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HOW STUDENT-ATHLETES' SELF-ESTEEM AND PERFORMANCE ARE INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL MEDIA SPORTS FANDOM

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Abstract

This study evaluates the role of positive and negative messages on social media from sports fans and its effect on student-athletes' self-esteem and performance. Through a qualitative research process, this study examined what drives student-athletes to seek validation of their identities through messages in social media and how the messages they read online affect their self-esteem and performance in their sport. Public relations has become an integral part in college athletics in reputation management, brand attributes and social issues. It is essential that public relations specialists involved in athletics are aware of how their student-athletes are feeling regarding social media and controversial events happening in the world. Athletic programs must be able to communicate effectively and educate its student-athletes on current events and how to manage their brand on social media. Student-athletes on the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University were selected to participate in a focus group where ten questions were asked regarding how they felt about their audience and followers on social media. Basketball players were chosen for this research due to my participation as a women's basketball player at Syracuse University. Both the men's and women's teams were chosen to differentiate if one gender is impacted more than the other.

HOW STUDENT-ATHLETES' SELF-ESTEEM AND PERFORMANCE ARE

INFLUENCED BY SOCIAL MEDIA SPORTS FANDOM

by

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Thesis

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Introduction

I remember my heart sinking as I read accusations and speculations as to why I was transferring from University of Texas at Arlington to Syracuse University. "Not committed, selfish, entitled." These were the words I was reading across the screen about myself. A moment of excitement for new opportunity and a fresh start as a basketball player turned into insecurity and doubt in my decision. As a student-athlete, I have personally been affected emotionally by both positive and negative posts of sports fans via social-media platforms, which has become a vital piece to sport communication and news. Athletes use a variety of different social media platforms with Twitter being the social media platform "of choice" amongst athletes (Sanderson, 2011). Athletes have used Twitter and other social media platforms as a way to seek the opinion of their fans and communicate with them as well (Jarvie, 2017). Athletes are able to market themselves via social media and create the identity they want fans to perceive of them in order to increase their fan followings (Sanderson, 2013). Social media can be used as a branding instrument for student-athletes, but it also invites the critiques and praises of fans and followers of the student-athlete.

The role of public relations practitioners in college athletics has become more popular because of athletic departments' needs for financial implications of its stakeholders, potential crises and bringing clarity through controversies (Barnett, 2008). The job of a public relations practitioner is to communicate their client's message effectively and positively to their audience, counsel their clients in engaging with their audience and strategically planning for their clients' goals and their audience's needs (Jackson & Wagner, n.d.). When a controversial event within a sports organization occurs, it can have a negative impact on the branding and reputation of the athletic department as well as the school (Ruihley et al., 2016). A negative impact of a

controversial incident can create relational and reputational concerns for an athletic program and its institution because its integrity in the eyes of its stakeholders and public can be at risk. Public relations within an athletic program develops the roles of bringing sports information and managing media for sports teams, to be able to stay ahead of what is to come and be proactive when a controversy or social issue occurs (Ruihley et al., 2016).

Athletes are told to ignore what is said on social media and in newspaper coverage to avoid seeing criticism, but with the increasing growth of users and fan bases on social media, it is inevitable for student-athletes to come across these messages. Cade Foster, A 22-years-old senior for the University of Alabama football team, missed three field goals against Auburn in 2013 and in result lost an opportunity for a third consecutive national title. Within one day, his Twitter handle (@Foster_43) received over 12,000 mentions, with some of these tweets saying: "You're the worst kicker in Alabama history," "don't come back to campus," "drink bleach," "I'm gonna kill you and your family" (Christensen, 2015). Richard Pitino, head coach for the men's basketball team at the University of Minnesota said, "It's very natural for 20-years-old kids, first thing after the game to go check Twitter, that's just part of being a student-athlete in today's world. Everybody can say, 'Oh, it doesn't bother me.' That's nonsense. If it didn't bother you, you wouldn't read it" (Christensen, 2015). Coach Pitino was one of three coaches in the Big Ten to ban his team from social media use during the basketball season in 2015-2017.

Fieldhouse Media, a social media company who supplies social media training with student-athletes and college programs all around the country, conducts a survey every year with student-athletes to get a grasp of college athletes' social media usage. In the latest survey conducted for 2019, over 2,300 student-athletes participated. In this survey, they found that 98% have a Facebook account, 93% have a Twitter account, 99% have an Instagram account and 93%

have a Snapchat account (DeShazo, 2019). While some coaches, like Rick Pitino, may try to prevent their players from using social media and reading posts about themselves, student-athletes will still find a way to go on social media to read what others are saying. Kevin DeShazo, founder of Fieldhouse Media claimed that a better approach is educating the student-athletes on how best to use Twitter and other social media platforms (Christensen, 2015).

Student-athletes receiving negative messages are expected, but so are positive messages. This thesis looked at how public relations could help guide student-athletes and athletic programs respond to negative and positive messages and how these messages could potentially impact the emotions and/or performance of these student-athletes after reading them. The Identity theory, public relations theory and Looking-Glass Self (LGS) were used in this thesis to discover how sports fans' social media messages influence athletes' self-esteem and performance. Some fans criticize student-athletes with aggressive and condescending language (Trotter, 2012). Before going into how Identity theory, LGS and public relations theory relate to student-athletes' self-esteem and performance being affected by fandom through social media, the terms that will be used throughout this thesis will be defined and specified in the Literature Review.

Studies have been conducted on student-athletes and their usage of social media, however, limited research was found on how social media posts directed towards a student-athlete affects their self-esteem and performance. There have been recent studies conducted on the role public relations plays within college athletics. In the Spring of 2016, *Journal of Applied Sport Management* released an article with updated research based off of Brody Ruihley's research of public relations in sports in 2009 (Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016). In this journal article, the authors researched the perceptions and roles of public relations in college athletics by

examining their athletic directors and chief executives. In this study, questionnaires were sent to 333 NCAA D1 athletic directors and 49 were anonymously completed. In this study, the research found that athletic directors' perceptions of a public relations practitioner is one that occupies the role of problem-solving process facilitator, communication technician and communication facilitator (Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016).

This study also found that public relations practitioners in athletic programs are included in senior level meetings to be able to provide guidance and strategic planning guidance. The study also found that the valuer of technical skills is vital to athletic departments because of the need to connect, engage and inform publics on social media for sports programs. The variety of social media continues to increase, which makes the role of public relations practitioners more important. In collegiate sports, it is vital for public relations practitioners to obtain the skills needed for this role as well as developing strategic problem-solving skills (Ruihley, Pratt & Carpenter, 2016).

One study done in 2012 targeted a topic of how student-athletes perceived critical tweets and how they responded to them (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). This research used the uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974) and dialogical self-theory (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992). Another study contained qualitative research to interview six high profile student-athletes on a men's basketball team about their Twitter use to understand why they used Twitter, whom they interacted with, how they viewed themselves on Twitter and how they perceived their audience (Nichols, 2015). The study attempted to understand the Twitter experience for high profile student-athletes using qualitative research (Nichols, 2015).

While these studies examined how student-athletes responded to criticism on social media and how high-profile athletes use Twitter, this thesis examined how positive and negative

social media posts affect student-athletes' emotions and/or performance through qualitative data. This study did not look at how high-profile athletes use Twitter specifically nor did it examine how the student-athletes responded back to fans and how to have appropriate responses in return. This thesis specifically focused on nineteen student-athletes from the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University and their perspective on if reading social media posts towards themselves affected their self-esteem or performance in anyway.

This thesis is organized in separate chapters. First, a literature review which looked at the Identity theory, Looking-Glass Self and public relations theory and the correlations between these theories and how they can be used in the study of how student-athletes are impacted emotionally and in their performance by negative and positives social media posts. The chapter after the literature review reviewed the methodology used to convey qualitative research by conducting two focus groups between participants of the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University. The results chapter analyzed and discussed the findings from the focus groups and contained examples of responses from the interview questions. The discussion and conclusion chapter identified the findings from the secondary research and the focus group interviews and summarized the overall findings from both. The limitations and suggested research section listed each limitation of research in the process of this thesis and listed out future research suggestions for this particular study on how social media messages affect student-athletes' emotions and/or performance.

Literature Review

<u>Identity Theory</u>

Identity theory (Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1967) states that identity is based on roles, acknowledgment of other people and social performances (Banton, 1965; Goffman, 1967). Identities can be formed through the motivating to affirm a person's self-views (Heshmat, S. 2019). Identity confirmation validates one's worth and value which is why humans prefer to converse with those who view themselves in a positive way as opposed to those who do not. Failure to affirm one's identity creates an issue with self-esteem (Heshmat, 2019).

Identity theory was first built on the idea that multiple roles in different social contexts are how people acquire their "identities" (Mead, 1934). An identity defines who a person is when he or she has a particular role in society, is a member of a group or has characteristics that make up his or her identity as a person (Burke & Stets, 2009). In the Identity theory, society and individuals have a relationship that is established by roles, which is defined as, "the functions or parts a person performs when occupying a particular position within a particular social context" (Schlenker 1985, p. 18). An individual can identify his or herself as a student, spouse, parent, athlete (roles), when they are a member of a group like a player for a sports team or a member of a sorority (members in particular groups) or when they claim they are friendly or introverted individuals (personal characteristics that they identify themselves as). Individuals have multiple identities because of their roles, memberships to different groups and of how they identify themselves as people according to their personal characteristics (Jhangiani et al., 2014).

Identity theory seeks to explain the reasons that individuals have for the multiple identities they classify themselves as, how these identities relate to one another, how their identities influence their behavior, thoughts and feelings or emotions and how their identities tie

them to society (Burke & Stets, 2009). The roles placed on a person by society are internalized and can comprise a person's sense of self. This internalization of roles creates a social behavior pattern that is socially appropriate within a certain situational context (Banton, 1965). The beginning of the Identity theory's framework was based on Georg Herbert Mead's viewpoint that "society develops out of interaction and shapes self, but self in return shapes interaction" (Stryker, 2008, p. 17). Social roles in identity theory are defined as "expectations attached to positions occupied in networks of relationships" in which the expectations that are attached to a person's position is internalized as a role expectation on one's self (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286).

Charles Horton Cooley set out ideas about the Identity theory regarding the importance of sentiments or emotions occurring when an individual interacts with others (Burke & Stets, 2009). Cooley described the relationship between an individual and others as the main source of sentiments and this relationship between an individual and others is Cooley's idea of looking-glass self. Looking-glass self is described as "a mirror that people see themselves reflected by the reactions of others to themselves" (Burke & Stets, 2009). Cooley recognized that people have emotions of pride or embarrassment to what others' reactions of them are (Cooley, 1902).
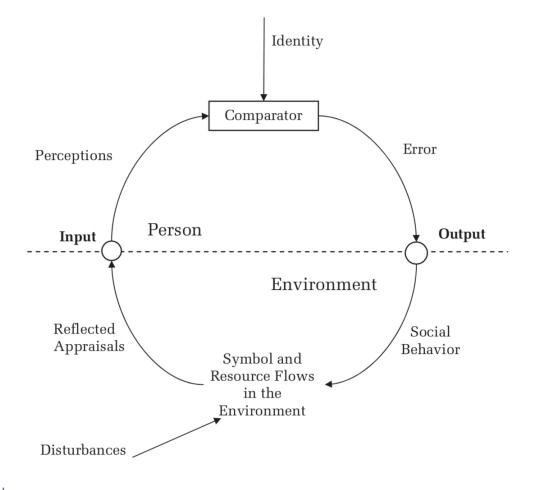
Figure 2.1

This figure, from *Identity Theory* by Burke & Stets, displays the four key components of the identity process: an input, an identity standard, a comparator and an output (Burke & Stets, 2009). The inputs are what our perceptions are that we are trying to control shown in figure 2.1. Our perception communicates to our brain about our environment and is our only source of information about what goes on around us (Burke & Stets, 2009). The Identity standard may be viewed as defining the "character of the identity." For example, being more masculine or more feminine is an identity standard. The comparator compares the input perceptions relevant to an identity with the identity standard and from it an "error signal" is created. The error signal determines what an individual is perceiving around him and in return changes their verbal and

nonverbal behavior, which alters the meanings of the behavior in the situation according to what the individual believes he or she should do (Burke & Stets, 2009). The output is behavior produced in the environment an individual is in. The effect of output behavior is to change the environment from how it originally was. Once everyone in the environment have changed their perceptions, the meanings are altered. (Burke & Stets, 2009, p. 66-67).

