

Social Media Constraints in College Athletics

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SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Abstract

Colleges and Universities ability to control what their student-athletes post to their personal social media accounts is something that has been a topic of debate for some time now. It has created an uproar of mixed feelings about the act of doing it to the student-athletes. The overall purpose of the study conducted was to examine the relationship between college athletes' social media usage and the constraints that they face from their university's social media policies. The athletes were asked a series of questions composed from three research questions to get an understanding of what they understand about their school's social media policies and their feelings toward the policy. There were three research questions that were discussed for this study: How knowledgeable are college athletes about social media policies at their institution? Do college athletes feel their speech is constrained by university social media policies? Do college athletes feel that social media policies are fair to them? The design of the study included athletes at Marshall University taking a survey with questions assigned to each of the three research questions. Question one had ten questions, question two had six, and question three had six questions. This survey was concluded with eight demographic questions asking the survey participant questions such as their age, gender, etc.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Social media is prevalent everywhere in today's society and used by virtually everyone. People have numerous social media accounts available at their fingertips via apps on their mobile devices to tweet, text, post and share anything that they choose to. However, some individuals are exempt from the "freedom of speech" when it comes to posting on social media accounts. These individuals are college athletes. College athletes are monitored closely when it comes to what they post on their social media accounts by the institutions they play for as well as the National Collegiate Athletics Association. The NCAA places strict rules on college athletes and some have even lost their scholarships due to certain scenarios that have occurred with regards to what they have posted on their social media accounts. "College scouts don't just look at the player and their abilities on the field, but also how the player, the person, acts off the field; even what they post on social media" (Toler, 2017). The public often views the NCAA as an employer and the student-athlete as a current employee. The athletes' behavior influences the perceptions about their University and the NCAA. JD Campbell, Indiana University's assistant athletic director and head sports information director for men's basketball stated in a recent interview that "It's just important to be honest and important to remind them as much as you possibly can, that your reputation is always on the line" (Osterman, 2015).

Whenever college athletes are reprimanded for their social media posts, speculation brews about whether the athlete fully understood institutional rules surrounding the topic. Free speech advocates argue that it is unfair to take away an athlete's basic rights as a United States citizen and not allow them freedom of speech on their own personal accounts. Pete Warner from *Bangor Daily News* commented on this issue of the NCAA controlling social media usage in college athletes by stating "The NCAA has stayed away from this area because of the state laws, and you're very borderline on the infringement of freedom of speech" (Warner, 2014). What are

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

these constraints that college athletes are held to when posting on social media accounts? And why do Universities all over the country and the NCAA monitor so closely what each individual athlete posts? Research is needed to examine the type of constraints on college athletes' social media use and to understand why these policies are implemented. This study will be beneficial to individuals who are also studying the effects that social media use has on collegiate athletes and how they are monitored when using their social media accounts.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Social Media Constraints in College Athletes

College athletes all over the country are forced to constantly monitor and think twice about what they post on their personal social media accounts. There are numerous types of social media constraints placed on college athletes and they basically must oblige by those constraints or lose their scholarship completely. The main issue with social media constraints and athletes is that they do not always know what they are being told what they can and cannot do.

Social Media Use Policy

Uniform adoption of social media policies and sanctions are inconsistent across colleges and universities in the United States. Santus (2014) noted that “the policies that certain schools have differ in severity and breadth, and detail sanctions that include written reprimands and team suspension, up to the loss of scholarships and dismissal from athletic teams”. Currently, each university is responsible for setting its own social media policies, and choosing its own methods of policing and enforcing these policies. While “the NCAA does not require its member schools to monitor social media accounts of student-athletes’ it does “encourage schools to do so (NCAA, 2017). There are certain institutional behaviors that can be seen as policy trends, all of which have potential implications for freedom of speech and individuals’ right to privacy.

First, colleges often control social media use on personal accounts. It is also not uncommon for some schools to even ask for their athletes’ social media accounts and passwords, so that they can monitor them personally. Until 2012, football players at Florida State University (FSU) had to give up the rights to their twitter accounts to keep them from embarrassing the school. The University of Oklahoma admitted to requiring their athletes to friend all of their coaches on Facebook. Utah State University even went as far as forcing their athletes to allow school officials to access their private accounts. These acts of censoring student-athletes’ social

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

media accounts are arguably a violation of the 4th Amendment of the Constitution. The issue here is that with each school comes different ways that they monitor and control the athletes' social media use, and that control could be in violation of the 4th Amendment rights that that student athlete has (Barocas 2015). Moreover, many schools do not even apply their social media restrictions evenly across student-athletes, but rather only to select teams. This lack of uniformity allows athletic directors and coaches to take whatever measures of social media monitoring and restricting they so choose. If the school chooses a method such as installing monitoring software or demanding a Facebook friend request, it may be violating several constitution rights, including freedom of speech and freedom "against unreasonable searches and seizures" (Barocas, 2015).

a. Punishments for social media use

Not all schools have the same rules for the use of social media and the punishments that go along with ill misuse of social media accounts. The main rules that apply to college athletes are generally the same though, from the low range of having to sit out of a game or competition, to the high end of being dismissed from the athletic team completely. "The policies that certain schools have differ in severity and breadth, and detail sanctions that include written reprimands and team suspension, up to the loss of scholarships and dismissal from athletic teams" (Santus 2014).

