Facebook page in the fall of 2009 (Martin, 2009).
- In 2008, University of Texas football player Buck Bernette was dismissed from the team after he made a threatening and racially insensitive remark related to President-elect Barack Obama on his Facebook page (Duarte, 2008).
- In 2005, two gymnasts from the University of Maryland were kicked off the team after they posted provocative photos of themselves on Facebook that later ended up in a *Playboy* article (O'Toole, 2006).
- Two Louisiana State University men's swimmers were removed from the team in 2005 after they were determined to be members of a Facebook group that was focused on posting inflammatory remarks about the team's coaches (Brady & Libit, 2006).

These are just a few examples of student-athletes getting into trouble over inappropriate OSN use. Additionally, student-athletes at times can be vulnerable to virtual harassment, as was the case with Texas Tech quarterback Graham Harrell. The former student-athlete reported that after key victories over Texas and Oklahoma State that he had to cease his usage of Facebook as he became overwhelmed when his network had grown to the maximum of 5,000 friends (Duarte, 2008).

For these reasons, college athletic administrators are beginning to be more proactive in their student-athletes' usage of OSN sites. Boise State University head football coach Chris Petersen banned his players from using Twitter. Petersen stated, "It's just a distraction that we just don't really need to have right now. There's plenty of time in their lifetime for Twitter" (Boise State banned, 2010, ¶ 1). Similarly, former University of Michigan head football coach Rich Rodriguez said that he would prefer his players not to use OSN sites but did not go as far as preventing them from doing so. Instead, he believes education and monitoring are important for the protection of the student-athlete and institution (Rothstein, 2010).

You've got to make sure they are representing not only themselves and their families but also every other football player, our university, our community and before you push that send button, it's there for life and future employers could look at that (¶ 5).

Due to the concerns of inappropriate use, some institutions have begun to monitor their student-athletes' usage of OSN sites, and additional education has been provided to ensure the safety of the student-athletes, coaches, teams, athletic departments, and institutions. The current study investigated the usage of OSN sites by student-athletes at a mid-sized university, knowledge of the dangers associated with OSN, their perceptions regarding



inappropriate posts, and their feelings toward possible monitoring of profiles by athletic and school administrators. Student-athletes and non-student-athletes were compared in this study to determine if differences existed in their knowledge of OSN dangers, perceptions of inappropriate use, and possible monitoring practices. Since student-athletes are tied to the university in ways different from non-student-athletes through representing the institution in athletic competition, they are often held to a different standard than students in the general body. Therefore, it is important to gauge student-athletes' general knowledge and perceptions of OSN usage, how they feel about possible monitoring activity by the athletic department or university, and any differences that exist between student-athletes and non-student-athletes. The following research question guided the investigation:

RQ: Do student-athletes differ in their knowledge, perceptions, and feelings about online social networking sites from those in the general student body?

A review of the literature addressing social capital, OSN, and college students' use of OSN sites will begin the discussion. The methods used for the study and results will be presented. Theoretical and practical implications will be presented in the discussion, along with limitations and areas for future study.

Review of Literature

Social Capital

Social capital has been the subject of research in many contexts. In fact, at the time of Adler and Kwon's (2002) research, they observed at least 15 different definitions for the term. Noting the lack of a concrete definition, the researchers expressed concerns relative to whether or not the term's context and scope was based upon internal, external, or a combination of internal and external social ties. To address this issue, Adler and Kwon combined the three different types of social ties and developed their unique, workable definition for the term. Using their work as a guide for this research, social capital is viewed as: "the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor" (p. 23).

Utilized to increase *social production (social relations that can lead to efficient gains in noneconomic goods)* (Paxton, 1999, p. 92), social capital among individuals can serve to fulfill personal goals, such as the sharing of information between two people to develop a personal or professional relationship (Coleman, 1988). Examples of the acquisition and usage of social capital can include an employed individual sharing information with an unemployed friend in regard to an open position within the employed friend's respective organization. College students sharing information relative to an upcoming party, with the goal of hosting the biggest party on campus, is another exchange of social capital. Finally, and most relevant to this discussion, collegiate student-athletes are enhancing their social capital when they build and maintain relationships with friends, family, and coaches on their Facebook page which may later aid in fulfilling one of their personal goals (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Although these examples of the utilization of social capital are not exhaustive or exclusive, they are indicative of how and why social capital is acquired and utilized.

Social Networking

Social networks, simply viewed as connections with other people (Donath & Boyd, 2004), bridge and aid in the development of social capital (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). In



today's world, the bridging of social capital via social networking occurs with far greater ease than in the past. The aforementioned ease is due to the fact that today's social networking frequently occurs through the usage of OSN sites, where users can exchange information with far greater rapidity and frequency compared to older, more traditional methods (e.g., telephone calls, letters, etc.). In fact, Adler and Kwon (2002) recognized that opportunity is a key element in the development of social capital, specifically noting that the more social ties one has, inevitably the more opportunities one will have for social capital transactions. As a means to this end, OSN sites certainly provide the ability for one to improve their social capital. Nie (2001) suggested that OSN may decrease the number of face-to-face interactions people engage in, while others assert that "gaps" between physical interactions are filled or supplemented by online communications (Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton, 2001; Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Nevertheless, people today have undoubtedly developed, acquired, and maintained social capital through their usage of popular OSN sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Online Social Networking