Looking-Glass Self

Charles Cooley (1922) articulated the theory of the looking-glass self (LGS), which is currently an accepted part of modern social psychology and symbolic interaction (Scheff, 2005). In this theory are two fundamental propositions, "(1) self-consciousness involves continually monitoring self from the point of view of others. As Cooley put it, we "live in the minds of others without knowing it," (2) living in the minds of others, imaginatively, gives rise to real and intensely powerful emotions, either pride or shame" (Scheff, 2005). The idea of looking-glass self says that part of how we perceive ourselves stems from our perception of how others perceive us (Cooley, 1902). The looking-glass self describes the practice of individuals basing their sense of self or "identity" on how they believe others view them, whether correct or incorrect. Social interaction with others is used as a type of "mirror" where the individual uses the social cues and judgments received from others to measure their own worth, values and behavior ("Perception Is Reality," n.d.). Cooley's theory (1922) suggested that self-concept is built within social settings and not on seclusion ("Perception Is Reality," n.d.). Society and individuals are not separate, but instead complement each other. The process of discovering LGS is through three steps: "(1) an individual in a social situation imagines how they appear to others, (2) that individual imagines others' judgment of that appearance and (3) the individual develops

feelings about and responds to those perceived judgments" (Thompson, Hickey, & Thompson, 2019). An individual might believe they are funny because other individuals laughed at their jokes or vocalized that the individual had a good sense of humor. LGS states that individuals' perceptions of themselves are often in parallel to how other individuals view them (Beer, Watson, & McDade-Montez, 2013).

When an individual is labeled by others, self-labeling can transpire, which is when an individual adopts others' labels into their own self-view (Jhangiani, Tarry & Stangor, 2014). Self-esteem of an individual can be affected by self-labeling. In sports, if a fan has labeling bias on a student-athlete, self-labeling can occur within the student-athlete. Josh Thole, a catcher for the Blue Jays, said he quit Twitter in 2011 because it was "constant negativity" (Brady & Ortiz, 2013). Thole said that every time he opened his phone up with Twitter notifications after not playing well in a game, the notifications would read, "You stink, you suck, you should jump off a bridge" (Brady & Ortiz, 2013).

Monitoring one's self from others' points of view also plays a role in public relations. Because athletes' reputations and branding are important in their roles and how they view themselves, it is important to monitor what is being said about their brand and image. If an athlete is not regularly monitoring what is being said on their social media, they can miss chances to view how their brand is perceived by fans and the public. Monitoring one's self through social media by reading, watching and viewing news relevant or about one's self and analyzing the content is a key element in PR practice (Why Media Monitoring Tools Should Be Part of Your PR Strategy, 2019).

The process of monitoring one's self through social media helps the individual identity and understand their target audience. By understanding one's target audience, the individual can

gain an understanding of what to post and how to communicate with their audience. When a

student-athlete monitors their social media, they learn what their audience cares about and what

they love or hate about themselves. Monitoring in looking glass-self helps an individual

efficiently advance their communication skills to post content that relates directly to their target

audiences. An individual who monitors their social media also increases enhances their

reputation management by being proactive in what they want others to see about themselves.

When an individual is aware of what their audience is saying online, the individual can better

respond and relate to their followers and the public and increases their brand and reputation in a

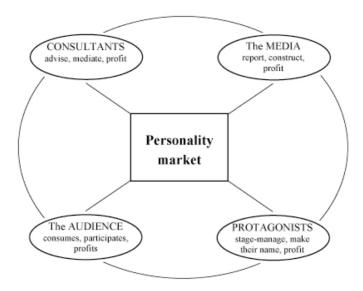positive way (Media Monitoring: The Ultimate Guide, 2020).

Public Relations Theory

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations states that, "public relations is about

reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you" (Bailey,

2020). CIPR also defined PR as "the discipline in looking after reputation, with the aim of

earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and

sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an

organization and its publics" (Advanced Solutions International Inc., n.d.).

Two areas within public relations theory that relate to student-athletes and PR

practitioners who are managing a team are: reputation management and brand attributes.

Reputation management has become one of the top priorities in public relations. It is defined as

"the management of relations between an organization and the constituencies on which it

depends" (Spilka, 2019). According to the "Clutch 2018 Online Reputation Management

Survey," where 224 digital marketers participated, 21% of the participants monitored their online

reputation hourly and 42% of the participants checked their online reputation daily (Spilka, 2019). Reputation management cases are usually talked about when businesses fail to react efficiently and effectively to breaking stories. One negligent post can gain millions of views in minutes, which can be a detriment to a brand (Spilka, 2019). If reputation management is lacking in a brand, it can lead to negative stories overpowering the brand on social media, which affects the company's share value and even its position on an online search engine.

Public relations is becoming increasingly popular in college athletics because PR has become "the most dominant role of all communication disciplines" (Nessman, 2010, p. 377). The authors of *Transforming Your Personal and Professional Brand* claim that, "PR is essential because all aspirants in the visibility-marketing process need distribution of their image. The role PR plays in the visibility industry involves enabling, designing, managing and protecting the brand image" (Hamlin et al., 2006, p. 290). Karl Nessman, an author on personal branding, gave four "key players" of personal branding in the personality market: the protagonists, the media, the audience and the consultants (Nessman, 2010, p. 378). In the case of the role of PR in college athletics, the protagonist would be the student-athletes, the coaches or the athletic department. The protagonists aim to enhance their influence, popularity and to become better known in the social media presence. The media includes sports writers, journalists, TV and the internet who interview the protagonists and write about or advertise the protagonists for profit and increased popularity. The audience, like sports fans and the public consume the media, stories and posts of the media and protagonists and identify with the protagonists. The consultants are the marketing, advertising and public relations consultants who mediate between the protagonists, the media and their audience (Nessman, 2010, p. 382).

Figure 2.2 Key players on the Personality Market

This figure displays the co-existence of the key components of the personality market. The consultants help the protagonists with fame, financial success, credibility, likeability and trust (Nessman, 2010, p. 383). The PR consultant helps the protagonists display the positive attributes of the brand identity and creates a credible brand for the media and audience to perceive.

A brand represents the identity of a company and helps build the type or characteristics a company wants to display (Sandel, 2020). The definition of attributes is, "a quality or feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something," meaning that brand attributes are the characteristics that an audience views as a fundamental part of a brand (Sandel, 2020). Brand attributes are made up of an organization's colors, logos and culture that they show to the media and their audience. It is important that an organization establishes their brand attributes before displaying their brand to establish a strong visual identity that is credible, appealing and trustworthy to its viewers. A student-athlete's attributes would be the

characteristics that they display on their social media and to their audience, such as funny, intelligent, successful or talented. A student-athlete's brand attributes can be described by their audience. A follower of the student-athlete or team's organization can voice what the attributes of the players and team are, the feel of the emotions and culture of the team and the look and organizational aspects of the player or team's social media profiles.

This is an important part in brand attributes and is where a public relations practitioner comes in. Without purpose, guidance and the organizational skills of a PR professional, players of a college sports team and even the sports team's social media pages can become confusing, unorganized and hard to look at. A PR professional helps the players and team focus on what type of personality they want to exude and defines the team's brand voice. A brand voice is how a person or organization's brand sounds to its audience and the media (Sandel, 2020). A brand voice can sound intense, exciting, successful, welcoming and authentic. A student-athlete needs the professional guidance of a PR consultant to portray the type of brand attributes that exude not just their personalities, but values and culture that the team and school represent.

According to the International Association of Business Communicators, by helping organizations build relationships and by resolving conflicts between the organization and its strategic publics, public relations departments contribute to organizational effectiveness (Spilka, 2019). Public relations also plays a pivotal role between the athlete and his fans. On social media platforms like Twitter, fans not only make comments on the performance of an athlete, they may also respond to the stance an athlete posts about wearing a mask in public to help stop the spread of COVID-19 or on whether or not a person should kneel during the National Anthem. When a player posts their opinions about social issues on social media, the thread may be filled with

comments of support by loyal fans. This may make the athlete feel a sense of empowerment in that they can make a difference not only to their fans, but for the greater good of the public in general.

Receiving support for their position on current events may not only make the athlete feel invested in the fan base, it can reflect positively on the team in the eyes of the fans. When someone scrolling through their Twitter feed agrees with the post of an athlete and sees the positive comments, the person may feel inclined to leave a positive comment and lend support for the team. The growing fanbase increases the investment the athlete feels towards the public and the relationship between the athlete and its social media followers strengthens and grows. In contrast, if an athlete posts about social issues and receives negative comments that cause conflict, it can make the athlete feel that they do not have fan support. The athlete may feel a sense of disconnectedness to their fanbase. Additionally, the social media post full of conflict could send off an unwanted image about the team. Although each team member should have the right to express themselves on social media, they must keep in mind that what they post may bring about a negative or positive reaction from their fans. It is a part of the Sports Information Director's (SID) job to set guidelines and monitor social media posts by student-athletes to prevent an inappropriate reflection on the team or school. At the same time, if a fan makes a comment that is demeaning or inappropriate towards an athlete, it should be allowed to be reported by the SID who acts as a public relations specialist for the team. This measure is not only important for the well-being of the student-athletes, but for the reputation of the school.

Public relations has become a key component in sports marketing and keeping a positive brand and reputation. Almost three billion people are active on social media platforms, which has

made companies continue to adapt quickly to the rapid rate of news spreading to ensure that any harmful content towards their brand is managed as soon as possible (Spilka, 2019). As a team member, each athlete represents the "brand" or image that a team or school wishes to portray. Although fan feedback on digital or social media can have a negative or positive impact on the individual athlete, both the athlete and the SID should be aware of how feedback from fans can impact the reputation of the team or university. In today's world, a single post that is grossly neglected can gain millions of views in only a few minutes (Spilka, 2019). In the sports world, social media has given people the opportunity to comment negatively towards an athlete and if an athlete responds to those negative posts, they will be criticized for doing so (Melendez, 2018). In some cases, the negative comments impact the player based off how they respond or react to those comments.

Twitter and Social Media

Social media contains platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where people can connect with each other digitally ("Perception Is Reality," n.d.). Mary Aiken, author of *Cyber Effect*, says that social media has created a concept called the "cyber self" where a person chooses how they want to present themselves on a digital platform ("Perception Is Reality," n.d.). Social self through digital platforms was studied and published in the *Journal of Social Media and Society*, where YouTube video producers were asked about their content posts and how it influenced their "sense of self." The results of the study are as followed:

- A sense of gained confidence
- Enhanced creativity
- Overcoming of major social hurdles
- Increased sense of self-worth
- A strengthened professional image
- Feelings of altruism and "helping others" through their content
- Interacting in a positive social space

In this case, the comments and feedback of their social media posts on YouTube created a positive effect. According to Hootsuite's research, more men use Twitter than woman globally, but in the United States, more women use Twitter than men (Shannon, 2018). About 80% (262 million) of active Twitter users live outside the U.S. and 72 million users reside in the United States and 40% of U.S. adults who use Twitter are aged between 18 and 29 years, more than any other age group (Shannon, 2018). Over 95% of student-athletes surveyed said that they are an active user on Twitter (Smith, 2017). Twitter has become the most dominate use of social media platforms for student-athletes to communicate and interact with fans and display their "cyber self" (Smith, 2017).

Social media is going to continue to grow and so are posts targeting student-athletes with praise or criticism (Kirpalani, 2017). Twitter is a social networking "microblogging" service that allows members to post messages or short posts called "tweets" (Rouse, 2015). The site is free and can be downloaded on a smart phone mobile device or on a desktop computer or laptop at Twitter.com. Twitter members can tweet and follow other users. Tweets are limited to 280 characters and become permanent once posted. Whether an individual is a member of Twitter or not, they can view and search tweets because they are public (Rouse, 2015).

The relationship between fans and student-athletes can create an identity for student-athletes to succumb to the way fans want a student-athlete to be or perform (Schneider, n.d.). A student-athlete's sense of self is not only in the way he or she behaves but can be formed through social contact with fans (Schneider, n.d.). Social media platforms like Twitter are used as a communicative device for student-athletes, but it has a negative side to it as student-athletes are criticized harshly by fans (Nichols, 2015). Identities characterize individuals by their different positions in society.

Social media is defined as, "design to readily supports participation, peer-to-peer conversation, collaboration and community (Meraz 2009, p. 682). Identity consists of both internal and relations factors (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 2003). The internal factor is defined as how one perceives themselves and is influenced by messages from others. The relational factor is defined by how identities shape by one's interaction with other people (Sanderson, 2013). A student-athlete has the ability to display the identity they want others to perceive and promote this identity. Social media has increased this ability for student-athletes to portray themselves in the light they want to be seen in and gain fans in support of the athlete's preferred identity (Sanderson, 2013). While student-athletes have some control over what others know and see about their life as an athlete and in their daily tasks, athletes cannot avoid negative responses which can harm the way they see themselves.

