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Kick these kids off the team and take away their scholarships:

Facebook and perceptions of athlete activism at the University of Missouri

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The purpose of this study was to examine how individuals responded to a 2015 protest by the University of Missouri football players' in response to racial injustices on campus and the perceptions associated with this activism. Specifically, comments made to posts on the official University of Missouri Athletic Department Facebook page were analyzed through the theoretical lens of framing and critical race theory. Data were analyzed using constant comparative methodology with critical race theory as a guiding framework. Four themes emerged inductively from the data analysis including (a) trivializing racism; (b) encouraging advocacy; (c) systemic critiques; and (d) incompatibility of advocacy. Comments discussed how college athletes were manufacturing racism and that they should not engage in activism due to its incompatibility with sport. While encouragement existed in the data, some went as far as to suggest that these activism efforts warranted the revocation of the athletes' scholarship. These comments reinforced dominant ideology of Whiteness in sport by suggesting that athletes should be grateful for their opportunity and not question their place within institutional hierarchies and structures.

Keywords: athlete activism, critical race theory, framing, Facebook, athlete advocacy

During the fall of 2015, the University of Missouri's campus was engulfed by tumult, due to racist incidents and racial injustices involving Black students. These racially charged incidents included the student body president being called the "n-word," a Black students' play rehearsal being interrupted with racial slurs, and a swastika being drawn in feces on a residence hall wall (Izadi, 2015). Throughout this time, students and other stakeholders were critical of university administrators for their perceived lack of response to these issues. Additionally, Johnathan Butler, a Black graduate student at the University of Missouri was involved in a 7-day hunger strike in response to these incidents, a protest that received substantial media coverage. Racial tensions on campus reached their boiling point on November 7th when Black athletes on the university's football team announced that they were not going to play another football game until Tim Wolfe, the university president stepped down (Burke, 2015).

On November 8th, this proclamation was followed by the coaching staff (including head coach Gary Pinkel) and the remainder of the football team declaring their support for these players (Kirshner, 2015). One could argue that the highly-publicized actions of the football team led to President Wolfe's resignation on November 9th (Izadi, 2015). This step by college athletes was bold, and reflected a willingness to engage in resistance for social justice issues. While such advocacy has not been uncommon with athletes throughout history, this statement represented a key turning point in the saga at Missouri. Indeed, this stance also generated a volume of responses from Missouri football fans, the public, and reporters who offered both support and condemnation for the Missouri players.

The purpose of this study was to examine how individuals responded to the Missouri football players' protest and the perceptions associated with this activism. Specifically, comments made to posts on the official University of Missouri Athletic Department Facebook page were analyzed within the theoretical lens of framing and critical race theory. The researchers were guided by two underlying questions: (1) how are individuals framing these activism efforts via Facebook comments, and (2) how do these comments challenge or reinforce dominant ideology around racism in sport? This study was a worthy avenue of investigation as it illuminated the divergent narratives introduced by Facebook users regarding these incidents and it extended previous research by focusing on how individuals responded to the protest actions of college athletes within a high profile, revenue-generating sport. Furthermore, this study was significant in that examining athlete activism, reactions to activism, and university discipline (or lack thereof) in response to activism efforts could potentially impact subsequent activism efforts on college campuses.

Literature Review

Athletes and Activism

Athlete activism and responses to athlete activism have been part of the sport landscape for decades. In the 1960s, Black athletes such as Muhammad Ali, Arthur Ashe, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos were heavily criticized for their advocacy efforts in response to racial injustices (Agyemang, Singer, & DeLorme, 2010). Whereas such activism was a common trend during the Civil Rights Movement, in more recent years, athletes, particularly Black athletes, have been criticized for their lack of advocacy (Agyemang, 2012; Powell, 2008; Rhoden, 2006). Kaufman

(2008) expressed that Black athletes who engage in activism often face “intense backlash” for their efforts (p. 234). Additional reasons for lack of advocacy among Black athletes include the perception that issues such as racism are less prevalent today, a focus on athletic achievements as opposed to social advocacy, and the fear of financial repercussions in response to activism efforts (Cunningham & Regan Jr., 2012). Scholars also suggested that for Black athletes, the culture of sport precludes activism, as engaging in social justice and other issues can bring financial ramifications that damage the ideal that sport is a way out of poverty and economic hardship (Cunningham & Regan Jr., 2012; Khan, 2012). Consequently, this creates an environment where activism among Black athletes is both frowned upon and wrought with potential long-term career altering consequences.

