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 cases, 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.