The influence of other's appraisals on an individual can cause student-athletes to internalize them. Labeling bias transpires when an individual is "labeled" and other's views and expectations of the individual are affected by that labeling (Fox & Stinnett, 1996). For a student-athlete, having a label defined by attributes such as height, skin color, race and agility can create views and expectations of sports fans that are affected by these labels (Jhangiani, Tarry & Stangor, 2014). Jimmy Snyder, a sports commentator, labeled black athletes as more "superior" and credited black athletes of their quickness and vertical due to their "slaving trading" in the Civil War (McCall, 2020). Snyder claimed that when it came to sports, black people dominated physically over non-black competitors. Athletes are often linked with their race, the position they play in their sport and how the athlete is referred to (McCall, 2020).

In more recent controversies, student-athletes have used their platform to voice their stances and concerns on social justice issues and returning to university campuses during a

global pandemic. Before the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man killed by police in Minneapolis, many administrators and coaches at universities would have required student-athletes to stay silent on public opinions and expressions. That narrative has been altered, as student-athletes have voiced their disappointment in their schools, university leaders and even coaches. Universities and coaches became willing to allow their sports brands to speak on social justice issues and support their athletes after feeling the pressure (Blinder & Witz, 2020). Marvin Wilson, a defensive tackle at Florida state said in an interview, "People are starting to realize we have a say-so in how this country should run."

Social media has typically been a place where student-athletes' following on social media brought praise and criticism for their athletic performance or heated debates about whether or not student-athletes deserve to profit off their name, image and likeness within the $14 billion industry, however student-athletes and their sports programs are using their platforms to incorporate their support for the Black Lives Matter movement as well as advocates for wearing masks and concerns of returning for summer work outs during the COVID-19 outbreak (Blinder & Witz, 2020). The football coach at Maryland, Mike Locksley, stated, "it's where we are as a society that there's no room to quiet the voices or stifle them." In 2014, university officials at the University of Maryland did not allow the football team to wear shirts opposing police brutality that had the words "I can't breathe" on them, which represented Eric Garner's last words before he passed. Student-athletes at the University of Texas released a list of requests to the university to rename certain buildings and replace the school song titled "The Eyes of Texas" to rid of racist meanings and connotations. The athletes included that without these requests being met, they would not participate in recruitment or donor events (Blinder & Witz, 2020).

Change has been implemented in the sports world as well as society because of student-athletes' exposing the truth of what is said behind closed doors and due to their posts Twitter. One example is of the Florida State football team, where the newest head coach, Mike Norvell, told a reporter that he had individually spoken to each player about Floyd's death. One of the team captains tweeted that the coach did not meet with each player and stated that the team would not be working out until further notice. Norvell apologized to the team a few hours later in a team meeting and the players vowed to participate in 10 hours of community service, raise money for an African American college scholarship fund and help students in Tallahassee with lower income (Blinder & Witz, 2020). Some of the fan's responses to the player's tweet said, "Thanks for airing out your dirty laundry on social media like a child" and "transfer portal is always open."

Another example of a student-athlete who faced praise and backlash for his stance on racism is Kylin Hill, a star running back at Mississippi State who tweeted that he would transfer if the state did not change its flag. Mississippi featured the Confederate battle flag as a part of the state flag. One fan tweeted back at Hill saying, "Omg. Cry about it. It's called the transfer portal. Bye." Another fan tweeted, "that's fine we got a lot of young studs that can fill in. That's a great idea to lose your draft stock and all. Won't be anything if you do this, I hope it will be worth it." Just six days later, on June 28, 2020, the Mississippi state legislature passed a bill to remove the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag permanently (Bieler, 2020). The symbol had been on the state's flag for 126 years and after many calls to remove the racist symbol, Hill's tweet demanding the removal led to action from student-athletes and coaches throughout Mississippi and around the country (Willingham, 2020).

Another concern that has impacted student-athletes and brought on the comments of fans at the expense of athletes' tweets has been the risks of returning to their college campus during the COVID-19 outbreak. Thirty UCLA players on the football team condemned the university for failing to protect their health and safety. The thirty players wrote a letter that demanded outside health officials for testing to ensure that safety protocols were being followed, whistle-blower protection to report any violations of these protocols and the right for players to make the decision to attend sporting events without fear of retaliation or losing their scholarships (Hussaini & Lipoff, 2020).

Colleges all around the country have been assertive in bringing its athletes back on campus for voluntary workouts, potentially increasing the athletes' risks of getting sick as well as the people around them. After the *Los Angeles Times* tweeted an article regarding the letter submitted by the UCLA athletes, commentary by the public and fans followed. One person tweeted, "Leave UCLA. Or stop complaining.." and another tweeted, "I'm not a UCLA fan but if you don't like it you can leave the school, that's my opinion. UCLA is one of the finest universities in the USA! Ridiculous" (Hussaini & Lipoff, 2020). The debate about pay for college athletes has increased after the COVID-19 outbreak, where decisions to bring student-athletes back on campus during the peak of the virus in the United States and without vaccines expose the colleges' conflicts. In these cases, the student-athletes' interests are not above the institutions' interests. Student-athletes sacrifice their time and body in exchange for tuition, room and board. The debate about paying student-athletes has regarded the topic of fair compensation for risk and efforts, which COVID-19 adds to. If student-athletes are being asked to participate in work outs and contact sports, protection and compensation to these student-athletes should be granted without repercussion.

Summary

While research shows that looking glass-self, Identity theory and public relations theory can explain the role of social media on self-esteem in everyday life for teens, little research exists to demonstrate how student-athletes self-esteem is shaped by social media use by sports fans. Researching how sports fans' messages on social media influence athletes' self-esteem and performance through Identity theory, LGS and public relations theory was processed through secondary research and in-depth focus group interviews with nineteen members of the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University. This research has many aspects, but understanding the ideas of LGS, public relations theory and Identity theory and how they relate to social media messages from sports fans to student-athletes is crucial in the process of determining how sports fans influence student athletes' in a mental way and in their craft.

This thesis will examine how fans' negative and positive comments towards student-athletes through social media impact student-athletes' performance and emotions. Through this thesis, exploring the Identity theory, public relations theory and looking-glass self will examine what student-athletes can learn from this and other studies focused on social media as an attack platform for sports fans and how it applies to the public relations profession.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What motivates student-athletes to use social media?

Rationale

The researcher examined the motivations behind why student-athletes use social media both during and out of season. The participants in the focus group discussed why they use social media, if at all, during their basketball seasons. The researcher wanted to examine if student-

athletes may use social media during their basketball seasons to build or maintain any type of emotional connections with their followers and to examine if what they read about themselves as basketball players affected their emotional state and/or performance.

RQ 2: How are student-athletes' emotional state and performance affected by digital sports fandom, specifically social media?

Rationale

This question considered how both positive and negative messages by sports fandom through social media towards student-athletes could potentially harm or boost the performance and emotional state of a student-athlete. To analyze this research question, questions about how the participants defined positive and negative messages were asked as well as their responses to seeing both negative and positive posts. The research questions examined if either negative or positive messages on social media directed towards the student-athletes affected the way they viewed their athletic abilities and if it affected the way they would perform after reading it.

RQ 3: How are the emotions and/or performance of student-athletes affected by perceived emotional connection with fans?

Rationale

This research question was analyzed by asking the participants how they perceived their audience, who they interact with on social media and if they have any emotional connection towards their following. To analyze this research question, the researcher asked these specific questions to gain a better understanding as to if the student-athletes had any type of emotional connection towards their following and if somehow this emotional connection to their audience affected their own emotions and/or performance.

Methodology

The research evaluated two focus groups totaling 19 members of the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University to determine how these athletes perceive social media, their social media followers and their perception of their own online persona via social media. The goal of the research method was to produce qualitative data to compare to what research has already been done to see how Identity theory, looking-glass self and public relations theory play a role in student-athletes' performance and emotional state and how those are affected by fans' messages on social media. This research will help student-athletes and public relations professionals understand how fans' criticism and praise online can potentially affect student-athletes emotional state and their performance.

<u>Methodological Approach</u>

Student-athletes from the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University were recruited to participate in two separate focus groups containing 9-10 members divided by gender. The recruitment process consisted of sending a mass e-mail sent to the school e-mail addresses from the online database to the men's basketball team followed up with text messages via iMessage to the men's basketball players who were interested in participating. A text message containing the information for the focus group was sent to the women's basketball team at Syracuse University through our team group chat via iMessage. One focus group was held for the women's basketball team, where ten participants were asked ten questions regarding the topic and the other focus group was held for the men's basketball team, where nine participants were asked the same ten questions.

<u>Location</u>

Data for this research have been collected from the two focus groups containing players from both the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University and was held on an online Zoom call due to the COVID-19 outbreak which prevents an in-person session. The women's team's focus group was on an online Zoom call held on May 8, 2020 at 12:00 p.m. ET with ten of the women's basketball players at Syracuse University. This focus group lasted 45 minutes. The men's team's focus group was held on May 15, 2020 at 3:00 p.m. ET with nine of the men's basketball players at Syracuse University. This focus group lasted 38 minutes. A $5 gift card to the participant's choice of either Starbucks or Amazon was provided to each participant who participated in the Zoom call interview.

<u>Sample</u>

The sample of respondents come from college basketball players on both the men's and women's sides. For the focus group, I chose to interview members from the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University because of the relevance the sport has to my experience as a women's basketball player and because of the access I have to both teams. I decided to include the men's team for two reasons: (1) interviewing 10-13 student-athletes on the women's team would not meet my desired number of 19-20 focus group members, and (2) I wanted to see if there was one gender that was more impacted by fandom messages on social media than the other. The student-athletes are between the ages of 18 and 24 and must be a current member of either the men's or women's basketball teams at Syracuse University participate.

Instrument

The moderated script from both focus groups held on two separate online Zoom calls was my instrument to convey research on this topic. Participants were audio recorded during the Zoom call in order for me to go back to polish my notes for research. Only I have access to the recording and the recording will be deleted once my thesis is completed. Every participant gave consent to being audio recording during the Zoom call. Notes were taken from the recording of both the 45-minute focus group audio and the 38-minute focus group audio of the men's and women's focus group and recorded in this thesis.

Reliability and validity

The focus groups only contained participants who are currently participating on the basketball teams for Syracuse University. Since the research is based off of student-athletes' perception of their self-esteem and performance, their experiences and/or statistics can be proved as valid. Research done by Shifa College of Medicine to examine the validity and reliability of focus groups was obtained and resulted in finding that focus groups are a useful and reliable tool for collecting trustworthy information by interacting among participants. It supports quantitative data and is strengthened by parallel themes within the participants' perceptions and experiences (Rauf et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

After analyzing the qualitative data from the focus group interviews, the results of the answers helped conclude how student-athletes are influenced in their self-esteem due to what fans say about them on social media but was not able to conclude how student-athletes are

influenced in their performances. Although some athletes in the study claimed that negative and positive messages did not have an effect on their emotions, some felt inspired and motivated by the positive messages they received and most of the participants liked to engage with their fans. The research helped identify how the student-athletes were impacted by what was said on social media by fans and the impact these messages had differed based on the student-athletes' gender. The goal of this study was to understand how fandom's messages on social media influence student-athletes' self-esteem and performance in their sport, but the performance aspect could not be measured and the way the participants were impacted emotionally was measured by their perception and experience.

Timeline (Duration)

The first focus group zoom call was held on May 8, 2020 at 12:00 p.m. ET with ten of the women's basketball players at Syracuse University. The focus group lasted 45 minutes and ended at 12:45 p.m. ET. The second focus group was held on May 15, 2020 at 3:00 p.m. ET with nine of the men's basketball players at Syracuse University. This focus group lasted 38 minutes and ended at 3:38 p.m. ET.

Results

Answering RQ1-RQ3

The following analysis of the two focus groups with participants from both the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University were used to answer each initial research question created by the researcher. The focus group questions and answers by each participant

from both groups can be found in the appendix section to further explain each participant's opinion.

RQ1: What motivates student-athletes to use social media?