While there are barriers that preclude Black athletes from engaging in activism, there has been a surge in athletes’ willingness to speak out on political and social issues. Whereas these endeavors may lack the coordinated effort to be considered “activism,” these advocacy efforts are still significant and given an athlete’s visible social position, these actions can initiate larger public discourse and media coverage on these topics (Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). In terms of coordinated and planned efforts, the St. Louis Rams’ players using the “hands up don’t shoot” pose during player introductions following the Michael Brown shooting, generated significant conversation, both about racial issues in the United States and the appropriateness of athletes making political statements at games (Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Another contemporary example of planned athlete activism involved San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick refusing to stand during the national anthem during the 2016-17 season, an effort which multiple NFL players subsequently joined. This engagement in activism has garnered responses by both traditional media and the general public via social media. Reactions via social media have been mixed, with negative commentary such as renouncing fandom and levying judgement regarding proper punishment for the athletes involved in activism (see Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016).

While the previously mentioned incidents involved professional athletes, advocacy efforts are not uncommon within the realm of college athletics. Back in 2003, Toni Smith (now Toni Smith-Thompson), a guard at Manhattanville College, turned her back to the American flag to protest the Iraq War (Pennington, 2003). Ariyana Smith, a basketball player at Division III Knox College, laid on the court for four minutes prior to a game to protest police violence and support the Black Lives Matter movement (Zirin, 2014). More recently, Nigel Hayes and Jordan Hill, two basketball players at the University of Wisconsin, stood behind their teammates during the National Anthem to protest a racial incident that took place during a football game in which fans wore a Barack Obama costume with a noose around the neck (SI Wire, 2016). Finally, during the 2016 college football season, University of Nebraska football players Michael Rose-Ivey, Daishon Neal, and Mohamed Barry kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality (Nohr, 2016). While all of these are noteworthy, the incident at Missouri is unique as it represented a coordinated effort among multiple athletes on the same team.

Though there have been recent instances of athlete activism, these efforts continue to be bounded by notions that sport is a haven that is free from racial and other forms of social inequity and injustice (Leonard, 2004; Sanderson, 2010), a condition which some believe exists in contemporary society as well (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). This is further compounded by a pervasive reality in which athletes are fed messages whose underlying meaning is wrought with the rhetoric that sports and politics do not mix (Kaufman, 2008). In addressing these claims,

Critical Race Theory (CRT) serves as a valuable framework to analyze critiques of this dominant position.

Critical Race Theory and Sport

Despite claims to the contrary, sport continues to be plagued with racism and other forms of social injustice, and scholars have argued that issues with racism in sport can be attributable to larger societal structures that favor Whiteness (Ebanda De B'beri & Hogarth, 2009; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). As these cultural structures favor Whiteness, minority athletes, particularly Black athletes are positioned as needing to be grateful for their opportunities and consequently, they should not question the system (Ebanda De B'beri & Hogarth, 2009). By not questioning the system, Black athletes are thereby rendered apolitical and complicit laborers. By accepting this lot, Black athletes “resemble that wandering lost tribe, a fragmented remnant unable to organize itself to project the collective power it embodies but is afraid to use” (Rhoden, 2006, p. xiii). In that regard, the success of Black athletes does little to challenge White supremacy and White masculine privilege (see Ferber, 2007).

Given the presence of racism in both sport and society, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful framework to investigate issues of racism in sport (Hylton, 2005, 2010; Solorzono & Yasso, 2001). CRT is centered on the influence and pervasiveness of race and racism in American society, and contends that racism is normalized in American society and is (re)produced in such a way to reinforce status and power between Whites and Blacks (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). Hylton (2010) further observed that one of the key tenets of CRT is acknowledging that we live in racist society. According to Solorzono and Yasso (2001), CRT also challenges traditional dominant ideologies such as surrounding objectivity, color-blindness, and meritocracy, is dedicated to social justice, the centrality of the marginalized voice and transcends disciplinary boundaries.

As Agyemang and DeLorme (2010) observed, “sports is included within the confines of American society and is in no way immune to the far reach of racism” (p. 42). Additionally, within sport, Ebanda De B'beri and Hogarth (2009) posited that racism is invisible to White power holders who, “demand that Black players change to accommodate the existing culture” (p. 104). Such views are consistent with tenets of CRT which suggest that Whiteness is the standard to which all other cultures must adhere (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010; Harris, 1993). This is also in line with Feagin's concept of the White racial frame. According to Feagin (2013):

The concept of the White racial frame is an ‘ideal type,’ a composite whole with a large array of elements that in everyday practice are drawn on selectively by White individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in recurring interactions. (p. 15)