Star Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff (1993) have been documented as developing the first online social network in 1978. Entitled the *Electronic Information Exchange System* at the New Jersey Institute of Technology for the United States Office of Civilian Defense, the network permitted employees to exchange emails and office information that until that point was unfathomable (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993). Approximately 20 years later in 1997, the first formally recognized OSN site, sixdegrees.com, was introduced. Predicated upon Stanley Milgram's *Six Nodes of Separation* study, the original OSN site allowed users to create a profile, obtain and list friends, as well as browse the contact lists of their respective friends. Up until that point, no previous OSN site had the collective capabilities of sixdegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Today, the capabilities of OSN sites are vast. Not only do these sites give individuals a chance to produce personal profiles, obtain friends, and engage in instant and private messaging (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), but many athletes, companies, organizations, movie stars, and otherwise iconic figures of our world have also established profiles on Facebook and Twitter (Wakiyama & Kagan, 2009; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). While it stands to be noted that a multitude of additional OSN sites (e.g., Friendster, Ryze, MySpace, LinkedIn, etc.) have gained and waned in popularity over time (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), the current intrigue associated with Facebook and Twitter has come to fore, with these respective OSN sites becoming almost synonymous in the minds of many when referencing the term social networking.

Facebook and Twitter

Developed in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin, Facebook is perhaps the most popular OSN site today (Wakiyama & Kagan, 2009). Initially created in hard copy to encourage the interaction of on-campus Harvard University students through the sharing of personal information and photos, today Facebook has arguably become a modern day phenomenon since its online presence was established (Fletcher, 2010). In fact, Facebook has become so popular some have fathomed the idea that if the site continues to grow at its current pace, by the year 2013 nearly every user of the Internet will have a Facebook profile (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Despite the popularity of the site to the masses, Facebook has not strayed too far from its roots, as the site continues to be extremely popular among college



students for staying in touch with their friends (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Pempek et al., 2009).

Like Facebook, millions of people are now using Twitter to network and follow the lives of others. Providing a slightly different format for its users to interact and build social capital, Twitter was developed in 2006 by a San Francisco company entitled *Obvious*, and the amount of visitors and users of the site has increased dramatically in just a few short years (Farhi, 2009; Miller & Vega, 2010). Considering the short length of the messages that Twitter permits, 140-character messages, information is short and to the point, frequently pertaining to either one's location or thoughts on a particular topic. Due to this fact, information is of such a nature that it could be determined to be curt or frank, as in the case of the Texas Tech football team who were banned from using the site by former head coach Mike Leach, after a player tweeted about the coach's tardiness to a team meeting (Olson, 2010). Regardless, the popularity of the site and the idea of following, networking, and inevitably building social capital with others are intriguing to millions.

Use of OSN by College Students

Previous commentators have acknowledged that college student rationales and motives for using online social networking *groups*, defined as "a particularly popular and useful module that allows discussion forums and threads based on common interests and activities," may distinctively vary (Park et al., 2009, p. 729). However, today it appears to be a commonly held belief that many college students attribute their most significant rationale for using OSN sites to remaining in contact with their friends. Some college students have acknowledged that they use Facebook to provide information to others expressing 'who they are' (Pempek et al., 2009). Further, it stands to be noted that some students (evidenced by their usage of these sites), do not fully grasp the significance of using OSN sites inappropriately, or inadequately. An example of inadequate OSN usage by a college student would be not posting relevant information such as interests, birthday, or education, thereby not optimizing his/her social capital. Perhaps the dichotomy that exists between expressing one's self on the Internet and in person diminishes the significance of the student's perception of the significance of his/her online postings (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002),

Athletic Department OSN Monitoring

With a keen awareness of these issues and a multitude of additional public relations nightmares relating to student-athletes' usage of OSN sites, some athletic departments and universities have taken a considerable interest in protecting their reputation (Brady & Libit, 2006). Noting the potential loss of booster donations, damage to university and athletic department image, and the risk of huge public relations crises (Henry, 2010), many athletic departments have begun to monitor their student-athletes' usage of OSN. Furthermore, approximately 24 college institutions have decided to seek the assistance of the OSN site monitoring service, UDiligence.com (Meredith & Marot, 2010).

Launched in 2008 by former Congressional Press Secretary Kevin Long, UDiligence.com provides interested institutions with software that monitors the profiles and OSN activities of their student-athletes. Long developed the program after listening to concerns from athletic administrators in regard to the institutional ramifications of inappropriate OSN use by student-athletes (Meredith & Marot, 2010). Despite the occurrences involving student-athletes and unscrupulous acts, photos, or language on OSN sites as previously outlined,



some administrators have reported that they are not interested in the “monitoring” of the OSN activities of their student-athletes. Rather, they have a more profound interest in educating their student-athletes on the proper use of OSN sites (Brady & Libit, 2006).

For example, The University of Iowa decided that the monitoring of OSN sites would be conducted by each of the university’s teams’ respective senior leaders, with any significant findings to be passed along to athletic administrators for further education of the student-athlete in violation. Many other schools have instituted a policy in which student-athletes must accept a coach or athletic department representative as a friend (Oppenhuizen, 2008). However, for schools that are slightly more active in monitoring the OSN use of their student-athletes, UDiligence believes they can aid in the omnipresent athletic department endeavor of reputation management (UDiligence, 2010).

