Weighing in on the Coaching Decision: Discussing Sports and Race Online

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Abstract

The online consumption of sport is becoming increasingly popular among sports fans. This study examined how fans used computer-mediated communication to discuss allegations of racism in American Division I College Football hiring practices. A thematic analysis of 1,254 postings to an ESPN.com discussion forum revealed that fans addressed the issue through messages of (a) transference, (b) irrelevance, (c) reverse racism, and (d) recognition. Results suggest that the online commentary (re)produced an ideology that (a) claims racism as nonexistent, (b) blames the victims of racism for their underrepresentation, and (c) suggests any lingering racism is against Whites (e.g., Whites are victims of reverse discrimination). The findings reveal how computer-mediated communication domains are important sites for examining how fans' messages (re)produce societal beliefs about the role and relevance of race in sport.

Sports have long been considered to reflect the racial hierarchy of a society (Frey & Eitzen, 1991; Lapchick, 1986). The belief that issues of "race" are no longer present in sport (Leonard, 2004; Springwood, 2006) is consistent with contemporary U.S. American beliefs that racism has vanished from the social scene (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Carr, 1997; Crenshaw, 1997). This perception has become so entrenched that questionable racial practices made by sports organizations often go unquestioned, whereas those who publicly contest these decisions endure harsh criticism for attacking "American values" (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009; King, 2006). Although scholars have explored

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how these beliefs have become (re)produced through the organizational policies of sports organizations (Hughes, 2004; Ruggiero & Lattin, 2008) and throughout the media (Halone, 2008; Zagacki & Grano, 2005), the Internet has become an overlooked space for examining issues of race in sport. This study examined how sports fans used computer-mediated communication (CMC) channels to discuss allegations of racism in the face of American Division I College Football hiring practices.

Race and Ethnicity in Sport(ing) Culture

Contrary to popular belief, issues of race are firmly embedded in the sports world (Springwood, 2006). The domain of sport has become historically linked to an American identity that has promoted a dominant White ideology (Gemmell, 2007; Staurowsky, 2007). For example, King (2006) contended that sports teams that used American Indian names and mascots (e.g., Atlanta Braves, Washington Redskins) reinforced dynamics of Whiteness by conjuring up frontier-conquering images and stereotypes of American Indians. King (2007) further noted that—although these names and mascots are offensive to many American Indian groups—when critiques of these "naming" practices are extended, those "sounding the alarm" are often condemned as attacking American identity and values; ideas that have become deeply intertwined with sports (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009). Similarly, Newman (2007) profiled how flying the Confederate flag at University of Mississippi football games reconstituted the vestiges of both the Confederate United States and a privileged White ideology. In 2 years of systematic observation of this practice, it was never challenged, implying a promotion and maintenance of a Dixie Civil War identity (Newman, 2007).

These aforementioned dynamics have been further reinforced throughout sports media (Billings, 2004; Buffington, 2005; Halone, 2008). Invoking stereotypes is one of the primary ways that televised sport both promulgates and reinforces troublesome representations for its viewing audience. Sports broadcasts, for example, have depicted Black athletes as occupying physical superiority, whereas White athletes have been depicted as possessing intellectual superiority (Billings, 2008; Hermes, 2005; Li, Harrison, & Solmon, 2004). Although these trends are problematic, the belief that racism does not affect sports continues to exist (van Sterkenburg & Knoppers, 2004). Indeed, people are socialized to these "color-blind" discourses at an early age (Glover, 2007), leading to the prevailing ideology that "American sport is an arena, in the popular imagination, which simultaneously celebrates itself as a racial utopia while erasing race and racism" (Springwood, 2006, p. 365).

Race and Ethnicity in Sports Organizations

Sport organizations also have enacted policies that privilege unquestioned forms of Whiteness (Hughes, 2004). Newhall and Buzuvis (2008), for example, chronicled Penn State University's dismissal of women's head basketball coach, Rene Portland, who observed that Penn State University enforced standard policies of hair and beauty

that silenced the identity expression of Black athletes. Similarly, in 2005, the National Basketball Association (NBA) amended its dress code to require inactive players sitting on the bench to be dressed in business professional attire (Wise, 2005). This change was largely attributed to the NBA's attempt to pacify concerns from corporate sponsors that many inactive players wore clothing that resembled "the ghetto" (McCarthy, 2005).

