Embracing the Culture of Winning in Big-Time College Football: Exploring How Fans Reinforce Coaching Power

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College football coaches are often the highest paid employee at their institution and as such, have a great deal of influence. This research explored how fans reinforced coaching influence by examining responses to an incident between University of South Carolina head football coach Steve Spurrier and Ron Morris, a member of the local media. Using social identity theory as a framework, a thematic analysis of 221 postings to an article Morris wrote on The State website apologizing for criticisms he made towards Spurrier was conducted. Results indicated that fans reinforced coaching influence through: (a) personal vendetta attributions; (b) divergence with the fan base; (c) boycotts; (d) collective attacks; and (e) admonishments. A small portion of the sample expressed support for Morris through vindication. The results suggest that fans reinforce coaching influence to maintain emotional connections with a winning coach and football program. As fans do this, it leads to stronger in-group affiliation as they vilify those who express dissent and criticism towards a coach, which further strengthens a coach’s influence at the institution.
The relationship between collegiate coaches and the press has become somewhat tenuous as media members have sought increased access and a host of media outlets have emerged during the past decade (e.g., Big 10 Network, SEC Network, Bleacher Report). In particular, with the advent of the Internet and social media platforms, information (both on and away from the playing surface) is instantly reported to sports fans (Sanderson, 2011). Websites are updated literally minutes after the conclusion of competition and press conferences and reports from these events are immediately disseminated via blogs and Twitter. The abundance of information emanating from both traditional and digital networks feeds the seemingly insatiable demand from sports fans who consume information in a 24/7 news cycle. For example, the Southeastern Conference (SEC) Football Media Days had nearly 1,250 attendees in 2013, with reporters discussing everything from Texas A&M quarterback Johnny Manziel oversleeping to the clothes that the college athletes in attendance were wearing. There was some discussion about the upcoming football season as well (Litman, 2013).

Whereas most sports have seen a dramatic increase in media coverage, interest in college sports is at an all-time high, and media outlets have, in return, responded with a plethora of information about collegiate sports. Sport and media have a symbiotic relationship and each benefit from one another (Wenner, 1989, 1998, 2013). Terms such as “mediasport” (Wenner, 1998) and “mediasportscape” (Rowe, 2009) have been coined to emphasize that collectively, these two components are much more powerful than they are individually (Wenner, 2013). For example, in 2011, the University of Texas launched The Longhorn Network, a 24-hour cable channel devoted to the school’s athletic program. ESPN is paying the University of Texas $300 million dollars over 20 years to own and operate the network and in August 2013, Time Warner announced it would carry the channel for its Texas customers (Finger, 2013). The 2013 Bowl Championship Series Championship Game (Alabama vs. Notre Dame) had 26.9 million television viewers and drew a rating of 17.5 (National Football Foundation, 2013), the second largest viewing audience of any program in cable history (Solomon, 2013). Sales of collegiate licensed merchandise topped $4.6 billion in 2012 (Collegiate Licensing Company, 2012), and Rivals.com, a network of websites covering college sports, boasts 28.39 million unique users (Rivals.com, 2013). High merchandise sales would likely be unattainable without media coverage; yet, media networks need sport to provide the content that makes these ratings possible.

It also is important to note the relationship that many collegiate coaches have with the media. Many NCAA Division I – Football Bowl Subdivision coaches’ salaries are derived from sources other than the base pay offered by the university. For example, University of Tennessee head football coach Butch Jones’ contract with the university has a base pay of $245,000 and annual supplemental pay of $2.7 million. His supplemental pay includes compensation for his weekly television show during the season as well as radio appearances (Quinn, 2012). Similarly, in 2006, when the University of South Carolina hired Steve Spurrier to be its head football coach, he received a base salary of $250,000 but his television and radio appearances through university programming paid him an additional $500,000. This was just part of Spurrier’s multi-million dollar contract through the university and athletic department (Employment Agreement, 2006). University of Alabama coach Nick Saban was paid the following contractual amounts annually for “personal services” which included television and radio appearances: 2007 - $3,275,000; 2008 - $3,525,000; 2009 - $3,675,000; 2010 - $3,875,000; 2011 - $3,925,000; 2012 - $3,975,000; 2013 - $3,975,000, and 2014 - $3,975,000 (Employment Agreement, 2007). It also is important to note that more than 20% of athletic department budgets come from NCAA and conference distributions. This revenue is derived from the NCAA men’s basketball tournament television contract, conference broadcasting rights, and bowl game television contracts (Fulks, 2013).

As college sports exposure, especially football, has proliferated and media coverage has become more intense and on-demand, there have been several notable confrontations between college football coaches and members of the press. Perhaps the most (in)famous of these incidents occurred in 2007 when Oklahoma State University head football coach Mike Gundy unleashed a verbal barrage on a Daily Oklahoman columnist for what he perceived to be a critical article about one of his players. Gundy’s
invective included such phrases as “That article had to be written by a person that doesn’t have a child” and “Come after me, I’m a man, I’m 40!” (Weiss, 2007). In 2011, during a press conference, Steve Spurrier refused to answer any questions until local reporter Ron Morris left the room. Spurrier was upset about an article Morris had authored alleging that he had swindled a player away from the basketball team and after issuing this ultimatum, Spurrier then left the room (Steve Spurrier Calls Out Columnist, 2011). During the 2012-13 college football season, Kansas University head coach Charlie Weis made headlines after he criticized the student paper on Twitter, declaring, “Team slammed by our own school paper. Amazing! No problem with opponents or local media. You deserve what you get! But not home!” A student reporter was then instructed by the football team’s director of communication to not ask Weis questions at a press conference, due to “lingering ill-will among members of the football program” (Watson, 2012).