For a cost ranging from \$500 to \$5,000, dependent upon the number of student-athlete profiles the institution would like monitored, UDiligence will search Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter profiles for *buzz* words. For example, the athletic department can utilize or alter a pre-existing UDiligence developed list of approximately 500 words for the software to monitor (Meredith & Marot, 2010). If any of these words happens to arise on a profile of one of their student-athletes, a notification is sent to the athletic department representative that is in charge of keeping tabs on the service (Henry, 2010). Although some have argued that a monitoring service such as UDiligence could potentially infringe upon the student-athlete’s privacy (Oppenhuizen, 2008), ultimately any disciplinary action that is enforced is left to the discretion of the athletic department and/or institution.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that Long and UDiligence hold steadfast in their assertion that their service is not intended to discourage the use of OSN sites by student-athletes. Instead, they contend that the service should be used as a mentoring and teaching tool, a tool that can not only aid in the preservation of the reputation of the institution and student-athlete, but also prevent current and future incidences. As a final example, Long told a story of a former athletic and academic student-athlete All-American that was unable to continue in an interview at a Fortune 100 company after the interviewer asked him to display his Facebook page. According to Long, the former student-athlete had a profile picture of himself drinking beer from a plastic funnel when the interviewer determined it was no longer necessary to proceed with the interview (Olson, 2010).

Taking stories such as Long’s into consideration, the following study was conducted to address a gap in the literature. Noting that previous research has included rationales and popularity of OSN sites, the current study was conducted to address the specific gap in the literature that exists between college student-athletes’ and non-student-athletes’ usage of OSN sites, knowledge of OSN dangers, perceptions of OSN activities, and perceptions regarding possible monitoring practices by athletic and university administrators. The phenomenon of OSN, including the rationale for why non-student-athletes and student-athletes use OSN sites and differences in general knowledge and perceptions of administrative oversight between the two groups has not been examined previously, and therefore is meritorious of exploration. The next section will detail the methods used during the study and present the results from the investigation.



Methods

Participants

Paper surveys were distributed to students in undergraduate Sport and Exercise Science (SES) classes, upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval on March 25, 2010, at a mid-sized university in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Students enrolled in SES classes were chosen as participants because they represented a wide variety of majors, as these classes were required of all students at the university. The study was conducted in cooperation with the university athletic department, and due to this fact the surveys were distributed only to students only at the university rather than online, where non-affiliated students may have gained access to the survey. This initial sampling method yielded a limited number of student-athlete respondents in comparison to non-student-athletes, so additional student-athletes were solicited to complete surveys at team practice sessions and at the Student Athlete Academic Success Center. After the second group of surveys was received, the sample consisted of 216 respondents – 90 student-athletes and 126 non-student-athletes. No incentives were given to students to fill out the survey.

Instrument

The survey was largely adapted from the work of Peluchette and Karl (2010), with additional questions of interest developed by the researchers. First, in order to segment the two groups for analysis, respondents were prompted to indicate whether or not they were or had ever been a student-athlete at the current university. Respondents were then asked to provide other demographic information such as age, gender, and time spent per day on OSN sites. Next, questions were included regarding perceptions of appropriate and inappropriate uses of OSN sites, the level of education received regarding potential ramifications of inappropriate use (either from the University or another source), and feelings toward OSN activity being monitored by authority figures (coaches, advisors, etc.). A pilot study was given to a group of 20 graduate students so the authors could receive feedback on the clarity and effectiveness of the survey questions.

The survey contained a total of 27 questions. In addition to the demographic information listed above, perceptions of inappropriate OSN use (10 questions in total) was measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) inappropriate to (5) appropriate. Each question contained a particular behavior (i.e. posting provocative photos, posting comments regarding use of alcohol), and the students recorded their perception of the level of appropriateness for that behavior on OSN sites. Student perceptions regarding the monitoring of OSN profiles by authority figures (5 questions in total) were measured on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) unacceptable to (5) acceptable. Questions were designed to gauge how students felt about various types of authority figures (i.e. professors, advisors, coaches, employers) monitoring their profiles, and whether they felt differently if the monitoring was in place in order to give positive feedback and advice, or to distribute punishment for inappropriate use.

Analysis

Frequencies and independent samples t-tests were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18 in order to examine the similarities and differences between student-athletes and non-student-athletes. Descriptive statistics were examined to ensure the soundness of the data, sample means and standard deviations were assessed to



gauge perception level, and independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine any differences in the mean perceptions between the two groups. Reliability of the instrument was measured through an examination of the consistency of the two multi-item variables using Cronbach’s alpha coefficients (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). Both the 10-item ‘perceptions of inappropriate social networking use’ scale ($\alpha = 0.906$) and the 5 item ‘perceptions of profile monitoring’ scale ($\alpha = 0.851$) exhibited strong internal consistency.

