

# Penalties Off the Field: Exploring Social Media Policies for Student Athletes at Universities

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## *Abstract*

University student-athletes and their teams rely on social media to communicate with their fans, and these interactions may be beneficial for teams and athletes alike. But social media use also carries risk if an offensive photo or statement goes viral. Using frameworks from social cognitive, privacy, and uses and gratification theories, this article captures the status of university social media policies

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for athletes through content analysis and interviews. The findings outline strategies for monitoring, penalizing and rewarding athletes for their online interactions.

**S**ocial media have changed the game for sharing information, and digital platforms consume much of our culture and media use today. Whether users are engaging in the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vine, or Snapchat, they and their organizations may connect to others using these fast and inexpensive social networks. According to one study, the immediacy function of social media is one of the tools that people and media outlets enjoy most (Kian & Zimmerman, 2012). This immediacy attracts many users and organizations to social media, including sports teams and individual athletes. Social networks allow both teams and their athletes to interact easily with fans before and during games, as well as to promote upcoming contests.

Most college and professional teams today maintain accounts on at least three different social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram—to communicate with followers (Sanderson, 2011). One of the most popular functions of all three platforms is that each post is broadcast to a large network of followers or fans, who then have capabilities for retweeting or sharing information again and again with their own networks. While this may be beneficial for distributing timely, compelling or emotional information to a wide audience, this capability also allows questionable and negative messages to be instantly shared beyond the original social media user, with no way of re-

trieving messages. Posts may be deleted, but not before thousands or even millions of people, including large media outlets, have saved the posts and broadcast them widely to large audiences. For athletes, this virality of posts can be especially problematic, because social media represent the brand of an athlete and/or a sports organization (Sanderson, 2011). When student-athletes take to social media, they are not only representing themselves, but their teams and universities. This is both beneficial and risky, in terms of reputation management.

One of the current problems in college athletics is an athletic department's handling of student-athletes' social media use (Sanderson, 2011). Many college athletic programs attempt to control social media through providing general guidelines, monitoring student-athlete posts, or banning social media all together. Despite different approaches for each program, reputation management is key for the student-athlete, the sports program, and the university. However, most college athletic programs in the United States lack social media policies or guidelines for their student-athletes. A recent survey by the College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) revealed that 56% of U.S. college athletic departments do not have social media policies, and 36% do not have a strategy or goal for social media within their departments (Syme & Dosh, 2014). This includes social media for the department itself, as well as student-athletes who represent the department and their schools. Most universities currently have no universal athletic department social media policies and have openly expressed concerns that they are far behind where they want to be in addressing social media (Syme & Dosh, 2014).

Therefore, collegiate sports teams need guidelines for implementing student-athlete social media policies. Countless examples nationwide show student-athletes using social media inappropriately, resulting in players being suspended, getting kicked off teams, or creating unwanted and negative media attention around athletic programs (Sanderson, 2011). When these situations occur, the media shift their focus from an athlete's abilities to off-the-field actions of a player. Often, questions arise about the coach's control of his or her team, an athlete's decision to transfer to another team or other issues. These questions may be generated from one single careless use of social media. For this reason, this study is intended to explore current social media policies for student-athletes. It will address critical challenges in creating and implementing these policies with sports communication leaders, and it will provide guidelines for social media policies for collegiate sports teams in the United States.

## **Literature Review**

The background for this study is based on literature exploring past social media misuses by college athletes, the status of social media policies within sports organizations, social media's role in athletics (as it has expanded to become a major component of athletic communication and marketing strategies), and uses and gratifications and social cognitive theories.

## **Social Media Misuse**

Improper uses of social media by student-athletes have created headaches and negative media attention for athletic departments (Hernandez, 2013). There is a clear

need for better social media policies across the board, even for universities with policies already in place. Today, student-athletes' social media behavior is being examined before they even step foot on a college campus. During the recruiting process, college recruiters have been known to look to social media to evaluate potential players' character and judgment. Former Penn State offensive line coach Herb Hand tweeted from his own Twitter account that they were no longer interested in a player due to his social media presence, indicating that social media posts had given Penn State coaches insight into potential players' true personalities (Hand, 2014). Coaches across the country are baffled about student-athletes' blind spots about what is appropriate or inappropriate to post online, and the ways that could negatively impact outside perceptions (Associated Press, 2014). In 2012, several North Carolina football players used social media to communicate with professional agents, which was a major NCAA infraction. As a result, North Carolina received a postseason ban and lost many scholarships. Violations of social media can prove costly for all parties involved. High school athletes can lose potential scholarships, college athletes may lose eligibility, scholarships, and/or receive suspensions, entire teams may be fined or penalized, and coaches can be held liable for all of it. In addition, it affects the brand of the university, sponsors, and a variety of other stakeholders (Hernandez, 2013).