Institutions argue that they are not trying to control student athletes unfairly. Athletic Departments are often motivated to keep the athlete and the university out of the public eye. "The coaches main concern for controlling athletes' social media accounts are to ensure that they do not damage their reputation, or the school's, and to continue to have them play and perform well athletically. The regulations aid coaches in protecting their athletes from outside distractions

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

and unknown detractors whose communications could impact athletic performance and outcome” (Penrose 2014).

d. Monitoring athlete’s social media accounts is a costly process

Ohio State spends \$1.1 million a year just trying to stay out of NCAA’s “doghouse”(Wolverton, A1). The rise of social media and the voracious appetite fans have for news about their teams have led to unprecedented scrutiny of players. That environment has prompted the NCAA to propose broad changes in its rules and how they are enforced.). OSU had set an ambitious goal for themselves: they wanted to build the best compliance system in the country.

Synthesis Section

It is arguably unfair that college athletes are given such strenuous policies to follow with regards to their social media use with their personal accounts. Social media account censorship conflicts with their student-athletes first amendment right to freedom of speech. Social media account controlling violates student athletes’ fourth amendment right to privacy. All of the effort put into control and censorship requires too much of an Athletics Departments resources and attention. There needs to be a certain process implemented in maintaining a healthy balance in athletes being able to post from their own social media accounts without fear of being removed from their sports teams. The NCAA needs to provide a uniform social media posting code of conduct for student athletes.

Consequently, the following research questions are proffered:

RQ1: How knowledgeable are college athletes about social media policy at their institution?

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

RQ2: Do college athletes feel their speech is constrained by university social media policies?

RQ3: Do college athletes feel that social media policies are fair to them?

Method

Participants

My population of interest is athletes at Marshall University. Students participants will be student athletes at Marshall University and will be recruited via random selection. There will be one male and one female student-athlete chosen from each sports team on campus. The sports teams with only female athletes or only male athletes will have two participants chosen from them. A total of 14 participants will be recruited to complete the study. I plan to ask each participant what they know about the use of social media at Marshall University and if they know the policies that are implemented here in regard to student-athletes and their personal social media usage. I will also ask them if they are aware of the punishments that will ensue to any athlete who does not abide by the rules that are placed here. Then I will ask them if they believe that these rules are fair, or do they think that more freedom should be allowed when sharing information on their own accounts. A convenience sample will be recruited for this study due to the availability of the student-athletes on campus.

Procedures

The student-athletes that are chosen will be required to provide informed consent to participate in this study. Participants in my study will be asked to respond to a survey of questions that asks them about their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about Marshall University's student-athlete social media usage policies. They will then answer demographic questions that focus on their age, sex, year in college, major, and sport.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Instrumentation

Social media constraints in college athletes. Information on the constraints that college athletes have when it comes to social media usage was collected from participants using an interview-based research approach. Participants were asked questions mentioned above about if they knew about Marshall University's social media usage policies for athletes, if they knew the repercussions for not following these rules, and if they agreed with the policies that the university has in place. I created a list of questions for each research question, listed below.

For research question one, "How aware are college athletes on the social media policy at their institution?". To test the perceived knowledge, I will create a true-false test of 10 items from the policy.(See Appendix)

For research question two, which is "How aware are college athletes on the social media policy at their institution?", this focuses in on attitude toward social policy, attitude toward the message received was measured by asking participants to respond to six items about the policy (bad [rc], smart, negative [rc], wrong [rc], unacceptable [rc], and intelligent). Participants were asked to indicate their agreement to the statement on a 7-point scale for each adjective (strongly disagree, moderately disagree, slightly disagree, neutral, slightly agree, moderately agree, and strongly agree).(See Appendix)

For the third research question, "Do college athletes feel that their university's social media policies are fair to them?". Student perception of the fairness of the social media policy will be assessed by asking participants to respond to seven items about how fair they believe the policy is to them. Items included: fair to unfair, reasonable to unreasonable, appropriate to

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

inappropriate, straightforward to unclear, legitimate to illegitimate, and objective to subjective.(See Appendix).