Results

Both the student-athlete and non-student-athlete groups were similar in terms of gender, types of OSN sites used, reasons for OSN use, and the *nature* of advice received (risks of inappropriate use, privacy settings, etc.). One area where the groups differed was that more student-athletes (84%) indicated having received information regarding OSN than did non-student-athletes (62%). Further, non-student-athletes had received more advice from friends (70%) than had student-athletes (48%) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Demographics and OSN usage

Respondents	Non Student-Athletes (n=125)		Student-Athletes (n=90)	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Sex				
Male	60	48%	51	56%
Female	65	52%	39	44%
Types of OSN				
Facebook	122	97%	85	94%
MySpace	38	30%	20	22%
Reasons for OSN use				
Keep up with Friends	117	93%	88	98%
Procrastinate	76	60%	53	59%
Keep up with Family	74	59%	54	60%
Advice Received				
Advice from Friends	63	70%	43	48%
No Advice Received	47	38%	14	16%
Types of Advice				
Risks of Inappropriate use	77	61%	58	64%
Privacy Settings of OSN	71	56%	48	53%

In terms of education, the majority of both student-athletes and non-student-athletes indicated they believed that education regarding OSN would be helpful. The groups did not differ significantly in their feelings regarding the usefulness of educating students about dangers of inappropriate OSN use (see Table 2). Similarly, feelings toward being warned about the dangers of inappropriate use of OSN by others did not yield a significant difference. It should be noted that for these two questions the non-student-athletes believed the two types of education would be more helpful (63% and 65%, respectively) than did the student-athletes (56% and 57%, respectively). The non-student-athletes and student-athletes differed



significantly in whether they thought that students, in general, were aware of the potential dangers of using OSN (58% and 76%, respectively).

Table 2
Perceptions of the usefulness of OSN education programs

Respondents	Non Student-Athletes (n=125)		Student-Athletes (n=90)	
	n	%	n	%
Would an education program about danger(s) of Personal Inappropriate OSN use be useful?				
Yes	79	63%	50	56%
No	47	37%	40	44%
Would an educational program about danger(s) of Others Inappropriate OSN be useful?				
Yes	81	65%	51	57%
No	44	35%	39	43%
Are students aware of potential dangers of using OSN? *				
Yes	72	58%	68	76%
No	50	40%	21	23%

* Significant at $p < .05$

When asked their perceptions of various types of inappropriate use (photos of drinking, comments regarding ex-friends, etc.), the groups differed significantly only in terms of their feelings towards posting provocative photos, with the student-athletes ($M = 2.03$) being more tolerant of the potentially inappropriate pictures than the non-student-athletes ($M = 1.70$) (see Table 3). For each of the other listed behaviors, there were no significant differences between the two groups' perceptions. The mean responses for both groups indicated they believed that all of the behaviors were in some way inappropriate (all mean scores were less than a neutral score of 3.0). In varying degrees, photos and comments regarding drinking were considered the most acceptable overall, while photos with illegal substances or firearms were considered the least acceptable. It should be noted that while the responses all tended towards inappropriate, as previously mentioned, there was a relatively large amount of observed variance in the scores, as indicated by the large standard deviations when considering that a 5-point scale was used (1 or slightly higher for most items, with 0.85 being the smallest).



Table 3
Perceptions of Inappropriate Use

Perception	Non Student-Athletes M (SD)	Student-Athletes M (SD)
Photos of drinking	2.47 (1.01)	2.33 (1.01)
Comments regarding use of alcohol	2.49 (1.00)	2.54 (1.11)
Provocative photo(s) *	1.70 (1.02)	2.03 (1.12)
Comments regarding sexual activities or sexual preferences	1.72 (1.03)	1.92 (1.06)
Personal comments regarding an ex-friend	2.27 (1.09)	2.36 (1.08)
Photo(s) with firearms	2.37 (1.36)	2.26 (1.18)
Photo(s) with an illegal substance	1.72 (1.05)	1.54 (0.85)
Comments regarding use of illegal drugs	1.84 (1.03)	1.72 (0.95)
Comments regarding an ex-partner	2.20 (1.07)	2.20 (1.07)
Photo(s) posing with illegal firearms	1.72 (1.14)	1.62 (0.98)

Note. 1 = inappropriate; 5 = appropriate

* Significant at $p < .05$

In general, student-athletes ($M = 2.00$) believed that the monitoring of their OSN profiles by university officials was less acceptable than did non-student-athletes ($M = 2.36$) (see Table 4). Interestingly, both groups believed that monitoring by employers was more acceptable than monitoring by other authority figures (professors, advisors, coaches, etc.). Student-athletes also found monitoring by prospective and current employers ($M = 2.31$, $M = 2.31$ respectively) less acceptable than non-student-athletes ($M = 2.86$, $M = 2.83$ respectively). Even when the nature of the monitoring by university officials was meant to help students use OSN safely, non-student-athletes ($M = 2.54$) and student-athletes ($M = 2.17$) still felt that supervision by these individuals was less acceptable than monitoring by employers. There was no significant difference between the groups' feelings towards punishment which, unsurprisingly, both groups felt was the most unacceptable monitoring behavior overall. As with perceptions of inappropriate use, the standard deviation values suggested that there was a relatively large amount of variance in the groups' perceptions ($1.08 < SD < 1.36$ for all standard deviations in the scale).



