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### **Social Media Policies within NCAA Member Institutions: Evolving Technology and its Impact on Policy**

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**Jimmy Sanderson, Ph.D.**  
*Clemson University*

**Eric Snyder, Ph.D.**  
*University of Oklahoma*

**David Hull**  
*University of Oklahoma*

**Kelly Gramlich**  
*Clemson University*

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*Social media's rapid adoption and usage by student-athletes has created risk for athletic department personnel who are often tasked with creating policy to protect both the department and the student-athletes. This research examined 244 social media policies from Division I, Division II, and Division III schools using framing and communication privacy management theories. An exploratory sequential mixed methods approach was utilized to collect the data. Analysis methods included content, thematic, and calculation of chi-square coefficient for significance. The results indicated that the policies overwhelmingly framed social media as restrictive. The analysis also revealed that student-athletes were presented with conflicting messages about ownership of social media content and were subjected to rules that governed content, monitoring, and the actions of others. As such, the authors suggest that social media policies should include more language that explains how student-athletes can benefit from social media technologies.*

*Keywords: intercollegiate athletics, communication privacy management, student-athletes, sport communication, governance*

As social media platforms diversified and usage steadily increased in the United States, athletic departments have begun to realize with that social media is most likely not a temporary fad that will only be used by American teens (COSIDA, 2013). The adoption of social media platforms by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), athletic conferences, and athletic departments continues to evolve in efforts to achieve respective organizational goals. While connectivity and information access has been largely successful when striving to reach such objectives, these organizations have discovered the difficulty associated with controlling the message of student-athletes and monitoring their public commentary expressed on these platforms.

In order to curtail negative behavior, many athletic departments adopted official social media policies that are included within student-athlete handbooks. To be clear, negative behavior is often considered from the point of view of college athletics administrators. Thus, what is considered “negative” may vary based on individual perspective. Indeed, researchers have noted that terms used by college athletics administrators often carry different meanings for student-athletes (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). Yet social media policies appear to have inconsistent adoption in collegiate athletics. A study by Sanderson (2011) found that of the 249 Division I online student-athlete handbooks, only 159 institutions, just over half, included a social media policy (64%). A more recent survey by the College Sports Information Directors of American (COSIDA) (2013) found that of the 450 participating institutions, only 33% had a written social media policy for student-athletes. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that 50% of the sports information directors (SID) who completed the survey reported having to remove a social media post from a coach or student-athlete over the course of the 2012 academic year.

Social media has a major impact on the communicative landscape of college athletics (Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2011; Sanderson & Browning, 2013) as evidenced by the evolution of sport media and sport communication practices of many NCAA participating institutions (Clavio & Walsh, 2014; Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012). Student-athletes individually and athletic programs collectively can experience both positive and negative consequences stemming from student-athletes social media use. Thus, the influence of social media policies for student-athletes is a critical topic in need of thorough investigation. Previous work in this area is limited to Sanderson’s (2011) study where Division I schools were examined. Broadening the scope of this line of inquiry by examining social media policies at multiple levels within the NCAA will add to the growing body of literature. Additionally, it should be noted that social media has changed dramatically since the 2011 study, as visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat emerged and appear to be growing in use by student-athletes (Social Media Use of Student Athletes, 2015). This research answers Sanderson’s call by exploring social media policies in NCAA Division I, Division II and Division III athletic programs to further understand the policies that impact student-athlete social media use. Additionally, the research also seeks to examine if messages about social media usage as contained in student-athlete handbooks have evolved in their framing of social media as a primarily negative sphere (Sanderson, 2011).

## Review of Literature

The proliferation of social media technologies throughout the world is remarkable. Social media has altered traditional forms of communication and increased the speed with which individuals can connect. In 2011, it was estimated that roughly 250,000 social networking sites were available for virtual use (de Borchgrave, 2011). Some, such as Facebook (890 million daily active users, Company Info, 2014); Instagram (300 million users, 300 Million Sharing Real Moments, 2014); and Twitter (288 million monthly active users, About Twitter, n.d.) have been quite successful at attracting a plethora of followers. Others, like Amplicate, Mixx and Skribit have all failed to succeed in the industry (Craig, 2013). Regardless of business viability, each of the social media sites have a commonality, individuals must, at least initially, visit the website in order to participate (Craig, 2013).

Social media's growth in intercollegiate athletics can be witnessed on a daily basis through college network tweets, the number of users who follow both intercollegiate athletic department and student-athletes' social media channels, and live streaming of comments from social media users during intercollegiate athletic events. In 2014, the inaugural College Football Playoff launched their website which included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest accounts (College Football Playoffs, 2014). At the Division I level, research has found that athletic departments have quickly embraced social media by incorporating the platforms into traditional athletic department operations including marketing, sales, and merchandise development (Clavio, 2011), although some Division I schools experience low participation rates on their social media platforms (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). Athletic department compliance personnel's social media usage has increased given the creation of social media policies and the growth of social media use by student-athletes (Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Snyder, 2014). Augmented following by the public also is evident. For example, at the time of this writing, the University of Michigan football program has 268,544 Twitter followers (Twitter.com/UMICHFootball) and the University of North Carolina basketball program has 198,186 followers (Twitter.com/UNC\_Basketball, 2014). Perhaps most impressive is University of Kentucky head coach John Calipari's 1.3 million Twitter followers (Twitter.com/UKcoachCalipari) which trumps all other Division I men's football and basketball head coaches (Machir, 2013). What a few years ago seemed to be the prerogative of a few select athletic programs is now a communication reality for all NCAA member institutions (Cooper & Pierce, 2011).