Schmittel and Sanderson (2015) noted that fans, “represent the dominant position in sport that tends to privilege Whiteness and subjugate Black culture” (p. 336). Consequently, when athletes speak out on racism, it challenges the ideology of the dominant social position. Given that fans represent the dominant position, critiques of the position initiate disruption for fans, who are confronted with the notion that structural issues exist. Such disruption is often unpleasant for many fans, and to mitigate this cognitive dissonance, they pushback by telling athletes to “stick to sport,” and minimizing critiques of the system by suggesting that racism is

exaggerated or that if racism does exist, it occurs as “reverse racism,” wherein the dominant group are the ones negatively impacted (Sanderson, 2010). Indeed, Khan (2016) discussed how a double standard exists in sport with regard to race, as “white athletes are afforded a degree of posterousness but black athletes are expected to conform to a more respectable norm” (p. 43).

Given the contemporary surge in athlete activism around race and the likely disruption this causes for fans, investigating public reaction to athletes’ activism efforts is necessary. Such inquiry helps illuminate the ways in which the public reinforces dominant ideology around race and society, and sheds light on barriers that social justice advocates can use to inform efforts to work for equality and inclusiveness. Moreover, these responses also may influence future advocacy efforts from athletes’ as negative public perception and repercussions may inhibit an athlete’s willingness to speak out on social issues. With that said, framing theory serves as an ideal framework to examine responses from the public regarding athlete activism.

Framing

According to Entman (1993), the framing process selects various aspects of reality, making them more salient through the selection, emphasis, and exclusion of information. It is through these functions that news frames help establish meaning towards societal issues (Zaharopoulos 2007). Additionally, the framing process has been argued to reflect the dominant norms and values within a society (Endres, 2004). In their discussion of the framing process, Gamson and Modigliani (1987) described frames as packages used to characterize an issue. With regard to this characterization of frames, Tewksbury and Scheufele (2009) stated, “A frame is what unifies information into a package that can influence audiences” (p. 19). Communication scholars have examined the process of mass media framing on various issues in political and health communication (Andsager, 2000; Holton, Lee, & Coleman, 2014; Major & Coleman, 2008). In addition, the power of media framing has been found to affect the opinions, perceptions, and attitudes of audiences toward these issues (Druckman, 2001; Tewksbury, Jones, Peske, Raymond, & Vig, 2000).

From a sport perspective, framing has been employed to examine issues such as race, gender, and nationality during the Olympic Games (Angelini, MacArthur, & Billings, 2014; Billings, Angelini, MacArthur, Bissell, & Smith, 2014; Eagleman, Rodenberg, & Lee, 2014; Zaharopoulos, 2007). Scholars also have examined framing and the Olympics in regard to social or political issues within a country, with recent studies examining both the Beijing and Vancouver Olympic Games (Huang & Fahmy, 2013; Liang, 2010; van Luijk & Frisby, 2012). Framing also has been employed to examine issues such as race, nationality, and the personal scandals of professional athletes. In her examination of the framing of professional baseball players in *Sports Illustrated* and *ESPN the Magazine*, Eagleman (2011) found that stereotypes based on race and nationality existed in both publications. Bishop (2005) similarly found that sportswriters framed Seattle Seahawks receiver Joey Galloway as a selfish individual during his contract holdout in 1999, likely based on race. In an examination of newspaper coverage of tennis player Arthur Ashe following the publication of his AIDS diagnosis in *USA Today*, Laucella (2009) found Ashe was portrayed as a victim, pioneer, role model, and hero. However, Laucella (2010) also discovered differing frames such as the scapegoat, victim, trickster, hero (or fallen hero), and other world (i.e., celebrity athlete vs. the underworld) utilized by journalists to cover Michael Vick during his arraignment and trial for federal dogfighting charges.

While framing has consistently been applied to traditional media outlets, researchers have extended this theoretical framework into the realm of social media. This line of research has revealed that social media can serve as an outlet for coordinating social movements (Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012), framing content around political movements (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013), and framing content around political elections (Ampofo, Anstead, & O'Loughlin 2011; Groskek & Al-Rawi 2013; Hawthorne, Houston, & McKinney 2013). In particular, this body of research has primarily examined framing conducted by individuals rather than media outlets, which Nisbet (2010) referred to as bottom-up framing. According to Nisbet, bottom-up framing is the framing of issues by individuals who regularly produce and contribute content to the online realm. Research has begun to explore bottom-up framing on social media within the context of sport. This line of inquiry has revealed that individuals utilize social media to counter public perceptions of an event (Burch, Frederick, & Pegoraro, 2015), create organic frameworks around controversial incidents (Frederick, Stocz, & Pegoraro, 2016), express dissent (Blazska, Frederick, Newman, & Pegoraro, 2016), and create unique topics for discussion outside of what is being covered by traditional media (Frederick, Pegoraro, & Burch, 2016).