The best way to analyze this research question was to ask each participant from both groups if they used any type of social media and then to answer why if they did or why not if they did not use social media. The underlying theme within the answers to this question were that the participants either used social media to find information about other teams they compete against, to stay in contact with friends and family, to advertise and promote their basketball program and when games are and to post pictures of themselves after games to show their accomplishments and hard work. Of the nineteen participants, only one participant claimed that they would use social media some seasons and in others, they didn't. Although the focus groups were divided into the women's participants and the men's participants, the themes remained the same throughout these first two questions.

Examples of the most frequent themes from the women's side are as followed: Participant 8 from the women's basketball team at Syracuse University said, "there is a lot of information about other teams too and it's important for me to be informed about how their seasons are going for every team and it's important for me to use social media during season so I can be informed about what goes on in other programs." Participant 9 in this same focus group said, "yes, I do use social media during my season. I see a lot of people tend to not use it because it can be seen as a distraction, but I feel as though it is fun to look at what my friends post and what new things are happening."

The following responses from participants were highlighted as the most frequent theme of the questions and also the most in-depth answers to further explain the theme. Examples from the focus group of participants from the men's basketball team at Syracuse University are as followed: Participant 1 said, "I use social media during the season to post a picture if I get a good in-game pic or maybe after a win or something I'll post. I am usually on Instagram the most. Twitter during the season I'd say I'm off a little more here and there just because some people are negative and that stuff comes with it and I am on Instagram a good amount and I'm not on it as much during the off-season I'd say." Participant 5 from the men's focus group said, "I'd say I use social media a lot during the season and even off of it I guess just because it's a way to connect with fans even more especially next year if fans aren't allowed to come to the games, it'll be the only way to connect to fans. So, it's just an easy way to allow them to know what's going on with us in our lives. I am on Instagram more than any of the other platforms, I used Twitter here and there just to bring more awareness about our team and games and anything involved with the program."

The next question that was asked to all participants was how each participant portrayed themselves on social media and why. The purpose of this question was to analyze any potential reasons why players might be posting about basketball and refraining to post about other things in fear that it could harm their image or reputation as a person and player. The most dominant theme within the answers of the participants from both groups were that the student-athletes would mainly post about themselves as a basketball player, and because of their role as a member on the Syracuse University basketball teams, they intentionally watched what they posted and monitored what they said.

The following responses from participants were highlighted as the most frequent theme of the questions and also the most in-depth answers to further explain the theme. Examples from the women's focus group are as followed: Participant 1 said, "I share whatever I am comfortable with media and others seeing. If I know something is going to stay on the Internet, then I usually try to strictly post basketball stuff. I also like to post social issues if I feel needs to have light, then I share that." Participant 4 from this same focus group said, "I put stuff up that I feel mostly comfortable about. I wouldn't put anything up there that might give me a bad reputation or if endangers me in some way." Examples from the men's focus group are as followed: Participant 6 said, "I portray myself in a first-class way, only posting appropriate things and being extremely careful what I say or do." Participant 2 said, "I think everyone has to portray themselves as like a nice person. If you say something negative anybody could take it the wrong way and they could use it against you somehow. You've got to always be respectful and you can't cuss on social media, you really have to be careful about what you say." Participant 5 said, "Yeah, especially being an athlete and having fans and younger people following our stuff, we have to monitor what we say and be clean on social media. People are going to be watching you on TV a lot of times playing in your games and with the behind the scenes stuff off of the court, we want to maintain our character by making sure we are representing Syracuse in the right way. We are presented as Syracuse basketball players and we represent more things than just ourselves."

The next question asked was how the participants think people view them on social media. This question was asked to understand how each participant perceives how others see them and how much each participant values how other perceive them. The most common theme within the participants' responses were that they wanted people to view them in a positive light and most likely view them as a basketball player for Syracuse University.

The following responses from participants were highlighted as the most frequent theme of the questions and also the most in-depth answers to further explain the theme. Examples from the women's focus group are as followed: Participant 4 said, "I hope positive. Everybody likes me on social media, and I think I get a lot of likes." Participant 8 said, "I hope that people see me as a person that you can learn from. In whatever aspect you want, I hope others can get something out of me." Participant 3 said, "I think as athletes a lot of people view us as inspiring. I have gotten messages from people I went to high school with that I inspired them and I have never understood why and I still don't, but I guess the way we carry ourselves on social media, it changes people's lives a lot."

Examples from the men's focus group are as followed: Participant 3 said, "I feel like people have a positive view of me on social media. I would never put anything up there that would embarrass myself, my family or my peers. I try to stay very positive on social media." Participant 1 said, "I think it would be obvious to people that I love basketball, my teammates and my family, so just things that are important to me and I am always trying to be happy and the best I can."

These different answers from each question examined why these basketball players use social media, what they post for others to see and why and also how they believe other people might view them on social media. The participants wanted to highlight their achievements, use social media as an information tool and to connect with friends and family. Although these were the main reasons for why the participants used social media, they still were cautious of their following and because of that, refrained from posting content that could be viewed as inappropriate or explicit, in order to maintain a healthy and positive image. The most common

themes were very similar between both the women's and the men's participants from both basketball teams at Syracuse University within these three questions. The most dominant theme reoccurring throughout the questions were that the participants wanted to maintain a clean and friendly image and wanted others to portray them in that way as well.

RQ 2: How are student-athletes' emotional state and performance affected by digital sports fandom, specifically social media?

In order to understand how social media posts targeted towards student-athletes would affect their performance and emotional state, specific questions were asked to the participants regarding what they perceive a positive post and a negative post to be and if reading positive or negative posts has ever affected the way they felt emotionally or affected the way they played after reading it. The following are examples from the women's focus group of what positive and negative messages on social media are: Participant 2 said, "I consider positive messages to be those who will push you to be your best and to keep you motivated. The negative messages are those of people who just find the bad in everything." Participant 1 said, "I think it has to do with your emotional state at the time too. If you are sad, some things can uplift you, but certain things can bring you down. What is negative for others may not be negative to you and what is positive for you to see may not be positive to others." Participant 4 said, "positive posts make me feel confident and encouraged or even inspired. Negative posts are posts that degrade me as a person or player and make me feel defensive or irritated."

Examples of answers to this question from the men's focus group are as followed: Participant 3 said, "negative posts are when people try to bring you down or hate on your game. Positive posts are when they like your game and let you know you're doing well. Having a larger

following will also lead to both positive and negatives. People tend to speak their mind more often through social media, so I tend to get a lot of negative messages after a bad game. I like to use these negatives to fuel me in most cases." Participant 6 said, "a positive message on social media is basically anything positive in regard to you, your post or comments. A negative message would be anything that really doesn't need to be said. Something that will hurt your feelings."

The next question that was asked to the participants was if they had ever read a negative post about themselves on social media and how it made them feel. Examples from the women's focus group are as followed: Participant 8 said, "I have gotten negative comments about how I play basketball and it made me feel shitty. It made me feel like I had to improve. It didn't hurt me, but it made me feel like I had to improve myself and I can't make those mistakes twice." Participant 5 said, "I have read negative posts mainly regarding basketball. It made me feel a little irritated but for the most part I try to shake it off."

Examples of the men's answers to this question during their focus group are as followed: Participant 6 said, "I have read plenty of negative posts about myself on social media. In the beginning it would get to me a little, but I learned how to block it out really well and not pay attention to what people are saying especially those who don't know anything about basketball." Participant said, "Yeah, I mean I read them all the time and I don't really feel a certain type of way about any of them, I just check them out and I don't really comment back. I read them sometimes just to see what people are saying, what's going on, what people are thinking, and it doesn't really mean too much to me. I know who is going to be there for me, I know who is

going to help me out and I know who I should be listening to and should be paying attention to, but what they say is whatever their opinion is, so it doesn't really bother me too much."

The themes within these questions were a mixture of participants feeling down at seeing negative posts about themselves, but ultimately moving on from the comment. The majority stated how if the comment came from someone they did not know, they tried to not let the comment affect them emotionally, but if the comment came from someone whom they respect as a basketball player or coach, then they would take the comment more seriously. When the question was asked if negative comments affect the way the student-athlete viewed themselves as an athlete or their performance, the answers varied by gender. The negative comments seemed to affect the women participants in a more harmful way than the men, based off of their answers. The following are examples from the women's focus group: Participant 1 said, "sometimes. It depends on the person. I am really hard on myself and if I didn't play my greatest game and I see someone put out there, "you suck" I will be upset and be like yeah, I already know that. But if I am already confident in myself, negative posts don't really affect me, it just depends on how I talk to myself at the time." Participant 7 said, "I think I agree with everyone else, it really does affect us whether we believe it or not, but you have to remind yourself that these people don't go through what we go through and they don't have the ability or talent to be where we are at. The people putting us down aren't putting our feelings or how we may take what they say into consideration when they are saying these things."

The participants in the men's focus group had a majority of answers that disregarded negative comments and claimed that they did not feel that their emotional state was harmed or damaged how they felt about themselves, whereas on the women's side, the majority answered

that it did affect them in some way, but in the end they didn't let negative comments affect them anymore. Examples of the men's responses are as followed: Participant 5 said, "I'd say no not really. I'll read it and I'll think about it, but it doesn't really make me feel a certain type of way. I know who I should be listening to like my coaches and the staff as well as my teammates, so if they say it, then yeah I need to listen to it, but if it's somebody else saying it then I don't really pay too much attention." Participant 8 said, "I'd say I have confidence in myself and that's what I need, and I listen to what my coaches and teammates are saying, as well as people closest to me. I don't really let negative posts about me on social media affect me too much."

The next question that was asked was if positive posts about the student-athletes affected the way they viewed themselves as athletes and if it affected their performance. The responses of the women had a theme that positive messages meant a lot to the participants. The women participants felt more confident and motivated after reading positive posts about themselves. Examples of the women's responses to this question are as followed: Participant 10 said, "yes, it definitely helps me and motivates me to keep going. It drives me. I love reading positive posts about myself and how I did in games." Participant 4 said, "I do like seeing positive posts about myself especially from younger girls because it makes me feel like I have more of a purpose in playing, but I usually see those posts directly on my page or in my messages since I try not to search for it."

The men's responses in their focus group were similar to their responses of how negative posts affected the way they saw themselves as athletes and their performance. Although some of the men's responses were that they do appreciate positive posts, it does not affect the way they see themselves as an athlete nor does it mean anything significant to them and their abilities.

Examples of the men's responses are as followed: Participant 5 said, "I am the same way about the last question, it's just like I am going to read it and think whatever about it, but it doesn't really mean much unless it's coming from my coaches or teammates. If it's not really in house, it's good to see and all, but it doesn't really mean much." Participant 3 said, "positive posts also do not have an impact on me. I try to always stay not too low, but also not too high. When people love the praise so much, they tend to lose the inner drive that got them there."

RQ 3: How are the emotions and/or performance of student-athletes affected by perceived emotional connection with fans?

In order to analyze this research question, the researcher asked three specific questions to learn (1) who the student-athletes were interacting with on Twitter and Instagram, (2) how the student-athletes perceived their audience/following on social media and (3) if they felt they had any type of emotional connection to their following and if so, why. The themes within these questions were different for the men's side and the women's side. While the men's responses revealed that input, whether positive or negative, didn't affect how they viewed themselves as an athlete nor did it harm their emotional state as much as the women's responses revealed, both the men's and women's responses conveyed that their fans do matter to them and both the men and the women participants try to respond and engage with their fans who reach out to them for support, encouragement or advice.

The following are examples from the women participants on who they interact with on Twitter and Instagram: Participant 8 said, "I don't use Twitter, but on Instagram I interact with my friends and people that are following what I am doing and inspiring them in that sense. I interact with anyone that reaches out to me for advice or a suggestion. Mostly, I use it for my

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friends. Participant 4 said, "I use it to interact with friends, family, fans and random people." As for the men participants' responses, the majority did not interact or engage with fans as much, but some liked to as much as they could. Examples of responses from the men's focus group are as followed: Participant 5 said, "yeah, I would say friends, teammates, family, basically just the people that I guess I know personally. Sometimes even though people may follow you or what not that you may not know, I really just interact with the ones I know and trust, I guess." Participant 8 said, "yeah, I mean friends, family and some of my favorite musicians to see what albums they are dropping soon and stuff like that. Every once in a while, when a fan reaches out, I'll try to get back to them."

When the participants from both focus groups were asked how they perceived their audience, the themes were similar in that their friends and family followed them, but also a lot of Syracuse basketball fans followed their page, which also included younger children. The following are examples of responses from the women's focus group based on this question: Participant 3 said, "my audience is constantly changing and until this year most of the people following me were my age or older and this year I have a lot more younger fans and so I try to watch what I post, because I used to post whatever came to mind, but now I have to be careful because I have little kids who follow me now." Participant 7 said, "the people who follow me are some younger people, some older people and my coaches, so we watch what we post because the people who view our posts can see what we are doing so we don't want to be doing anything we shouldn't be doing."