While the NCAA has cracked down on violations by imposing sanctions and penalties, the collegiate organization has shown little interest in attempting to regulate social media (Hernandez, 2013). As transgressions continue to occur, organizations associated with the NCAA—such as

the aforementioned CoSIDA—are beginning to bring the existence of social media problems to athletic departments' attention. The NCAA encourages athletic departments to create and/or modify social media policies, but generally leaves the specifics to each university's discretion.

### **Current Status of Social Media Policies in Athletic Departments**

A recent survey (Syme & Dosh, 2014) revealed 43% of athletic departments regulate social media through department policies. In addition, 36% of athletic departments reported no social media communication strategies. Not only is there a lack of regulations to prevent negative posts, but there is also a lack of consensus in incorporating social media into the overall communication strategy (Syme & Dosh, 2014). While media relations professionals guide student-athletes in traditional media interviews, these professionals have much less control over student-athletes' social media use. The speed and convenience of social media is a challenge for media relations professionals because student-athletes can post at any time of day, from anywhere. Traditional media exposure, which requires more preparation, scheduling and oversight, affords media relations professionals the opportunity to guide student-athletes in an interview setting. On the other hand, these professionals have much less control over student-athletes' social media use. Especially following a tough loss, a student-athlete is more likely to vent to the media with a potentially inappropriate response during a post-game interview. Media relations professionals are trained to prepare student-athletes with appropriate responses, give them time to cool down or even withhold them from

the interview altogether. Social media provides no such filter to prevent an unwanted response.

From the student-athlete perspective, social media education is usually only occurring after a violation has occurred. Sanderson (2011) claims that athletic departments may intentionally use ambiguous and subjective terminology in their social media policies in order to maintain control over athlete tweets. If athletes are unsure whether their tweets violate social media policies, they are less likely to tweet it. Overall, student-athletes feel athletic personnel are not prioritizing their time efficiently and should be spending more time educating about Twitter (and other social media) than waiting for them to mess up (Sanderson & Browning, 2014). How universities manage social media for their student-athletes is critical because it impacts the reputation of the university, especially at the Division 1 level. In his content analysis of 159 written social media policies from NCAA Division 1 programs, Sanderson (2011) found that athletic departments are primarily using policies to outline how social media should not be used instead of instructing student athletes about how to prevent any future social media mishaps. In addition to clearly outlining how social media can be harmful, acknowledging the positives of social media may be beneficial in building the awareness and brand of the athlete, team, and university. In the 2011 study, only seven of the 159 policies mentioned the benefits of social media use. Student-athletes have expressed a strong desire for social media training; however, they cannot recall specific passages from policies, and echoed similar complaints about ambiguity (Sanderson & Browning, 2014).

Sanderson and Browning (2014) conclude much so-

cial media monitoring may be ineffective or in need of heavy refining. Some athletic programs use software to flag certain words and alert administrators, but the software frequently commits errors or is unable to place certain words in context. For example, one student in this 2014 study said she was flagged for using the word “crack,” however the context of the post was that “a joke had cracked her up,” which is clearly not inappropriate to flag. Other similar false violations were reported, creating more frustration than prevention. Student-athletes concluded that more hands-on training and constructive policies would be more productive than many of the current restrictive policies.

### **Social Media in College Athletics**

Social media were designed to create online connections, collaborations, and a sense of community (Meraz, 2009). All of these factors have contributed to the mass spread of social media within athletics for marketing promotions, team updates, and play-by-play action during a contest (Sanderson, 2011). Researchers are also exploring how student-athlete tweets and Twitter’s unique components impact consumer perceptions and behavior. Athlete tweets, on the amateur and professional levels, have shown to generate massive amounts of interactivity that can give athletes “unprecedented power and influence” (Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014, p. 17). Pegoraro (2013) notes that fans and athletes are attracted to the idea of connecting to each other without the red tape of media, who often spin or frame how an athlete really feels about a topic. When athletes directly reach out to fans and solicit them to attend an event or perform an action, fans experi-

ence a social interaction with athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2010).

Despite these benefits, social media have become a “conundrum” within the sports world (Sanderson, 2011, p. 492), because organizations also must deal with controversial and inappropriate posts. When Twitter accounts began to become commonplace for college athletes around 2010, compliance officials among NCAA member institutions complained that the NCAA was too slow to act because it did not know how to handle a potential First Amendment conflict within this new digital medium (Carroll, 2012).

### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory suggests that consumers engage in certain media for various needs and reasons (Mahlangu, 2015). Audiences consume different media while seeking out differing gratifications from mass media outlets (Vincent & Basil, 1997). Whiting and Williams (2013) explored social media usage from a uses and gratifications perspective, performing in-depth interviews to investigate why people consume social media, and some of the top reasons for all age groups included social interaction, seeking information, and passing the time. More specifically, recent studies confirm these needs can be greater in college students, leading to high social media use among the 18 to 22 year old demographic (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center, adults aged 18-29 have more accounts with Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram than any other age group (Duggan, 2015). While social media in general have grown in popularity with adults 30 and older, the most used ap-

plications— Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, and YouTube – have the highest usage in teenagers and young adults 20-29 (Harland, 2014). U&G presents an understanding of the wide range of reasons why college students use and consume social media, specifically with college-aged students. With a clear understanding of student-athletes' motivations for using social media, athletic departments can find the best ways to implement social media plans that benefit all stakeholders.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT) creates a lens for investigating how certain behaviors are acquired and developed. Behavior can be formed through both internal intuition and external, or environmental, influences. Past studies have used SCT to examine media influences on behavior, such as violence on television. More recently, Bandura (2002) notes that changes and advancements in media technology create more media exposures and external influences. Additionally, new behavioral patterns can emerge that fall outside typical communication. For example, online spaces – particularly social media – create relationships that previously did not exist. Viewing social media through a SCT framework reminds us that social media interactions are unique and separate from traditional communication platforms. Therefore, media education for using social media should differ from traditional media.

One problem is rooted in perceptions, which may be based on traditional media platforms. College students may perceive that no one is looking at their social media posts and that they are not harmful at all (Lupsa, 2006).

Furthermore, Brock (2007) reported that college students have exaggerated their alcohol or drug use on Facebook, and that this younger generation may feel there is a competitive rivalry for keeping their profiles open, which will lead to fame and popularity (Funk, 2007). When this type of behavior persists in a network of college students, they become desensitized to the potential harm of the posts, which leads to future inappropriate posts. Thus, when college students post controversial content, they feel they are adhering to social norms (Miller, Parsons, & Lifer, 2010). SCT allows social media to be viewed as a behavior influenced by college student's social environment. This environment creates a unique space where student-athletes feel their potentially inappropriate social media content are not a problem and fit into place with the rest of the culture.

Both U&G and SCT provide frameworks for the variety of reasons why college students take to social media and the unique environment social media create. Establishing these motives reveals a strong factor in the problem faced by college athletic departments. College students frequently use social media to share information and express themselves; however, their specific uses and perceptions of the medium often result in inappropriate content that can potentially jeopardize the student-athlete's career and brand reputation of the entire university.

### **Communication Privacy Management Theory**

When looking at communication policies, past research has examined the communication privacy management theory (CPM). CPM is a communication theory regarding privacy and disclosure (Sanderson, 2011). More

specifically, it views communication as a means to an end, or a goal. When there are restrictions on that communication, it can influence future communicative choices (Miller, 2009). When the communication is bilateral and socially accepted, restrictions are generally accepted. However, power dynamics also play a huge role in CPM (Petronio, 2008). For example, when social media restrictions are handed down from administrators to student-athletes as a form of one-way communication, the acceptance of regulations is not as seamless. Complications with the social media application arise when viewing one of the components of CPM. This first proposition regards information that the individual considers having control. In this case, the student-athlete is likely to feel ownership of his or her social media profiles, therefore monitoring and/or restricting this information can feel like an invasion of privacy to the individual. Looking through this CPM lens is critical to understanding the impact social media policies can have on student-athletes. CPM recommends a more bilateral than unilateral approach when implementing restrictions on information. Therefore, receiving feedback from student-athletes regarding policies may be beneficial to all stakeholders, as well as lead to better execution of the policies.

### Research Questions

This study seeks to answer these research questions:

**RQ1:** What is the current status of collegiate student-athlete social media policies?

**RQ2:** What are the primary challenges of communicating and enforcing social media policies with student-athletes?

**RQ3:** What social media policy strategies are effective and/or ineffective when communicating and enforcing social media policies with student-athletes?

## **Method**

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

To address these research questions, a mixed-methods approach was employed, including qualitative content analysis and interviewing. In the first part of this study, a qualitative content analysis of current collegiate social media policies was conducted to establish the current landscape of social media policies, particularly in comparison to Sanderson's 2011 study.

The selection of social media policies comprised a census of Division 1 "Power 5" Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)-level universities, which totaled 63 schools from five athletic conferences: the Atlantic Coast, the Big Ten, the Big 12, the Pac-12, and the Southeastern conferences. This selection also includes Notre Dame, which competes independently but is viewed as an FBS-level school. Of the 64 schools included in this study, 44 contained online and public social media policies for student-athletes; therefore, a qualitative content analysis was performed on all 44 social media policies.