### *Social Media Benefits and Challenges in Intercollegiate Athletics*

Social media offers important benefits to intercollegiate athletic departments and institutions of higher education, particularly in terms of revenue making capabilities, marketing of products, and the branding of the institution (Asur & Huberman, 2010). For instance, the University of Central Florida utilized Facebook to promote their football team's game winning defensive play against the University of Houston in an attempt to sell additional tickets (McClellan, 2014). The University of Illinois used Twitter to garner their fans' attention by offering tickets for \$9.99 for an allotted period of time during the summer (McClellan, 2014). Moreover, the development of the social media platform Chirpify has resulted in select

institutions revolutionizing their marketing and development strategies within athletic departments (McClellan, 2014).

Unfortunately, the benefits of social media are often times overshadowed by negative incidents arising from the content of student-athletes' social media posts. Increasingly, social media research has focused on questionable content (Miller, Parsons & Lifer, 2010; Roberts & Roach, 2009; Sanderson 2011), ethical dilemmas (Garber, 2011), social interactions (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson & Truax, 2014), and legal issues (Epstein, 2011; Hopkins, Hopkins, & Whelton, 2013; Mayer, 2013; Parkinson, 2011). Nevertheless, social media does offer benefits to student-athletes as well. Through social media, athletes can display more of their personality and identity beyond the sphere of athletics, which opens up additional avenues for fans to identify with them (Sanderson, 2013), which can lead to unique opportunities where athletes ask fans questions and engage with them via social media (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Additionally, social media also allows athletes to keep in touch with friends and family from whom they are geographically separated. Social media also holds benefits as a career development and networking tool. Thus, some researchers argued that these positive aspects of social media need to be incorporated into social media education for student-athletes to balance out messages about social media's negative effects (Sanderson, Browning, & Schmittel, 2015).

Questionable content is often the topic of discussion with media outlets when student-athletes are found to have shared inappropriate material. While social media provides opportunities for individuals and organizations to create social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) through networking (Waters, Burnette, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009); it also can mitigate individual and organizational worth. For example, in February 2014, a student-athlete from Kent State University was indefinitely suspended after tweeting comments about the media coverage of the first openly gay player, Michael Sam, being drafted into the National Football League (NFL) (Nichols, 2014). In April 2014, Penn State offensive line coach Herb Hand issued a tweet indicating that a prospect had been dropped from recruitment due to his social media presence, and Hand indicated that via social media, he had seen the prospect's genuine character (Associated Press, 2014). This comment suggests that, increasingly, college coaches and athletic department personnel are using social media to evaluate a future student-athlete's character (Associated Press, 2014). One ill-conceived tweet, post, or comment can result in the loss of a scholarship and future career opportunities with the decision-making onus resting in the hands of athletic department administrators or coaches (DiVeronica, 2014).

Research regarding social interactions between student-athletes and fans presents additional challenges for athletic departments as well. A study by Sanderson and Truax (2014) investigated messages sent to University of Alabama placekicker Cade Foster after losing to rival Auburn University in 2013. The findings indicated that belittling, mocking, sarcasm, and threats were the most common negative behaviors expressed. However, it should be noted that supportive tweets overwhelmed the negative tweets, as fans chastised those who expressed these vitriolic remarks to Foster. Nevertheless, maladaptive comments are often severe and can be potentially problematic for student-athletes' mental health (Olson, 2013). Another study by Browning and Sanderson (2012) conducted interviews with 20 Division I student-athletes to investigate how they responded to receiving negative tweets. They found that Twitter presented challenges for student-athletes as it made them susceptible to harsh criticism and they wanted to respond to these detractors but were often forbidden from engaging in such behavior. Both of

these studies advocated that athletic departments remain proactive in helping student-athletes utilize social media while also providing support for athletes that are targets of abusive behavior.

Legal issues arising from social media are unavoidable, yet laws to protect individuals have been slow to metastasize. A law review article by Epstein (2011) indicated that courts have failed to provide a clear standard for universities and athletic departments regarding appropriate and inappropriate social media monitoring and banning. According to Epstein (2011), the most prevalent legal issues that evolve from social media use are vicarious liability and negligence. Consequently, Epstein argued that the best course of action for institutions was to implement a policy that was rational while simultaneously providing clarification of the policy through education. An additional law review focused on an institution's choice to implement a social media policy and the impact of that decision on a student's constitutional rights (Mayer, 2013). Mayer (2013) recommended that athletic departments adopt wide reaching social media policies that are incorporated into financial aid agreements to avoid equal protection claims. Hopkins, Hopkins, and Whelton (2013), investigated the NCAA's "forcing" of universities to monitor student-athletes' social media activity and the legal implications arising from this directive. Their findings raise concerns about speech and privacy rights, tort liability, and student-athlete safety. They also suggested that athletic departments monitor only publicly available social media accounts as a way to minimize risk while protecting institutional interest(s) without violating student-athletes' legal rights. While these articles provide advice to athletic department administrators and coaches, how to shape policies is not elucidated in the literature.

### *Organizational Policies*

Research pertaining to social media policies and legislation in intercollegiate athletics is sparse as social media regulation is relatively new to intercollegiate athletics. Legislation and policies created and/or proposed by the federal government, state governments, the NCAA, conferences, institutions, athletic departments and individual teams vary in regards to scope and function. Social media policies exist at both private and public schools and some of these schools actively monitor and/or restrict social media usage rather than having policies in place against inappropriate content (Hopkins, Hopkins, & Whelton, 2013). Regardless of organizational level, each policy directly and indirectly affects all stakeholders. This portion of the literature review will focus on federal and state legislation, and social media policies within college athletics.