The following are responses from the men's focus group regarding this question: Participant 1 said, "I guess I perceive my audience like, with my friends you know what you are

going to get from them, you know they are always going to support you and with others you know there is always going to be negative fans and no matter what the situation is, I think they'll never change, especially playing at a big school like Syracuse and you just kind of learn to tune that out, that's fine, because all I really care about are the people that I am close with and that know me as a person and that's all that I really look at." Participant 2 said, "I would say my audience is mainly Syracuse fans other than my friends and family. They comment a lot under my Instagram pictures trying to see what my next move is or wanting me to come back to Syracuse and not transfer, things like that."

The last question to analyze this specific research question was if the participants had an emotional connection to their following on social media, and if so, what type of emotional connection? The following are examples of responses from the women's focus group: Participant 7 said, "I don't know if it is an emotional connection, but I feel like social media is a trend. Since everybody else has it I feel like if I don't have it, I feel lost and don't know what's going on with my friends or around the world." Participant 6 said, "I don't read into it as much, I just have social media to keep up with trends, but I don't feel emotional towards my following."

The following are responses from participants of the men's focus group: Participant 1 said, "I mean yeah, it's definitely cool when your friends are commenting on your posts and they're off at college and you grew up with them and you get to see where everyone goes. It is cool that they still keep in touch with me and keep track of what I am doing. It's also cool having young kids that are looking up to you and comment on your stuff and trying to be like you. It's something that is really cool, and I think that I try not to take that for granted." Participant 7 said, "I would say fans like to reach out and if they have problems or need some inspiration, I just feel

like that's the part that is kind of emotional, because you have to be supportive and just encourage them and tell them that they'll be fine and stuff like that."

While negative comments can be hurtful at times to the participants of both men's and women's teams, the answers revealed that positive messages are more meaningful to the participants, and while it may give a temporary confidence boost, it does not change the way the participants view themselves as athletes, whether positive or negative. The answers also revealed that while the athletes may not feel an emotional connection towards their followers, they do feel appreciative of support and encouragement and like feeling like a role model and as if they are inspiring others.

Discussion & Conclusion

The topic of how student-athletes can be affected emotionally and in their performance by social media messages was examined by connecting this topic with Identity theory, looking-glass self and public relations theory. Intertwining these theories with this topic showed how student-athletes identity and sense of self can be impacted by social media, their followers and how others perceive them. Previous literature has looked into how student-athletes use social media (Nichols, 2015) and how they respond to criticism on Twitter (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). The results from the research in this thesis exemplified the responses from nineteen student-athletes on the men's and women's Syracuse basketball team on how positive and negative social media posts affect their emotions and/or performance.

A majority of the participants in the women's focus group perceived their audience as positive and did not feel that they had an emotional connection to their following, however

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positive posts were perceived as an encouragement and boost of confidence in the majority of the participants in this focus group. For the men's focus group, a majority of the participants did not feel that they had an emotional connection to their following, however they did believe it was important to engage and interact with their fans.

Regarding how negative comments affected the student-athletes, a majority of the responses from the women's focus group were that some negative comments they have read did affect their emotional state, but over time they learned to either not let those negative comments affect their mental state or took into consideration who was making the criticizing comment. One stated that negative comments motivated her to prove her criticizers wrong. In the men's focus group, the majority of responses from participants were that they were aware of negative comments and would read them, however it did not affect how their emotions, nor did it affect the way the student-athletes perceived themselves.

The majority of the participants in the women's focus group stated that after reading positive posts about themselves on social media, they felt reassured, more confident and motivated. Four participants stated that positive posts still did not affect how they perceived themselves as athletes, but of those four, three stated that although it did not affect how they viewed themselves, it did make them feel nice and gave them a boost of confidence. In the men's focus group, the majority of the participants' responses were that there was no emotional effect after reading positive posts about themselves. Every participant responded that it is nice to see positive comments and messages on social media about themselves, but it does not affect how they perceive themselves as people or athletes.

This research study examined the responses from nineteen student-athletes on high profile basketball teams at Syracuse University. The study concluded that the majority of the male participants did not feel impacted emotionally or in their performance after reading messages towards themselves on social media, regardless of the content being positive or negative. The majority of the female participants did feel affected emotionally by negative posts, but with time and experience, learned how to ignore criticism from strangers and fans via social media. The majority of the participants in the women's focus group also felt impacted emotionally and viewed themselves as more confident, happier and reassured after reading positive messages about themselves on social media.

This research study will help contribute to future research regarding how student-athletes are impacted by positive and negative messages from fans on social media. PR professionals can use this information regarding how their clients feel about what is said online and help guide their student-athletes on what to post and how to create the brand attributes and reputation that they desire. With these results, student-athletes, coaches and athletic departments can learn more about the impact on student-athletes' mental health and wellness. Mental health and wellness in student-athletes has increased in awareness and is becoming increasingly important in high-level sports (Scott, 2018). In this study, a direct insight is displayed on how nineteen student-athletes are affected emotionally by positive and negative messages via social media. With this information, further research can be done in more in-depth interviews over a longer period of time with a larger sample size of student-athletes.

The greatest limitations in the process of this research were the short amount of time to conduct the research, the sample size that was taken and the focus groups being held online due to COVID-19. Because of the outbreak of COVID-19, Syracuse University's campus shut down and all NCAA sports post-season tournaments were canceled. Post-season is an integral time in which student-athletes receive positive and negative messages on social media, due to the high popularity and viewership of the post-season tournaments. Also, because Syracuse University's campus was shut down, it prevented an in-person focus group with the participants. The technological issues with delayed response and only one participant being able to speak at a time made it difficult for more dialogue to occur, which could have provided more response if the focus groups were in person.

The sample size was just limited to nineteen basketball players at Syracuse University. This cannot account the experience and perception of every student-athlete and could differ depending on sport as well. While these nineteen participants' responses were valid and useful within this specific study, it cannot be said that thousands of student-athletes across the country have the same experiences and opinions. It would have been ideal to have an equal number of males to females in this study, but due to time conflict, transfers and those declaring for the NBA draft, nine male student-athletes were available.

Another limitation of this research was the timing of the focus groups, which were held during the beginning stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S. and before protesting took place after the death of George Floyd, which occurred on May 25, 2020. Although this thesis includes the topics of student-athletes' stances on Black Lives Matter and COVID-19 testing,

these topics were not included in the ten questions asked to the nineteen student-athletes who participated in this study.

Because the questions asked and the answers given by the nineteen participants were not directly about social justice issues or concerns regarding COVID-19, there was no primary research into how the student-athletes felt impacted emotionally and/or in their performance from these topics. Because the events of student-athletes being asked to return to college campuses for workouts during the peak of the virus and the protesting around the country against police brutality had not occurred during the time of the focus group interviews, these social issues were not considered or asked at the time.

Although protesting against police brutality is not a new occurrence in the United States, the recent acts of police brutality that were caught on camera have created a call to action to change and confront racism in the United States. The latest protests have prompted many companies, sports organizations and brands to speak on the matter and reveal the attributes of their culture. Student-athletes have been the front of the charge in prompting this change and calling out people in the positions of authority. The PR industry is essential and necessary in promoting these organizations' brands, culture and the importance of speaking on human rights issues. When an organization, team or athlete ignore the social issues around them, their character and integrity can be questioned by its audience.

In the future, researchers can use the research done for this thesis to produce more discussion and research towards this topic. While this was a one-time interview between both focus group participants while they were in off-season, this research could be analyzed on a larger and deeper scale. Following up with certain high-profile athletes or athletes on a high-profile team weekly to interview them on what they saw about themselves on social media that

week, how they felt and how they played afterwards, would help strengthen this research. If athletes are interviewed regularly about this topic for research, their performance can be analyzed, and researchers can find if a student-athletes' performance enhances or downgrades after reading a negative or positive post about themselves.

Future research could consist of the different topics talked about in this thesis, specifically of how student-athletes are impacted by fans' opposing opinions on social justice issues and being attacked and/or supported on social media platforms for taking a stance against racism. The emotional aspect of how student-athletes feel during protesting and the comments made by hundreds of fans on social media comment threads attached to a student-athlete's tweet regarding the topic could be analyzed by generating more surveys for student-athletes and in-depth focus groups on a larger scale. The surveys could generate the temperament of how student-athletes feel about the protection, acceptance and support or lack thereof from their fans, coaches and administration of the school that they attend, with the student-athlete's race being a key component for the demographics.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, questions regarding the pandemic were not asked to the nineteen participants at the time due to the unknowns of the illness and impact it would continually have in our society and in the sports world. With sports and education being uncertain to continue in the Fall, student-athletes are being treated as "essential workers" with the requests by their coaches and athletic programs to return to their college campuses for workouts without a vaccine that is proven to prevent the disease and without the technology to trace COVID-19. This puts the student-athletes at risk to become ill, as well as impacting all who are connected to the student-athletes such as friends, family and the staff involved in practices and events. Many football teams, such as Kansas State, Oklahoma State, Houston and Boise

State, have had a spike of COVID-19 within their teams. With over 90 players on a college football roster, it only takes one to spread and turn into many cases, affecting dozens. After these college football programs attempted to hold voluntary workouts on campus, every one of these teams had to shut down the workouts and sent the athletes back home.

As mentioned in this thesis, 30 UCLA student-athletes on the football team did not trust the authority and leadership of their staff and administration and requested outside health professionals to ensure the honesty and integrity of the testing and protocols. Attached to an understandable and standard request to protect the health and well-being of the student-athletes, hundreds of sports fans weighed in their opinion, with the claims that a scholarship to a school like UCLA was enough to be content and asking for separate professional guidance was asking for too much. Research on how student-athletes are impacted emotionally and in their performance during a challenging time of playing college sports and being a college student during a global pandemic would be beneficial for this research topic as well as give insight and knowledge into how a PR professional can navigate the correct ways of how to promote a brand, strengthen credibility and be empathetic to the student-athletes' needs.

Appendices
IRB Approval Letter

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
MEMORANDUM

TO: Bradford Horn
DATE: April 27, 2020
SUBJECT: **Expedited Protocol Review - Approval of Human Participants**
IRB #:   20-124
TITLE: *How Sports Fandom Through Social Media Messages Influences Student-Athletes' Self-Esteem and Performance*

The above referenced protocol was reviewed by the Syracuse University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) and has been given **expedited approval.** The protocol has been determined to be of no more than minimal risk and has been evaluated for the following:

1. the rights and welfare of the individual(s) under investigation;
2. appropriate methods to secure informed consent; and
3. risks and potential benefits of the investigation.

This protocol is approved as of **April 27, 2020.** An Expedited Status Report will be requested annually, until you request your study be closed.

It is important to note that federal regulations require that each participant indicate their willingness to participate through the informed consent process and be provided with a copy of the consent form. Regulations require that you keep a copy of this document for a minimum of three years after your study is closed.

Your consent form has been date stamped with the approval date. If at any time during the course of your research, a revised consent document is submitted to the IRB via an amendment, it will be stamped with the date the amendment is approved.

Formal amendment requests are required for any changes to the initially approved protocol. It is important to note that changes cannot be initiated **prior** to IRB review and approval; except when such changes are essential to eliminate apparent immediate harm to the participants. In this instance, changes must be reported to the IRB within five days. All protocol changes must be submitted on an amendment request form available on the IRB web site at: Amendment-Request-Form.doc.

Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others must be reported to the IRB within 10 working days of occurrence on the Report of Unanticipated Problems form located on the IRB website at: Report-of-Unanticipated-Problems.doc.

Thank you for your cooperation in our shared efforts to assure that the rights and welfare of people participating in research are protected.

Katherine McDonald
IRB Chair

DEPT: Public Relations, Newhouse – 215 University Place   **STUDENT:** Brooke Alexander

IRB Consent Form

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Syracuse University
IRB Approved

APR 27 2020

Department Name: S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications

Master of Science: Public Relations

Protocol Title: How Sports Fandom Through Social Media Messages Influences Student-Athletes' Self-esteem and Performance

Principal Investigator/Key Research Personnel: Brooke Alexander, email: balexa01@syr.edu Mobile: 817-403-1416. Thesis advisor: Brad Horn, email: bdhorn@syr.edu

IRB # 20- 124

Introduction:

My name is Brooke Alexander, and I am a public relations graduate student-athlete at Syracuse University. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about participation in a research study I am conducting under the guidance of my thesis advisor, Brad Horn, and offer you the opportunity to decide whether you wish to participate. You can take as much time as you wish to decide and can ask any questions you may have now, during or after the research is complete by contacting the me at - balexa01@syr.edu. Your participation is voluntary. Participants cannot be guaranteed complete confidentiality in a focus group setting.