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Method

Facebook data was collected utilizing the N-Capture feature of the NVivo10 software. Specifically, posts ($n = 7$) and comments ($n = 792$) between November 7th and November 9th were collected from the official Facebook page of the University of Missouri Athletic Department. These dates were chosen as they represented unique events along a tumultuous timeline, such as the players announcing they were going on strike (November 7th), coaches expressing their support for the athletes on strike (November 8th), and the university president stepping down (November 9th). The seven posts during this three-day timeframe were distinct as they were all tagged posts. The posts contained links to stories from various news sources that had tagged Missouri athletics and were therefore shared on Missouri's athletic department Facebook page. The sources included *Deadspin* (two stories), *247 Sports* (two stories), *Gawker* (one story), *SB Nation* (one story), and *Fox Sports* (one story). The athletic department themselves remained dormant during these three days in terms of posting original content to their Facebook page, though posts resumed following this 72-hour timeframe. All seven tagged posts pertained to the events taking place on Missouri's campus. Comments made to these posts were

subjected to further analysis. Comments between users were removed from the dataset, resulting in a final sample of 473 comments.

Data were analyzed using constant comparative methodology with critical race theory as a guiding framework. Constant comparative methodology is an inductive and iterative process that enables researchers to reduce data through multiple rounds of coding (Fram, 2013). Whereas constant comparative methodology is often used in concert with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop new theory, it can be used outside of this objective (Fram, 2013). Fram (2013) noted that constant comparative methodology can be conjoined with a theoretical framework to understand socialization processes. In this research, given the strong feelings that activism in sports can induce, we wanted to understand how audience members were making sense and interpreting the actions of the Missouri football players. Thus, we were interested in the socialization processes at work in the data. Nevertheless, given that the crux of the activism was centered on race, we felt critical race theory was sufficient to interpret comments and did not justify the creation of new theory. Utilizing constant comparative methodology with an existing framework to guide analysis has been used in other sport communication research. For example, Sanderson and Truax (2014) used a constant comparative approach within the framework of maladaptive parasocial interaction in their analysis of tweets to University of Alabama placekicker Cade Foster. Sanderson, Frederick, and Stocz (2016) employed constant comparative methodology within social identity theory to examine responses to athlete activism.

Accordingly, we adopted an inductive approach to allow for themes to emerge organically rather than categories being generated *a-priori*, which is consistent with previous research endeavors examining social media content (Sanderson & Hambrick, 2012; Sanderson, Frederick, & Stocz, 2016). Each comment served as the unit of analysis. Three researchers (who were familiar with the theoretical framework and qualitative analysis of social media content) independently read through the data and developed descriptors and themes by micro-analyzing comments and classifying themes into emergent categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, two rounds of qualitative coding were conducted. The first round consisted of open coding, which Strauss (1987) described as unrestricted coding. During this stage, categories are “built, named, and have attributes ascribed to them” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 251). When conducting open coding, each researcher labeled a comment according to its dominant message. In other words, comments were inductively placed into only one thematic category (criticism, support, leadership critiques, incompatibility with sport, etc.). The second round consisted of axial coding (see Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During this stage in the coding process, connections are made between categories, effectively bringing separate categories together under the umbrella of an “overarching theory or principle” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). Each researcher summarized and compared categories to ascertain similarity and reduced the categories as much as possible while still preserving meaning.

Once both rounds of coding had been conducted independently, the researchers met and reviewed the themes and sub-categories to discuss any discrepancies in coding. These discussions revealed only minor differences in terms of the names ascribed to themes/sub-categories and the categorization of a few comments. Any disagreements were discussed until the researchers reached a consensus regarding the names ascribed to each theme/sub-category and the proper categorization of all comments. While minor differences existed, the three researchers agreed regarding the theory (or principles) used presently within the dataset. The use of multiple coders is acceptable (and sometimes preferred) for qualitative research; however, it often requires more interaction and effort (Altheide, 1996; Eagleman, 2011), which was the

rationale for meeting and discussing each researchers' coding in detail to reach a consensus regarding the meaning of the data. This meeting of the minds was conducted in lieu of intercoder reliability used in quantitative research. With regard to the utility of intercoder reliability in qualitative research, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) stated:

Not many investigators consider this to be a worthwhile step because the category definitions are unique to the study and the person who did the coding. In addition, the categories often exist in an interdependent, discursive relationships to each other. These issues, which would be a major impediment for a quantitative study, are not weaknesses in qualitative inquiry; they are in fact a linchpin of the process. (p. 272)

Results and Interpretation

A total of four themes emerged inductively from the data analysis including (a) trivializing racism; (b) encouraging advocacy; (c) systemic critiques; and (d) incompatibility of advocacy. The overarching themes and their sub-themes are discussed in more detail in the following section. Exemplars are provided to illustrate each theme and were taken verbatim from the data. Thus, spelling and grammatical errors were left intact.