First introduced at the federal level in 2012, the Social Network Online Protection Act (SNOA) continues to be modified and re-introduced in subsequent congressional sessions (Social Network Online Protection Act, 2013). According to Hopkins, et al. (2013) and Snyder, Hutchens, Jones, and Sun (in press) this federal legislation does not specifically mention student-athlete protections. It does, however, apply broadly to all students in higher education and amends the Higher Education Act. While it remains uncertain whether or not SNOA will gain widespread support, the language within the legislation does not extend to the monitoring or banning practices to which some athletic departments require student-athletes to comply (Snyder, et al., in press). This differs from state legislation that has been enacted to protect students.

According to Snyder, et al. (in press) since 2012, 12 states passed laws addressing social media use in higher education: Arkansas, California, Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Wisconsin, Louisiana, and Utah. Delaware and California were the first to pass such legislation in 2012 (Conley, 2012). The laws in all twelve states prohibit a college or university from requiring a student or prospective student to disclose private

social media account information (e.g., username and/or password). According to Michigan's law, educational institutions are prohibited from the following:

Requesting a student or prospective student to grant access to, allow observation of, or disclose information that allows access to or observation of the student's or prospective student's personal internet account (Mich. Comp. Laws § 37.274).

With the passing of these state laws, athletic departments in the states that passed this legislation must now remain cognizant of the law when creating, implementing, and/or enforcing a social media policy.

At the athletic department level, a single study by Sanderson (2011) investigated the differences and similarities between social media policies at Division I institutions. He examined student-athlete handbooks from 159 Division I institutions and found that policies heavily restricted content and often implemented external monitoring processes. Moreover, many of the institutions portrayed social media as dangerous and associated its use with risk. As such, Sanderson (2011) suggested that social media policies should be inclusive of both positive and negative frameworks while continuing to stay abreast of current technological trends and training.

These studies in conjunction with continued investigation of state and federal legislative changes have contributed to a better understanding of social media policies in college athletic departments. However, it is important to note that Sanderson's (2011) study was completed prior to any state legislation being passed. In addition, the rapid increase of social media technologies suggests a need to revisit athletic department policies to ascertain their currency. As athletic department visibility continues to escalate, an investigation and synopsis of current social media policies becomes an essential component that must be included in scholarly research.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Framing*

Framing is a function of the mass media wherein mass media outlets report stories in certain ways to generate a particular interpretation with the audience (Kuypers & Cooper, 2005; Paxton, 2004; Tian & Stewart, 2005). Framing occurs when media organizations specifically emphasize certain aspects of a news story to promote particular understandings and interpretations with the audience (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001). Whereas framing is prominent in media, it is not the only entity that can engage in framing. With the advent of the internet and social media, framing can now rest in the hands of the public, advocacy groups, and organizations. For example, Porter and Hellsten (2014) analyzed participatory interaction on YouTube and noted how participants enacted framing in response to climate change. Additionally, other work has noted how framing can be enacted by message forum participants (Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014), and how fans can introduce alternative framings to counter the way that an athlete is being framed in the mainstream media (Sanderson, 2010).

With respect to social media policies in intercollegiate athletics, the way that an athletic department frames social media can send messages designed to generate a particular interpretation and understanding with student-athletes. Sanderson's (2011) study of social media

policies in Division I athletics found that institutions overwhelmingly framed policies as risky and that only seven policies in the sample described positive ways that student-athletes could use social media. Sanderson (2011) suggested that future research should investigate policies over time and that these endeavors also should broaden the sample to include athletic programs from all division levels. Accordingly, the current work seeks to evaluate how social media policies in intercollegiate athletics evolved by exploring policies at the Division I, II and III levels. Specifically, we propose the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the overall tone in the social media policies towards social media usage?

RQ1a: Are there significant differences in how social media policies are framed between Division levels?

RQ2: How do policies present social media's impact on student-athletes' future?

RQ2a: Are there significant differences in how policies present social media's impact on student-athletes' future?

RQ2b: Are there significant differences in how social media policies present social media's impact on student-athletes' future between Division levels?

### *Communication Privacy Management*

Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory is an effective framework for analyzing the ways in which individuals manage their private information. The framework was originally applied to face-to-face social communication, but recently has expanded to include social media technologies (Child, Pearson, & Petronio, 2009; Sanderson, 2011; Thompson, 2011). CPM "offers a privacy management system that identifies ways privacy boundaries are coordinated between and among individuals" (Petronio, 2002, p. 3) and "suggests a way to understand the tension between revealing and concealing private information between and among individuals" (Petronio, 2007, p. 218). Thus, communicative choices are influenced by an individual's choice to distribute information, impose regulations on that information, and negotiate rules with others who have access to the information (Miller, 2009).

CPM specifies six principles regarding privacy management that provides a path to illuminate when access to the information is granted and denied (Petronio, 2002). The six principles are as follows: (1) the belief that private information belongs to the individual; (2) the belief that individuals should have control and ownership of their information; (3) in order to control their private information, individual and collective privacy boundaries are developed; (4) when individuals provide access to their private information, collective ownership occurs. For those who utilize social media, information disclosed on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter becomes co-owned by all the people who have access to it. Hence, anyone who can see the information then has the ability to relay the information to others without considering the individual's privacy; (5) once information is co-owned, privacy rules are developed regarding the distribution of information; and, (6) if these privacy rules are broken, then boundary turbulence can occur. The principles inherent in CPM helped guide the analysis of intercollegiate social media policies. Specifically, we proposed the following research questions:

RQ3: How is student-athletes' ownership of social media content presented within social media policies?

RQ4: What rules and boundaries for social media usage are contained within the social media policies?