The purpose for this research study is…

- **To consider the research objective of understanding how the student-athletes for the men's and women's basketball teams at Syracuse University feel about positive and negative messages towards them on social media. I chose a sampling frame that was inclusive of all individuals familiar with how their self-esteem and performance are impacted by sports fandom through social media messages, if impacted at all.**

You will be asked to…

- **I am conducting research on student athletes' self-esteem and performance being affected by sports fandom through social media messages, both positive and negative. I will be asking you ten questions and will leave time at the end for open discussion. All responses will remain confidential and no identifying factors will be recorded or included in my report. This focus group will be no longer than 60-minutes. Because of the circumstances of an online conference as opposed to an in-person meeting, you will be asked to refrain from using your cell phone and give your undivided attention to the group. Thank you for considering participating in this focus group.**

- **Some examples of the type of questions you will be asked are as follows:**

215 University Pl, Syracuse, NY 13210
S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications
Phone: (315) 443-2302

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"Does sports fandom through social media messages influence student-athletes' self-esteem and performance?"

Focus Group Introduction:

~ Hi everyone, thank you for taking the time to participate in this focus group. My name is Brooke Alexander, and I am a public relations graduate student-athlete at Syracuse University. I am conducting research on student athletes' self-esteem and performance being affected by sports fandom through social media messages, both positive and negative.

I will be asking ten questions and will leave time at the end for open discussion. I would appreciate if one person talks at a time so I can obtain adequate notes. In addition, please respect each other's opinions. All responses will remain confidential and no identifying factors will be recorded or included in my report. This focus group will be no longer than 60-minutes, and when everyone is ready, we will begin. Because of the circumstances of an online conference as opposed to an in-person meeting, please refrain from using your cell phone and give your undivided attention to the group. If you would like to talk, please press the "raise hand button" located on the screen in this Zoom app. Again, thank you for participating in this focus group. ~

Icebreaker: Please introduce yourself and your favorite thing about being a student-athlete.

Question 1: Do you use social media during your basketball season? Why or why not?

Question 2: How do you portray yourself on social media? Why?

Question 3: How do you think people view you on social media?

Question 4: Who do you interact with on Twitter? Instagram?

Question 5: How do you perceive your audience on social media?

Question 6: Do you have an emotional connection to your following on social media? What type of emotional connection?

Question 7: What do you consider positive and negative messages on social media?

Question 8: Have you ever read a negative post about yourself on social media? How did it make you feel?

Question 9: Do negative posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?

Question 10: Do positive posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?

Open-Discussion: Does anyone have any additional remarks about how they feel regarding what sports fans say on social media and how it impacts their performance?

Focus Group Closing:

~ That concludes the conversation. Thank you everyone for baring the online call to participate in the focus group and contribute to my research. Please feel free to ask me any questions and I will distribute your gift cards via e-mail. Enjoy the break from residential classes and please stay healthy. ~

Focus Group with Participants from the Women's Basketball Team at Syracuse University

Question 1: **Do you use social media during your basketball season? Why or why not?**

Participant 8: there is a lot of information about other teams too and it's important for me to be informed about how their seasons are going for every team and it's important for me to use social media during season so I can be informed about what goes on in other programs.

Participant 1: I use it in spirts to stay in contact with my friends or help advertise our program. If we have a game and it's on TV, I will put it on social media to market our team.

Participant 3: I use social media during the season to promote our games and get more attention.

Participant 2: Yes, I use social media because it's given me the opportunity to show my many accomplishments I've worked hard for and to also show who I am outside of the basketball court.

Participant 4: I follow other teams and players in our conference to see what they are doing and to market our team.

Participant 7: I would say I also use it to stay up to date with my friends and what is going on. I also like to repost when our basketball page posts about our games or a picture of me.

Participant 9: Yes, I do use social media during my season. I see a lot of people tend to not use it because it can be seen as a distraction, but I feel as though it is fun to look at what my friends post and what new things are happening.

Participant 5: some seasons I do use my social media because I like to keep up with everything throughout the season. Other seasons I have actually deleted my social media apps to allow myself to be more focused.

Participant 10: Yeah, I usually always use social media, but maybe not as often during because I am more focused.

Participant 6: Yes, I do use social media during the season because I don't believe I get distracted by it.

Question 2: **How do you portray yourself on social media? Why?**

Participant 7: I usually share if Syracuse WBB page posts something I will reshare it and I also post myself in my regular clothes. I also share things that I think are important to my life on my Instagram stories.

Participant 9: I portray myself on social media in a way that reflects myself, my family, and my program as well as possible. I do so because it is important to be respect and be true to who you are as a person.

Participant 2: I portray myself as an intelligent black female first and then basketball player. Just because there is this stereotype out about women's basketball player, so I show who I am on and off the court

Participant 1: I share whatever I am comfortable with media and others seeing. If I know something is going to stay on the Internet, then I usually try to strictly post basketball stuff. I also like to post social issues if I feel needs to have light, then I share that.

Participant 5: My social media accounts such as Instagram and twitter show me as a basketball player for the most part but also displays me and my friends. I try to keep it professional because I am an athlete who represents my school.

Participant 8: I think that I portray myself on social media with the most important information, I don't post anything that wouldn't be interesting to anybody else. I wouldn't put something out from my personal life, because people don't need to know those things.

Participant 4: I put stuff up that I feel mostly comfortable about. I wouldn't put anything up there that might give me a bad reputation or if endangers me in some way.

Participant 3: I post anything that I find important to me or that I find funny. I post stuff that I think affects myself or my friends around me or I post anything that is just funny to me.

Participant 6: I believe I portray myself as an athlete and girly. It gives a story line to people on my profile about what I have been through and where I am at now in my life.

Participant 10: I usually am just myself. I like to show myself in the basketball life and also my personal life which is a lot of fun and traveling.

Question 3: How do you think people view you on social media?

Participant 4: I hope positive. Everybody likes me on social media, and I think I get a lot of likes.

Participant 7: I think everybody believes others see them nicely because they wouldn't be following you if they didn't like you. If they follow you, I am guessing they think you are cool.

Participant 2: People may view me as a person that understands the risks social media can have on student-athletes but still able to be a normal person.

Participant 3: I think as athletes a lot of people view us as inspiring. I have gotten messages from people I went to high school with that I inspired them, and I have never understood why and I still don't, but I guess the way we carry ourselves on social media, it changes peoples lives a lot.

Participant 5: I'm not too sure how people view me, but I think probably as an athlete.

Participant 9: I think people see me as an athlete because of the pictures I post.

Participant 8: I hope that people see me as a person that you can learn from. In whatever aspect you want, I hope others can get something out of me.

Participant 6: I feel like people perceive me as an athlete and see that I have been through a lot.

Participant 10: Probably as fun and outgoing since I post myself playing basketball and traveling.

Participant 1: I feel like people see me as funny or just that I play basketball since I just try to keep my social media about basketball.

Question 4: Who do you interact with on Twitter? Instagram?

Participant 5: I don't interact much on twitter but on Instagram I mostly only interact with my friends and family

Participant 2: I rarely interact with people publicly, but I may send direct messages to a few of my friends majority of the time.

Participant 7: I mostly interact with my friends or family. On twitter I will share tweets with my friends that I think are funny. I only interact with people I know the most.

Participant 9: I interact with Twitter because seeing other people's opinions are interesting and there is always something going on. I interact with Instagram to watch videos and look at pictures.

Participant 8: I don't use Twitter, but on Instagram I interact with my friends and people that are following what I am doing and inspiring them in that sense. I interact with anyone that reaches out to me for advice or a suggestion. Mostly, I use it for my friends.

Participant 6: On Instagram I interact with people my age and teammates. On Twitter I interact with more professional people in the basketball world.

Participant 3: I use Instagram for friends and business, I network with a lot of people on the side. On Twitter I use it mostly to interact with friends and I also look at the twitter news page to stay up to date with recent news and interact with anyone who is tweeting about trending topics.

Participant 10: My best friends mainly from home.

Participant 1: Only with people I know. I don't like to talk to random people.

Participant 4: I use it to interact with friends, family, fans and random people.

Question 5: **How do you perceive your audience on social media?**

Participant 3: My audience is constantly changing and until this year most of the people following me were my age or older and this year I have a lot more younger fans and so I try to watch what I post, because I used to post whatever came to mind, but now I have to be careful because I have little kids who follow me now.

Participant 5: I perceive my audience as friendly and respectful I've never had a problem on social media.

Participant 2: Half of my audience are my basketball friends that go to different universities or playing professionally

Participant 6: It depends on the person. Most of my audience is female. Players from my previous and present teams too, but a lot of fans for sure.

Participant 9: My audience is interesting, funny, unique and most of them are athletes.

Participant 8: I feel like my audience is mostly younger people and kids because I think they have seen me as a basketball player and someone who is in inspiration so that is why they follow me. I try to look out for what I am posting because I know that the audience that is following me is maybe younger.

Participant 4: My general audience is people my age and maybe some younger. I recently started to get a lot of older people on my page and also young kids. My audience has a good mix of ages, so not everybody would be cool if I was posting me going out to a party or something like that.

Participant 1: A lot of people who follow me are from back home where I live and also people who know me personally.

Participant 7: The people who follow me are some younger people, some older people and my coaches, so we watch what we post because the people who view our posts can see what we are doing so we don't want to be doing anything we shouldn't be doing.

Participant 10: I have a large following, so I don't know if I could generalize all of them, but definitely people who are interested in my life and what I am doing. Most of my followers are really positive and post nice things under my comments.

Question 6: **Do you have an emotional connection to your following on social media? What type of emotional connection?**

Participant 3: I don't know if it's an emotional connection, but as I have gotten older, I pay more attention to who I follow and this past month I have unfollowed a lot of people I don't find relevant or don't agree with the things they do. I rather follow people who inspire me or motivate me or doing something that I can learn more about.

Participant 2: No, I don't really have an emotional connection.

Participant 5: I have an emotional connection with my friend followers because I love them and care for them and hope for their success.

Participant 8: I agree to that, I mostly follow people who I know and also who I want to know about. I don't want to waste my time following things I don't care about, so I rather follow my friends who I care about and keep up with what they are doing. I don't really follow people who I don't care about what they are doing.

Participant 6: No, I don't care about who follows me and who doesn't.

Participant 1: I don't have an emotional connection to my following really.

Participant 10: No, not really. I just like to interact with as many people as possible to get my followers and likes up and engage with fans.

Participant 7: I don't know if it is an emotional connection, but I feel like social media is a trend. Since everybody else has it I feel like if I don't have it, I feel lost and don't know what's going on with my friends or around the world.

Participant 9: No, I don't have an emotional connection with my following on social media.

Participant 6: I don't read into it as much, I just have social media to keep up with trends, but I don't feel emotional towards my following.

Question 7: What do you consider positive and negative messages on social media?

Participant 10: Positive posts are encouraging comments and support. Negative messages are the haters who talk a lot of trash about you online.

Participant 2: I consider positive messages to be those who will push you to be your best and to keep you motivated. The negative messages are those of people who just find the bad in everything.

Participant 6: Positive would be people commenting saying you look great or thinking of you. Negative would be like if someone called you ugly or something hateful.

Participant 9: Positive messages on social media are ones that aren't opinionated, but ones that are uplifting, encouraging, and loving. Negative messages are ones that promote hate, ignorance, violence, or anything in that nature.

Participant 3: Positive messages are just encouraging people or someone whether it's positive reinforcement or encouraging them to learn something or try something new. Negative messages are ignorant and making rude comments about someone or not respecting others.

Participant 8: I also think negative messages are when people post that they are at parties or drunk because then people think oh that is so much fun, I should be that. You don't have to drink to have fun. I don't think it's a positive message to show people we are drunk and dancing on tables.

Participant 7: If you are always drunk or sloppy, then yeah that is negative, but if you are posting a picture at a party, I don't think it's negative.

Participant 1: I think it has to do with your emotional state at the time too. If you are sad, some things can uplift you, but certain things can bring you down. What is negative for others may not be negative to you and what is positive for you to see may not be positive to others.