### **Coding Procedure & Variables**

A qualitative content analysis was performed on 44 social media policies that existed in March 2016. Policies were first screen-grabbed from athletic department websites for initial viewing before being copied into a Microsoft Word document for analysis. A preliminary examination of

15 randomly chosen policies was used to develop a coding sheet for this study (Appendix A). Focusing on a summative type of qualitative content analysis, the coding sheet was created to allow collection of content in several forms within a policy, rather than to count only one type of content through the existence of a specific keyword only (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). An iterative approach for reading the 15 policies allowed the researcher to capture the different ways that content could be included within policies, keeping in mind the total context of social media use by athletes. During the initial phase of coding, each policy was examined by the researcher for the existence of these kinds of content: punitive measures, as well as other variables such as monitoring notification to student-athletes and protocols for monitoring; the frequency of social media language; the frequency of benefits presented; overall ambiguity of the policy; and overall tone of the policy. Next, the coding sheet was refined and used to analyze all 44 policies; each policy was assigned a number from 1 to 44. Saturation was one goal of this research project, since all 44 policies were included in the selection; in other words, the researcher was focused on finding the variety of different ways that these 44 policies contained the variables listed above, rather than finding narrowly defined and very specific instances of words used (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). Another goal of the analysis was to create descriptive meaning contained within the policies related to the variables, rather than numbers alone (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach allowed the current study to take a more holistic look at social media policies and their ambiguity, since that feature was prominent in Sanderson's 2011 study.

### **Personal In-depth Interviews**

While the first method explored the current status of the policies, the second part of the study was composed of semi-structured interviews with managerial leaders in athletics communications, or sports information directors (SID). Drawing from research questions 2 and 3, the goal of this part of the research was to gain insights about and beyond the policies, into the largest challenges in creating and implementing successful social media environments for student-athletes.

Participants in this part of the study are six sport communication professionals working for a Power 5-level university in media relations. These professionals were responsible for regulating student-athlete social media usage. They were selected with snowball sampling and recruited with an email seeking their participation. Once participation was confirmed, respondents were emailed an informed consent statement and the topic guide for the interview. All interviews were conducted in March 2016 via telephone, recorded, and eventually transcribed for data analysis. All interviews were transcribed verbatim as a Microsoft Word document and the identities of each respondent were coded to protect their identities. Each interview lasted 20-55 minutes.

### **Results**

The qualitative content analysis of 44 policies revealed they are ambiguous and heavily focused on social media restrictions, listing few student-athlete benefits for using social media (Table 1). Student-athletes were generally not informed of any monitoring, and the specifics of the monitoring were rarely seen. Student-athletes were

also informed of a range of punitive measures if a policy was violated.

Overall, policies averaged 601.5 words, with the shortest policy containing 95 words and the longest policy containing 1,441 words. Four of the public and online policies were published three or more years ago, with the oldest policy dating back to the 2010-11 academic year. While this could be for a number of reasons, including failure to upload the most recent policy or student handbook, the year of the policy was tracked to show the recency of social media policies. Just over 90% of policies were from the 2014-15 or 2015-16 academic years.

### **Punitive Measures**

Of the 44 policies, 61.4% ( $n = 27$ ) mentioned penalties for violating the social media policy. Penalties ranged in severity, from a simple written notification from an administrator in the athletic department, to listing the progression of penalties. This progression of penalties was listed because of multiple violations of the social media policy or dependence on the severity of any violation. For example, policy 5 reads: “Any inappropriate activity or language in violation of the above prohibitions, including first time offenses, is subject to investigation and possible sanctions” (2015). The particular policy then lists penalties such as written notification, temporary suspension, team dismissal, and reduction/loss of athletic scholarship. Policy 33 was much vaguer, indicating any violation would result in “disciplinary action” (2015).

### **Monitoring Strategies**

As the CPM theory outlines, privacy and communi-

**Table 1**  
*Content Analysis Results*

<i>Category</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
<i>Informing Student-Athletes of Monitoring</i>		
Yes	15	34.1%
No	29	65.9%
<i>Punitive Measures</i>		
Yes	27	61.4%
No	17	38.6%
<i>References to Social Media</i>		
0-5	31	70.5%
6 or more	13	29.5%
<i>Benefits</i>		
None	9	20.5%
1	23	52.3%
2-3	8	18.2%
4 or more	4	9.0%
<i>Content Restrictions</i>		
Comments	36	81.8%
Images	34	77.3%
Offensive/Derogatory Language	34	77.3%
Personal Information	32	72.7%
University affiliation/reference	27	61.4%
<i>Ambiguity</i>		
Not Ambiguous	0	0.0%
Slightly Ambiguous	8	18.2%
Ambiguous	28	63.6%
Very Ambiguous	8	18.2%
<i>Tone (Risk-to-benefit ratio)</i>		
High Risk	36	81.8%
Medium Risk	4	9.1%
Balanced	4	9.1%
Medium Benefits	0	0.0%
Heavy Benefits	0	0.0%

cation restrictions can have an impact on organization-employee relationships. Similarly, notifying student-athletes whether monitoring is occurring may have an impact on how they interpret social media policies and their propensity to follow the policy. Nearly two-thirds of policies ( $n = 29$ , 65.9%) contained language indicating some monitoring of student-athlete social media activity. These strategies included notification of random social media audits, notification that an assigned coach or staff member would be monitoring student-athlete social media activity, and/or an indication that computer software would track and flag social media activity. Similar to the punitive topic, details were often vague and restrictive in nature, such as policy 32, which states: “Athletic department may monitor the internet sites for the sole purpose of determining whether you are in compliance” (2010). Some policies suggested student-athletes monitor their own activities and even their friends’ activities to ensure appropriate social media behaviors.

