We Love You, We Hate You: Fan Twitter Response to Top College Football Recruits’ Decisions

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Using a theoretical underpinning of parasocial interaction—BIRGing (basking in reflected glory) and CORFing (cutting off reflected failure)—this study explored fan reactions to high school athletes’ commitments to play football for National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I programs. A thematic analysis of tweets made by fans during the 2020 recruiting period was examined in two stages: (a) tweets directed toward recruits before they committed to a program and (b) tweets directed toward recruits after they committed. Findings show fan frivolity in regard to identification, as well as a desire to become part of the recruiting process of high school football players. In addition, results yield the possibility of a shift in athlete motivations for social media use, fan association with athletics programs, and how fans cope with unexpected loss. Theoretical and practical implications are further discussed.

Keywords: fandom, parasocial interaction, social identity theory, social media

Justin Flowe, a linebacker from Upland, California, who played his senior high school football season in the fall of 2019, had scholarship offers to attend and play college football at nearly any university of his choosing. Rivals.com, the longest-running and largest subscription website dedicated to coverage of college athletics and recruiting, ranked Flowe as a five-star prospect, the highest ranking given to recruits. In addition, as one of the most sought-after players in the 2020 recruiting class, he also garnered plenty of attention through social media where he gained thousands of followers. On Twitter, fans made various posts directed at Flowe, some well-meaning, some encouraging, and some that took a different approach, such as this tweet posted on December 9, 2019: “You know what dude. Don’t bother coming to clemson if you’re not fr. Go suck at miami dumbass!”

The phenomenon of fan communication with athletes through social media has existed since the first social media sites first launched more than 20 years ago. There are plenty examples of positive interactions, such as Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts responding to a tweet of a 6-year-old fan wearing a...
monogrammed backpack with Hurts’ name on it, with a tweet of himself holding a backpack with the 6-year-old’s name on it (McPherson, 2020). However, the above tweet represents many of the negative posts directed at athletes. According to Sanderson and Truax (2014), tweets such as this can push athletes out of their sport and allow fans to preserve their perceived fandom value. But as Mike Farrell, national recruiting director for Rivals.com suggests, it is part of an increasing trend of fans attempting to insert themselves into the decision of an athlete:

I’ve had kids who [are] a legacy recruit, whose parents went to Texas or Florida State, or wherever. They’ll have those types of fan bases on ’em like crazy. They seem to love it on the surface and then they’ll DM me and say, “These people are nuts.” (M. Farrell, personal communication, August 4, 2020)

The extent of influence on the recruiting process has yet to be determined; it is a long and drawn out process that can begin early in a student-athlete’s high school career. Through visits, phone calls, mail, text messages, and other methods, college coaches actively engage with these student-athletes, including their families and high school coaches, in an effort to entice the student-athlete to choose to attend school and play football at their college or university (Silva et al., 2018). Recruiting high school athletes extends beyond football to other collegiate sports as well—especially those with high-stakes and high-revenue potential such as basketball. The recruiting process has also continued to garner considerable media attention for more than two decades. At the center are subscription-based websites that provide media coverage of university athletics and their recruiting endeavors, most notably, Rivals.com (Winemiller et al., 2020). The network of national and team-specific sites builds and maintains a database of recruits, which includes updated stories and other content. These sites also have a sizeable presence on social media, an extension of their reporting. Traditional media have previously furnished some coverage of recruiting, but coverage of the recruiting process of high school student-athletes has intensified with the growth of social media and recruiting websites (Bennett, 2017; Turick et al. 2018; Winemiller et al., 2020).

Prior to the advent of the internet, there was little interaction between high school recruits and college football fans. However, with the growth of electronic media, particularly social media outlets such as Twitter, there is now a substantial opportunity for fans to interact directly with players during the recruitment process. Twitter has proven to be a valuable method to communicate and build a brand for student-athletes; however, it also leaves them vulnerable to attack from fans (Browning & Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson et al., 2020). In response, numerous college athletic teams have banned their players from using Twitter and other social media during the season (Smitts, 2018). That does not apply, however, to high school student-athletes, who are recruits.

