

Student Athletes on Facebook

Cliff Lampe
Michigan State University
lampecli@msu.edu

Nicole B. Ellison
Michigan State University
nellison@msu.edu

ABSTRACT

Student athletes at U.S. universities are bound by rules affecting their participation in their sport and are highly visible to their fellow students and a larger public of fans. This difference makes them more likely than other students to be sensitive to issues of impression management and use of social network sites (SNSs). In this paper, we show how student athletes at a large university engage with the social network site Facebook compared with their fellow students, including differences in the size of their networks, reported uses of the site, and perceptions about their audience. This work shows that while student athletes have a higher anticipation of being watched, they have similar uses and concerns compared to other students.

Author Keywords

Social network sites, Facebook, student athletes.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces] Collaborative Computing

General Terms

Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

Student athletes have distinct characteristics that may affect their use of Facebook. Student athletes in U.S. universities are highly visible, with some members becoming, in essence, campus celebrities. They are often considered to be representatives of the university, and may be the most visible spokespeople for, in some cases, hundreds of thousands of university alumni and fans. At the university where data collection for this study took place, student athletes have to sign “good behavior” pledges, maintain adequate grade point averages in order to participate in their sports, and agree to strictly bound conduct codes. Student athletes are more likely to be from out-of-state than the average college student and are more likely to have time management issues, to report multiple dating partners, and to be known by a large group of other students [8].

Ellison et al. [3] examined the extent to which demographic variables like gender, ethnicity, grades, or in-state status

affected the relationship between users’ social capital benefits and Facebook use. The different status of student athletes on Facebook may provide clues about SNS use by users who don’t share the same type of celebrity status. All users of social network sites (SNSs) face issues with managing impressions among their audience and are often speaking simultaneously to several audiences [2]. Skeels and Grudin [6] found several differences in how populations within an enterprise setting used LinkedIn and Facebook, showing that many of their respondents struggled to balance personal and professional identities. In addition, student athletes, because of their visibility and influence, are good proxies for other high status users, including managers or executives in organizations. For example, DiMicco et al. [1] found that one of the motivations to use SNSs in the enterprise was to interact with those more central in the network, like managers. These struggles of managing hierarchies, balancing identities, and re-structuring status through SNSs may have consistent features across a range of organizations that host many different populations. One aspect of this tension of use is in managing what impressions of the self are transmitted through the SNS profile.

Student athletes are not just a subdivision of a larger community, but are “lead case” users who are particularly sensitive to issues that affect all users, as well as those that affect any SNS users that have different tensions than the rest of the population. Research recently has focused on general issues of impression management on SNSs [4, 7], with an indication that impression management is affected by issues of signaling, self-esteem, and other personal characteristics. Little work has looked at the role of status differences and the effect that has on the use of and attitudes toward SNS use.

METHOD

This study uses data collected from student athletes at a large U.S. university, in conjunction with additional data provided by the university’s office of Intercollegiate Athletics. We employed a survey instrument and did a basic content analysis of their Facebook pages to elicit information about how student athletes at the university use Facebook.

The survey was sent to all student athletes at the university, using a list of email addresses provided by the university’s Athletic Department. In December 2008, invitations to participate in an online survey hosted on a commercial site were sent to 746 student athletes, of which 202 responded, for a 27% response rate. All 19 sports officially sanctioned

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

CSCW 2010, February 6–10, 2010, Savannah, Georgia, USA.
Copyright 2010 ACM 978-1-60558-795-0/10/02...\$10.00.

by the university were represented, though some sports had lower participation than others. Total student enrollment at the university at this point in time was 35,608 undergraduate students.

To see how student athletes differ from the general population, we compare these responses to data collected from an April 2008 survey offered to a random sample of the general student population at the same university. This data collection included 419 respondents, with a 21% response rate. Results from these data have been reported in previous work [5]. Although the two surveys were conducted several months apart, previous work [5] has shown that Facebook use is static over long periods, so we do not anticipate that the time difference has a strong effect on results presented here.

Finally, all results from surveys and content analysis were shown to the coaches and student support staff. A focus group of these individuals was conducted in December 2008 with the data reported here used as the orienting topic. At the time of data collection, MSU did not have an overarching policy defining Facebook use by student athletes, though they had sent memos reminding athletes that the already existing rules of conduct also applied to Facebook. Individual teams had different policies regarding Facebook use.

RESULTS

In comparing student athletes on Facebook to the general student population, we find several differences in how student athletes experience Facebook. For example, student athletes have an average of 565 friends (SD = 319) compared to 333 (SD = 227) for the general student population. An independent samples t-test shows this to be a statistically significant difference ($t = -10.132$, $p < .001$). However, the total amount of time reported using Facebook was not different between the two populations. Student athletes reported a mean of 88 minutes a day on the site, compared with 94 minutes in the general population, which is not a statistically significant difference.