Los Angeles Lakers coach, Phil Jackson, reinforced such perceptions when he stated, "The players have been dressing in prison garb the last five or six years . . . all the stuff that goes on, it's like gangsta, thuggery stuff" (J. Wilson, 2005, p. 21). Jackson's choice of words—associating players' attire with "prison," "gangsta," and hence criminal activity (rather than with what had become trendy or fashionable)—intimates the presence of racial overtones. Jackson certainly could have connected their attire with fashion trends or the desire to wear casual clothing when off the court; yet, his comments demonstrate how prevailing notions of race and ethnicity at a societal level affect decision making at an organizational level. In this case, the NBA implicitly reinforced Whiteness through the dress code, as players subsumed their cultural clothing to align with the interests of the league's White corporate sponsors.

The argument that racism also has trickled down to the hiring of head coaches has prompted some to contend that such practices have become normalized (Fort, Lee, & Berri, 2008; Scully, 1989). In light of this, some sport organizations are taking steps to promote more racial diversity within the coaching ranks. Consider the National Football League's (NFL) implementation of the "Rooney Rule," which requires teams to interview at least one minority candidate for a head coaching vacancy, unless the team is promoting an assistant (Smith, 2009). However, despite a recent surge of Black head coaches hired in the NFL, questions still remain about the rule's effectiveness. For instance, some teams willingly circumvent the rule and accept fines issued by the league for bypassing this process, or by merely granting "token" interviews to minority candidates who are not seriously being considered for the coaching vacancy (Rhoden, 2008).

Although some progress has been made in coaching opportunities for minorities in the NBA, the NFL, and Major League Baseball, among others, American Division I College Football—commonly referred to as the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS)—has not followed suit (Berkotwitz & Wieberg, 2009). Indeed, at the present time, only 14 (or 12%) of the 120 available head coaching positions in the FBS are held by minorities (Wieberg & Brady, 2010). However, this marks a significant increase in minority hiring at FBS programs over the past year, even though a clear discrepancy still exists (Wieberg & Brady, 2010).[1] Despite a host of reasons why racial diversity within the FBS coaching ranks remains low, it is unclear how this disparity continues to remain unquestioned by the general public. Two candidate explanations surface for this disparity. First, as fans are conditioned to accept sports as a "racial utopia," they also may perceive that workplace opportunities in sports are no longer influenced by issues of race (Berry & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Second, given the strong identification levels that fans have with the sport they support, such questionable practices become passively accepted and, therefore, continue to persist (Newman, 2007).

In the past, fans were limited to calling in to talk-radio shows or writing letters to the editor of the newspaper to broadcast their opinions about sports organizations decisions. The Internet now enables them to voice commentary, almost instantaneously, on these decisions with other fans across the globe. Thus, when allegations of racial discrimination are made against a sports organization, fan commentary can provide a micro-level view of how fans respond to the organizational (meso-level) practices enacted by sports organizations.

Sports Fans and Computer-Mediated Communication

Within the past decade, sports media has experienced exponential growth to the point that an abundance of sports information is now available on demand from a variety of media outlets. Much of this expansion has resulted from traditional mass media organizations increasing their programming options (e.g., ESPN developing a host of channels, sports leagues establishing their own networks). Internet technology increasingly shares responsibility for being able to usher in the current era of instantaneous and continuous sports news availability (Butler & Sagas, 2008; Dart, 2009; Galily, 2008). Whereas fans were once dependent on waiting for evening news telecasts or local newspapers to obtain their sports information, they can now access this data immediately via the Internet, cell phones, or other technological devices. This alteration has prompted some scholars to suggest that the proliferation of Internet sites devoted to sports is creating a vast digital environment for fans to interact about and to consume sports (Hutchins & Rowe, 2009).

Not surprisingly, research is attending to these recent changes in the sports media landscape. Research has discovered, for example, that sports fans employ CMC to discuss their experiences at sporting events (Dart, 2009), parasocially interact with athletes (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Sanderson, 2008), and contest hegemonic knowledge produced and distributed by sports organizations (Plymire, 2008). Fans' increasing use of computer-mediated forums to consume sport (Clavio, 2008; Dart, 2009) is so widespread that traditional mass media outlets have developed Web-based sports sites to remain competitive in this growing sports media market (Butler & Sagas, 2008).

One of the more prominent outcomes of sports-related CMC is that it enables fans to connect with others to discuss sports. The ability for fans to interact with others about sports—across time and space—creates a community-building function wherein meaningful discussions on sport can take place. W. Wilson (2007), for example, analyzed an Internet discussion board devoted to the U.S. Major League Soccer (MLS) league. Here, it was found that virtual communities that formed around teams lacking strong social identities enabled fans to hold meaningful discussions about professional soccer's struggle to gain mainstream acceptance in the United States (W. Wilson, 2007). Ferriter (2009) also examined fans' narratives posted on retired NFL players' Wikipedia pages and found that they used such digital spaces to (a) collectively celebrate and debate the athletes' achievements and (b) construct representations of these athletes that stimulated future online interaction.