Table 4
Perceptions of Monitoring

Perception	Non Student-Athletes M (SD)	Student-Athletes M (SD)
Professors/Advisors/Coaches monitoring student OSN activity*	2.36 (1.26)	2.00 (1.10)
Prospective employers monitoring student OSN activity *	2.86 (1.36)	2.31 (1.11)
Current employers monitoring student OSN activity *	2.83 (1.26)	2.31 (1.14)
Professors/Advisors/Coaches punishing students for inappropriate OSN activity	2.11 (1.27)	2.04 (1.08)
Professors/Advisors/Coaches monitoring student OSN activity to provide helpful feedback *	2.54 (1.24)	2.17 (1.15)

Note. 1 = unacceptable; 5 = acceptable

* Significant at $p < .05$

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the differences in usage and perceptions of two student groups regarding OSN, namely student-athletes and non-student-athletes, at a mid-sized university. The comparison between the two groups yielded interesting results and carries implications for university administrators.

Students in both groups overwhelmingly use the OSN site Facebook (97% non-student-athletes, 94% student-athletes), illustrating that it is the most popular form of OSN on the college campus investigated. Further, both student-athletes and non-student-athletes use OSN to keep up with their friends and family (93% non-student-athletes, 98% student-athletes). This indicates that the student groups in the study in fact use OSN as a way to build, enhance, and exchange social capital.

On the other hand, more student-athletes felt college students in general were aware of the potential dangers of OSN than non-student-athletes. This could be due to the fact that student-athletes at the university investigated go through different orientation and information sessions than does the general student body. For example, at the institution studied, student-athletes are reminded of their OSN usage at the beginning of every academic year whereas non-student-athletes are given instruction of proper OSN usage before the first day of enrollment in the university and do not receive any more information throughout their academic tenure. Tips on how to use OSN sites safely are available on the university web site; however, the responsibility falls primarily on the student to familiarize himself/herself with the information (Tips for Safer, 2010). Also leading to further confusion about the knowledge and exposure to appropriate OSN usage, perhaps student-athletes and non-student-athletes are not aware of differences in orientation and education policies between the two groups.

That being said, the two student groups indicated they were aware of the potential dangers of inappropriate OSN use. The most frequent open responses when asked if students in general knew of the dangers associated with OSN was that it should be “common sense,” and “people should know by college.” However, the incidences found in this discussion along



with the countless examples of inappropriate OSN use by student-athletes and non-student-athletes illustrate possible contradiction between what students say and what they practice online. When asked if an educational program regarding OSN would benefit college students, responses varied. Some participants felt that an educational program would be helpful and the appropriate uses of OSN would be “good to know.” Some other participants disagreed, and felt “people will use OSN inappropriately regardless.” This again highlights the difference in what students say and practice regarding OSN.

Both student-athletes and non-student-athletes tended to perceive questionable actions by others as moderately inappropriate. Noting the mean values and standard deviations previously stated; both groups scored toward the inappropriate end of the perception scale regarding actions of others. The only significant difference that existed between the two groups was the posting of provocative photos, with student-athletes indicating the actions contained within the photos were more appropriate than non-student-athletes. This was surprising to the researchers, as it was believed that student-athletes would rate such actions as more inappropriate than non-student-athletes because of the additional information they receive in orientation. One possible reason could be that student-athletes see each other in clothing that may not be considered acceptable to non-athletes outside of competition or practice. Also, photos and comments regarding drinking were considered to be more acceptable by both student groups. This could be the result of the drinking culture that has become commonplace on many college campuses (Wechsler & Nelson, 2008).

Additionally, photos of firearms were seen as more appropriate than most of the items in the scale, but also exhibited the largest standard deviations of any of the perception items ($SD = 1.36$ and $SD = 1.18$ for non-student-athletes and student-athletes, respectively). One possible reason for this finding could be the setting of the university under investigation. The institution in this study is located in an area where hunting and fishing are popular, and readily available to individuals. For example, an individual that hunts regularly may find pictures with hunting guns appropriate, whereas people from the nearby large urban areas may have a different perspective towards firearm usage.

Both student groups indicated they were not particularly accepting of monitoring by authority figures of their OSN activity. Some of the more common sentiments found in the open-ended question regarding OSN monitoring were that both student groups felt coaches, faculty, or administrators looking at their profiles was over the line and “creepy.” However, student-athletes were less accepting than non-student-athletes with administrators monitoring their OSN activity. There are several reasons that could help to explain this finding. First, it could be a result of the typical busy lifestyle that student-athletes often lead. Student-athletes are required to practice, participate, and make appearances when necessary as part of their relationship with the university athletic department. Further, they are required to study and take classes that require large amounts of academic time. It is possible that leading this type of structured life causes student-athletes to view their OSN activity as something that they have the most personal control over. When an authority figure chooses to monitor the OSN activity of student-athletes, the athletes possibly see this as an infringement upon their college student life.

Another reason why student-athletes may differ from non-student-athletes in their perceptions of monitoring is the different types of education received by the two groups previously discussed. Student-athletes are told about the proper use of OSN, and results



suggested that they possibly viewed expressing themselves through their online profiles as a way to show their individualism or displeasure with monitoring. Along this line, most non-student-athletes are not educated on an annual basis about using OSN and may not be aware if an administrator chose to monitor their profile.