Trivializing Racism

This theme ($n = 202$) was comprised of four sub-themes: (a) mis-attributed racism; (b) mocking; (c) criticism; and (d) downplaying. With respect to mis-attributed racism, comments deflected attention from the players' protest and instead, focused on topics such as reverse racism, which minimized the significance of the players' activism. For instance, "No such thing as racism towards white people in America. Only minorities can be discriminated against;" "Does anyone know what the issue really is? Or is this just more made up racism;" and "I wonder if there's an organization for white students. Course not." In terms of mocking, users joked and made light of the issues occurring on campus. One example mocked the significance of the swastika comprised of human feces that had been smeared on a dorm room wall, "HATE CANNOT WIN. Today, I will smear my feces into a heart to represent love." Other comments poked fun at the team's performance. For example, "I thought the team has been on strike all year." In addition, users also criticized the activism efforts of athletes, "If they wanted to make a statement, why did they wait till they lost to boycott?" Criticism also manifested as users implored others to show their distaste and, "BOYCOTT MISSOURI TIGERS FOOTBALL." With regards to downplaying, comments suggested that the players' activism efforts either lacked meaning or were an inappropriate course of action. For example, "I don't think this is the step that'll create transformational, long term change. Especially since he isn't directly in charge of how climate at Mizzou is. But I would say it's still a win;" and "Not sure this is the correct way to get action."

For these individuals, the players' activism was not to be taken seriously. Accordingly, they framed the activism by reducing its importance. That is, rather than acknowledging the rather unprecedented nature of the protest, the activism was re-appropriated as an issue for Whites. Indeed, as people invoked narratives of reverse-racism, the players' activism was seen as further evidence of manufacturing racism. Thus, rather than bringing attention to the incidents that had occurred on campus, the issue was seen as being incompatible with modern American

society and values (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009). Or said differently, that any racism experienced was an issue for Whites, not Blacks or other minorities, thereby reinforcing White privilege (Njororai, 2012; Singer, 2005). Moreover, people also framed the activism as being inopportune, as apparently, advocacy was more pertinent when associated with success on the field. In minimizing and subjugating the actions of the players, these frames reduced the significance of the protest and the issues behind it, promoting the preservation of the dominant position of Whiteness (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2012). However, there were those who did offer support for the players and championed their efforts.

Encouraging Advocacy

Within this theme ($n = 126$), there were two sub-themes: (a) support; and (b) the significance of football players. General support dominated the conversations in this theme. While many were quick to criticize or downplay the athletes' activism, others took the opportunity to praise them and show support for their actions. These comments praised the method of activism, "I am proud of a team that would stand up for what they believe in especially when it is through nonviolent protest;" and the fact that athletes were invoking their rights, "They're student-athletes. Exercising their 1st amendment rights for a cause they truly believe in." Additionally, users attempted to place the protests in perspective with comments such as, "Some things are more important than football." In terms of the significance of football players, various individuals reinforced the substantial power that football wields on college campuses. Comments such as the one below discussed how the football team drew national attention to the university, which eventually led to the president's resignation:

Mizzou is now my favorite college football team, no football team involvement no resignation, I SALUTE YOU, would it have gotten the national attention without the football team, think not.

Additionally, comments such as, "You can't pull their scholarships!!! Way to stand up for the University of Missouri. Football program is the biggest money maker on campus..." noted that money (generated by college football) equals power when it comes to activism and influence. Individuals often framed the players as acting on their Constitutional rights and engaging in behavior that was to be commended. Consequently, it was normalized that athletes would speak up when they saw issues that warranted attention, and in using their high visibility on campus, the players utilized their influence to bring attention to the issues surfacing on campus. Gill Jr. (2016) noted that while athletes may understand social issues that are occurring, they may not possess the skills to enact change. In this case, however, the perceptions of some people indicated that the players had in fact been able to enact change. Whereas change may be more difficult to enact in professional sports due to its commodification (e.g., endorsements) (Gill Jr., 2016), college athletes, particularly football players in a highly visible/revenue generating conference (i.e., the SEC), may be in a fruitful context to translate their understanding of issues into tangible action. It is important to note, however, that not all college athletes (due to competition level and/or media coverage) would be able to enact or influence such change at a university.