Participant 4: Same as everybody else really, positive posts make me feel confident and encouraged or even inspired. Negative posts are posts that degrade me as a person or player and make me feel defensive or irritated.

Participant 5: I think positive messages can be as simple as saying to someone you look pretty or keep up the hard work. Negative comments would be anything to tear someone else down emotionally

Question 8: **Have you ever read a negative post about yourself on social media? How did it make you feel?**

Participant 6: I don't think I have, if I did, I can't remember which means it didn't hurt me too much if I can't even remember.

Participant 8: I have gotten negative comments about how I play basketball and it made me feel shitty. It made me feel like I had to improve. It didn't hurt me, but it made me feel like I had to improve myself and I can't make those mistakes twice.

Participant 7: I don't think I did, but I feel like it depends on who it is because if it just a random person or a fan, I shouldn't care as much. If it is not someone relevant it doesn't really matter to me. If it is someone I respect in basketball, then I will consider it as something I need to work on.

Participant 4: I try not to view posts about me especially during basketball season because I don't want to read anything even if it is negative or positive. I use social media during season to release me from the basketball pressures, but if I do see something it does kind of affect me, but I try not to let it get to me and it doesn't really matter to me.

Participant 3: I don't think I have read a negative post about me, but the only negative post I have seen was how I dressed for pregame on senior night and it didn't really make me feel any type of way. I just thought it was weird that they made a comment about how I was dressed in jeans and an off the shoulder shirt.

Participant 5: I have read negative posts mainly regarding basketball. It made me feel a little irritated but for the most part I try to shake it off.

Participant 9: No, I have not read a negative post about myself on social media.

Participant 10: Yeah, of course I have. I am really confident in myself, so I don't really care.

Participant 2: Yes, I have. I just laughed and forgot about it because it was from people who have never met me and really don't know who I am.

Participant 1: I haven't really, but I also haven't looked for it. If I have seen some minor comments after I played a bad game, it just depends on the emotional state I was in at the time of reading it.

Question 9: **Do negative posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?**

Participant 5: No negative posts about me don't affect how I view myself as an athlete. I know who I am, what I want to do, and how to accomplish those goals.

Participant 10: No, never. It motivates me to prove them wrong.

Participant 1: Sometimes. It depends on the person. I am really hard on myself and if I didn't play my greatest game and I see someone put out there, "you suck" I will be upset and be like yeah, I already know that. But if I am already confident in myself, negative posts don't really affect me, it just depends on how I talk to myself at the time.

Participant 3: For me it reminds me of my freshman year when I transferred because of my coach. There were a lot of fans who put their opinions out there about all of the girls who transferred. They said we were weak minded and called us a lot of names in the comments. For a minute, it offended me but then it didn't because if you know your worth and who you are then you can ignore those negative comments. It hurt me at first that they didn't believe what we went through, but then at the end of the day I knew I didn't do anything wrong and I did my best. It depends on who it comes from, if I trust you then I am going to read into the comments, but if I don't know the person then they don't know anything about me or my life so it's not going to affect me.

Participant 7: I think I agree with everyone else, it really does affect us whether we believe it or not, but you have to remind yourself that these people don't go through what we go through and they don't have the ability or talent to be where we are at. The people putting us down aren't putting our feelings or how we may take what they say into consideration when they are saying these things.

Participant 8: I think it does depend on who says it. If it is someone who isn't involved in basketball, then it is irrelevant to me. If it is a person that knows what they are talking about

regarding basketball and they say something, then I would probably try to change something and maybe I am not as good in this and would think something differently about myself

Participant 4: I try not to look at any basketball related posts about myself. If I see something, I will retweet it or add it to my IG story, but I really try not to look at any basketball related posts. I am already my toughest critic, which is why I don't want to look at what others have to say, because I don't want to add on any more pressure or stress to myself. I try to protect myself from viewing any negative stuff.

Participant 9: Yes, negative posts on my social media would affect the way I view myself. My confidence would decrease, but at the same time I have learned to not let bad things that have been said about me change the way I view myself. However, it doesn't affect my performance.

Participant 6: No. I don't care what people say because I know how good I am as an athlete and the person writing whatever they say probably has never played or is fat sitting behind a computer screen.

Participant 2: Not at all.

Question 10: **Do positive posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?**

Participant 10: Yes, it definitely helps me and motivates me to keep going. It drives me. I love reading positive posts about myself and how I did in games.

Participant 5: Positive posts about me don't necessarily affect me either because it just shows I'm on the right track which I try to think I am regardless as long as I'm doing what I'm supposed to do. I do think positive post create a happiness though

Participant 8: I feel like positive posts help me feel like I am doing something right.

Participant 3: Positive posts mean a lot to me because I am really hard on myself, so I am big on reassurance.

Participant 7: I agree, I feel like reading positive posts makes me feel more confident, even if you don't necessarily know it, you get more confidence in yourself and about what you do.

Participant 1: It definitely gives me motivation. It gasses me up and gives me confidence to play really well for the next game.

Participant 9: Positive posts about me on social media are nice, but it doesn't affect the way I view myself as an athlete, nor does it affect my performance.

Participant 2: No because it will be the same person who come back and have something negative to say about me

Participant 6: It obviously gives me a little boost, but I wouldn't say it affects my performance because I already know my worth.

Participant 4: I do like seeing positive posts about myself especially from younger girls because it makes me feel like I have more of a purpose in playing, but I usually see those posts directly on my page or in my messages since I try not to search for it.

Open-Discussion: **Does anyone have any additional remarks about how they feel regarding what sports fans say on social media and how it impacts their performance?**

Participant 6: I think social media can be a distraction to some people because they read it too much and go searching for peoples' opinions about stuff when the person writing their opinion has no credibility in the sports world. It can hurt people who don't know themselves, their abilities or their worth.

Participant 9: Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but don't let it affect how you feel about yourself as an athlete or affect your performance.

Participant 1: I think everybody is going to have an opinion at the end of the day, so I don't think we should focus so much on what they say as opposed to what we say to ourselves. I think once we are comfortable with ourselves, I don't think comments would affect us anymore.

Participant 3: Yeah, I agree, I feel like 90% of people who speak on our talents haven't even played sports in their life or were horrible at it, so it's like do I really care about your opinion? No, because you're not good. It also reminds me about when people comment and talk trash about transfers because people will never know what it is like to transfer out of a program and people always assume that people who transfer want to leave because they didn't get a lot of playing time, but they never actually understand what you truly went through, so you just have to take it with a grain of salt, because none of them really understand what you have went through. Participant 7: I think even if a fan or anyone, it usually always hurts us. When I was reading this year under the Cuse page about how our team sucks, I feel like it does hurt us. We just feel bad about it and we shouldn't because it's not people that know about the team, what we go through, or what we do. But obviously what people think will always mean something to us in some sort of way.

Participant 7: I agree that most of the people or our fans haven't really been a big part of basketball in their lives themselves and so that's why they think they are very involved and they think they understand everything about our team even though they don't really understand our team. I can agree that we shouldn't care about what they're saying because they don't know what happens on the inside.
Focus Group with Participants from the Men's Basketball Team at Syracuse University

Question 1: **Do you use social media during your basketball season? Why or why not?**

Participant 7: Yes, I like to post pictures and things so people from my hometown can see how I am doing and stuff like that. I also like to post something that I like or to see highlights of our games or to see other posts about sports like football.

Participant 9: I use social media during basketball to reach my parents and my siblings and friend since I'm an international student.

Participant 4: I do, mostly to keep up with friends or news.

Participant 6: I do use social media during my season mainly because I like to read about how other teams and leagues are doing. I believe social media has a lot of benefits and it is not good to completely delete it during your season.

Participant 1: I use social media during the season to post a picture if I get a good in-game pic or maybe after a win or something I'll post. I am usually on Instagram the most, Twitter during the season I'd say I'm off a little more here and there just because some people are negative and that stuff comes with it and I am on Instagram a good amount and I'm not on it as much during the off-season I'd say.

Participant 5: I'd say I use social media a lot during the season and even off of it I guess just because it's a way to connect with fans even more especially next year if fans aren't allowed to come to the games, it'll be the only way to connect to fans. So, it's just an easy way to allow them to know what's going on with us in our lives. I am on Instagram more than any of the other platforms, I used Twitter here and there just to bring more awareness about our team and games and anything involved with the program.

Participant 3: During the basketball season I use social media to inform my followers of basketball games we just played or accomplishments I have had throughout the season.

Participant 2: I use social media to stay connected with my friends and family. I don't see a point of not using it except when people say negative stuff and it's hard not to say something back.

Participant 8: I'd say I use it the same amount during the season and the off season to stay connected to people and if there is any negative stuff I just try to brush it off, so it doesn't really affect me too much I'd say.

Question 2: **How do you portray yourself on social media? Why?**

Participant 6: I portray myself in a first-class way, only posting appropriate things and being extremely careful what I say or do.

Participant 4: I portray myself as who I am in real life and what I am interested in. I post what's going on in my life. I want to be real with who I am on and off the court and on social media as well as off of it.

Participant 9: Apart from using it to reach my family, I keep contact with friends and keep them updated if I'm doing anything new, but I believe my close friends want to know about that as well.

Participant 2: I think everyone has to portray themselves as like a nice person. If you say something negative anybody could take it the wrong way and they could use it against you somehow. You've got to always be respectful and you can't cuss on social media, you really have to be careful about what you say.

Participant 5: Yeah, especially being an athlete and having fans and younger people following our stuff, we have to monitor what we say and be clean on social media. People are going to be watching you on TV a lot of times playing in your games and with the behind the scenes stuff off of the court, we want to maintain our character by making sure we are representing Syracuse in the right way. We are presented as Syracuse basketball players and we represent more things than just ourselves.

Participant 8: I would say you want to maintain your reputation online and make sure you are a good role model because you don't know who is following you and looking at your stuff on social media.

Participant 7: I would say to just be a leader on social media because there are a lot of young kids who follow us and look up to us. I also portray myself as exactly who I am, I always want to be myself, I try to be politically correct sometimes, but I have to stay true to who I am at the same time.

Participant 3: The way I portray myself through my social media is the same way I portray myself in the real world. Hardworking, competitive, but also very humble. Through my stories I like to give people a glimpse of things that I enjoy doing when I'm not on the basketball court.

Participant 1: I usually just use social media to post pictures of me playing or with my family and friends and just kind of show a little bit of who I am, but always keeping it clean and being a good role model. I want to make sure I am not doing anything silly on social media either.

Question 3: How do you think people view you on social media?

Participant 6: I think people view my social media as a way to get to know me or the game of basketball better.

Participant 2: I think they might view me as someone who doesn't post a whole lot. I mainly just like to see what everybody else is posting and doing on social media. They probably view me as quiet, but I do post about basketball and nothing else really.

Participant 9: I guess as someone who doesn't really post a whole lot, but definitely a basketball player at Syracuse.

Participant 5: I don't really know, a lot of stuff that I post just has to do with basketball, so probably just that I represent Syracuse and my hometown. Basketball is a main part of my life and it's the main thing I post on social media, so I am assuming that people just think I love sports and what not and that I just like to have fun, I guess.

Participant 7: I would say people view me as a fun guy. I like to post funny content on my Instagram stories and try to crack jokes on my social media and stuff like that, so definitely a fun guy.

Participant 3: I feel like people have a positive view of me on social media. I would never put anything up there that would embarrass myself, my family or my peers. I try to stay very positive on social media.

Participant 4: I think they know as much about me as anybody can know from a couple pictures. A basketball player, where I am from, or just outside things you can know about anybody on social media.

Participant 8: Yeah, I mean I think people can see what is most important to me, which is like basketball, my friends and my family for the most part.

Participant 1: I think it would be obvious to people that I love basketball, my teammates and my family, so just things that are important to me and I am always trying to be happy and the best I can.

Question 4: Who do you interact with on Twitter? Instagram?

Participant 2: Mainly friends. I would say mainly friends and teammates.

Participant 9: My friends on Instagram and some of my friends, I don't really interact with anyone on Twitter.

Participant 5: Yeah, I would say friends, teammates, family, basically just the people that I guess I know personally. Sometimes even though people may follow you or what not that you may not know, I really just interact with the ones I know and trust, I guess.

Participant 4: Friends mostly, fans in messages and old friends or family you only speak to on Facebook.

Participant 7: I would say friends and family, but some people that I look up to as well. I look up to other athletes or influencers on social media even though some of them may not reply to my comments, I do interact with people like that because I am really interested in what they are posting.