Both student groups were slightly more accepting of potential and current employers monitoring their OSN activity. This could be a result of college student-athletes' and non-student-athletes' knowledge that potential and current employers occasionally view online profiles during the hiring process and throughout employment, about which they have been educated in lower levels of schooling and also through the mass media. Further, this was illustrated by the earlier example of a student-athlete not being allowed to continue a job interview because of an inappropriate profile picture on Facebook (Olson, 2010).

Theoretical Implications

The literature concerning college students' use of OSN posits that social capital is an important outcome of OSN profiles (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Park et al., 2009), and was further supported by the current study. Research also shows how students perceive their own and others actions on OSN sites (Peluchette & Karl, 2010). Currently however, little research exists that investigates how student groups feel about authority figures possibly monitoring their OSN activity. Further, to date no comparison of OSN usage and perceptions between student-athletes and non-student-athletes has been conducted. The current study addresses both areas and adds to an area lacking in the theoretical literature presently available.

Practical Implications

There are many practical implications that can be derived from the current investigation. First, the current study illustrates that there is possible contradiction between what students say they know about OSN and what they actually practice. This is a problem because many students say they know the dangers of inappropriate OSN use, but continue to make bad choices regarding how they portray themselves online. Possibly, the need to feel as though one belongs to a group, lack of maturity early in college, or the apathy of some college students lead to such decisions. Some students indicating their OSN usage had changed over the course of college, as they got closer to graduation, illustrates this point. The current study indicates that education of all university students regarding OSN usage may not be properly addressing the problem of inappropriate online activity. For this reason, more educational programs could be developed to help all students fully understand the benefits of using OSN correctly, along with the ramifications of inappropriate use.

Second, college and athletic administrators should tread lightly when addressing the issue of actively monitoring for proper and improper OSN usage by student-athletes and non-student-athletes. As the current study indicated, both student groups tended to perceive monitoring by athletic and academic administrators as inappropriate. If administrators wish to monitor the OSN profiles of students, they need to ensure they have fully explained the need for such measures. More importantly, administrators have to ensure that they are properly educating about and monitoring student OSN usage so as not to infringe upon student personal rights (Oppenhuizen, 2008).

Both groups were more accepting of potential and current employers monitoring their online profiles than authority figures within the university. For this reason, athletic and academic administrators need to stress the educational purposes of using OSN appropriately when



speaking with students or monitoring online profiles. When educating student-athletes and non-student-athletes about appropriate and inappropriate use, administrators should stress explaining that their OSN activity could negatively affect future opportunities. The responsibility to communicate this information with student-athletes could fall on the media relations or sports information staff. Moreover, the student-services personnel could lead educational sessions for student-athletes and non-student-athletes at the beginning of semesters and competitive seasons. Attending sessions periodically where appropriate and inappropriate usage is stressed could help student-athletes and non-student-athletes better understand the repercussions their OSN activity could have.

Finally, it should be reiterated that there are many benefits for college students using OSN sites. As previously mentioned, having an OSN profile is one way to enhance one's social capital (Pempek et al, 2009). It is the researchers' mindset that academic and athletic administrators should not deter students from using OSN sites; rather, they should stress the benefits of appropriate use and the potential consequences of inappropriate use.

Limitations

As with any study, the current investigation was not without limitations. The first limitation of note is the setting of the university under investigation. The study was conducted at a mid-sized university in the Rocky Mountain region with a football team competing at the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) level. The teams at the institution typically do not receive significant media attention compared to those competing at a larger university with a football team in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS); hence, inappropriate OSN activity by student-athletes in this setting may not receive the same media scrutiny. Further, two major state universities are located nearby the institution in this study. This also acts as a limitation because the two surrounding universities compete in the highest NCAA division and receive more media attention. While this is not to say that educating student-athletes and non-student-athletes at a smaller university is not important, conducting the study at a university with a more visible athletic program could have possibly affected the findings and implications.

Another limitation of the study was the use of two questions addressing the education the two student groups had received regarding OSN. Responses indicated that the two student groups possibly misinterpreted the purpose of these questions. For example, when asked if they had received educational information regarding OSN, some students indicated they had received none. However, the students gave a different answer when asked what types of information they had received.

Finally, it must be pointed out that many of the surveys were distributed in undergraduate classes, which could have affected results by students wishing to give desirable answers. Additionally, a number of student-athletes were administered the survey through team meetings or the Student Athlete Academic Success Center. This too could have influenced student-athletes to give desirable answers. For example, if a student-athlete thought that the athletic department would see their responses, they possibly would want to answer in a way consistent with the vision of athletic administrators regarding OSN usage. However, due to the nature of the investigation and the cooperation with the athletic department, this limitation was beyond the control of the researchers.



Future Study

The current study opens avenues for future research. Conducting the study at more schools would help to generalize the findings. Further, conducting the study at different levels of NCAA competition could yield different results. It would be interesting to compare results from schools participating at different competition levels. A school competing at the highest level of the NCAA, which attracts more media attention, may treat OSN education and student-athlete usage differently than the type of school in the current investigation. Schools competing in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) could also yield different results.

Noting the possible confusion surrounding two of the questions, and the apparent division between the knowledge and actions of college students regarding OSN, a qualitative study investigating the knowledge gap would be beneficial. Future research should attempt to explain why such a gap exists, and investigate ways to minimize the distance between the knowledge and actions of student-athletes and non-student-athletes.