The saga between Steve Spurrier and Ron Morris escalated again in 2012, and provides an illustrative case to examine how fans reinforce coaching influence. Case study methods are appropriate when researchers are investigating phenomena that do not require behavioral control and that focus on contemporary events (Bylund, 2003; Yin, 1994). Case studies also enable researchers to unpack meaningful patterns within narratives (Babrow, 1995; Matsunaga, 2007). We were interested in the meaning that participants in an online discussion forum ascribed to a feud between a member of the media and the head football coach and how these messages work to reinforce coaching influence.

Review of Literature

Coaching Influence

We define coaching influence as the power a college coach possesses to affect and impact institutional decision-making. College coaches are, in most cases, the highest paid employee in the university system, making significantly more than the president of the institution. Table 1 provides an illustration of the top college football coaching salaries in 2013 (Gaines, 2013).

Table 1: 2013 College Football Coaching Salaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coach</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Total Pay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nick Saban</td>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>$5,545,852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mack Brown</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>$5,453,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bret Bielema</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>$5,158,863</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butch Jones</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>$4,860,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob Stoops</td>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>$4,773,167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Meyer</td>
<td>Ohio State</td>
<td>$4,608,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Miles</td>
<td>LSU</td>
<td>$4,459,363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady Hoke</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>$4,154,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirk Ferentz</td>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>$3,985,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie Strong</td>
<td>Louisville</td>
<td>$3,738,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As a point of comparison, the highest paid college president is Robert Zimmer of the University of Chicago at $3,358,723 (Adams, 2013), placing him well outside the top 10 coaching salaries. This underlying structure inherently endows coaches with significant power to influence decision-making and, in some cases, can make presidents, leadership, and other stakeholders reticent to challenge or question the coach. Consider this statement, apparently made in jest, by former Ohio State University President E. Gordon Gee, in reference to former head football coach Jim Tressel who was undergoing investigation for violation of NCAA rules, “I’m just hoping the coach doesn’t dismiss me” (Morris, 2011). There is likely more truth than fiction to that statement across the college sports landscape.

Coaches have influence and perceived power throughout the institutional system and winning often prompts fans to ignore any misuse of this influence. Spurrier himself used his influence to alter the admissions policy at South Carolina for athletes. Specifically, Spurrier had tendered scholarship offers to two prospective athletes but they were not admitted to the university. They met the NCAA minimum qualifying standards but did not meet the university’s admissions criteria and were not granted special admission. Spurrier threatened to quit if changes in the admission policy were not made and university administrators agreed to work with Spurrier to help resolve the issue (Lederman, 2007). Former Florida State University head football coach Bobby Bowden allegedly had students diagnosed with learning disabilities so they would not be subject to academic eligibility requirements. Bowden refuted those claims but nearly 33% of the football team was diagnosed with a learning disability (Farray, 2009). Penn State employees were reticent to report sexual abuse by former assistant football coach Jerry Sandusky because they feared head football coach Joe Paterno would have fired them (Burke, 2012). Vicky Triponey, the former head of student affairs at Penn State, spoke of the power Joe Paterno had in institutional matters such as athlete discipline and she noted that high-ranking administrators wanted to please him (O’Neill, 2012).

Another example lies with the University of Kentucky and its men’s basketball program. Under head coach Billy Gillespie, Kentucky basketball had experienced subpar years, and in 2009, Gillespie was fired and replaced with John Calipari. Calipari was the coach at the University of Memphis and had been successful in Conference USA and the NCAA Tournament. However, Calipari holds the distinction of being the only coach to have two Final Four appearances vacated by teams he coached – one at the University of Massachusetts and one at Memphis. The thought of winning appeared to outweigh questionable actions by Calipari (Forde, 2009). Fans and other stakeholders seem to be willing to overlook misuses of influence and unethical behavior in order to field a winning team. This gives coaches the ability to be outspoken about issues because there is minimal fear in losing their job. It also gives coaches the ability to influence institutional policy and operations. Fans and other stakeholders often ignore these actions, as their connection and attachment to the success the coach offers appears to trump any other issues.