The interactivity and access afforded by CMC enables a multitude of voices to emanate from these sites for researchers to investigate. Thus, CMC sites can provide valuable insight into fan reactions when the racial sanctity of sport is publicly challenged: given that sports is widely held to be a racial utopia combined with its links to fan identity. What remains unknown, however, is how CMC practices are used among sports fans when the racial sanctity of sport is publically challenged. Such an incident occurred on December 15, 2008, when former NBA player, Charles Barkley, publicly criticized Auburn University, his alma mater, for hiring a White candidate (Gene Chizik) instead of a Black candidate (Turner Gill) as their head football coach.

Auburn's Search for a Football Coach

On December 3, 2008, after a disappointing season with a record of five wins and seven losses, Auburn University head football coach, Tommy Tuberville, resigned (Thamel, 2008). After Tuberville's resignation, Auburn began a national search to find a replacement. During the search, Turner Gill, who had rebuilt the University of Buffalo's football program, publicly emerged as a popular choice to become Auburn's next head football coach, where he was subsequently interviewed for the job (Hickey, 2008). On December 13, 2008, however, Auburn announced that they had hired Iowa State University head football coach, Gene Chizik, as their new head coach. Chizik's hiring was promptly criticized, with some detractors pointing to Chizik's record at Iowa State (5-19 in two seasons) as evidence that he was unqualified (Glier, 2008). Criticism was also directed toward Auburn for failing to hire a qualified Black candidate; drawing further attention to the issue of Black coaches in the FBS.

One of the more prominent critiques came on December 15, 2008, when former NBA star and Auburn alumnus, Charles Barkley, publicly chastised the school for hiring Chizik. In commenting on the story to ESPN, Barkley declared that "race was the No.1 factor" in Chizik's hiring, that he was "disappointed" in the hire, and that he:

> thought Turner Gill would be the perfect choice for two reasons: He's a terrific coach and we needed to make a splash. I thought we had to do something spectacular to bring attention to the program. Clearly, if we'd hired a black coach, it would have created a buzz. (Schlabach, 2008, para. 7)

Barkley's comments were reported by major mass media outlets, which prompted a multitude of fans to go online and respond to his allegations. Considering the large participation that resulted from Barkley's criticisms (9,005 total postings on ESPN. com alone), this event appeared to prompt strong fan reactions about the role of race in sport (Douglas & Jamieson, 2006; Springwood, 2006). The corpus of fan commentary that resulted from this story offers a salient opportunity to examine how sports fans discuss issues of race in sport online.

Method

Data, obtained from the ESPN Web site, consisted of online postings that responded to ESPN college football reporter Mark Schlabach's (2008) article that reported Barkley's criticisms.[2] The ESPN network is considered "the single most successful sports enterprise in the world" (Perez-Pena, 2007, p. 1) and has multiple distribution formats such as ESPN television programming, *ESPN The Magazine,* and ESPN.com. As the dominant U.S. site for online sports consumption (Lemke, 2008), ESPN.com was an appropriate choice for data collection. ESPN.com enables audience members to post comments to stories reported on their Web site, and, in order to do so, one must create a user account by providing personal information (e.g., date of birth, gender, e-mail address) while entering a username that is linked to the comments that one posts.

At the time of analysis, there were a total of 9,005 postings that spanned 2 days, 11 hours, and 37 minutes.[3] Given the large number of available postings, data were randomly selected for analysis. A 20% stratified random sample was employed, with every fifth posting selected for inclusion ($n = 1,801$ postings). This procedure mirrors prior strategies to systematically examine large amounts of online fan communication (Kassing & Sanderson, 2009; Sanderson, 2008). Participation in the forum ranged from people making 1 comment ($n = 548$) to 37 comments ($n = 1$). Table 1 depicts the participation frequencies in the data.

An online post served as the unit of analysis. Each post was initially read to see how participants reacted to Barkley's allegations. Postings that did not contain messages meaningful to the study ($n = 547$; e.g., "Go Gators," commentary about other sports stories) were excluded from analysis. This left 1,254 online postings available for analysis. Although the postings appeared to be from fans, it remains a possibility that some of the postings were authored by ESPN.com personnel attempting to manage the discussion: a trend that has been observed in other sports media research (Meân, Kassing, & Sanderson, in press). However, the number of postings combined with the stratified sampling technique minimized the impact of this on the findings.