The purpose of this study is to explore fan reactions to high school athletes’ commitments to play football for National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I programs. Using harvested Twitter data during the 2020 recruiting period, researchers examined tweets posted by fans during two stages of the recruiting process, (a) tweets directed toward recruits before they commit to a program and (b) tweets directed toward recruits after they commit. The current study explores two avenues through which fans develop connections with athletes

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and teams they support. First, we explore the extent to which fans initiate parasocial interactions (PSIs), or perceived, one-way relationships (Sanderson et al., 2020) with high school football recruits in an attempt to sway them to commit to the team they support. Second, once a recruit has committed, we explore fan responses as basking in reflected glory (BIRGing) and cutting off reflected failure (CORFing; Kim & Kim, 2019), as fans either applaud the commitment or try to separate themselves from it based on their team identification.

A growing body of scholarship has used the psychological concept of self-identification to describe the extent to which fans develop and reaffirm connections with athletes and teams (c.f., Billings et al., 2017). However, to date, few—if any—studies have sought to explore how these connections manifest between fans and high school student-athletes being recruited by fans’ favorite teams. This project both addresses that gap and extends our understanding of how relevant theories—PSI and social identity theory—can explain the way these connections are made, maintained, and dissolved through social media platforms and what that means for future research on sports fandom via social media more broadly.

**Literature Review**

To develop an appropriate conceptual framework, the following review of the literature is organized around three critical areas: (a) social media in the sports industry, (b) PSI, and (c) social identity theory—specifically, BIRGing and CORFing. Each topic will be addressed sequentially below.

**Social Media in the Sport Industry**

The sports industry has widely adopted social media at its inception, and it continues to be an efficient—and profitable—way for sports organizations, athletes, and fans to interact with one another. The intersection of sports and social media has generated substantial academic interest over the past two decades. Indeed, a cursory Google Scholar search of “sports” and “social media” yields more than 1 million results. The sheer volume of extant research on the subject presents both significant challenges and unique opportunities for engaging in meaningful work that advances research in the field of sports communication. The challenge becomes finding unique and insightful ways to approach the study of sports and social media as previous scholars have criticized the body of work for being largely too descriptive. A 2014 issue of Communication and Sport included a Twitter Research Forum in which notable scholars from across the field provided guidance on how to approach Twitter research in a manner that capitalizes on opportunities for creating meaningful work. Hardin (2014), in particular, argued that the next logical step in research on social media is to put a higher priority on studies that (a) theorize new media in communicative terms and (b) place understanding of their importance and function in a wider sociocultural context.

Subsequent research has answered this call. Watanabe et al. (2015) applied economic demand theory to examine the factors that determine daily changes in Twitter following of Major League Baseball teams as a form of derived demand for a sport product. Hayes Sauder and Blaszka (2018) drew from Goffman’s
concept of self-presentation in their analysis of the U.S. Women’s National Soccer team players’ tweets during the 2015 Fédération Internationale de Football Association Women’s World Cup. Others (O’Hallarn et al., 2018; O’Hallarn et al., 2019) have applied Habermas’ concept of the public sphere to explore the ways in which Twitter communities and hashtags provide an open forum that approaches the participatory requirement of the public sphere. Vergeer and Mulder (2019) evaluated soccer players’ performance on the pitch against their performance on Twitter to explain their popularity on the platform. At the heart of this growing body of inquiry is the need for research at the intersection of sports and social media to be grounded in relevant theoretical approaches that offer new avenues for scholars to explore beyond merely describing the phenomena, but rather extending our collective understanding of the implications associated with the broader sociocultural context in which they emerge.

To that end, the current study seeks to further examine how college sports fans build, maintain, and potentially sever their relationships with prospective student-athletes being recruited to play for their team. Specifically, we draw from PSI theory to evaluate the ways in which sports fans perceive their relationships with recruits during the recruitment process and draw from concepts related to social identity theory to understand how fans react to recruits’ commitment, namely BIRGing and CORFing.

**Parasocial Interaction**

Previous research has shown that consumption of media causes people to develop a bond with the personas they see through media. Twitter allows for that perceived intercommunication (Stever & Lawson, 2013), also known as PSI. This type of perceived relationship a person has with a media persona originated in examination of the relationship between TV viewers and media personalities on local TV news (Horton & Wohl, 1956). It has been used to explain the discerned, one-way relationship a person has with a fictional or nonfictional character whom they do not actually come in contact with, such as with athletes (Sanderson et al., 2020), celebrities and social media (Kim & Kim, 2020), or video game characters (Breves, 2020). People typically have a need for companionship and part of the PSI people have with other characters is “seeking guidance from a media persona, seeing mediated personalities as friends, and imagining being part of a favorite program’s social world” (Rubin et al., 1985, p. 156–157).