## Method

### *Data Collection*

Data were obtained from the NCAA member institutions at the Division I, II, and III levels (<http://web1.ncaa.org/onlineDir/exec2/divisionListing>). For Division I, schools in the “Power Five” conferences (Atlantic Coast, Big 10, Big 12, Pac-12, and Southeastern) were selected, yielding a total of 65 schools. This decision was made as previous research (Sanderson, 2011) examined social media policies at the Division I level, and as we wanted to include Division I, II, and III, we elected to use the “Power Five” conferences as a purposive sample. Moreover, in August 2014, member schools in the “Power Five” were awarded more autonomy over rules and regulations and thus now have significant power to shape Division I athletics (Bennett, 2014). Thus, given as were expanding previous work on social media policies that had looked at Division I schools more comprehensively, we felt that the “Power Five” schools would provide representation for Division I so we could enjoy a wide latitude with Division II and III schools. A list of Division II ( $n = 23$ ) and Division III ( $n = 55$ ) conferences and member schools (Division II,  $n = 292$ ; Division III,  $n = 531$ ) also were obtained from the NCAA website.

Using similar procedures to Sanderson (2011) the athletic department website for each school was then visited to obtain the student-athlete handbook. Some schools did not have the student-athlete handbook available electronically (Division I = 22, Division II = 172, Division III = 342), or have a social media policy within the student-athlete handbook (Division I = 7, Division II = 24, Division III = 77). Thus, the final sample for the analysis was 244 policies<sup>1</sup>. Each policy was copied into a Microsoft Word document yielding a total of 312 pages. For Division I schools, the policies ranged from 22 words to 1,682 words ( $M = 440$ ,  $SD = 417$ ). For Division II schools, the policies ranged from 20 words, to 2,269 words ( $M = 398$ ,  $SD = 412$ ). For Division III schools, the policies ranged from 33 words to 2,963 words ( $M = 357$ ,  $SD = 337$ ). Whereas some policies mentioned multiple social media platforms and others did not mention them at all, the platforms mentioned included: Facebook ( $n = 187$ ), Twitter ( $n = 137$ ), MySpace ( $n = 96$ ), Instagram ( $n = 47$ ), YouTube ( $n = 39$ ), LinkedIn ( $n = 15$ ), Pinterest ( $n = 14$ ), Friendster ( $n = 9$ ), Vine ( $n = 8$ ), Xanga ( $n = 8$ ), Flickr ( $n = 6$ ), Google+ ( $n = 5$ ), Snapchat ( $n = 5$ ), Tumblr ( $n = 5$ ), Picasa ( $n = 2$ ), and Digg ( $n = 2$ ).

### *Data Analysis*

An exploratory sequential mixed methods approach was utilized to collect the data (Cresswell, 2014). To begin, two researchers completed a content analysis by reviewing the policies to obtain a general sense of the messages contained therein. From this analysis, a codebook was developed which included eight variables that were operationalized as follows: four categories were developed to represent the overall tone of the policy, specifically, whether the policy framed social media as: (a) enabling (e.g., the policy listed positive benefits to using social media and described how student-athletes could benefit from using social media); (b) restrictive (e.g., the policy listed prohibitions and restrictions and described only the pitfalls of

social media); (c) neutral (e.g., vague or ambiguous references to social media that did not indicate either a positive or negative aspect to using social media), or (d) framing was absent. The framing of social media's future impact on student-athletes in the policies was coded to reflect whether the policy presented social media as having a: (a) positive future impact (e.g., student-athletes could use social media to elevate their chances of getting a job, connect with industry professionals, engage in personal branding); (b) negative future impact (e.g., student-athletes could lose out on job opportunities and risk their eligibility by using social media), (c) neutral future impact (e.g., policies that mentioned that employers checked social media but did not delineate what the outcome of that process might be), or (d) discussion of future impact was absent.

Two coders coded 10% of the policies in the sample ( $n = 25$ ) and inter-coder reliability was determined. Neuendorf (2002) recommends an overlap of data of 10%-20%, placing our procedure within acceptable parameters. Intercoder reliability was determined using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960) and resulted in scores of .93 for overall tone of the policy and .93 for framing of future impact. Based on these scores, the remaining policies were divided equally and coded. Upon completing of the coding procedure, the researchers utilized a quantitative approach to analyze the differences between divisional affiliation (I, II, and III) and the overall tone (e.g., enabling, restrictive, neutral, or absent) and future impact of the policy (e.g., positive, negative, neutral, absent). These differences were reported as chi-square coefficients.

To answer the third research question, a thematic analysis using constant comparative methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was employed. To begin, two researchers read through the policies to obtain a sense of how they discussed student-athletes' ownership of social media content. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that this reading involves researchers looking for patterns and meaning, rather than just casually reading through the data. Accordingly, this approach requires researchers to make notes about what is compelling in the data and to generate initial categories, which allows for possible patterns to emerge and be shaped. Braun and Clarke (2006) also noted that this procedure can be informed by data or theory and the data-driven approach was selected to allow categories to emerge as data analysis unfolded rather than *a priori* (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009). Next, using similar procedures to Sanderson and Emmons (2014) two researchers independently coded a random sample of 25% of the policies ( $n = 61$ ), developing themes by micro-analyzing and classifying themes into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) based on the ways that ownership of social media content was being presented. Development, clarification, and refinement of categories continued until new observations did not substantively add to existing categories. This allowed both researchers to gain insight into the usefulness of the developed thematic categories (Suter, Bergen, Daas, & Durham, 2006). Both authors then met and reviewed the categories and any differences were resolved until reaching consensus. After reaching agreement on the categories, the remaining policies were equally divided and analyzed.