Certainly, while the athletes played a role in bringing about change at the University of Missouri, it also can be seen as problematic that it took this step for change to occur. That is,

administrators may be slow to react until a tipping point occurs, and the requisite amount of pressure surfaces and an entity that holds influence speaks up. With events at Missouri, while the athletes' activism efforts may not be entirely responsible for the ouster of President Wolfe, the correlation between the two events is plausible more than circumstantial. As these events unfolded, and personnel changes occurred, people criticized University administrators, Head Coach Gary Pinkel, and others for what they perceived to be leadership shortcomings.

Systemic Critiques

The *systemic critiques* ($n = 79$) theme was comprised of the following sub-themes: (a) leadership critiques; (b) generational critiques; and (c) consequences of advocacy. Users were quick to criticize university leadership in terms of how they handled the Missouri student's hunger strike and the players' activism. For instance, "Who's running the university? Why the football team and 200 black protesters!" "Bad precedent if they let the tail wag the dog here;" and "He is dumber than the players!! Where is the Board of Regents who can fire the President if he has committed an egregious act of any kind??" Generational critiques were directed to both the athletes as well as those who were instilling what some viewed as detrimental life lessons. For example, "All you are teaching kids is to hold your breath until you get your way.....pathetic;" and "This is dumb. Your teaching kids that if they don't get their way to just quit. I can't see why is the presidents fault at all. It's the students that run around and think they own this town."

Here, the dominant position was reinforced as commenters attributed activism to a rising generation who does not conform to the existing culture (Ebanda De B'beri & Hogarth, 2009). Thus, rather than acknowledging that the existing power structure was in need of reform, challenges to the dominant position, and the lived experiences of those negatively affected by the system were attributed to one simply not getting one's way. Further, these comments re(produced) ideology that one who did not desire to suffer through adverse experiences, was merely "entitled," ironically failing to address the entitlement derived from those who benefit from the current power structure that privileges Whiteness. More specifically, these people noted that in situations where college athletes spoke up, administrators needed to enact a strong stance and not be perceived as caving into the athletes' demands. In showing what was perceived to be weakness of leadership, the protest was subsequently framed as possessing chaos and anarchy as those who typically are expected to follow directions were driving the decision-making. Consequently, through such narratives, activism was framed as being incompatible with adversity. That is, either one "bucked up" and dealt with issues, or displayed entitlement by refusing to participate. This dichotomy may serve as a barrier for athletes to engage in activism due to the potential for such negative framing and also may foster perceptions in the public that activism is incongruent with athletics.

Incompatibility of Advocacy

Incompatibility manifested ($n = 66$), as people suggested that advocacy was incompatible with sport, including being incongruent with being a student-athlete and winning. Here, individuals noted that advocacy performed by college athletes was likely to bring future consequences for participation. For some individuals, activism was simply incompatible with sport:

Another example of how liberal-created political correctness has used minorities in this country as their own tools for agenda advancement by instilling the perception into minorities that they are victims. Keep race and politics and sexual orientation out of sports, period.

Others conveyed that being a student-athlete and engaging in activism should not mix. For instance, “Plenty of football players and coaches out there that will replace these idiots.” People also proposed punishments for players and coaches that were partaking in activism efforts, such as, “Cut the players it’s a privilege not a right to play college athletics;” and “They should all be let go. This is not standing up for what what’s right. It’s a breach of contract there are ways to go about standing up for what is right.” In terms of incompatibility with winning, individuals stated that athletes on teams who were having success on the field would not have time or be interested in engaging in activism. For example, “Don’t think this would be happening if they were 8-0 and playing for national championship” and “Nope, since they have a shitty season they want to go on vacation early.”

In addition to individual punishments for players and coaches, some people posited that there would be long-term and large scale ramifications for athletes engaging in advocacy. These comments focused on the future of recruiting with comments such as, “Maybe not at Stanford or Michigan, but smaller University leaders might be re-thinking their recruiting practices. I fear this will only hurt the scholarship programs that helped these kids get into a good school;” and “now Universities will be looking closer at who they recruit to make sure this doesn’t happen again. The racial divide will just grow wider. I’m sure there are a list of names getting added to the do not hire list now.” Individuals also talked about how activism efforts could potentially impact scholarships in the future. For example, “Personally, I am no fan of football and certainly not of money pouring into universities because of this or that sports team. However, on the academic level, who do you think will pay the tuition and other fees if you protest against them?”