Participant 6: I tend to interact with my friends and a lot of fans. I always respond to the comments on my posts and a lot of dm's from the Syracuse fans. They give us so much support during the season and I want to show them my support as well.

Participant 1: I mean yeah, I am also interacting with celebrities I like, Tom Brady, I try to stay up to date with what he is doing and other guys I look up to and you know obviously my friends and the Cuse basketball account on Instagram and stuff like that.

Participant 8: Yeah, I mean friends, family and some of my favorite musicians to see what albums they are dropping soon and stuff like that. Every once in a while, when a fan reaches out, I'll try to get back to them.

Participant 3: I usually stay away from twitter during the season because people tend to say whatever they feel to you on Twitter. I usually only like seeing positive things on my feed so I stay away during the season. I also try to respond to all my dm's if someone is asking for basketball or life advice.

Question 5: How do you perceive your audience on social media?

Participant 3: Definitely a lot of fans. Having a large audience brings in a lot of different kinds of people, but typically they are fans of my game or the team.

Participant 9: I have love for all of them, I don't feel that they are a negative type of audience.

Participant 6: My audience is mainly made up on sports fans, especially from Syracuse.

Participant 5: Sometimes it can go both ways, like sometimes on Twitter, you have to ignore the times when people are hating, I mean it could be the same way on Instagram too, but there is a lot of times where you are going to get half and half I think depending on what you're doing, how you're playing, what's going on with your team or yourself, so sometimes you can see that there are a lot of negative people, but then sometimes you can see that there are a lot of positive people. You can also see that there are the fans that when your team is doing good, they are all about you and the team, but when we are not doing well, they're not about us.

Participant 1: I guess I perceive my audience like, with my friends you know what you are going to get from them, you know they are always going to support you and with others you know there is always going to be negative fans and no matter what the situation is, I think they'll never change, especially playing at a big school like Syracuse and you just kind of learn to tune that out, that's fine, because all I really care about are the people that I am close with and that know me as a person and that's all that I really look at.

Participant 8: I definitely love hearing from all my friends and all of the support, and I definitely get a lot of that on social media and then the occasional negative comment, you just kind of have to block out. I think the positive definitely outweighs the negative by a lot.

Participant 4: A mix between friends and family, fans, fans of the team or random people.

Participant 7: I really just try to focus on the positive, I really don't care about the negative, I just really want to focus on the positive. There is a mix of both, but I think I have a positive audience.

Participant 2: I would say my audience is mainly Syracuse fans other than my friends and family. They comment a lot under my Instagram pictures trying to see what my next move is or wanting me to come back to Syracuse and not transfer, things like that.

Question 6: Do you have an emotional connection to your following on social media? What type of emotional connection?

Participant 9: I don't think I have one. I don't post a whole lot and I also don't pay attention or engage to comments, whether positive or negative.

Participant 4: Not really, I feel like I only really have emotional relationships with people I meet in real life.

Participant 2: Only like friends and family, I really don't care about anybody else.

Participant 6: I wouldn't say I have an emotional connection, but I definitely have some sort of connection, since I do respond to fans and people who message or comment.

Participant 1: I mean yeah, it's definitely cool when your friends are commenting on your posts and they're off at college and you grew up with them and you get to see where everyone goes. It is cool that they still keep in touch with me and keep track of what I am doing. It's also cool having young kids that are looking up to you and comment on your stuff and trying to be like you. It's something that is really cool, and I think that I try not to take that for granted.

Participant 7: I would say fans like to reach out and if they have problems or need some inspiration, I just feel like that's the part that is kind of emotional, because you have to be supportive and just encourage them and tell them that they'll be fine and stuff like that.

Participant 8: I mean I agree with what everyone else has said, I like to engage with fans when they reach out and I do think there is an emotional tie there.

Participant 5: Exactly, me too. I definitely have an emotional connection with my friends and family and care about what they post, what they say and comment on my own posts, but I like to see positive comments on my pictures from fans as well.

Participant 3: I might not have an emotional connection like most people have to their social media, but I do try to stay connected with my followers so I can develop more of an emotional connection with them.

Question 7: What do you consider positive and negative messages on social media?

Participant 9: I really don't mind because it is all based on opinion and people are entitled to their perspective. Positive messages may be when someone is for you and negative messages are when they are against you.

Participant 3: Negative posts are when people try to bring you down or hate on your game. Positive posts are when they like your game and let you know you're doing well. Having a larger following will also lead to both positive and negatives. People tend to speak their mind more often through social media, so I tend to get a lot of negative messages after a bad game. I like to use these negatives to fuel me in most cases.

Participant 2: A negative message is when people direct message us when we lose and are like, "you guys are some shit" or "I can't believe how awful you played," and stuff like that. Positive messages are when people message us and say, "I am glad you guys won, keep playing well" and stuff like that.

Participant 6: A positive message on social media is basically anything positive in regard to you, your post or comments. A negative message would be anything that really doesn't need to be said. Something that will hurt your feelings.

Participant 5: Yeah, I mean it's kind of self-explanatory, if someone is putting the team down or putting you down, it's just like obviously that is negative and doesn't need to be there, but then positive messages are the opposite, when they are hyping you up and happy about the team's success and stuff like that, so you can just tell when someone is being positive or negative.

Participant 7: I would say negative messages are like when people make rude comments, but we find them mostly on Twitter. There are blogs regarding our team online and they talk about the coaching, the players, the recruiting and all of the stuff that pertains to our team and it's usually really harsh and negative comments. People online will try to put you down sometimes and it has hurt me sometimes when I read that fans say my coach could have gotten a better player over me and stuff like that, but the positive stuff is when people comment about how we won or how great we are.

Participant 1: Yeah, I mean I definitely think it's a lot centered around the team and especially when you are losing you're going to see a lot more negative messages and when you're winning again you're going to see the messages switch back to more positive.

Participant 8: Positive messages on social media make you feel good and I would say negative messages are something that make you feel attacked or tear down your character or abilities.

Participant 4: Positive is anybody who's normal and nice. Negative is most other things. Luckily I don't have a lot of negative messages so far, but if I get more followers I probably will.

Question 8: **Have you ever read a negative post about yourself on social media? How did it make you feel?**

Participant 2: Yes, I have. Sometimes when I see it, I try to see who it is and see if they are old or young. If they are of age, I might say something back, but if it is just like a little kid or something or just somebody who looks like they don't know anything about basketball, then I just kind of ignore it.

Participant 6: I have read plenty of negative posts about myself on social media. In the beginning it would get to me a little, but I learned how to block it out really well and not pay attention to what people are saying especially those who don't know anything about basketball.

Participant 7: Honestly, I will click on people's pages when I see a negative post about myself. I do this to see who they are and see what kind of person they are and just see if they are worth commenting back, but I don't reply even if they say something negative. Silence is the best reply, because if you reply that's all they need to say something extra, so I just look at it and move on.

Participant 9: Yes, many times, but it does not change my feelings because they are entitled to their own opinions and sometimes, they don't know what they are talking about. As an athlete, I already accept people talking negatively about me because we are not perfect, if I was perfect, I wouldn't be performing and practicing to get better at what I do.

Participant 5: Yeah, I mean I read them all the time and I don't really feel a certain type of way about any of them, I just check them out and I don't really comment back. I read them sometimes just to see what people are saying, what's going on, what people are thinking, and it doesn't really mean too much to me. I know who is going to be there for me, I know who is going to help me out and I know who I should be listening to and should be paying attention to, but what they say is whatever their opinion is, so it doesn't really bother me too much.

Participant 4: Sometimes, I don't care about it really, I don't know that person so I don't really care and as long as most things are positive, I can't be bothered. I can imagine if you get a lot of negative messages though it can hurt.

Participant 8: Yeah, I mean I definitely see them and just try to brush them off. If anything, I just kind of use it as a fuel to the fire I guess, it makes me want to be better if anything.

Participant 1: There is always going to be people that are negative and want to see you lose or they are envious and want to be where you are and that's just a part of it and you kind of have to embrace it. Going to Syracuse or any big division 1 college that is going to happen, so it's just expected, and you just have to use it to motivate yourself.

Participant 3: Yes, but negative posts have never affected the way I view myself as an athlete or a person. People are always entitled to their opinion, but that should never sway the confidence you have in yourself.

Question 9: **Do negative posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?**

Participant 2: No, because they're not in a position that can tell me how to be as a player.

Participant 5: I'd say no not really. I'll read it and I'll think about it, but it doesn't really make me feel a certain type of way. I know who I should be listening to like my coaches and the staff

as well as my teammates, so if they say it, then yeah I need to listen to it, but if it's somebody else saying it then I don't really pay too much attention.

Participant 4: I think it can. That's why a lot of famous people quit social media. But right now, I don't really take most people serious on social media. Most things are either jokes or things a person would never say to another in person.

Participant 6: Definitely not. I would never let someone's negative post about me make me think less of myself.

Participant 9: It does not affect me at all because no one is perfect and usually people who sit at home criticizing people are bored at home and don't have any idea what they are talking about in sports.

Participant 8: I'd say I have confidence in myself and that's what I need, and I listen to what my coaches and teammates are saying, as well as people closest to me. I don't really let negative posts about me on social media affect me too much.

Participant 1: I mean I'm not going to let it change how I am as a player or anything, I am going to listen to my coaches and my teammates because that's what is most important and anyone on the outside will always have their opinions, which are usually not right and usually don't know what they're talking about or have the experience of playing basketball at a high level.

Participant 7: No, I know how I work and what happens in the gym and that's all I like to make of myself, which is how I am doing personally, but I don't want to listen to somebody else's opinion because they don't know how I much work I put in.

Participant 3: No, it makes me irritated sometimes, which is why I try to steer away from seeing negative comments about myself on social media, but even if I do, I am confident in my abilities as a basketball player, so what gives me confidence is what I do in the gym on my own time, not what others say about me.

Question 10: **Do positive posts about you on social media affect the way you view yourself as an athlete? What about your performance?**

Participant 9: As I said before, I could care less about people's comments about me because I'm not doing anything to make them feel good, I'm doing it to make myself better and learn more about sports as we all are students of the game.

Participant 7: No, some people they just try to gas you up and repost you, but I don't look at it like it affects how I view myself; I look at it as something that I appreciate. I know what I am like and what my weaknesses are, and I will just focus on the work I put in and not focus on what people are saying about me.

Participant 5: I am the same way about the last question, it's just like I am going to read it and think whatever about it, but it doesn't really mean much unless it's coming from my coaches or teammates. If it's not really in house, it's good to see and all, but it doesn't really mean much.

Participant 8: I agree, it's good to see and it's nice, but just like how you don't want to get too low with negative stuff, you don't want to get too high with positive stuff. You just want to kind of keep working and stay motivated.

Participant 1: Yeah, I mean unless it's like a highlight of me dunking on someone. It's cool to see yourself in highlights here and there, but you always want to stay humble and never get satisfied. It's motivating to see progress and positive stuff is always good, but you always want to keep your goals right and listen to the people that matter.

Participant 6: I agree, I wouldn't say it affects the way I view myself, but sometimes it could give me a confidence boost but never anything more than that.

Participant 2: Not really, I like seeing them because it is uplifting, but how others view me as an athlete whether positive or negative don't really affect the way I see myself as an athlete.

Participant 3: Positive posts also do not have an impact on me. I try to always stay not too low, but also not too high. When people love the praise so much, they tend to lose the inner drive that got them there.

Participant 4: It can boost your ego I guess but the same logic applies too that you can't take it too seriously. Of course, I am talking about messages from people you do not know personally. Messages from family and friends should be the ones taken seriously.

Open-Discussion: **Does anyone have any additional remarks about how they feel regarding what sports fans say on social media and how it impacts their performance?**

Participant 6: I think social media has a ton of benefits for kids and that you shouldn't delete your social media platforms during season. Obviously don't search yourself on twitter, Instagram or other platforms. But besides from this I think it very beneficial.

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ACCOLADES AND ACADEMIC AWARDS

Women's basketball player and team captain at the University of Texas at Arlington, June 2015 – May 2019 and Syracuse University June 2019 – May 2020.

Scholar Athlete (3.5 GPA or higher), Fellowship of Christian Athletes student leader, Student Athletic Advisory Committee leader, National Honor Society member and Sigma Alpha Lambda National Leadership and Honors organization member.

SERVICE

Mentor and basketball coach for children with disabilities, 2015 – 2019.

Basketball coach for youth, camps and training in North Texas, 2016 – present.

Compassion Child donor, sponsoring a child in Tanzania, Africa to help him with food, resources and education, 2016 – present.