We also compared responses of student athletes and the general student body on questions related to their attitudes of Facebook as being important to them. All responses are reported as averages of Likert responses where 5 was “Strongly Agree” and 1 was “Strongly Disagree.” Results are reported in Table 1.

In general, responses were very similar between these two populations. One area of difference was in response to the item asking whether they felt “out of touch” when they hadn’t logged into Facebook. This may be related to the use of Facebook by this population to maintain a larger set of friends, or with more distant friends given their higher

	Student Athlete	General Student	t-score
Facebook is part of my everyday activity.	3.70	3.85	-1.54
I am proud to tell people I am on Facebook.	3.24	3.34	-1.40
Facebook has become part of my daily routine.	3.61	3.66	-0.47
I would be sorry if Facebook shut down.	3.76	3.72	0.37
I feel out of touch when I haven’t logged onto Facebook in awhile.	3.19	2.84	3.44*
My use of Facebook has caused me problems.	1.88	2.20	3.55*

Table 1: Comparison of student athlete and general student attitudes towards Facebook. *= $p < .001$

propensity to be from out of state. Additionally, student athletes indicated less agreement with the statement that their Facebook use had caused them problems. This could result from the higher likelihood that student athletes have adults (i.e., managers and coaches) monitoring their accounts, so either self-monitor or receive feedback that affects how they use Facebook. This is reflected in some of the comments from the open-ended questions, where students mentioned they knew they were being surveilled.

We also asked both the general student population and the student athletes about who they thought had viewed their profile in the last 12 months, with options listed as groups such as high school friends or future employers. The final two rows (alumni and coaches) were not asked of the general student population. Results are reported in Table 2.

Patterns in responses were similar across the two populations. One of the larger differences was in the anticipation of family members looking at a profile. We anticipate this is related again to the higher probability that student athletes come from out of state. Student athletes as a whole were very likely to report that university alumni would be looking at their profiles, as well as their coaches. It’s not clear whether they interpreted alumni as people they didn’t know, or friends of their own who had graduated from the university. During the focus groups with coaches, we found that some teams require their athletes to “friend” a manager or assistant coach so that this individual can have access even when the page is set to “friends only” viewing, and other teams make it clear to their athletes that their accounts will be monitored.

	Gen. Pop.	Athletes
My high school friends	94%	99%
Friends other than HS friends	87%	93%
People in my classes	83%	87%
Someone I met at a party or social event	72%	80%
Total strangers from MSU	55%	49%
Family members	70%	86%
Total strangers from other campuses	28%	32%
Total strangers who aren't affiliated with any college or school	24%	25%
My MSU professors	15%	13%
Law enforcement	6%	10%
Future employers	18%	11%
MSU Alumni		77%
My coaches		49%

Table 2: Comparison in who respondents thought had looked at their profile.

Student Athletes Rate Their Overall Facebook Experience as Positive

In general, student athletes felt that their Facebook use was positive and that they represented themselves well through their Facebook profile. When asked if their coaches had viewed their Facebook profile, 49% of respondents answered affirmatively. Table 3 shows how student athletes responded to other questions about their use of Facebook. Responses to the value of Facebook to interact with teammates had a high mean score, though so did responses to hearing about other athletes having trouble because of Facebook use. One interpretation that was also confirmed in focus groups was that “horror stories” of Facebook use were used by coaches and senior teammates to create norms of use of the site.

Examining gender differences, we found only two strongly statistically significant differences in these responses between men and women. Men were more likely to agree that they would “friend” someone they haven’t met offline ($t = 3.57, p < .001$) and that they had friended a fan of their team ($t = 4.15, p < .001$). Interestingly, there were no gender differences in concerns about safety, though an intermediating variable like privacy settings could affect how respondents answered this question.

We conducted an ANOVA test to see if there were differences between sports in how respondents answered the questions above. The only strongly significant differences between sports was seen in these same items: likelihood to friend someone they haven’t met offline ($F = 1.95, p < .02$) and history of friending a fan ($F = 4.26, p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant difference between sports in how team members responded to the

	Mean	S.D.
My coaches don't approve of Facebook.	2.70	0.70
I have heard about other student athletes having problems because of their Facebook use.	3.48	0.93
MSU should have a policy for how student athletes use Facebook.	2.33	1.02
The Facebook use of other people has caused me problems.	2.16	0.82
I have posted content on Facebook that my coaches wouldn't approve of.	2.10	0.92
I represent Michigan State University well in my Facebook profile.	4.05	0.65
My use of Facebook has caused me problems.	1.88	0.82
I am likely to friend someone on Facebook who I haven't met offline.	2.31	1.08
I have accepted friend requests from people who are Facebook fans of my sports team.	2.54	1.10
Facebook has made it easier for me to communicate with my teammates.	3.95	0.76
I am concerned about my safety because of Facebook.	1.93	0.81
I am worried that my Facebook use could make a future employer view me negatively.	2.24	0.87

Table 3: Likert responses to student athlete experiences on Facebook.

item, “I am worried that my Facebook use could make a future employer view me negatively” ($F = 2.03, p < .02$).