These comments reinforced notions that athletes should be grateful for their opportunities and not question institutional structures and their place within those hierarchies. Indeed, these individuals suggested that by engaging in activism, the athletes were violating sport norms, by politicizing it, and that by virtue of their position, they should be precluded from speaking and should instead, focus on playing the sport. Moreover, that the Missouri football team had a losing record was used as evidence that the team had too much time on their hands, and that the athletes should be devoting that time to winning. Despite these pronouncements, the intermingling of sport and politics has been well noted by scholars (Butterworth 2012; Khan, 2016). Thus, because athletes were speaking up about an issue that made some fans uncomfortable, they pushed back with predictable refrains of athletes needing to stick to sports, which reinforce notions that athletes are only to fuel the power structure, not question it (Kaufman, 2008; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015). When athletes circumvent this script, and bring attention to issues that might make fans uncomfortable, they are positioned in ways that reflect negatively on their efforts by reducing them to only having value as sporting participants, not as social justice commentators and activists. Additionally, as noted by Gill Jr. (2016), for many fans, social justice issues do not transcend sport, and when athletes attempt to disrupt that notion, threats of punishment and consequences for the larger sport system are proffered, which may not only prevent athletes from future activism, but also frame consequences of advocacy as not being worth the cost, which ultimately works to reinforce the status quo.

Discussion

This research examined perceptions of college athletes' activism efforts at the University of Missouri. Beyond the emergent themes, there are several implications emanating from this research that are now discussed. First, consistent with critical race theory, the dominant position, or the structures in sport that benefit Whiteness were reinforced (Agyemang & DeLorme, 2010). Indeed, athletes were chastised and condemned for having the audacity to challenge the status quo, and these censures re(produce) ideology that athletes should be grateful for the opportunity to play sport, but certainly should not question it (Ebanda De B'beri & Hogarth, 2009). This is in line with Feagin's (2013) notion of the White racial frame, as individuals (either knowingly or not), were imposing the dominance that White privilege affords by criticizing the activism efforts of Black athletes (i.e., those affected by the racist incidents) and often downplaying and critiquing their efforts. This effectively was an attempt by a dominant group to render any challenge by Black athletes to a system that champions Whiteness as a meaningless and misguided effort, which echoes the sentiments of Ferber's (2007) work regarding the new racism that permeates society today. Additionally, the dominant position was reinforced as the lived experiences of those affected by racism were marginalized and some comments suggested that the only adverse action experienced was by the dominant group, not the Black students on campus. Thus, people introduced narratives that minimized the racist incidents and reinforced the notion that the inconvenience of the dominant group having to respond to the challenges was the primary issue at work.

These comments also introduced frames that reinforced notions that sport is a haven from social issues (Springwood, 2006) and that athletes who do speak up are manufacturing racism and deviating from expected behavior. Indeed, many felt that these activism efforts warranted downplaying and critique due to perhaps misguided perceptions that racism is no longer an issue permeating society. Additionally, as these frames unfolded, people introduced correlations that were quite enlightening. For instance, activism was positioned as something that athletes should not undertake. This supports Kaufman (2008) who stated that athletes that engage in activism often face backlash for their efforts, which is coupled with messages from various constituents that sports and politics do not (and should not) mix. This is ironic, considering it was the individuals who commented on Facebook that introduced politics (i.e., Constitutional rights) into the discussion, not those who were engaged in the activism itself. Additionally, some individuals stated that activism is only enacted when athletes are part of a losing team, which in the context of college athletics, reflects another instance of the entitled millennial generation. In that sense, individuals often framed racism as a relevant norm only to coddled youth, whose generation has bred unwarranted sensitivity to a once culturally significant reality that privileged enduring adversity. Interestingly, this lament emanating from the dominant group is instructive as the dominant group extols principles (e.g., enduring adversity) that are a common experience for subjugated groups and rarely experienced by the dominant group. In other words, these narratives are easily dispensed and employed as trite phrases from those in positions of power and/or privilege.

Collectively, these negative associations work to deflect attention from the root issues of advocacy and highlight a second implication for this study. In making light of the incidents at Missouri and criticizing the players for advocacy, the context was shifted to the athletes, or the messengers, rather than the message itself. Therefore, even though these athletes defied Rhoden's (2006) claims regarding Black athletes and their lack of ability to organize and project

collective power, these efforts were undermined by individuals shifting attention to the athletes themselves rather than the message they were trying to disseminate. Even in situations where people praised the athletes (i.e., encouraging advocacy), this commendation was more in the context of using their Constitutional rights, and while the exercise of those rights is not diminished, the focus was again on the messengers rather than the message.