Emotional Attachment

Bowlby (1979, 1980) conducted the original work on emotional attachment by examining the relationship between a parent and a newborn. Attachment is conceptualized as an emotional bond between a person and a specific object or person (Bowlby, 1979). The strength of the emotional attachment to an object or person dictates the person’s interaction or commitment. This construct is similar to Trail, Anderson, and Fink’s (2000) operationalization of identification, which asserts that an individual’s orientation to others results in “feelings or sentiments of close attachment” (p. 165-166). With respect to sports, Hunt, Bristol, and Bashaw (1999) believed that attachment distinguished devout fans from casual fans. Teams, players, or coaches are not an important link to a casual fan’s identity, but for devout fans, these entities serve as a significant identity corollary. Once sport fans have become attached to a specific team, coach, or player, this attachment can positively stimulate their behavioral intentions (Filo, Funk, & O’Brien, 2010). For instance, fans who possess higher attachment want to attend more games, purchase more team-related products, and consume more media content about the team, coach, or player (Shapiro, Ridinger, & Trail, 2013).
Attachment as an emotional bond has been adopted in the area of sport marketing (Funk & James, 2001; Robinson, 2004; Trail, Robinson, Gillentine, & Dick, 2003). Trail et al. (2003) suggested that sport consumers are likely to attend a sporting event for various motives and identify with different aspects of sport (e.g., team, coach, player) through their game experience. A person's emotional attachment can develop his or her commitment to the association (Rusbult, 1983), and desire to maintain it (Thomson, MacInnis, & Park, 2005; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). Funk and James (2001) defined attachment as “the degree or strength of association based upon the perceived importance attached to physical and psychological features associated with a team or sport” (p. 120). They developed the Psychological Continuum Model (PCM) to describe the ways fans and spectators develop attachments. They contended that attachment is generated via two routes: (a) awareness of a specific team or sport in which a person first gains knowledge; and (b) attraction to a specific team or sport based upon various social-psychological and demographic based motives. A person's consistent behavior as a devout fan can be traced to their position on the continuum of awareness-attraction-attachment-allegiance toward a team, coach, or player (Funk & James, 2001).

As fans form emotional bonds with coaches, players, and teams, they begin to associate their social identity with them. For some fans, this connection becomes so intense that they perceive positive and negative events experienced by teams, players, and coaches to also directly affect them. With respect to dealing with the press, some fans may perceive that a journalist’s critiques of a football coach or program are equivalent to a direct attack on themselves. Thus, social identity theory provides an optimal framework for the current examination.

**Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory (SIT) guided this study because it analyzes self-conception within group membership, group processes, and intergroup relations (Hogg, 2006). According to SIT, individuals maintain personal and social identities, and social identities are linked to demographic classifications or organizational memberships (Turner, 1982). College sports programs are popular social groups that many fans associate with to bolster their social identity and sports fandom is an integral social identity component (Wann, Royalty, & Roberts, 2000). Fanship may consist of an individual’s connection to a sports team, or to other fans of that team (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010).

Fandom is part of one’s social identity within a group, although that group does not have to be attending an event or watching on television (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012). A social group consists of a number of people who: (a) share attributes that make them different from others; (b) feel and perceive themselves as belonging to the group; and (c) who are considered by other group members to belong in the group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Group membership provides an individual with a social identity.

Tajfel (1972) defines social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292). In belonging to a social group and constructing social identity, an individual constructs group norms by interacting with in-group members and relating to the in-group behavior (Hogg, 2006). Brewer (2001) identified four types of social identity: (a) person-based social identities; (b) relational social identities; (c) group-based social identities; and (d) collective identities. Of these, relational social identities are most applicable to this study. Relational social identities define the self in relation to specific other people and are a form of social identity or personal identity (Hogg, 2006). Relating to others within a group may create community and social identity, but also challenge individuals to conform and adopt group identity.

Accordingly, college football fans may define themselves in relation to the head coach. In other words, fans who derive social identity satisfaction from a coach who is winning games may perceive that success is the predominant group norm. Therefore, it is imperative that any threats to winning are extinguished. Indeed, criticism directed at the coach may be perceived as a collective attack on the group that threatens its well-being, even if such critiques are valid. In these cases, a “no bad news” mentality may pervade the fan base and reinforce the influence a coach possesses. In turn, fans may turn the
proverbial “blind eye” to unethical coaching practices and other problematic behavior such as trying to manipulate press coverage.

Hogg (2006) argued that a collectivist culture prioritizes groups over individuals and values group-oriented behavior. In college athletics, this group-oriented behavior can be seen through message boards and interactions via social media, where group associations can be defined through networks of relationships within the group. In these larger groups, such as online message boards and social media, fans can mitigate threats to social identity by interacting with like-minded group members and attacking those who are perceived to be threatening the status of the group (Sanderson, 2013a).

Social Identity and Digital Media

The Internet and online communities have provided individuals and groups the opportunity to express fandom from remote locations and to generate their own stories (Antunovic & Hardin, 2012; Dart, 2009; Theberge, 2005). Sports fans have gravitated en masse to digital and social media sites to build community. Wilson (2007) analyzed an Internet discussion board devoted to the United States’ Major League Soccer (MLS) organization and observed that virtual communities formed around franchises lacking strong identities. Community building occurred through the interactive features of the discussion board that enabled fans to engage in meaningful conversations about professional soccer’s struggle to gain mainstream acceptance in the United States. In addition to building community, fans also use digital and social media to promote preferred representations of athletes (Sanderson, 2013b). For example Ferriter (2009) examined fan narratives posted on retired NFL players’ Wikipedia pages and found that fans used these digital spaces to: (a) collectively celebrate and debate the athletes’ achievements; and (b) construct representations of these athletes that fueled future interactions with other participants.

Digital and social media also have become spheres for sports fans to protect and defend social identity against perceived threats. For example, Sanderson (2013a) explored how University of Cincinnati fans used Facebook to manage the social identity threat that occurred after head football coach Brian Kelly left the program to take the head coaching position at the University of Notre Dame. He discovered that while a small segment of fans rectified this social identity threat by encouraging other fans to rally around the team in the face of adversity, the majority of participants turned to vitriolic and hateful communication to vilify Kelley and in doing so, lessened the perceived stigma surrounding the Cincinnati program.