### **Social Media Language**

This portion of the content analysis looked for references to specific social networking language that was included within policies. By using references to specific social media sites, this language would provide more concrete examples and enhance understanding between athletic department expectations and student-athlete message interpretation. About 70% ( $n = 31$ ) of policies contained five or fewer references to social media language. Only three policies (6.8%) contained 10 or more references. Examples of these references included discussion of privacy settings, caution about retweeting on Twitter, and

warnings about posting inappropriate pictures or words. These references represent specific examples of how social media should be used or not used. While a policy may simply instruct student-athletes to not affiliate with inappropriate posts/profiles/content, others were more specific, instructing student-athletes to not follow or “like” inappropriate posts/profiles/content.

### **Benefits**

One of the implications from Sanderson’s 2011 study was that the policies were very restrictive and had an overall negative tone. They were often instructions on how student-athletes could get into trouble. This portion of the present content analysis examined this phenomenon, looking for frequency of discussion about student-athlete benefits from using social media. A benefit is defined as a mention within a policy of how social media can be a positive for student-athletes, such as building their personal brand or spreading positive information about the team and/or school. Policy 16 reads, “Despite avoidable drawbacks, social media can be a GREAT TOOL for both you and [university].” CPM theory suggests that messages (policies) that intend to restrict or limit privacy or communication (such as social media in this instance) may be received better when balanced with potential benefits. Just over half—52.3% ( $n = 23$ )—listed one benefit, with 18.2% ( $n = 8$ ) listing two or three benefits, and 9.1% ( $n = 4$ ) containing four or more benefits. Nine policies (20.5%) listed zero benefits.

### **Content Restrictions**

The five types of content restrictions were con-

structured using a preliminary examination of social media policies and results from Sanderson's 2011 study. These prevalent content restrictions included the prohibition of posting personal information, inappropriate images, inappropriate comments, affiliations/references to university (including inappropriate pictures where the student-athlete is wearing university apparel), and offensive/derogatory language. The results show that inappropriate comments ( $n = 36$ , 81.8%) was the most frequently mentioned restriction regarding social media contents followed by inappropriate images ( $n = 34$ , 77.3%), offensive/derogatory language ( $n = 34$ , 77.3%), personal information ( $n = 32$ , 72.7%), and university affiliation/reference ( $n = 27$ , 61.4%).

### **Ambiguity**

One of the biggest takeaways from Sanderson's 2011 study was the ambiguous nature of social media policies. Universities made it clear that using social media inappropriately can result in penalties; however, the term inappropriate as well as other vague terms may be interpreted very differently by an 18-year-old student-athlete compared to a communications professional who created the policy. This trend continued strongly in the present content analysis. Content analysis results suggest 81.8% ( $n = 28$ ) of policies were rated as ambiguous or very ambiguous ( $n = 8$ , 18.2%). The remaining eight policies were rated as slightly ambiguous. Zero policies were rated as not ambiguous. As Table 2 shows, the overall policy was rated based on presence of specific examples and use of ambiguous phrases/terms. For example, policy 27 warns that "if you can't say it in front of your mother, grandmother, pas-

**Table 2**  
*Ambiguity Definitions*

Not Ambiguous	Specific examples used on every type of restriction that make it very clear what is considered acceptable and/or unacceptable on social media.
Slightly Ambiguous	Specific examples used on most restrictions. Messaging is mostly clear in what is considered acceptable and/or unacceptable on social media. Some ambiguous terms may be used.
Ambiguous	Specific examples present, but not very clear. Messaging is sometimes clear in what is considered acceptable and/or unacceptable on social media. Multiple ambiguous terms used throughout policy.
Very Ambiguous	Very few specific examples present. Examples are poor, irrelevant, and/or do not convey what is expected or acceptable social media use. Ambiguous terms used heavily throughout policy.

tor or any other family member, then don't say it" (2015). While this may be clear advice for some student-athletes, it is obviously making an assumption of student-athletes' family expectations. This makes the policy vague as to what is permitted and not permitted on social media.

### **Tone**

Tone was defined as the overall ratio of restrictions to benefits and ratings are defined in Table 3. Preliminary examination of social media policies found frequencies of benefits listed and specific content restrictions. However, this topic's goal was to weigh benefits and the presentation of risk together to determine the overall tone of the policy.

**Table 3**  
*Overall Tone Definitions*

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Heavy Risk-to-Benefit Ratio	Social media is presented as a very risky space that can lead to student-athlete punishments and embarrassment for the school. There are very few, if not zero, benefits listed to student-athletes using social media.
Medium Risk-to-Benefit Ratio	Social media is presented as a risky space that can lead to student-athlete punishments. Few examples of benefits listed to student-athletes using social media
Balanced	Social media is presented as a space that can be used to benefit the student-athlete, but poor use can be costly to the student-athlete and university.
Medium Benefit-to-Risk Ratio	Social media presented as a slight risk to student-athletes, but mainly is a space that benefits student-athletes.
Heavy Benefit-to-risk	Minimal risk presented. Social media primarily presented as a space for student-athletes to express themselves with little risk of social media misuse.