The remaining postings were subjected to a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). First, two subsamples of 100 postings were initially selected to develop inductively derived themes. Next, candidate themes from within each subsample were compared across each subsample to ascertain potential similarity. After this, once candidate themes were determined ($n = 4$), each subsequent posting was carefully read and placed in a candidate theme. Finally, formal codes for each theme were developed (Boyatzis, 1998).

Results

Four general themes emerged as follows: (a) transference ($n = 524$), (b) irrelevance ($n = 194$), (c) reverse racism ($n = 198$), and (d) recognition ($n = 338$). An illustration of each theme is located in Table 2. Each of these themes is now discussed along with exemplars drawn from the postings. To indicate the number of the posting in the data,

Table 1. Commentary Frequencies in Participants Responding to ESPN.com

Number of Comments	Number of People
1	548
2	114
3	53
4	32
5	15
6	13
7	12
8	4
9	3
10	5
11	4
13	2
14	3
15	1
16	1
17	2
18	2
19	2
22	1
23	1
26	1
33	1
37	1

a number is attached following each exemplar, indicating where the posting fell in the data set. Postings are reported verbatim from the data; spelling and grammatical errors were left intact.

Transference

A predominant theme that surfaced was *transference*. This theme suggested that Blacks[4] were to blame for their lack of representation in FBS head coaching positions. These postings contended that the lack of coaching diversity was because of the actions of Blacks, rather than through any systematic or institutional racism: thus transferring accountability to those affected by racism instead of to those who actually benefit from such racism. This form of redirection became specifically manifest through: (a) criticism ($n = 396$), (b) minimization ($n = 98$), and (c) the "race card" ($n = 30$).

Criticism. Some individuals used Barkley's comments as evidence that allegations of racism were a tool that Blacks used to avert accountability for social problems. For instance, "the bottom line is you don't want to get over it because you like having someone to blame for your problems" (600); "Black people have EVERYTHING handed to them and they still manage to lead the country in murders, teen pregnancy,

Table 2. Coding Elements for Participant Themes

Category Label	Number of Incidents	Definition	Indicators	Differentiation	Example
Transference	524	Postings that suggested that Blacks were to blame for lack of diversity in FBS head coaches or for racism in society	Postings that criticized, trivialized, or attributed racism allegations to the "race card"	Postings that invoked reverse racism, irrelevance, or agreement with Barkley	"Racism does not exist"
Criticism	396	Postings criticizing Blacks or Barkley for contending racism factored in Auburn's decision	Postings that criticized the allegation of racism	Postings that did not directly criticize Blacks or Barkley	"Just another stupid comment by Sir Charles"
Minimization	98	Postings that minimized the experiences of Blacks and other minorities	Postings that intimated that racism no longer occurred, was no longer relevant, or was not problematic	Postings that did not trivialize the experience of Blacks and other minorities with respect to racism	"Are you kidding me? It's the 21st century, no one cares about that stuff anymore"
Race card	30	Postings attributing racism or Barkley's comments to a display of the "race card"	Postings that considered Barkley's remarks or charges of racism to evidence the "race card"	Postings that did not mention the "race card"	"Barkley AGAIN shows his ignorance by AGAIN using the race card"
Irrelevance	194	Postings suggesting that racism had no bearing on Auburn's decision to hire Chizik	Postings that attributed Chizik's hiring to other factors such as tenure	Postings that invoked racism as the reason for Chizik's hiring or did not address the hiring process	"Gill has no history with Auburn, Chizik does"
Reverse racism	198	Postings suggesting that Whites were bearing the consequences of racism in sports and/or society	Postings that detailed some type of discrimination that Whites experienced	Postings that shifted blame for racism to Blacks or that agreed with Barkley's criticisms	"I'm outraged because there aren't enough white running backs in the NFL"
Recognition	338	Postings that acknowledged that the lack of diversity within FBS coaching was problematic	Postings that agreed with Barkley or emphasized the diversity problem in the FBS	Postings that did not consider the lack of diversity to be problematic	"Explain to me how 60% of the players are black, yet only 3% of the coaches are black"

Note: FBS = Football Bowl Subdivision; NFL = National Football League.

high school drop outs, and unemployed. STOP POINTING THE FINGER AT OTHER PEOPLE . . . IT'S YOUR OWN FAULT" (674); and "Why do blacks always feel like they are getting screwed?" (915). Fueled by these claims, other individuals then claimed that past allegations of racism had resulted in the underrepresentation of Blacks in FBS head coaching circles. For example, "Black people are not worth the risk because they can cause soooooo much trouble screaming racism. I'm sorry but they do it to themselves" (482) and "There arn't as many black coaches because there arn't as many good black coaches" (411).