Given that people gravitate toward social groups with similar attitudes as themselves (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Huggins, 2009), digital and social media sites provide a convenient avenue for that process to unfold. The ability to interact with other like-minded individuals and collectively promote social identity and ameliorate perceived social identity threats against group members makes these digital spheres important and valuable data repositories. We were interested to explore how fans responded to an incident between Steve Spurrier and Ron Morris to ascertain if fans reinforced coaching influence and how that manifested. Additionally we also were interested to observe to what extent, if at all, support for Morris was communicated. To guide this analysis, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: In what ways do fans reinforce coaching influence?
RQ2: In what ways do fans demonstrate support for Ron Morris?

Method

Steve Spurrier v. Ron Morris

During the 2012 college football season, Ron Morris, a columnist for the Columbia, South Carolina paper The State had written a column questioning Spurrier playing quarterback Connor Shaw in
a game against the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Morris contended that Shaw, who was recovering from a shoulder injury, was not needed to win this game. Spurrier then went on his weekly radio show and intimated that changes could be coming at The State. The following week, Morris appeared on an XM radio college football show and stated, “This is a real test for the administration. This is how things like Penn State happen when the administration won’t step up and confront the football coach and he becomes all-powerful” (Old, 2012). Not surprisingly, this commentary did not sit well with Spurrier and he responded, “If that’s part of the job [speaking to Morris] I can head to the beach. That’s not part of the job so we’re going to get it straightened out;” and:

We need to make some changes and I really believe between [South Carolina] president [Harris] Pastides and the guy that runs the newspaper, that some good changes are coming forth. And I encourage the people that cancelled their subscriptions last year, when some of this crap started last year, to give the newspaper and our university a chance. I believe that our city is going to be better off (Doyel, 2012).

Morris subsequently issued an apology and kept his position at The State, but was relieved of his weekend television duties with a local ABC affiliate (ABC Columbia Parts Ways, 2012). Morris posted an apology for his comments on The State’s website and given the ability for readers to post comments to stories, the site provided rich data to examine how fans reinforce coaching power in the context of a dispute with a media member.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from comments posted on The State’s website to Morris’s 945-word mea culpa entitled “It’s Not Easy Being a Coach or Columnist.” Within this post he apologized for his remarks that insinuated the situation at South Carolina resembled what happened at Penn State University. This site was selected for data analysis because it was in the same locale as the University of South Carolina and would be more likely to shed insight on how fans reinforced coaching influence. Visitors to The State website are able to post comments to stories by registering for an account, providing demographic information and then selecting a username and password. The username then appeared in the header of the user’s comment. There were a total of 221 comments to Morris’s statement and each of these was included in the analysis.

Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, a thematic analysis of the response postings was conducted using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each posting served as the unit of analysis. All posts were subjected to an initial reading to generate initial impressions in the data. After this immersion in the data, each post was micro-analyzed and classified into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on how respondents were reinforcing coaching influence or supporting Morris. Through this process, the authors gained insight into the usefulness of the developed themes (Suter, Burgen, Daas, & Durham, 2006) and development, clarification, and enhancement of categories continued until new observations failed to add significantly to existing themes. Due to the interpretative nature of data analysis, overlap between categories existed and the authors allowed for the chance that several themes could be evident in a single posting. This decision was made as some postings included multiple messages that could not definitively be classified into one specific category.

Through this process, coaching influence was overwhelmingly reinforced with 187 of the posts while only 34 posts supported Morris. Coaching influence was reinforced through five themes: (a) personal vendetta attributions; (b) divergence with the fan base; (c) boycotts; (d) collective attack; and (e)
admonishments. Support for Morris manifested through (a) vindication. Each of these themes is now discussed along with exemplars provided from the data.

Results and Interpretation

To indicate where a posting fell in the data set, a number is attached to each exemplar. For example, a posting with the code (200) indicates the 200th posting in the data set. Postings are reported verbatim from the data, and spelling and grammatical errors were left intact. We present the themes reinforcing coaching influence first, followed by the support theme for Morris.

Reinforcing Coaching Influence

Personal Vendetta Attributions. For some participants, Spurrier was justified in not speaking to the media and going on the offensive because Morris had violated journalistic objectivity. For these individuals, Morris was driven by a personal agenda and consequently, they sanctioned Spurrier’s behavior. Morris was accused of having a, “self absorbed vendetta” (23); accused of, “jealousy of Steve Spurrier” (1); and considered to have a, “personal axe to grind against Spurrier” (16). Others implied that Morris’s personal bias against Spurrier had compromised his ability to objectively cover the team. For example, “Geez some folks have no idea that there are limits to ‘freedom of speech’ …Its called Libel and Slander” (4); “RM writes his opinion as if it is fact. He constantly makes derogatory claims for which he has no factual evidence to back, but presents it as if it is the truth” (126); “Morris is apparently playing out some kind of personal grudge against Spurrier rather than just doing his job as a columnist and reporter” (10); and “You have lost your objectivity and jeopardized your position by continuing to provoke the old ball coach [Spurrier’s nickname] with integrity questions” (131). Thus, Morris was exceeding the scope of his job and merely satiating his vanity, “It was simply another case of a second rate columnist trying to get attention by eye-poking a first rate team and disrespecting one of the game’s greatest coaches” (68).