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Thirty-six of the policies (81.8%) were rated as having a heavy risk-to-benefit ratio, indicating many examples of risk and very few examples of benefits. Four policies (9.1%) were rated as medium risk-to-benefit ratio and four policies (9.1%) were rated as balanced. Zero policies were rated as containing more benefits than risks. Policy 15 was reflective of these 36 heavy risk-to-benefit ratio policies, reading, “For your own safety, please keep the following

recommendations in mind as you participate in social networking websites” (2015). Policy 25 warned student-athletes of online predators, saying “Many individuals are looking to take advantage of students-athletes, to get close to student-athletes to give themselves a sense of membership, or to gain information about you, your teammates, or your team for the purposes of sports gambling or negative publicity” (2015).

### **Interview Results**

In-person semi-structured interviews were used to answer the second and third research questions. Six in-depth interviews with communications professionals shed light on the greatest challenges in communicating and enforcing social media policies for student-athletes. Thematic analyses of interview transcripts determined the three most pressing challenges and strategies.

### **Challenges**

#### *Theme 1: Social Media is a Dynamic Environment*

All respondents talked about the ever-changing nature of social media as a challenge for communications professionals. With new apps popping up at a rapid pace, it becomes more difficult to teach and enforce social media rules and regulations. Each app has specific settings and features that can create new problems for student-athletes. Respondent 5 said, “How can you learn something in college in one year or four years when everything is changing at such a rapid pace? It’s difficult to come up with a policy that tells you how to do everything.” The implication of this dilemma means that even seniors are in need of instruction in their fourth year because of new

technology or apps. Respondent 4 echoed these sentiments, stating, “Social media keeps evolving. A lot of new things are coming out.” The rapidly changing environment may be a factor in the ambiguous nature of the social media policies. Athletic departments can cover many social media applications through broad language and content restrictions.

### *Theme 2: Student-Athletes Grow Up with Social Media*

All respondents discussed the challenge of today’s student-athletes growing up in a social media world, where social media have been relevant for a majority of the student-athletes’ lives. In other words, social media provide the go-to platforms for many student-athletes to express themselves. Any kind of restriction, then, is an attempt to break an engrained habit. Respondent 6 said, “As the years go on, we’re getting to the point where kids coming into college have never been without a phone in their hands.” This generation’s familiarity with social media may obscure their ability to see fully the detrimental impact of a single post. All respondents mentioned that one of the more difficult concepts for their student-athletes to understand was the overall impact of social media. “That’s a really hard concept for them to grasp because they’re in the type of generation where every single thing about their lives is put on social media,” said Respondent 6. These challenges have made it difficult for sports information directors to implement and enforce meaningful restrictions. One respondent said he has to remind his student-athletes weekly of responsible social media behavior and the implications of a poor post.

### *Theme 3: Many Voices*

Respondents echoed similar challenges in the many contributors to regulating student-athlete social media posts. Many policies have input from sports information directors, coaches, athletics administrators, student services, and compliance. Each one of these offices may have a different agenda. Coaches want to win, student services may stand up for student-athletes' rights, compliance is protecting the school from NCAA violations, and information directors are promoting the university's brand and image. Respondent 5 noted, "Each coach has his or her own thoughts and they add that into the [social media] presentation. Some of them have different guidelines. Sometimes it's a team rule that student-athletes are not allowed to post after a certain time at night." These contributions have resulted in mixed messages about the role of social media in student-athletes. Multiple respondents mentioned coaches encouraging their student-athletes to post about the team for recruiting purposes. Potential recruits may follow certain members of a team and seeing positive messages about the school and team's success may influence their decisions about where to attend school. Other coaches fear social media mishaps lead to unwanted media attention and attempt to ban social media use altogether during a particular time period during the season. All of these agendas make constructing an effective social media policy challenging.

### **Strategies**

#### *Theme 1: Educate Through Real Life Do's and Don'ts*

Many of the respondents believed the most successful method for enforcing responsible social media behavior

is showing student-athletes real world examples of proper and improper uses. For both types of posts, respondents indicated they also showed repercussions of these posts. “It’s important to teach them how powerful a tool it is and to use it the right way,” said Respondent 4. Similarly, Respondent 3 said, “From [showing them real examples], I haven’t had a single issue with any of my student-athletes. I think that has a greater effect than just saying ‘Be careful about this,’ ‘Don’t post this.’” Specific examples also provide insight into what other 18- to 22-year-old student-athletes have posted, leading to both negative and positive outcomes. By seeing the direct consequences of misuse, student-athletes are able to see firsthand the impact of their posts. This strategy may be more difficult to compile than the standard list of penalties for violations.