Nevertheless, athletes, particularly collegiate football players at the Division I level within a Power 5 conference (i.e., ACC, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac-12, and SEC), do have a very visible presence. Through this protest, they arguably brought swift resolution, which illustrates the ability to overcome one of the hurdles to athlete advocacy, namely that athletes may not be able to translate their knowledge of an issue to bring about meaningful change (Gill Jr., 2016). Importantly, within this point, athletes must demonstrate knowledge (e.g. present legitimate and substantiated information/data) of an issue to garner support or respect for their position or actions. Additionally, college athletes, though many receive scholarships and stipends, they do not have the same financial obligations that professional athletes do (i.e., million dollar contracts and endorsement deals), which may enable them to speak up more freely, or arguably with less constraints about social justice issues. While college athletes must be mindful that activism can alienate a large portion of their fan base that may be guided by White privilege, the efforts at the University of Missouri highlight the ability of athletes to utilize their visible position to bring about change with regard to social justice issues such as racism on college campuses.

With that said, there certainly is still risk involved for college athletes in speaking up and the frames that manifested in the data offered compelling evidence. For example, some people espoused that the athletes should lose their scholarships for engaging in protest. Given the volatile nature of college athletic scholarships, and their ability to be pulled at any time, this particular form of punishment may preclude athletes' future advocacy efforts, particularly if the fan base supports such consequences. The average fan may not be able to wield such sway over university administrators. However, influential fans/donors (such as T. Boone Pickens) could impact the decisions of administrators regarding punishment in response to athlete activism. In the case of the University of Missouri, people were very critical of the university administration and coaching staff. While administrators and coaches should be aware of the climate on campus and an athlete's ability to bring attention to social justice issues, they must do so judiciously, as a perceived lack of authority or inability to discipline would likely lead to condemnation from vested constituents. Condemnation may prompt administrators to discipline players for activism efforts. At the very least, condemnation may force administrators to speak out and frame these activities in negative ways, which then provides an impetus for fans and others to come together and attack players who are engaging in advocacy. For instance, during the 2016 college football season, University of Nebraska football players Michael Rose-Ivey, Daishon Neal, and Mohamed Barry kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality and this behavior was condemned by both the Governor of Nebraska and one of the schools' regents (Nohr, 2016). Whereas Nebraska President Hank Bound was supportive of Rose-Ivey, this may not be the case with every university administrator. In fact, if a university administrator were to cave into the demands of enraged constituencies and pull (or threaten to pull) athletes' scholarships, that would effectively squelch advocacy efforts among a powerful and visible sect of individuals whose only real form of "payment" is fully revocable.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like any research endeavor, this study was not without limitations. First, the research was delimited to Facebook comments. It would be worthwhile to compare Facebook data to tweets and hashtags generated on Twitter to determine whether dialogue specific to activism at the University of Missouri was consistent or nuanced across social media platforms. Additionally, it would be interesting to see what themes would emerge via traditional media (i.e., top-down framing) compared to the organic social media content (i.e., bottom-up framing) that was analyzed in this study. Second, this research only focused on activism efforts among college athletes at a major Division I program. Activism among athletes has been documented at the professional, collegiate, and interscholastic levels. Therefore, future research would be wise to compare dialogue surrounding activism efforts across various levels of competition. Third, this research was time-bound to the dates of November 7th through November 9th. These dates were chosen because they represented unique and meaningful events in the Missouri activism timeline. This was not the end of the dialogue pertaining to these activism efforts. Additional research is necessary to determine how long discussions related to these events persisted via social media as well as the nature and sentiment of this dialogue.

Conclusion

In Khan's (2016) work exploring traditional and social media's portrayal of Richard Sherman following his infamous post-game "rant", he quotes Greg Howard (2014) who stated:

Antics and soundbites from [white] guys like Brett Favre, Johnny Football, and Bryce Harper seem almost hyper-American, capable of capturing the country's imagination, but black superstars like Sherman, Floyd Mayweather, and Cam Newton are seen as polarizing, as selfish, as glory boys, as distasteful and perhaps even offensive (p. 1).

While the Sherman incident involved a professional athlete not engaging in activism, it did highlight a double standard that exists when athletes speak up. That double standard was certainly reflected in the current study, as the activism efforts of Black athletes was often framed as a selfish and distasteful act by a coddled and misinformed generation who did not deserve the opportunity to influence university policy and leadership. Had the advocacy been enacted by White students, or a successful team (in terms of wins), perhaps the response would have been different. It is this pervasive undercurrent of covert racism that deserves continued scholarly attention within sport and beyond.

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