These expressions intimated that Morris’s coverage of South Carolina football lacked requisite impartiality and was driven by personal antipathy for Spurrier. Nevertheless, skepticism about whether media “objectivity” is attainable abounds, and in sports media particularly, presenting information in particular ways to promote specific understandings in audiences is quite common (Sanderson, 2008, 2010a). Morris and Spurrier clearly had a rift, and it is not uncommon for coaches to not get along with certain media members. Yet what is interesting in this data, is that for these participants, coverage of the coach and/or the team that was critical in nature seemed to be equated with the reporter pursuing a personal agenda. Thus, the issue was not whether the criticisms were valid, but rather that these questions came from a place of partiality. This behavior then reinforces coaching influence by shifting attention away from the actions of the coach to the actions of the press. Not surprisingly, perceptions of Morris’s bias fueled sentiments that his views were incongruent with those of the fan base, and participants ascribed several attributions for this disconnect.

Divergence with the Fan Base. For some, Morris’ commentary reflected that he was out of touch with the fan base, and as such, was no longer firmly aligned with the in-group. Whereas one person overtly declared, “Your non-professional rants against a coach are out of touch with the fan base” (13) others claimed that his behavior resulted from his unwillingness to accept the prosperity being enjoyed by South Carolina football, “he doesn’t see USC Football as an elite program, and has dug in his heels in such unbelief…He’s been outpaced by journalists from around the country of the Cocks asencion into greatness” (172); and “You are jaded and biased against the University of South Carolina” (163). Accordingly, Morris was simply waiting for any opportunity to criticize the program and Spurrier, “I’m sure you are just salivating hoping and waiting for the Gamecocks to lose a game so you can run Spurrier down about it” (177).
Others opined that Morris’s fracture with the fan base was a result of his failure to unquestionably trust Spurrier. For instance, “I believe Steve Spurrier to be a man of integrity who would not put a football player on the field who is not healthy enough to play and I feel the same way about the doctors involved with the situation” (219); “It is down right wrong and evil to suggest a coach would endanger the health of a player to win a game unless you have hard evidence or prior facts that back up your story” (221); and “without anything other than your opinion, I can’t trust you. Why? Because I’ve yet to be shown something that demonstrates the university or Spurrier has done something that calls into question their basic integrity” (173). Another person firmly noted that, “The Gamecocks and coaches are never wrong” (193). Finally, some individuals claimed that Morris’s behavior was a result of moving away from the haven of South Carolina and joining up with the school’s rival – Clemson University. These sentiments were typified by comments such as, “You sound like a jealous Clemson fan to me” (56) “You are obviously a Tiger fan and your biased opinion is not welcome” (125); “You write so negative about South Carolina Gamecocks but won’t do that to the Clemson Tigers” (170).

For these participants, Morris’s commentary had disenfranchised him from the fan base, a shift that some perceived to be rooted in Morris masquerading as an in-group member, whose loyalty ultimately lied with the out-group. Coaching influence was then reinforced, again, as the emphasis was not the validity of the critiques, but that critique was even raised in the first place. Accordingly, someone who questioned the coach was positioned as one who was incapable of enjoying success and was merely trying to detract from the glory the team, and by association, the fans, were experiencing. Thus, the dominant message here seemed to be that as long as the coach was producing a winning program, he was not to be challenged, and winning was the predominant concern. Additionally, Morris also was perceived to question integrity, a shared group value, creating an identity threat for fans (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 1999).

When social identity threats occur, one strategy that can be called upon is social competition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which involves group members engaging in positive, direct competition with the out-group. In this case, participants intimated that Morris’s actions were a result of being associated with Clemson University, and as such they were quick to ascribe traits such as bias and jealousy to the out-group. In contrast, Spurrier was positioned as man of integrity and respectability, who was responsible for the success of the program, achievements that Morris apparently refused to enjoy. As such, Morris was framed as an enemy of football, one who was seeking to take away the immense satisfaction the group was enjoying. Given that Morris was incapable of supporting the South Carolina program, it was necessary to seek further action to ensure that Morris would not have additional opportunities to question Spurrier.

**Boycotts.** As Morris was perceived to have an agenda against the prosperity of South Carolina football and the man who was directly responsible for that success, it was necessary to seek his permanent removal. Some people indicated that they would not read *The State* until Morris’s employment was terminated. This involved simple declarations such as, “fire ron morris” (110); “I’m never reading this paper again in print or online until I learn from WIS, WLTX, ABC Columbia, or the Free Times that MoRon no longer works here” (122); and “Please just fire this guy” (167). Others called for fans to collectively rally and pressure *The State* to cease its relationship with Morris, “The people should boycott this great paper because they have a writer that crosses the line way to much without any kind of truth. I am asking all that I know to do this and more!” (134); “I have called The State today to cancel the 3 subscriptions I pay for. I am urging others to do the same” (57); and “I will not support any business that advertises in The State Newspaper until Ron Morris is fired or transferred far far away. I challenge the rest of you to do the same” (196). One person opined that these efforts would not cease, “The football community at our university will not rest until you are fired and the rag for which you write is put out of business” (183). Yet another individual elaborately noted:
Guy tries to give me a paper today at a local grocery store, had to explain why I cancelled my subscription and why I did not want a free copy of today’s paper. Told him once Morris is fired or moved to handling the obits I would seriously consider resuming the subscription (50).