People also criticized Blacks by contending that they had more pressing social issues that needed to be solved before attention could be devoted to racial discrepancies in coaching: "we should first worry about the percentage of black prison guards compared to black prisoners. Lets take care of your societal problems before we move into college sports" (442) and "I've never heard Barkley talk about all the black on black crime. The hundreds of young men killed each day in the streets by other black men. At least he and all the other complainers have their priorities straight" (502). People then leveled specific criticisms at Barkley for having the audacity to question that racism may have played a role in Auburn's hiring process. For example, "Charles Barkley sit you big fat A** down and shut up! No one gives a rats A** what you think, you piece of dog shi*" (817); "Barkley can rot in hell" (239); and "anything an alcoholic, gambling maniac says can't be taken seriously either" (302).

Others declared that Barkley needed to "Shut up" (311, 417, 835) or "Shut his big mouth" (221), as "no one cares what an overweight has been has to say" (610). Additionally, other people concluded that *Barkley's* allegations were racist: "I am sorry, when you say that the only reason someone got hired is because of race makes you racist" (559); "Charles Barkley is the racist in this story" (643); and "Charles Barkley is the BIGGEST RACIST I have ever heard from. NO BLACK MAN IS MORE RACIST towards white people than him" (909).

These criticisms essentially shifted the issue back to Blacks. Thus, rather than acknowledging that institutionalized practices may be racist, discriminatory actions were validated as the natural consequences of previous (unwarranted) racism claims. In other words, this commentary framed the underrepresentation of Black head coaches in the FBS as resulting from previous concerns and allegations raised about the lack of diversity in FBS coaching circles. This framing has been historically observed as a convenient way for Whites to deflect blame for racism onto minority groups (Foster, 2009; Renzetti, 2007). Thus, although Auburn may have had the noblest of intentions in hiring Chizik instead of Gill, the current situation surrounding minority coaches in the FBS suggests that Barkley's critiques certainly had merit. Rather than opting to pause for reflection and actually consider what changes *could* be made to bring more racial equity to the FBS, online participants collectively (re)produced messages that minorities were to blame for their lack of representation in certain fields of employment.

The public rebuke of Barkley's criticism may prevent other individuals—who share similar feelings—from actually speaking out, particularly if such backlashes label them in a way that prevents them from being considered for future employment

opportunities. For instance, individuals who perceive race and ethnicity as legitimate barriers that also contribute to differential treatment of coaches (Kamphoff & Gill, 2008; Mixon & Trevino, 2004) may reserve speaking out about racism for fear of being negatively labeled. Such personal silence, in light of such lingering public messages, (in)directly maintains the status quo by reifying the notion that what constitutes racism is the act of speaking out about it.

Minimization. Some participants minimized the contention that racism still existed in American society. As such, any allegations that racism factored in Auburn's hiring decision (or others) represented a crutch that Blacks used to compensate for their shortcomings and lack of achievement. For example, "Racism is much much lower than you believe but it makes ALOT of people feel better when they have something or someone else to blame it on" (1,131) and "Let the race issue go away please. Everyone is tired of hearing it. No one hires because of race anymore" (856). Because issues of race allegedly had no bearing on individual opportunity, charges of racism were viewed as an excuse to mask one's personal deficiencies. For example, "Any person today has the opportunity to go as far as their desire will take them. It's all up to you and you have no one left to blame" (136) and "Americas' promise is true for everyone who chooses to stay the course" (824). Interestingly, some considered the election of Barack Obama to the United States presidency as evidence of racism's exit from American society. For example, "Hey Charles, did you see the election? White people like Black people now" (210) and:

> I am quite frankly tired of him [Barkley] and other high-profile black people making comments claiming racism or prejudice keeps other blacks from getting jobs. Recently with the "hiring" of the first black President, that accusation has become void of any credibility. (902)

Scholars have suggested that minimization claims reduce perceptions that racism still functions, which frames instances of racism as rare, isolated incidents that are deemed as fluke occurrences (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; O'Brien & Korgen, 2007). Although this became manifest in the data, it was also interesting that people pointed to Barack Obama's election to the United States presidency as evidence that racism had diminished. In offering these arguments, this commentary reflected an ideology that conflates American culture and White culture (Nakayama & Martin, 2007). By presenting Barack Obama's election as evidence that *any* individual can aspire to anything they wish, the perceived relevance of racism was greatly reduced; in minimizing racism's relevance, these discussions perpetuated an ideology that anyone can overcome any barrier to achieve success (Gandy & Li, 2005; Renzetti, 2007).