To answer the fourth research question, a textual analysis was conducted (Fairclough, 2003; Paek & Shah, 2003). This method captured the rules and boundaries as the initial review of the policies uncovered that rules were explicitly stated (e.g., "do not post your social security number, do not criticize coaches"). Using similar procedures to those employed for the third research question, two researchers took a random sample of 25% of the policies ( $n = 61$ ) and extrapolated and grouped the rules and boundaries for student-athletes' social media content. The two researchers then met and reviewed their groupings, and resolved differences through discussion. Upon reaching consensus, the remaining policies were equally divided and analyzed.

## Results

### *Framing of Policies*

Analysis revealed that the social media policies were overwhelmingly framed in ways that restricted student-athletes social media usage. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the policy tones for each category and division level. The analysis revealed that there were no significant differences between the categories,  $\chi^2 = 11.50, p > .05$ .

Table 1 - *Policy Framing by Division Level*

Category	Division	<i>N</i>	% Total
Enabling	I	0	0
	II	0	0
	III	3	1.2
Restrictive	I	28	11.5
	II	87	35.7
	III	99	40.6
Neutral	I	6	2.5
	II	10	4.1
	III	10	4.1
Absent	I	1	0.4
	II	0	0
	III	1	0.4

Although there were no significant differences between the categories, it is worth noting how elaborate the policies were in detailing the restrictions on student-athletes social media usage. Whereas some of these were understandable (e.g., not posting personal information such as cell phone number, address, not posting public criticism of coaches or teammates) these also involved requiring student-athletes to be cognizant of content that their friends posted on social media about them. For example, one policy stated, “If a friend has uploaded an inappropriate photo, immediately ‘untag’ yourself and ask the friend to remove the photograph in question.”

Previous research on social media policies in intercollegiate athletics (Sanderson, 2011) found that very few of the policies contained information and instructions that told student-athletes how social media could be used constructively, and it appears that very little has changed in the intervening years. Specifically, only three of the policies in the sample framed social media as something that could benefit student-athletes, and these were all at the Division III level. One policy simply informed student-athletes that, “we consider student-athletes adults

who are able to make their own decisions” and in that vein, student-athletes were entrusted to be responsible for their own actions.

Another policy, however, provided reasons behind the popularity of Facebook and Twitter, noting that social media was not a fad, and therefore, the policy encouraged student-athletes to like the school’s athletic accounts on Facebook and Twitter in an effort to promote “brand consistency.” Additionally, this particular policy also recommended that student-athletes comment about as well as share athletic department content posted on Facebook, tag the athletic department in their Facebook posts, follow the athletic department account on Twitter, and provided specific hashtags that student-athletes could use in their tweets. A third policy focused on Facebook and encouraged student-athletes to use Facebook to get involved with the campus community and to promote their sport. The policy also recommended that student-athletes be proactive in managing their online identity and recommended, “Google yourself every once in a while to check on your public image.”

### *Future Impact*

Given the overall negative framing in the social media policies, it was not surprising that analysis revealed that most policies primarily presented social media as having negative impact on a student-athlete’s future, or made vague references about its future impact. In fact, only one policy (at the Division III level) presented social media’s future impact on student-athletes in a positive light. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the policy framing of social media on student-athlete’s future for each category and division level. The analysis revealed that there were no significant differences between the categories,  $\chi^2 = 6.06, p > .05$ .

Table 2 - *Policy Framing of Future Impact by Division Level*

Category	Division	<i>N</i>	% Total
Positive	I	0	0
	II	0	0
	III	1	0.4
Negative	I	15	6.1
	II	56	23.0
	III	64	26.2
Neutral	I	18	7.4
	II	33	13.5
	III	35	40.7
Absent	I	3	1.2
	II	7	2.9
	III	12	4.9

The majority of policies took a pessimistic view, and discussed how social media held a negative impact for student-athletes' futures. Student-athletes were told that social media content could cost them career opportunities post-graduation, as well as their eligibility. In terms of employment, graduate school, and other post-graduate opportunities, student-athletes were informed that "students have lost jobs and potential interviews after college due to inappropriate content on personal websites that future employers have checked prior to the hiring process;" "employers may use this information adversely if they perceive your sites to be immature or unprofessional as they gather information for a background check. Former student-athletes have been denied jobs because of this reason;" "graduate school admissions officers may use this information to ascertain your maturity and professional growth;" and "inappropriate postings can follow you for life." With respect to their continued athletic participation, the policies informed student athletes that social media held a variety of negative consequences for their continued athletic future. Student-athletes were informed that a variety of individuals, including the NCAA, coaches, fans, and faculty were capable of reporting social media content that could jeopardize a student-athlete's athletic participation.

Certainly, there is compelling rationale for such a position, as employers routinely use social media to evaluate job candidates (Berkelaar, 2014; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014, 2015) and student-athletes have been removed from teams as a result of problematic social media posts (Schwab, 2012). Nevertheless, social media can be a positive tool in the job search and networking (McGrath, 2014) and yet only one policy contained this perspective. Specifically, this policy recommended that student-athletes take control of their online identity and shape the persona that they wanted employers and other interested parties to see, "use good judgment with your Facebook account and postings! What do you want future employers, administrators, faculty and maybe even your parents to see?" Using a policy to place the onus of future impact on the student-athlete, rather than the actions of others, may empower them to use these platforms more strategically and responsibly.