Researchers have noted that a person's emotional attachment can dictate his/her commitment to the association (Rusbult, 1983), and the desire to maintain that association (Thomson, Maclnnis, & Park, 2005; Van Lange, Rusbult, Drigotas, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). In this case, the success Spurrier brought to the South Carolina football program fostered emotional attachments with fans. Indeed, the joy of winning prompted desires to maintain that feeling, and when someone was perceived to threaten that status – it was time for action. With these participants, action manifested through boycotting The State paper and emphasizing that their dissolution would remain until Morris was re-assigned or terminated. Yet for some, it was not enough to merely threaten to boycott the paper, their abstinence extended to advertisers and was so intense that they would not even read a free copy. Whereas Morris retained his position at The State he did lose his weekend television anchor position and while it is not clear that this was a result of his comments, it certainly seems plausible.

This behavior all works to reinforce coaching influence, as any critic of the coach must be silenced. It is not surprising that fans would enjoy the boost that comes from associating with a winning football program; however, if that association shrouds the ability to tolerate criticism and encourages mobilization against perceived offenders it may lead to problematic outcomes. This system or perceived system may intimidate some members of the media to only report “positive” stories, thereby suffocating the independent eye of the press that can be helpful in exposing problematic behavior that would be important to disseminate to the public. Troubling behavior may then be allowed to perpetuate until a major scandal affects the athletic program and the university writ large. Yet, for some fans, this is a tolerable risk to accept for victory on the field, and there is no shortage of allies for such a perspective. In that vein, when a coach is criticized, fans may collectively band together and given the importance of the team to their social identity, perceive the criticism to be leveled at them as well.

Collective Attacks. For some participants, Morris’s criticisms extended well beyond Spurrier and were perceived to be a personal attack on the South Carolina fan base and the Columbia region. One person shared, “Our city depends partly upon the revenues generated by the University. Ron you’re not only doing a disservice to our University, but to the city as a whole” (62); while another person declared, “You insulted not only Steve Spurrier, The University of South Carolina but also the fans, alumni and the citizens of the State of South Carolina with your remarks” (89). Others claimed that “While you have written columns that are of a positive nature, you tend to negate those positives with jabs and hateful statements about the HOME TOWN TEAM” (114) and, “You live in Columbia and I think all the readers want to see is for you to adapt to the culture and embrace the best years in college football ever at The University of South Carolina” (203).

When social identity is threatened, one method group members can employ to rectify the situation is to promote stronger group affiliation (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). In the data participants displayed this tactic by declaring that Morris’s attacks were not only hurtful to Spurrier and the football program, but to the fan base and the Columbia region collectively. Thus, Morris’s criticisms of Spurrier were essentially missives against a sizeable group of people who were ready to defend their coach and confront his attacker. Although participants bolstered group affiliation through their responses, in doing so, they laid out group “norms” that essentially suffocated dissent. Indeed, if one lived in the local area and covered the team, he/she was expected, and perhaps even obligated, to only discuss the team in positive terms. Failure to do so was equated with an unwillingness to enjoy the prosperity of the football program, which trumped any concern about potential problems. While these views fostered in-group solidarity, they also reinforced coaching influence by equating challenges or criticisms of the coach as personal affronts to the fan base and the region. Thus, to question Spurrier was to question the personal integrity of fans as well and ultimately shifted attention away from the coach to the press, suggesting that
as long as the coach is winning, there is no reason to question the coach and disrupt the “good times.” These feelings were so strong, that some individuals elevated their behavior by severally admonishing Morris and in some cases, threatened him for his perceived disloyalty.

**Admonishments.** Although most participants were perturbed by Morris’s comments, some individuals offered stern rebukes that were very telling about the expected behavior of group members. For example, one person warned, “it is not smart to lie about the ol ball coach” (33); perhaps, because as another participant noted, “Steve Spurrier is a legend, who does have much power here in Columbia” (44). Others counseled Morris that he needed to, “Show some integrity and respect for those people whose careers give you an opportunity to support your family” (105); and to, “Admit you are wrong and hope that you are ever lucky enough to be allowed to cover Carolina athletics again” (97). These warnings were necessary because Morris had dared to question the person that participants perceived was responsible for the prosperity of South Carolina football. Thus Morris was advised, “Suffice it to say that is Gamecock home town. You write positive about Gamecocks or you leave” (107) and, “I’m telling you that if you would adapt to the culture needed to Win in college football then you would garner a lot more success” (230). Morris was also advised that it was imperative he make these changes, “The Gamecocks family will not stand for your negative writing anymore without giving you a hard time. You have made your own bed so sleep in it” (170). Still others declared that Morris needed to recognize Spurrier’s place at the top of the hierarchy:

> Lets face facts now, the old ball coach is the rock star with a hot new album climbing up the charts and you are a vaulted writed who just like priests, poets and politicians, has many people to thank. Do the right thing and go personally apologize to Coach Spurrier to be able to attend all the press conferences and do your job (131).