Here, any racial discrepancy that allegedly existed throughout the FBS was merely a by-product of individuals not (a) working hard enough or (b) possessing the merit to be a head coach. By conflating the issue with American ideals (Butterworth & Moskal, 2009), any potential dialogue for exploring legitimate reasons for existing racial inequities in the FBS was silenced, which, in turn, absolved institutional culpability for the

current situation. Highlighting the successes of a few minority individuals was "evidence" enough that the system was working, which silenced the need to actually address these inequitable barriers.

The race card. Categorizing Barkley's critiques specifically, and racism allegations generally, as race card displays was another way that online discussion shifted issues of racism back to Blacks. Some contended that the race card performed an excuse making function: "When you say they should of hired a black coach instead of a better coach you have pulled the race card for no apparent reason" (271); "everytime a black man doesn't receive some ptye of recognition, or isnt hired as a coach, chosen for awards, or is being 'singled out' by the media, theres charles barkley crying race . . . stop playing the race card" (113); and "if you don't get what u want, just play the race card" (904). For others, the race card embodied their general frustration with the topic of racial issues: "I am sick and tired of somebody always throwing up the race card" (1,052); "I'm so tired of the race card being played, not just in sports, but in society as a whole" (207); and "I am so damn sick of people playing the race card" (1,187).

The race card provided a strategic way to both dismiss and silence challenges surrounding the status quo of FBS head coaching hiring. Rather than engage in a meaningful online conversation about the racial discrepancies that currently existed in the FBS head coaching ranks and explore viable options to ameliorate this issue, legitimate questions to these longstanding issues seemed to be conveniently discarded and categorized as race card displays that people were "damn sick" of discussing. Here, online participants further implicated the notion that coaching opportunities in this realm are equally available to people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, despite the fact that, as previously noted, only 12% of these jobs are held by minorities. These online postings corroborate research that suggests that the race card is employed in discussions to undermine support for current policies (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005). The commentary emanating among these posts indicated that there was no need for future legislation or policy revisions, such as the "Rooney Rule," because there was simply not a problem that warranted any action.

Irrelevance

Some participants quickly dismissed the relevance of racism in Auburn's hiring decision. Although some individuals acknowledged that Gill seemed to be a more qualified candidate than Chizik, they considered that factors other than racism accounted for Auburn's final selection. For example, "This is a case of stupidism not racism" (929) and "This is either blatant racism or complete stupidity. Stupidity is my vote" (263). Yet others contended that Chizik's hiring was merely an issue of the best candidate being selected: "It is sad that is still brought up whether the coach, player, scout, whatever is black or white. What happened to being the best candidate?" (154) and "I can see where Auburn is coming from by hiring Chizik, he was their DC [defensive coordinator] when they went 14-0" (531). Still others posited that Gill was not hired because he was simply not qualified to be the head coach at Auburn: "I think Auburn

believing that going from the MAC to the SEC is too big a step was the reason Gill wasn't hired, not b/c of Gill's race" (940); "Turner Gill's 'record' was compiled in the pee wee leagues. Gene Chizik helped Auburn to an undefeated season in the 'big leagues'" (1,045); and "Gill is an alright coach but coaching at buffalo and then auburn is a lot different in the sense of competition played" (45).

Commentary that contended racism did not enter in Auburn's hiring equation reflects how the prevalence of racism becomes underestimated in society (Steinhorn & Diggs-Brown, 2000). Although disparate hiring practices toward minorities clearly still exist (Berry & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Jackson, 2008), these participants argued that race could not have been a consideration because it paled in comparison with other factors (i.e., previous tenure, work experience). Although the hiring decision could have been possibly influenced by these components, suggesting that racism had *no* role in the hiring decision inhibited meaningful discussion from taking place: thus reinforcing an ideology that employment decisions are void of racial biases.