### *Theme 2: Establish Relationships*

One of the first methods sports information directors use when introducing social media policies is to establish healthy, open relationships with the student-athletes. Respondent 3 said, “If they want to post something potentially controversial, or want to weigh in on an issue, we want to have that relationship where they are comfortable enough to come talk to us about it beforehand.” Many respondents echoed this statement, saying they encourage their student-athletes to send them a text or email inquiring if a social media post would be acceptable. Respondent 4 expanded these relationships to the entire staff saying, “We’re really big on great communication between the SID, their coaching staff, and having that staff allows us to be vocal, listen/watch/monitor what our athletes do and provide guidance when we need to.” Although there are

many voices contributing to policies, strong two-way communication places everyone on the same page, adding clarity to the social media expectations.

### *Theme 3: Know Social Media*

One of the ineffective strategies described by multiple respondents was attempting to talk with student-athletes with a limited knowledge of social media. As Respondent 5 outlined, “Not every SID is equipped to [teach social media]. There’s no degree in this.” Older respondents discussed a learning curve when social media began to gain in popularity over the past decade, while younger respondents mentioned they had an advantage because they had social media when they were in college and could relate better to the student-athletes. The more comfortable sports information directors are with social media, the better chance of student-athletes receiving relevant instructions on responsible social media use.

Respondents were mixed in their answers about how social media fits into the overall communication strategy. Some communication departments openly discuss how they are going to implement social media policies each year, while others take direction exclusively from the coach. This may result in mixed messages about social media. Athletic departments need to ensure all employees are well versed in the potential pitfalls, opportunities and technical challenges presented by social media.

## **Discussion**

From a theoretical perspective, this study extended the significance of U&G and SCT theories in describing why and how college-aged students use social media. So-

cial cognitive theory explains how college-aged students' social media behavior is a result of their social environment. These issues were seen throughout the interview stage of the research, as all respondents described the specific challenge of enforcing social media education with 18- to 22- year-old student-athletes. Social cognitive theory was supported when respondents described how college-aged students are desensitized in understanding the impact and reach each social media post may have in the larger world.

This study also gives insight into how communications professionals attempt to manage student-athletes' engrained media habits. U&G theory was also supported, with observations by respondents and language in policies about the ways student-athletes use social media to share the details of their lives. Interview respondents noted that student-athletes in 2016 have been on social media for a large portion of their lives, making them comfortable with sharing life details, regardless of significance or appropriateness. This also speaks to CPM theory because many strategies for teaching responsible social media behavior help relieve the initial tension from attempts to restrict and monitor communication. As many respondents stated, future student-athletes will have more and more pre-college social media experience, making these challenges more difficult to solve. It is critical that future studies use these theoretical lenses as social media and college athletics change and evolve.

By analyzing policies and including the voices of sports information professionals, this study reveals the best practices for promoting the positive use and preventing the negative use of social media by student-athletes.

First and foremost is establishing strong and healthy relationships among all parties: student-athletes, sports information directors, and coaches. The interviews demonstrated the benefits of relationship-building, so that a student-athlete felt comfortable sending a simple text to receive guidance and support. Establishing this open, two-way, and transparent environment is a critical component for healthy student-athlete social media use.

### **Practical Implications**

A major practical implication from this study is that social media policies are not reflective of actual social media training. When these six participants presented social media training, they reported being likely to include a healthy balance of benefits and restrictions. They also included positive uses by student-athletes to promote their brands or engage with fans. Student-athletes were encouraged by these professionals to engage in an ongoing conversation about current events and all things social media. These reported interactions are in stark contrast to the policies, which had few benefits and heavy restrictions. The policies presented social media as a risky endeavor and advised student-athletes to take caution for their own safety.

This contrast brings into question the overall significance of the policies and their purpose. When participants were directly asked this question, many said that the social media policies (often within student handbooks) played “practically zero” role in educating student-athletes about social media (Respondent 3). While the athletics communications department contributes to these policies, many participants stressed that many other departments

have a hand in them as well, including compliance, student services, and athletics administrators. They discussed how the student-athlete's freedom of speech played a large role in this. Part of the content analysis discovered that most of the policies were placed in student-athlete handbooks and/or were part of the compliance section of the athletics website. These handbooks often discuss student code of conduct and mainly contain restrictions on student-athlete behavior. Similarly, compliance concerns student-athletes following NCAA policies, specifically not taking improper benefits, gambling on sports, and talking to sports agents. Placing a social media policy in these sections of an overall athletic department strategy speaks volumes to how athletic departments approach social media. The handwritten, physical policy is viewed as a risky endeavor and something that could result in some kind of harm to the student-athlete.

### **Suggested Guideline of Student-Athletes Social Media Policy**

Based on the results from content analysis and in-depth interviews of communication professionals in collegiate sports, the following guidelines are set forth for student-athlete social media policies.