Another person opined that Morris was fortunate to be dealing with someone as compassionate as Spurrier, “You just lucky that Coach Spurrier is a lot more passive than someone like me. Had you questioned my integrity with no shred of proof, I would have stomped you’re a$$ a long time ago” (159).

Here coaching influence was reinforced by individuals contending that criticism of Spurrier was unacceptable and fraught with tangible consequences. These expressions reveal interesting insights about the perceptions that these fans possessed about college football – namely that winning trumps all and is the most important end to obtain, regardless of the means employed in that pursuit. Consider the comment from the person who suggested that Morris simply needed to “adapt to the culture to win in college football.” Yet, one can argue that the culture needed to win in college football is turbulent, rather than smooth, and a “win at all costs” mentality can certainly lead to problems. For example, Seeger and Ulmer (2003) noted that one of the primary downsfalls of Enron was a company culture that refused to acknowledge bad news. While we are certainly not contending that Enron and major collegiate football programs are equivalent, the point is that when dissent is suffocated, and the critical eye disappears, problems are only temporarily contained until they overflow into the public arena and become a significant organizational crisis.

Ron Morris may or may not have had a personal vendetta with Steve Spurrier, but what is alarming is the perpetuation of norms that suggest as long as winning is taking place, the “good times” are to be reveled in and potential problems are to be eschewed – which all works to reinforce coaching influence. Nevertheless, there was a very small minority who supported Morris and legitimized his position. In authenticating Morris’s behavior, these participants advocated for the importance of a critical lens to be applied to collegiate athletic programs to avoid significant problems in the future.
Support for Morris

Vindication. Although small in numbers (15% of the sample), there were some participants who defended Morris and warned others of the consequences of placing too much control in the hands of one individual. These participants noted that as a member of the press, Morris was “simply doing his job” (24); that “he is entitled to have/write/say his OPINION, instead of just steadily reporting the facts” (25); and lamented that, “The day when a sports columnist has to apologize for giving his opinion is a very sad day” (124). One person declared that it was Spurrier, rather than Morris, who was in need of censure, “He should be disciplined for deciding he won’t talk with Morris present, or better yet, get a coach from this millennium” (36). Others posited that failing to question a coach could invite unfortunate consequences, “The blind allegiance to Spurrier is akin to that of Paterno Circa November 2011” (58); and:

You don’t throw away all the really important functions of a University by giving too much power to a football coach just because he can win football games – no matter how much the fans – and he – believes in his greatness (55).

Another person noted:

He is not saying Spurrier or staff is covering up sex crimes, just warning of letting a coach, because he has met with more football success than any other coach in the history of the school, start yielding too much power, a point Carolina would be wise to listen to (34).

And another declared:

EVERYONE involved in that athletic program needs to be careful not to let winning become more important than ethics and morals. There should never be a ‘win at all cost’ attitude in football or any other sport. You need to give Morris a break!!” (82).

Although comprising a small segment of the sample, these individuals contended that it was vital for an independent person to question the actions of a head football coach. Yet, given the sentiments expressed by the other participants in the sample, it is not difficult to imagine why a media member would be reticent to voice criticism of a head coach. Additionally, while it may be unpleasant to face criticism in the short-term and sustain a temporary social identity hit, this may be preferable to the more significant damage that can occur if problems are allowed to fester before erupting into the public domain. Further, while it may be popular and arguably, desirable, to turn a blind eye to the behavior of a head coach, a coach who operates with transparency and deals with issues as they occur, may provide additional avenues for emotional connection with fans. Indeed, previous research has noted that when athletes commit transgressions, initially acknowledging the problem hastens fans’ willingness to forgive and then support them (Sanderson & Emmons, 2014), and it seems plausible this would extend to college football coaches as well. The question is whether a majority of fans would be willing to accept short-term turbulence rather than disrupt the smooth ride of prosperity.

Discussion

This research explored the extent to which fans reinforced coaching influence through a case study analysis of a dispute between a college football coach and media member. Beyond the emergent themes, this research offers several important implications that are now discussed. First, the responses here illustrate one explanation for why problematic issues with coaches at big time college programs rarely gain traction with the public until it is past the point of no return. For example, consider the case of former Rutgers University head basketball coach Mike Rice, who was fired in April 2013, after video
surfaced depicting him engaging in verbally and physically aggressive behaviors towards his players (Armstrong, Schapiro, & Brennan, 2013). These incidents had occurred several months previously, and Rutgers administrators had known about them when they happened. However, they disciplined Rice internally and did not make any public comment at the time. When the video was released by a former member of the men’s basketball staff, it set off a pandemonium of media coverage, and many were left wondering how such behavior could occur on a college campus?

Although various answers were offered, one explanation is that in some cases, administrators and fans only see through the lens of winning and losing. Thus, so long as a coach is winning, all methods to achieve that status are inconsequential. What is interesting about the Rice case is that he had a losing record at Rutgers, and one can wonder if his termination would have occurred had he led Rutgers to a conference championship, Final Four, or national championship? Another reason such stories may be suppressed is that members of the press may be hesitant to investigate them given the attitudes fans, boosters, and others hold towards the coach. As the data here suggest, criticism is tantamount to disloyalty, and some members of the press may view the benefits of exposing problems to not be worth the hassle and the pushback that appears to be generated by fans and other supporters of the athletic program. The easy thing to do is not create controversy and report on the items that are not taboo in nature.