Student Athletes See Various Risks and Rewards of Facebook Use

We included an open-ended question in the survey about what student athletes saw as the positive and negative outcomes of Facebook. While one set of respondents seemed to believe that Facebook was not related to their team activities, another group saw positive effects, mentioning the use of Facebook to coordinate team training over the off-season, keeping in touch with family and friends, mentoring younger athletes they met at “camp” events in the summer, and publicizing team events.

One common positive outcome was the use of Facebook for team building in the off-season. Like other effects, this seemed to be dependent on norms developed within particular teams. For example, a member of the Women’s Rowing team reported: “*My team uses Facebook to keep in touch to coordinate solo workouts and to keep in touch over breaks. It is easier to communicate over FB than e-mail and reminds us that we're all working hard even if we're not together. We post meters on our group page as a mini competition to see if we can row around the world.*”

Some student athletes also mentioned using Facebook strategically to present a positive image of themselves. “I

use Facebook as a promotional tool, I count on the fact that employers look at my Facebook page, therefore I constantly post pictures and comments about the awards I've won and community groups I am a part of. Knowing that, I also routinely examine pictures which are posted of me, so far I have found Facebook to be a very helpful resource."

Others mentioned negative outcomes, including mistaken perceptions that others make from the photos posted in the site. *"People should definitely avoid posting 'party pictures.' When I was younger, I thought it was no big deal, but now I realize I can be judged SOLELY from that one slice of who is me, and inferences can be made that may or may not be true about me."*

Participants mentioned another negative outcome: the use of Facebook to broadcast information which could be taken out of context and seen as either gossiping or arrogance: *"One of my freshman teammates posted something about our team before she got here and we all read it. It was slightly offensive and arrogant, and I already had a tainted view of her when she got to campus."*

A common thread in responses is that athletes needed to be "smart" about how they used Facebook, given the scrutiny from their coaches and fans. "Smart" behavior seemed to include being careful about the types of content they posted and using the privacy functions of Facebook to control what content was displayed to which audience. Respondents seemed to expect that inappropriate material would be discovered: *"My team is carefully monitored by managers and coaches. We know not to put up anything that could hinder us in any way."*

Another common theme in the open-ended responses was the recognition that "high profile" sports were different: *"I think for the more popular sports like basketball and football it (Facebook) can have a huge impact. I have a lot of friends on both those teams and they have so many friends it's kinda crazy. They just need to watch out for the people who are trying to stalk them."*

DISCUSSION

An interesting finding was the evidence that student athletes try to instill norms of use amongst each other, both through direct sanctioning and possible through shared stories of bad outcomes. Some teams seemed to use Facebook to coordinate their activities, interact with their fans, and mentor younger users, but other athletes saw Facebook as a totally separate activity from their participation in sports. This appears to be in some part an effect of group norms by sport, with some effect based on the popularity of the sport.

Student athletes were different from the general student population in terms of network size and some attitudinal

measures. However, even though these students have a type of local celebrity, on many dimensions of perceived audience and attitude towards Facebook they are similar to other students. This could mean that most students have concerns of impression management, privacy and audience, and that status changes alone do not affect those concerns. In other words, everyone, to some extent, is a celebrity in their own social network.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks to Shelley Appelbaum at the Michigan State University Office of Intercollegiate Athletics for help in gaining access to student athletes, and in interpreting results.

REFERENCES

- [1] DiMicco, J., Millen, D., Geyer, W., Dugan, C., Brownholtz, B. and Muller., M., Motivations for Social Networking at Work. in *ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW 2008)*, (San Diego, CA, 2008), ACM Press.
- [2] DiMicco, J.M. and Millen, D.R. Identity management: multiple presentations of self in facebook *Proceedings of the 2007 international ACM conference on Supporting group work*, ACM, Sanibel Island, Florida, USA, 2007.
- [3] Ellison, N., Steinfield, C. and Lampe, C. The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, 12 (4). article 1.
- [4] Kramer, N. and Winter, S. Impression Management 2.0: The Relationship of Self-Esteem, Extraversion, Self-Efficacy, and Self-Presentation Within Social Networking Sites. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 20 (3).
- [5] Lampe, C., Ellison, N. and Steinfield, C., Changes in Use and Perception of Facebook. in *ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, (San Diego, CA, 2008), ACM Press.
- [6] Skeels, M. and Grudin, J., When social networks cross boundaries: a case study of workplace use of facebook and linkedin. in *Proceedings of the ACM 2009 conference on supporting group work (GROUP 2009)*, (Sanibel Island, FL, 2009), ACM Press.
- [7] Tong, S.T., Heide, B.V.D., Langwell, L. and Walther., J.B. Too much of a good thing? The relationship between number of friends and interpersonal impressions on Facebook. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (3). 531-549.
- [8] Watt, S.K. and Moore, J.L. Who Are Student Athletes? *New Directions for Student Services* (93). 7-18.