Another area for further study is to conduct the investigation at an institution with an established-monitoring policy. As discussed in the literature review, many schools have monitoring policies and even make use of monitoring agents to help supervise student-athlete OSN activity. Student-athletes at the university used in the current investigation are educated about OSN usage, but established monitoring does not take place. Also for future study, if athletic and school administrators participated in the study, one could compare the findings between the student and authority figure roles.

Conducting a content analysis of student-athletes OSN pages might also be beneficial to the literature. As addressed throughout this discussion, there is apparent confusion between what students say they know about OSN and what they actually practice. The analysis could also help to bridge the gap between the perceived knowledge and application of student OSN usage. Finally, a qualitative study targeting victims of hazing or harassment through OSN is another avenue for future study. The example of former Texas Tech quarterback Graham Harrell illustrates that high-profile student-athletes sometimes can be inundated with friend requests and vulnerable to virtual harassment (Duarte, 2008). For this reason, an investigation of selected student-athletes could prove to be beneficial.

In closing, the purpose of the current study was to determine student-athletes' usage, education level, and perceptions of OSN activity. The researchers also sought to gain the student-athletes' perceptions of possible monitoring of OSN profiles by coaches and administrators. Non-student-athletes from the general student body were used to compare results between the two groups. Both student groups in the study appeared to use OSN to enhance, increase, and exchange their social capital, as illustrated by the amount of time spent on the sites and reasons for usage. Student-athletes differed from non-student-athletes in their perceptions of general student knowledge regarding OSN dangers, perceptions of provocative pictures, and monitoring by administrators, coaches, supervisors, and employers. Student-athletes at the institution were less accepting of monitoring by supervisors than non-student-athletes. Past research has investigated the reasons college students use OSN sites, but has not addressed the differences between student-athletes and non-student-athletes or feelings regarding monitoring by authority figures. This study addressed such differences, and these findings illustrate an interesting divide between the two student groups, which warrants further study.



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PERCEPTIONS AND GENERAL KNOWLEDGE OF ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING ACTIVITY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENT-ATHLETES AND NON-STUDENT-ATHLETES



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MANAGEMENT WHITEPAPER

Research Problem

The purpose of the study was to examine differences in the general knowledge and perceptions of online social networking (OSN) usage of student-athletes and non-student-athletes. This research contains important information for university and athletic administrators regarding the perceptions of inappropriate OSN usage and monitoring practices. Results indicated that student-athletes were more accepting than non-student-athletes regarding the posting of provocative photos on OSN profiles, and were less accepting of authority figures monitoring their OSN activity than non-student-athletes. This article contains information that would likely be helpful to administrators of intercollegiate athletic departments. In particular, athletic departments that are concerned with their public image, as well as those that are currently monitoring or contemplating monitoring the OSN activity of their student-athletes will find this article useful.

Issues

Online social networking (OSN) is becoming one of the most popular mediums of communication available. The ability to broadcast one's desired profile leads many people to go online and share the details of their lives with others. College students are no different, illustrated by the use of Facebook and other OSN sites on campuses across the country. Student-athletes and non-student-athletes alike use OSN to follow the lives of friends/*contacts*, display their thoughts regarding social issues, and keep others updated on their lives.

Along with the benefits of OSN, it also can have negative repercussions if used inappropriately. For instance, in 2008 a University of Texas football player was dismissed from the team after he posted a racially derogatory comment regarding President-elect Barack Obama on his Facebook page. Two gymnasts at the University of Maryland were dismissed from the team in 2005 when pictures on their Facebook profiles ended up in Playboy magazine. These are just two examples of student-athletes finding themselves in trouble because of inappropriate OSN activity. This trend has led many athletic administrators and departments to take notice and implement educational, and in some s, monitoring programs.

In the current study, we wanted to examine the usage, knowledge, and perceptions of college students on OSN sites at a mid-sized university located in the Rocky Mountain Region. Student-athletes and non-student-athletes were compared to examine if significant differences existed between the two groups concerning knowledge and perceptions of usage and monitoring by authority figures. The following question guided our investigation. Do student-athletes differ in their knowledge, perceptions, and feelings about online social networking sites from those in the general student body?

Past research addressing social networking and OSN suggests that people, including student-athletes and non-student-athletes, use such sites in an effort to exchange and increase social capital. An example of a university

student using OSN to exchange and increase social capital would be an individual sharing information regarding an upcoming party on Facebook or Twitter. When Facebook launched its online presence, college student-athletes and non-student-athletes began using the site to keep up with friends, families, and contacts on and off campus. Shortly after the rapid increase in OSN usage by college students, problems arose over information posted on online profiles, including profiles of student-athletes. Athletic departments quickly reacted to the issue and started warning their athletes of the dangers associated with inappropriate OSN use. Some athletic departments went so far as to limit their student-athletes usage of OSN sites and enlisted the help of the monitoring service UDiligence to keep tabs on profiles.

The findings from this study have implications for athletic department and college administrators because student-athletes and non-student-athletes were given a chance to express their perceptions regarding OSN usage and monitoring practices. Being cognizant of the perceptions toward OSN in general and monitoring practices is important for administrators trying to protect their student-athletes and non-student-athletes from the dangers and ramifications associated with inappropriate OSN usage.