### *Social Media Ownership*

The primary messages that emerged from data analysis included: (a) notifying student-athletes that once they posted content on a social media platform, they lost control of it, and; (b) a dialectical tension between freedom and restriction. Policies notified student-athletes that "information can be copied and put on other sites. Something that is meant to be seen only by the social network user can end up elsewhere, and may exist on the internet forever;" and "once a student-athlete posts pictures and makes statements, the student has no control over who views that information and how it is used." This also extended to student-athletes needing to intervene in ownership of other individuals' pictures and posts that involved them. For example, "A photo could be tagged to you, leaving you with little control over the content or usage of the photograph;" and "Be aware that photos can be altered or tagged by others." This also included admonitions that student-athletes should be aware of, "information that may be posted by others on your page." Policies also noted that while freedom of speech and expression were valued, limits did exist. For instance, "the University recognizes and supports its student-athletes' rights to freedom of speech, expression, and association. However, understand that freedom of speech is not unlimited;" "be sure not to have a false sense of security about your rights to freedom of

speech;” and “online social network sites are NOT a place where you can say and do whatever you want with repercussions.”

Via policy, student-athletes also were informed that ownership of content was influenced on being a representative of the school, and this relationship justified the governing of their social media postings. For example, “While we encourage and fully support freedom of speech, expression, and association, we also ask that you be cognizant of the fact that you are representing yourself, [school], the Athletic Department and your team every time you use social media;” “you are not precluded from participation in such activities [social media] however you are representatives of [school] at all times and your comments or postings on these sites are reflective of [school]” and:

The [school] athletics department recognizes and supports its student-athletes rights to freedom of speech, expression, and association, including the use of online social networks. In this context however, each student-athlete must remember that playing and competing for [school] is a privilege not a right. As a student-athlete, you represent [school] and you are expected to portray yourself, your team, and the [school] in a positive manner.

Whereas student-athletes were considered representatives of the university with respect to social media content, they were solely responsible for any consequences stemming from social media. These included statements such as, “**You are personally liable for any violations** [emphasis in original] of other students or student-athletes’ privacy rights; “You are personally responsible for what you post on your own sites and on the sites of others;” and “student-athletes are required to abide by all laws related to the use of the internet (including state and federal privacy laws such as FERPA and HIPPA) and student-athletes are personally liable for any violations of those laws.” Although some policies explained the progressive discipline that would accompany a policy violation, including the opportunity for the student-athlete to present a defense, this was inconsistent. In one policy student-athletes were reminded that, “If it looks like it is happening, it is happening. Perception is reality on social media.” In another policy, student-athletes were informed that social media content was considered final and there would be no opportunity for an explanation:

Photographs or statements included on a social networking site will be considered non-rebuttable evidence. For example, if a picture of you with an empty beer bottle is on your Facebook site, it will be assumed that you were consuming alcohol. You will not have a chance to explain the circumstances of the picture. It is your responsibility to stay vigilant with regards to your social networking sites.

### *Rules and Boundaries*

Policies provided a variety of rules and boundaries that governed student-athletes’ social media usage. These were classified as follows: (a) content rules; (b) monitoring rules; and (c) other-oriented rules.

**Content Rules.** Student-athletes were made aware of a number of content restrictions in regard to their social media postings. These included restrictions from posting personally identifiable information (e.g., phone number, social security number, address), or information

that could be embarrassing or put the student-athlete, his/her friends, teammates, coaches, and school in a negative light. The policies also contained general rules about not posting “inappropriate content.” Whereas some policies did define what was meant by inappropriate content (e.g., content that was racist, depicted illegal activity) others did not and simply left it up to the student-athlete’s discretion. Some policies also included additional instructions to refrain from posting content that depicted team-related activities. Photos of the student-athlete wearing university-themed clothing, posting of travel schedules or itineraries and negative critiques regarding coaches and teammates also were barred.

*Monitoring Rules.* Monitoring rules involved student-athletes being informed that various personnel would be monitoring their social media activity. In some instances this involved general warnings, “coaches, athletic department and college administrators can and may monitor these sites regularly;” “the [school] including coaches and administrators, has the right to monitor these websites” but also included specific requirements that student-athletes submit account information to coaches or other athletic department representatives. For instance, “student-athletes must provide their coaches with access to their social networking sites if requested;” and:

The Athletics Compliance Department is currently monitoring all online social networking sites including, but not limited to Twitter and Facebook. Student-athletes are required to provide user names for any such sites, and are required to give the Department access to their site by accepting the Department as a “friend,” and/or providing access to “follow” an account. Remember as student-athletes, you are held accountable to a higher code of conduct.

Interestingly, in addition to having their social media accounts monitored, student-athletes also were informed that they had an obligation to monitor their teammates’ accounts and to take proactive steps if they observed a teammate posting what was considered to be inappropriate content. Examples included, “Monitor social network usage among my teammates;” and:

Monitor social network usage among your teammates. (a) Your team is only as successful as it’s weakest link. Help your team to make positive choices so that inappropriate conduct does not result in team-affecting consequences. (b) If you do not feel comfortable with confrontation, then discuss the issue with a coach or teammate and have him or her resolve the issue.

*Other-Oriented Rules.* In addition to their individual content, student-athletes also were instructed about rules governing social media content that might be posted by others, yet involved the student-athlete. For instance, one policy informed student-athletes that all content posted on social media had to be consistent with the, “university’s lifestyle, expectations, community standards, NCAA rules and regulations, and state and federal law.” This policy then stated, “‘content’ includes postings and tagged photos, etc. from social network friends” and that “if contacts or friends post unacceptable and inappropriate content, as described above, the student-athlete must remove such content within 24-hours.” Other examples centered largely on photographs, “Check ‘tagged’ photos to make sure it’s appropriate;” “Also monitor ‘tagged’ photos posted by others and ask them to remove any that depict you in a negative light;” “Please screen your own photos for inappropriate images, and if you are tagged by others, ask to have the photo removed;” “Frequently check tagged photos. If you find an inappropriate photo tagged

with your name, then untag it, and ask the photographer to delete the picture from their album” and “If an inappropriate photo is taken, I will ask the photographer to refrain from posting the picture on the internet or, at the very least, to exclude me when tagging pictures individuals.”