Reverse Racism

Online participants also contended that elements of reverse racism were present. These claims suggested that Whites were the group who were encountering racism in sport. These messages shifted focus from the core issue (i.e., lack of minority head coaches) to the White sporting experience. For instance: "The number of white RB's [running backs] in the NFL is absolutely unacceptable" (24), "I think the only reason I did not get recruited to play running back at Auburn is because I am white. I want justice, I have been discriminated against" (835), and "I will think about hiring a black head football coach when half the players in an NBA game are white and not on the bench" (229). People also argued that this discrimination extended beyond sports and was a result of societal policies: most notably, affirmative action. For example, "if our ancestors would have known that this is what would have happened to our country, they never would have adopted slavery" (96); "the bottom line is that when things go bad for whites, they have to deal with it. When they go wrong for blacks, the entitlement mentality kicks in" (841); "what do all the white coaches that didn't get the job get to blame it on?" (110); and:

> To all blacks, I, as a short white boy, with no ball skills, understand your plight, have been a victim of racism myself and therefore ask that you stand with me in protest and help me to start an affirmative action program to stamp out the obvious racism in pro basketball. (141)

These claims suggested that Whites no longer had equal opportunities for athletic participation and, therefore, were confronted with an unequal playing field. This, ironically, appeared to have trumped the real issue at hand: the lack of minority coaches in the FBS. Although racial inequity within FBS head coaching circles may have been a salient issue, the more pressing matter for these online participants was

the diminished participation opportunities for Whites. Despite the fact that Whites have enjoyed a monopoly on sports participation throughout sporting history, such contentions dismiss the years of discriminatory practices and struggles that minorities have encountered to gain an equal footing in sports (Simpson, 2008). Messages such as these, in turn, further enable discussions of racism to emanate from a White point of view (Deleuze & Guttari, 1980/1987).

Recognition

Some individuals acknowledged that the lack of coaching diversity within the FBS was problematic and, thus, warranted corrective action. Some audience members conveyed that the small number of Black head coaches in the FBS was a significant problem and stressed that this situation could no longer be ignored. Some individuals expressed that the low number of Black head coaches was "indefensible" (1,035), "truly ridiculous" (40), and "a joke" (5). Others more emphatically noted, "Get your heads out of the sand minority candidates are being passed up. these schools aren't going after the best candidates they get and are not being inclusive. 4 out of 119 c'mon!!!" (994), "You hire a white coach with a losing record over a black coach with a winning record? There's something wrong here" (148), and:

> Why are there so few Black head coaches??? Throw out the qualified argument because this story obviously defeats that defense, easily. Seriously, explain why isn't the ethnicity of the majority of football players represented in the coaching ranks? (1,569)

Another stated the following:

> Can somebody please explain to me how there are only 4 african-american coaches in a sport which has had a large percentage of african-american participants for over 30 years? And if your answer is something along the lines of "the best candidate always gets the job" can you please explain to me how Charles Barkley is wrong for pointing out that in the last two coaching searches at Auburn, the worst candidate, who happens to be white, was offered the job over legitimate and established minority candidates? (43)

These messages used language to demonstrate the need for increased racial diversity within the FBS. That is, by labeling the current situation as "ridiculous" and "a joke," these participants illuminated the fact that the racial disparity in the FBS head coaching ranks could no longer be tolerated. There, moreover, appeared to be a strong emphasis placed on pointing out existing facts about FBS head coaching hires. By numerically acknowledging that "there are only 4 Black coaches out of 119 positions," a vividness emerges that is absent from other generalized postings. Although many had suggested that racism was not a relevant sports topic and had largely disappeared

from American society, these voices challenged such messages by acknowledging a need for dialogue. Despite prevalent postings suggesting that Barkley and others had greatly exaggerated the issue, these voices eloquently articulated why conversation about racism in sports is needed (Cole, 2008).

Conclusion

This study examined how fans discussed allegations of racial impropriety in sports via computer-mediated discussion forums. Sports fans reacted to Charles Barkley's implication that racism was a factor in Auburn University's hiring of Gene Chizik by entering into computer-mediated forums to differentially voice dissent against or agreement with Barkley's claims. The large number of online responses to this one story clearly demonstrated (a) how relevant the issue of race in sport actually is and (b) the utility that CMC forums potentially hold for facilitating such discussions. Although fans presumably did respond to this story using traditional media outlets (e.g., writing a letter to the newspaper editor, calling in to a sports radio talk show), these channels inherently limit the number of people who get published or who receive airtime. By going online, fans were able to participate in a public discussion that was not as limited by issues of access,[5] time, or space. They were personally able to comment on a story however they wished, as well as collectively engaging in a pertinent discussion about the relevance of race in sport while remaining comparatively anonymous.