Conclusion

Going into this study I was thoroughly interested in this topic because of how relatable it was to my everyday life. Social media plays a huge role in my daily life as a student-athlete and I wanted to examine how others were affected by it. I wanted to be able to take this study to the Marshall University Athletic Department and Compliance Office and use it to help better their relationship and lessen the grey area with student athletes and social media policies. Going into this study I thought student-athletes were a lot less aware of the policies than they actually turned out to be. The majority of them were well-aware of the Marshall University social media policy. If I could do one thing differently it would be to include coaches on the sports teams at Marshall University and getting some feedback from them to see if what they thought about the policies were different from the athletes.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Appendix A

Survey will include the following questions:

Research Question One:

1. You are allowed to use the Marshall University logo without permission from the University.
2. You have to adhere to copyright laws when posting from your personal social media account or accounts of others.
3. You are not allowed to announce University news on your social media account.
4. Terms of service do not apply to you when posting from your personal social media account.
5. You are allowed to post private information of people that you know on your social media accounts.
6. If you are posting for a social media account for the university, you do not have to acknowledge who you are when posting.
7. You must contact the Office of Communications and Legal Counsel if you plan on starting a social media page in affiliation to Marshall University.
8. Non-compliance to the social media policy results in a warning.
9. You are subject to removal of your social media account if you disobey the University policy.
10. If you are posting on your personal social media account, it is okay to create “unprofessional” posts because it is from your own account.

Research Question Two:

1. Coaches should be able to apply personal restrictions to their athletes when posting from their personal social media accounts.
2. Athletes should be held to a higher standard when posting from their personal social media accounts.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

3. Marshall University should have a direct say in what student athletes' posts on their personal social media accounts.
4. The Marshall University student athlete social media policy is wrong.
5. The Marshall University student athlete social media is bad.
6. The Marshall University student athlete social media policy is good.

Research Question Three:

1. An athlete can be punished for posting something deemed "unacceptable" by their coach or the compliance staff (punishments can go as far as not participating in their next competition).
(objective to subjective)
2. Athletes are treated as employees of Marshall University, so they must always be aware of what they post. (straightforward to unclear)
3. Athletes have different standards and rules to follow than everyday students at Marshall University. (reasonable to unreasonable)
4. Athletes cannot post images or videos of them participating in "every day" college activities (i.e. drinking alcohol, attending parties). (fair to unfair)
5. Coaching staff is allowed to monitor their athletes' personal social media accounts.
(appropriate to inappropriate)
6. Athletes must hand over their usernames and passwords to their personal social media accounts to their coaching staff. (legitimate to illegitimate)

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your age?
2. Are you male or female?
3. What year in college are you currently?

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

5. What sport do you play?
6. How long have you been playing your sport?
7. What is your family's social status?
8. Do you receive a scholarship or not?

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

Appendix B



February 28, 2018

Cam Brammer, PhD
Communication Studies Department

RE: IRBNet ID# 1187464-1

At: Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral)

Dear Dr. Brammer:

Protocol Title: [1187464-1] Jon Elmore

Site Location: MU

Submission Type: New Project APPROVED

Review Type: Expedited Review


In accordance with 45CFR46.101(b)(2), the above study was granted Exempted approval today by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Designee. No further submission (or closure) is required for an Exempt study unless there is an amendment to the study. All amendments (including the addition of research staff) must be submitted and approved by the IRB Chair/Designee.

This study is for student Jon Elmore.

If you have any questions, please contact the Marshall University Institutional Review Board #2 (Social/Behavioral) Coordinator Bruce Day, ThD, CIP at 304-696-4303 or day50@marshall.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Appendix C

Anonymous Survey Consent

	Marshall University IRB	
	Approved on:	2/28/18
	Study number:	1187464

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “Social Media Constraints in College Athletics” designed to analyze college athletes at Marshall University’s awareness and views on social media constraints. The study is being conducted by Cam Brammer, PhD and Jon Elmore, co-investigator from Marshall University and has been approved by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research is being conducted as part of the CMM Capstone requirement for Jon Elmore.

This survey is comprised of twenty two questions based on social media constraints. Your replies will be anonymous, so do not type your name anywhere on the form. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose to not participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate you can leave the survey site. You may choose to not answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Once you complete the survey you can delete your browsing history for added security. Completing the on-line survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions about the study you may contact Cam Brammer at 304-696-2810, Jon Elmore at 304-541-4554

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303.

By completing this survey you are also confirming that you are 18 years of age or older.

Please print this page for your records.

If you choose to participate in the study you will find the survey at www.surveymonkey.com

SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

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SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES

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SOCIAL MEDIA CONSTRAINTS IN COLLEGE ATHLETES