Following that line of thinking, a second implication from the current study reveals that critiques of the program tend to promote stronger in-group affiliation and equate dissent with a collective attack on the fanbase, further enhancing coaching influence. For instance, consider the participant who claimed that Morris’s questioning of Spurrier were attacks on the “fans, alumni, and citizens of the State of South Carolina” (89). These feelings may be strengthened when the coach is experiencing success, as noted by the participant who declared that Morris needed to “adapt to the culture and embrace the best years in college football ever at The University of South Carolina” (203). When a coach is successful, it seems plausible that in-group affiliation will be bolstered, which may then result in fans giving the coach a “blank check” so they can enjoy the satisfaction they derive from being associated with a winner.

These emotional connections then prompt fans to enact behavior that silences dissent and preserves the status quo, which works to reinforce coaching influence. As noted earlier, Morris did lose his part-time television position during this feud with Spurrier, and although not publicly acknowledged to be a correlation, it is plausible that the two are in fact linked. Consider fans who suggested that they would not purchase the newspaper and/or purchase from advertisers until Morris was relieved of his duties. Such pressure may force media outlets to take steps against those who are perceived to be “rocking the boat,” whether that be removing them from covering the team or terminating their employment altogether. This is a less of problem for members of the national media who are generally headquartered far away from college campuses, but for the local beat writers, the threat of discipline and retaliation may enable and maintain cultures that reinforce coaching influence.

A third implication from the current study that bears watching going forward is how criticism of head coaches is perceived by fans. In the data, many people attributed criticism of Spurrier with a lack of objectivity. In that vein, coaching influence is reinforced as critique and challenge is trivialized as an agenda-driven action that is not made with impartiality. Although one could argue that the converse would also be true – that support of the coach would reflect a lack of objectivity, individuals in the data seemed willing to live with a double standard. Indeed, unquestionable support was positioned as the appropriate group behavior, and any deviation from this course, was not only an attack on Spurrier but the collective fan base and geographic region as well. In this case, the fact that Spurrier had taken South Carolina football to arguably unprecedented prosperity seems likely to have influenced participants views on objectivity. But what happens when a coach begins to lose? When the pendulum swings the other way, fans may reverse course and position criticism as the appropriate and expected group behavior.
Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research has several limitations that are now addressed. First, the research examined only one site, and while we believe this site provided an appropriate and rich sample, caution should be used in generalizing these results to other head coaching incidents. Researchers have noted that one of the limitations of conducting research with discussion forums is that findings may be site-specific and not applicable to any context beyond the sample and that people may behave differently on a discussion forum than they would on another computer-mediated site or social network (Norwood, 2012; Wojcieszak, 2011). In this case, comments posted by participants may differ from views they might express in venues such as Facebook, Twitter, and other discussion forums. Sampling a diversity of sites may yield additional insights into ways that fans reinforce coaching influence.

Additionally, many people may merely lurk on discussion boards, and not participate (Daniels, 2009). Clavio (2008) also found that demographics of college message board users were primarily male, white and affluent, which indicates that the views expressed on these forums are reflective of a minority, rather than majority, position. Nevertheless, discussion forums are burgeoning venues for sports college sports fans (Hardin, Koo, Ruhikey, Dittmore, & McGreevey, 2012, and these sites can shed light on how a segment of fans are understanding and processing issues surrounding college athletics.

Third, we looked at only one context—a feud between a coach and a member of the press. Although we believe this is an important relationship, it would be salient to investigate fan responses to other incidents such as a coach refusing to let a player transfer to another program. Fans may be more or less willing to support coaches in different situations and it would be informative to see how support changes or differs across different incidents. Fourth, Morris is a local media member, and we wonder what differences and similarities exist when the perceived detractor is a national media member? That is, fans may perceive that local reporters have a more stringent obligation to be favorable in their coverage because they are immersed in the day-to-day activities and live in the local region, whereas a national reporter may be viewed as an “outsider” whose critiques are to be expected. Sports reporters with a national scope also are less likely to be pressured and intimidated into reporting only favorable coverage, whereas a local reporter may feel more constrained to ensure their articles conform to expectations (e.g., reinforcing the coach).

We believe there are several promising directions for future research to travel in exploring coaching influence. First, how does support for coaches vary as a function of winning and losing? It seems plausible that a coach with a losing record would have less leeway with fans, yet there may be other factors (e.g., charisma, alumni) that contribute to the decision to support and reinforce a coach’s influence. Second, it would be insightful to conduct research with members of the media, particularly those who are local beat writers, to better understand and assess their willingness to express criticism of influential head coaches at big-time college football and basketball programs. Third, does support for coaches differ by demographic factors such as age, gender, and identification with the school, team, and coach? Emotional attachment may trump all of these factors, but it would be interesting to see what differences existed amongst these variables.

Conclusion

The salaries of college football and basketball coaches continue to escalate and in some ways, college athletics has become an “arms” race (Tsitsos & Nixon II, 2012), with multi-million dollar facilities and massive personnel viewed as necessary expenditures to maintain competitiveness. As college athletics continues along this road to expansion, the role of the press will be vital to raise awareness and notify the public of potential problems. However, if a blind eye is turned to avoid the stigmatism that may arise from a temporary setback, fans, administrators and others will only have the mirror to look at when problematic incidents explode on the public scene.
References