1. Social media training must be addressed differently than traditional media training
  - A. Student-athletes consume and use social media differently than any other form of media, therefore education in responsible use of social media should be customized for this new environment.
2. Student-athletes must be aware of both potential benefits and potential negative consequences of social media

use.

A. Communication privacy management theory shows that limiting communication (or social media in this instance) can create tension. This is especially true when student-athletes feel they have ownership of their communication, such as personal social media profiles. This tension is alleviated through an understanding between student-athletes and the athletic department that includes showing student-athletes positive ways to use social media to build their personal brand and the brand of the university.

B. It can be argued that the downfalls of social media outweigh the potential benefits. However, student-athletes are more receptive to social media instruction when it is clear it is in their best interest and that includes acknowledging benefits.

3. Positive and negative student-athlete social media examples should be used when constructing a list of DO's and DON'Ts.

A. Student-athletes relate and respond better to social media posts coming from fellow student-athletes. Real world examples are specific and prevent any confusion over what is unacceptable and what can garner unwanted negative media attention.

4. Student-athletes must be informed about who is monitoring their social media accounts, what is being monitored, and how it is being monitored.

A. Transparency in the monitoring process builds trust between the athletic department and student-athletes, and alleviates tension brought on by the

idea of monitoring. Student-athletes may take it as an invasion of privacy that every post is being monitored by the athletic department; however, explaining the reasons for this monitoring, as well as the extent of the monitoring, may lead to a mutual understanding of the effects of social media.

5. Social media policies should operate outside of a student-athlete manual.

A. Placing student-athlete social media policies within the student-athlete manual and/or compliance sections of a website gives it a message that social media is something they should not do. Not only do past studies report little to no recall of student-athlete policies, but the handbook takes on a rules mentality that lists all of the ways student-athletes can get into trouble. Operating outside of the student-athlete handbook increases the significance of social media and allows it to take on a different and more receptive tone.

B. Specifics of training programs and in-person presentations should be included in any social media policy literature to ensure a unified message. Any questions about social media should be addressed in one location.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The current study was limited in several ways. First, the qualitative content analysis was performed using online and public social media policies, typically found in student-athlete handbooks or compliance sections of athletic websites. Due to this selection method, 20 schools (31.3% of the overall population) were not examined for a

variety of reasons. Some potential explanations may be a school did not have a social media policy or the school does not upload the policy to its athletic website (intentionally or unintentionally). Many private (and some public) universities in the athletic conferences selected for this study did not have public social media policies, reducing the selection size. Of the policies examined, there was not much difference in policy content between private and public universities; however, more data would have allowed for an examination of this phenomenon. As noted in the implications section, the social media policies were not reflective of social media training described by respondents in interviews. Many respondents mentioned additional literature and presentation materials that are given to student-athletes regarding social media behavior that are not currently available online. Gaining access to these materials may have filled the gap between in-person social media training and physical social media policies and provided an alternative perspective to social media approaches in collegiate athletic programs. Instead of the use of qualitative content analysis, future research could use quantitative content analysis with a more focused and narrow coding scheme. Lastly, this study limited its data to physical policies and interviews from athletic communications professionals to gain a communications perspective on social media policies. Future studies could examine additional perspectives through both interviews and focus groups, including coaching staffs, student services employees, compliance officers, and athletic administrators.

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## Appendix A Coding Sheet

*Name of Program:* \_\_\_\_\_

Year of most recent policy (ex: 2014-15 academic school year): \_\_\_\_\_

Length of policy (words): \_\_\_\_ words

1. Mention of punitive measures:

(1) Yes

(2) No

1a. IF YES, example(s) of punitive measures: \_\_\_\_\_

(Ex: suspension, social media revoked, etc.)

2. Mention of student-athletes being monitored:

(1) Yes

(2) No

2a. IF YES, specific monitoring strategies listed: \_\_\_\_\_

(Ex: Viewed daily or weekly by SIDs, specific social media monitoring, etc.)

3. Number of references to specific social networking language: \_\_\_\_\_

4. Number of social media benefits listed for student-athletes:

(1) None

(2) 1 mention of benefits

(3) 2-3 mentions of benefits

(4) 4 or more mention of benefits

4a. Examples of specific benefits listed:

\_\_\_\_\_

5. Examples of specific social media content restrictions for student-athletes:

(1) Personal information

(2) Inappropriate image

- (3) Inappropriate comment
- (4) Reference/posting of school logo/affiliation
- (5) Offensive/derogatory language

6. Instances of ambiguous messages in describing restrictions:

- (1) Not ambiguous
- (2) Slightly Ambiguous
- (3) Ambiguous
- (4) Very Ambiguous

7. Overall tone:

- (1) Heavy risk-to-benefit ratio
- (2) Balance of benefit-to-risk ratio
- (3) Low risk-to-benefit ratio

8. Other comments: \_\_\_\_\_