## Discussion

This research explored the messages contained within social media policies in intercollegiate athletics. Work in this area has been limited and although social media has evolved quickly, it appears that social media policies for student-athletes have not kept pace (e.g., emergence of visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat were mentioned sporadically, yet platforms that are essentially defunct such as Friendster and Xanga were still mentioned). Indeed, the policies largely present social media as a negative influence for student-athletes, and while there are certainly ways that social media can be used destructively, and acknowledging that athletic departments do need to protect themselves, it seems that student-athletes are only being given one side of the social media equation. Previous research suggests that student-athletes are significant consumers of social media, not unlike their age cohort (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson & Browning, 2013; Snyder, 2014), and while we did not examine the motivations behind the policy constructions, it appears that the predominant message being communicated to student-athletes is that social media should be feared.

Framing suggests that mass media outlets structure news stories in specific ways to guide audience interpretation by strategically emphasizing certain aspects of a story (Entman, 1993). In this case, social media policies are organized in ways that emphasize a comprehensive listing of negative outcomes, which may shape student-athletes interpreting these platforms as a hindrance rather than a benefit. It is interesting to note that student-athletes are receiving this message while athletic departments are simultaneously utilizing internal accounts to engage with fans and achieve marketing goals. Thus, a “mixed-message” is given to student-athletes, who may question why their social media use is so problematic when the athletics department appears to be aggressively pushing their social media presence.

Indeed, there are a plethora of news articles and consultants who work with athletic departments to develop social media strategy. This outcome is not altogether surprising as social media holds benefits for sport organizations for marketing, branding, and fan engagement (Delia & Armstrong, 2015; Walsh, Clavio, Lovell, & Blaszk, 2013). However, if social media has the overwhelming negative effects that are presented in these policies, it seems that athletic departments would be cautious about use, rather than aggressively integrating social media into operations. Further, for many athletic departments, student-athletes provide a good amount of the social media content (e.g., stories about student-athletes athletic and academic achievements, life experiences). Thus, it is somewhat ironic that student-athletes are overwhelmingly told that in their hands, social media is primarily negative, yet in the hands of athletic department personnel, it is a strategic communication and marketing tool. We argue later that student-athletes should be given more of a voice in matters of social media policy, and lessening the “framing” of social media may help empower student-athletes and result in more harmonious and collaborative social media climates in collegiate athletics.

Framing social media in a largely negative fashion overlooks the notion that social media can be used positively and strategically. For the policies that did outline how social media could be used constructively, student-athletes were given options on “how” to use social media instead of only being told “how not to” use social media. In one case, this involved student-athletes’

social media use being integrated with the athletic department's social media initiatives as student-athletes were provided with hashtags and encouraged to use them. Such an approach is likely to resonate with student-athletes more than outlining long lists of prohibitions and restrictions. For instance, Snyder (2014) found that Division I athletes were largely opposed to policies banning social media completely or during the sport season. This finding suggests that student-athletes want to use social media, and therefore, it seems likely that athletic departments who offer student-athletes options for using social media may experience a harmonious rather than an adversarial social media culture. For example, it may be beneficial for policies to outline how social media can help a student-athlete in their post-graduate plans, and encourage them to take advantage of sites like LinkedIn and explain how to begin building professional networks.

The results of this research also illustrate that student-athletes are presented with conflicting messages about social media ownership. While it is certainly the case that people who post content on social media do lose ownership, it seems plausible that presenting this in a more balanced way may help alleviate anxiety or negative feelings that often arise when a person feels that they have lost control over the release of information (Alge, 2001). More specifically, while it is not unreasonable for student-athletes to be held responsible for their social media content, it seems that explaining in the policy that student-athletes will have the ability to explain their version of the events may promote a stronger culture. That is, extending opportunities for dialogue may be more conducive instead of telling student-athletes that the social media post is the ultimate verdict and there is nothing they can say in their defense. Moreover, even though student-athletes lose control over content once it is posted, they are still expected to vigilantly monitor others and intervene if policy is broached. CPM contends that when information is revealed, privacy rules must be generated to govern ownership rules and how that information can be disseminated. Yet, this is very difficult to do with social media, as those who may access the content could be outside close geographic proximity to the student-athlete and in some cases, the student-athlete may not even be aware what a person is doing with their content (not to mention the student-athlete may have difficulty enforcing this with another social media user). Thus, rather than merely informing student-athletes that they bear these burdens, it may be helpful for social media policies to provide resources, including contact information that student-athletes can utilize to have content posted by others removed.

With respect to rules, while it is important for organizations to provide acceptable boundaries, it seems that student-athletes are presented with conflicting information here as well. First, whereas some policies did define the term "inappropriate," in most cases, this was left up to the student-athlete's interpretation, which may be entirely different than the view that administrators take of "inappropriate" (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). In some policies, this ambiguity may be strategic (Eisenberg, 1984) providing administrators with more latitude in interpreting what constitutes "inappropriate." However, if the goal of the policy is to reduce or eliminate problematic social media posts by student-athletes, it would seem reasonable to provide them with very clear examples of what is meant by "inappropriate." For example, a policy that outlines a prohibition of, "Using inappropriate or offensive language in all comments, videos, and other postings. This includes threats of violence and derogatory comments against race, religions, gender or sexual orientation" is likely to be more effective than a policy that states, "Do not create a group that is inappropriate." This is particularly pertinent if student-athletes are expected to take action towards the "inappropriate" content posted by others. If this is not defined, the effectiveness of these directives may have a very limited effect.