Summary

Students at a mid-sized university in the Rocky Mountain region with an athletic team competing in NCAA Division I athletics were asked to indicate their general knowledge and perceptions of OSN, including monitoring practices by authority figures. Participants were recruited through Sport and Exercise Science classes, athletic team meetings, and the Student-Athlete Success Center on campus. Tests were conducted to identify any significant differences between student-athletes and non-student-athletes.

Both student-athletes and non-student-athletes indicated using Facebook more frequently than any other OSN site. Keeping up with friends, procrastination, and keeping up with family were the most common reasons for spending time on OSN sites for both student-athletes and non-student-athletes. Both student groups also indicated receiving advice concerning OSN from their friends, typically concerning the risks of inappropriate use and privacy settings associated with OSN profiles. Student-athletes and non-student-athletes both indicated that education about OSN usage would be helpful. There were no noteworthy differences between student-athletes and non-student-athletes regarding the dangers of inappropriate personal or indirect OSN usage. Student-athletes differed from non-student-athletes in believing students in general were aware of potential dangers associated with OSN (more student-athletes believed students in general were aware of dangers).

Student-athletes indicated they were more accepting of provocative pictures posted on OSN profiles than non-student-athletes. Even though both student groups indicated all the behaviors on the survey were in some way inappropriate, photos and comments regarding drinking were considered the most acceptable overall, and photos with illegal substances or firearms were considered the least acceptable. Student-athletes believed monitoring of OSN profiles by university officials was less acceptable than non-student-athletes. Both groups believed that monitoring by employees was more acceptable than by other authority figures (professors, advisors, coaches, etc.). Student-athletes also found monitoring by prospective and current employers less acceptable than non-student-athletes. Both student groups were less accepting of monitoring by authority figures even when the nature was meant to help students use OSN safely.

Analysis

The purpose of the current study was to examine the differences in usage and perceptions of student-athletes and non-student-athletes regarding OSN. The results of the study carry implications for athletic and university administrators.

Student-athletes and non-student-athletes were not accepting of authority figures monitoring their OSN usage. A common sentiment found in the open-ended question regarding OSN monitoring was that students felt coaches, faculty, or administrators looking at their profiles was over the line and “creepy.” Student-athletes

were less accepting of monitoring by authority figures than non-student-athletes. This could be the result of the busy lifestyle student-athletes lead in college. With the amount of time devoted to practice, competition, training, and study hall, perhaps student-athletes feel their OSN profiles are the only place they are able to *be themselves*, and thus, any monitoring of this activity would be an infringement upon their college student experience. Student-athletes also receive more education regarding OSN usage than do non-student-athletes. For this reason, student-athletes may view expressing themselves through online profiles as a way to show their displeasure with monitoring. Further, both student groups were slightly more accepting of potential and current employers monitoring OSN profiles. This could be the result of the fact that college students are aware that employers will check an employees' or applicants' online profile periodically for inappropriate material.

These findings are important because they extend past work regarding student groups' general knowledge and perceptions of OSN usage. Further, this is the first time student-athletes have been a focal point of interest regarding OSN sites. Illustrated by the examples of student-athletes getting into trouble over inappropriate OSN usage discussed earlier, it is important that this group be the focus of such studies. Perhaps most important, this is the first time student-athletes and non-student-athletes were asked to give their feelings regarding OSN monitoring by authority figures.

Discussion/Implications

The findings from this study are important to practitioners because they illustrate the general knowledge and perceptions of student-athletes regarding OSN usage, and more importantly, feelings about monitoring by authority figures. The first recommendation to athletic administrators is to develop more educational programs regarding OSN usage for student-athletes. The study found that student-athletes tended to indicate they were aware of the dangers of OSN usage, but the existing examples of inappropriate student-athlete usage regarding OSN points to possible confusion between knowledge and action.

College and athletic administrators should tread lightly when addressing the issue of OSN usage of student-athletes and non-student-athletes, as the current study indicated that both groups perceived monitoring by authority figures as inappropriate. If administrators wish to monitor the OSN profiles of student-athletes, they need to ensure they have fully explained the need for such measures, and do so in such a way that is respectful to student-athletes private lives. Further, administrators have to ensure they are properly educating and monitoring OSN usage so as not to infringe upon student personal rights. This is important for administrators to stress so that students do not feel their personal rights are being infringed upon.

One possible way administrators could show the need for education and monitoring of OSN profiles is to highlight the benefits of portraying a positive online profile to potential and current employers. Both student groups were more accepting of potential and current employers monitoring their online profiles than authority figures within the university. For this reason, administrators should emphasize that employers monitor OSN profiles and stress that inappropriate OSN activity could negatively affect future opportunities.

In summary, the current study investigated student-athletes' usage, education level, and perceptions of OSN activity. The researchers also sought to gain the student-athletes' perceptions of possible monitoring of OSN profiles by coaches and administrators. Non-student-athletes were used to compare results between the two groups and differences were found regarding perceptions of general student knowledge regarding OSN dangers, perceptions of provocative pictures, and monitoring by administrators, coaches, supervisors, and employers. The two student groups in the study appeared to use OSN to enhance, increase, and exchange social capital, as illustrated by the amount of time spent on the sites and reasons for usage. This is the first step in determining how student-athletes use OSN profiles in their lives, and their perceptions of monitoring by authority figures.