Although meaningful sports discussions on this topic can certainly take place in other venues, the ability to enter online forums seemed to promote more openness in participants' commentary, possibly allowing for a more accurate societal barometer of fans' views on the relevance of race in sport. This is not to say that fans cannot be more open about their feelings in other venues, but the relative sensitivity of the topic may make the comparative anonymity and immediacy of CMC more likely to facilitate politically incorrect and less socially censored views. In other words, people who possess feelings about racism that may be considered socially unacceptable (e.g., Blacks are actually the ones to blame for racism) may be more likely to express these opinions in an environment where they are afforded anonymity (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Scott, 2004, 2009). Although this does not justify the perpetuation of such views, it does provide an opportunity to have public access to those views that some individuals hold privately. This access provides valuable insight into identifying how sports fans communicate about the role of race in sport, while uncovering prevailing ideologies that collectively govern views of race in a given society.

This "openness" that becomes stimulated vis-à-vis online anonymity provides some valuable insights into the ways people discuss issues of race in sport and society. Scott (2004), for example, made distinctions between "visual" and "discursive" forms of anonymity, suggesting that visual anonymity lacks a visual representation of the person (e.g., appearance, ethnicity), whereas with discursive anonymity—while

revealing something about the message source—users often feel anonymous as their personal information is being withheld. In this study, it appeared that discursive anonymity certainly enabled audience members to voice controversial and problematic views of their beliefs and opinions about the role of racism in sports, and—though sometimes troubling—they nonetheless demonstrated that racism still surfaces throughout sport. Similarly, the participants in this study appeared to sanction and defend organizational decisions that may perpetuate such practices. For instance, much of the discussion in the forum collectively served to (re)produce ideological positions that (a) claim racism as nonexistent, (b) blame the victims of racism for their underrepresentation, and (c) suggests any lingering racism is against Whites (e.g., Whites are victims of reverse discrimination). The presence of such commentary essentially silences dialogue and ultimately diverts attention away from current sports practices that reinforce such racial imbalances.

Participants, moreover, sought out the Internet to defend and protect the identity of college football by contending that the domain of sport is a haven free of racial strife. Given that sport is strongly linked to identity (Gemmell, 2007; Halone, 2010; Staurowsky, 2007), fans were quick to rebuff Barkley's criticisms by contending that the actual problem was with those accusing the systems of unfairness, not with the system itself. By rising up to quell racist allegations, participants (re)directed attention away from the issue at hand and positioned any racial problems as emanating from those who were questioning the system. In suggesting that racism does not enter into the sporting landscape and that its presence surfaces among those who cannot achieve on their own merits, a negative stigma was placed on those who actually raised the question. This may prompt people to perceive that overcoming racial inequities is a hopeless cause (Gazel, 2007), which may perpetuate unquestioned instances of hiring discrimination and collective feelings of hopelessness toward racism. And yet, important questions must be asked in situations such as Auburn's hiring process. For instance, although Gill was positioned as merely one person amidst a larger pool of candidates who were passed over for the job, why was Gill the only Black candidate considered for the job?

Scholars have contended that research needs to critically examine how media channels marginalize minorities (Bell-Jordan, 2008; Bogle, 1992; Orbe & Kinefuchi, 2008). Because the Internet is emerging as a powerful and influential media channel, it seems an essential site for scholarly examination (Plymire, 2008). Thus, in line with research that has expanded into online spheres (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2008; Nakamura, 2009), it would seem highly pertinent to examine how online discussions between sports fans (re)produce racialized constructions, knowledge, and stereotypes. As the topic of sports is a fluid conversation piece that one can discuss in multiple contexts, the Internet may facilitate people being more open in their disclosures; especially if they feel more secure in voicing what may be extremely problematic views and perspectives that may not get publicly disclosed in face-to-face or less anonymous contexts. And although these comments may be troubling, they nonetheless say a great deal about how racism gets perpetuated.

Notes

1. In 2008-2009, there were only 6 minority head coaches in the FBS, compared with the 14 in 2010. Thus, although there is still progress to be made, a dramatic increase has occurred over the past year
2. The site address for Schlabach's story and the commentary is http://myespn.go.com/s /conversations/show/story/3770769
3. At the time this article went to press, there were a total of 8,563 postings to the story, with the last posting being made on January 11, 2009. Although the exact reason for the smaller number of postings is unclear, one plausible explanation is that some commentary was deleted by ESPN.com for inappropriate content.
4. The usage of the terms *Blacks* and *Whites* reflects the terminology used by audience members in the data set, and as such they were incorporated in the analysis. This is not meant to suggest that these are preferred appellations for expressing one's ethnic or racial identity.
5. Although access to the Internet remains a relative privilege, in the United States its adoption and use has reached unprecedented levels, becoming a widespread and common communicative channel.

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