Second, the rules around monitoring were not entirely unexpected, given the cottage industry that has arisen in this area (Santus, 2014). Moreover, previous research (Snyder, 2014) indicates that Division I athletes were willing to accept social media monitoring by coaches, athletic department staff, or a team leader, yet were not supportive of monitoring done by outside vendors. Thus, policies that require student-athletes to turn over their account information to such vendors may prompt conflict and tension between student-athletes and administrators. Here, CPM provides a useful explanation, as people feel vulnerable when they feel they lose control over their private information. Thus, if student-athletes are compelled to submit account information, they may feel violated and engage in resistance. Indeed, Sanderson and Browning (2013) found that student-athletes often circumvented social media monitoring software or in some cases, did not install it and continued with their social media routines. Yet, if student-athletes are given options for monitoring, they may be more supportive of this action. The language in some policies that student-athletes should be responsible for monitoring their teammates social media accounts is an example that illustrates how internal monitoring may be an optimal solution. However, this specific practice should be communicated and discussed with student-athletes to ensure they are aware that this monitoring is common, and another way for teammates to hold each other accountable. Such an approach will help assuage conflict that may arise from a student-athlete who might perceive that a teammate is “snitching” on him/her.

The results of this research possess important implications for intercollegiate athletic personnel. First, social media policies need to be more reflexive. While it is most certainly appropriate to outline restrictions and boundaries for student-athletes in social media policies and to inform them about how they will be held accountable, these policies need to be more evenly balanced. Student-athletes are heavy social media consumers (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Snyder, 2014) and it is highly unlikely to suspect that they will, in large numbers, stop using these platforms. The question then becomes, how can athletic departments cultivate a social media culture that is harmonious rather than adversarial? One way such a culture can be achieved is to provide more verbiage about the benefits of social media offer. For instance, student-athletes could be informed how to use social media to connect with mentors and other career professionals who can help them develop post-graduation plans.

Second, while social media content can certainly hinder a student-athlete’s ability to get a job or continue playing, it may be worthwhile to describe how social media can facilitate obtaining employment (McGrath, 2014) and be used to reward student-athletes for positive behavior. As an example, the University of Washington instituted a #FeaturedAthleteProgram wherein the athletic department recognized student-athletes who used social media positively both during games and on the athletic department’s website (Syme, 2013). Finally, while Snyder (2014) suggested that student-athletes will accept some forms of social media monitoring and Sanderson et al. (2015) argued they desired social media education, athletic department personnel should involve student-athletes in policy formation and revision. Utilizing a group such as the Student-Athlete Advisory Council (SAAC) and bringing them to “the table” may help ensure that policies are relevant (e.g., consider the number of polices that mentioned Xanga and Friendster more than Snapchat) and will generate more support amongst student-athletes.

## **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This research was limited in that it did not draw from the entire sample of social media policies. There may be schools that developed enabling social media policies, but do not post

their student-athlete handbook online. One step that future researchers could take in the future is to request hard copies of the policies, which may generate a larger sample size. Another limitation is that while policies are instructive, they may only represent one segment of an athletic department's approach to social media. Thus, combining policy analysis with education programs and interviews of both athletic department administrators and student-athletes may be more illustrative of the social media culture within an athletic department. For example, Sanderson, et al. (2015) interviewed student-athletes regarding their perceptions of social media education and found that most of them viewed the training as ineffective. Whether this has a relationship to policy is unsure, but if the policy is setting a negative tone (and is plausibly the first exposure a student-athlete has to a school's view on social media through the handbook) this may influence student-athletes attitudes about other social media initiatives.

In terms of future research, there are several promising directions that future researchers can traverse. First, researchers could analyze how the student-athlete social media policy aligns or diverges with the social media policy for all students. It may be that the policy for student-athletes is more/less restrictive and comparing the two policies could illustrate growing disparities between athletic departments and their home institutions. Second, given how quickly social media is evolving, it will be important to replicate the findings of this research to ascertain how athletic departments are keeping pace. How do policies evolve in the future in terms of framing social media and its impact on a student-athlete's future? How does monitoring evolve? Do athletic departments continue to utilize outside vendors, or is monitoring phased out by more educational programming? Finally, many student-athletes used social media before they even enter college. Thus, it is important to consider how are high schools are addressing social media usage. There have been several instances where high school student-athletes created news stories with their social media postings (Peters, 2014), such as several high school wrestlers in New Jersey getting suspended for a state tournament after posting a photo on Instagram depicting a lynching that was a reference to how they were going to win their upcoming match (Photo simulating lynching gets New Jersey wrestlers tossed, 2014). It also would be worthwhile to see the type of instruction high school students-athletes are receiving prior to college, particularly the instructions effectiveness, as fewer student-athletes will play sports at the intercollegiate level, and social media screening is being used more frequently in college admissions (Singer, 2013).

## Conclusion

Intercollegiate athletics is far from the only organizational sector grappling with how to manage social media use by its internal constituents. Student-athletes are heavy consumers of social media and this communication technology shows few signs of being a fad that will disappear in a few years. Accordingly, it is crucial that athletic department personnel take a proactive stance in managing social media while working together with student-athletes to find mutually beneficial solutions. It is certainly important that student-athletes be told about the risks of social media, but this is not the only narrative to which they should be exposed. Athletic departments that find ways to work in tandem with student-athletes (e.g., encouraging them to use designated hashtags, to mention the athletic department accounts, how to maximize LinkedIn) are likely to promote a more harmonious and sustainable social media culture that will be predicated on trust and understanding rather than fear and negativity.

Notes:

1 – We elected to not identify the schools whose examples we used in the policy. Our decision was driven by the notion that we were not seeking to criticize an athletic department's approach, rather to provide a holistic view. A list of schools in the sample can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author.

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