Whereas fans have long been able to develop these relationships with athletes through one-way, traditional media (television, newspaper, and radio), social media platforms such as Twitter potentially change the relationship dynamics between fans and athletes, creating the opportunity for a fan to actually interact (at least virtually) with an athlete. Fans follow athletes on Twitter because of the need to chide or support athletes to reaffirm their own fan identity (MacPherson & Kerr, 2019), to keep tabs on those they consider to be influencers (Lamirán-Palomares et al., 2019), as well as reinforce loyalty toward the athlete and/or the team the athlete plays for (Yoon et al., 2017).

Athletes have demonstrated both parasocial and social interactions in their use of Twitter, which correlate with the six primary reasons athletes use Twitter:
interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content sharing, promotion, and fanship (Hambrick et al., 2010). Athletes tend to tweet primarily about their personal lives, rather than their sport or professional lives (Frederick et al., 2012), which can add to the level of PSI with other users. However, athletes have been known to elicit response from followers in an attempt to connect with fans (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015), yet overall actual access to celebrities has not necessarily increased, which can create a frustrating experience for fans.

It is not abundantly clear, however, if the athletes themselves are posting the content to their social media accounts, or whether it is someone close to that athlete, such as a personal assistant, agent, or even another family member. This, as well as athletes posting calls of support or other messages on a wide, not individual scale (Kassing & Sanderson, 2015), lends itself to the possibility of PSI in the contact between fans and athletes on Twitter. This relationship remains a parasocial one unless contact between a fan and the athlete is made (Sanderson et al., 2020).

The more active an athlete is on Twitter, the more of a relationship another user will likely feel like they have with that athlete (Frederick et al., 2012). For instance, former National Football League player Chad Ochocinco has invited fans to play video games online and in early 2019, paid the rent of one of his Twitter followers after the fan tweeted about his impending eviction (Caron, 2019). This type of use is referred to by Frederick et al. (2012) as a “high parasocial development,” and causes the Twitter user to have a desire to meet in-person.

There are two dimensions of PSI: parasocial enjoyment and parasocial attachment (Spinda et al., 2009). The first represents what is referred to as “milder, more enjoyment-orientated parasocial relationship” (p. 41). The latter represents a stronger connection a person has with another character or persona, while the level of PSI a fan has increases if a family member has the same cheering interests (Spinda et al., 2009). This might not necessarily contradict the assumption that the opposite, loneliness, is a strong factor for PSI, but illustrates the various circumstances that lead to it.

Not all relationships last, however, and can reach what is commonly referred to as a “para-social breakup” on social media (Garimella et al., 2017). This can take place when a user unfollows an athlete because of something the user deems the athlete did as negative or the fan feels unrewarded when the athlete does not respond to their posts. Temporary parasocial breakups can also occur when a character, celebrity, or athlete are out of the spotlight for a period of time, such as when an athlete retires and later returns (e.g., Michael Jordan, Brett Favre, and Roger Clemens). Emotional distress can also result for the fan (Lather & Moyer-Guse, 2011), which can lead to fans lashing out via Twitter and other social media.

**BIRGing, CORFing, and Social Identity**

The concepts of BIRGing and CORFing have been widely examined in social psychology and communication disciplines (Blaylock, 2010; Haridakis, 2012). BIRGing and CORFing emerged as an extension of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which suggests that one’s internalized perception of group affiliation—as an element of one’s self-concept—exerts influence over intergroup differentiation. The BIRGing process is considered to be a self-serving cognition that is rooted in individuals’ image maintenance and self-perception. That is, if
people associate themselves psychologically with a successful individual, organization, or group, they often believe that their own reputation is somehow enhanced (Cialdini et al., 1976). On the other hand, CORFing occurs when a person distances themselves psychologically from a person, organization, or group that experiences failure. For example, people who are associated with a group that is negatively evaluated by another observer or experimenter are also likely to perceive the group in a more negative light or be more prone to sever ties with the group entirely (Snyder et al., 1986).

According to Samra and Wos (2014), “social identity theory is applicable because fan behavior is socially visible, involves relationships with others, can lead to the formation of a fan role, and can foster a feeling of satisfaction associated with that role” (p. 275). Social identity theory posits that a portion of how individuals view themselves is a direct result of the group(s) with which they identify and use as points of reference for validation of self-concept. Although it has been debated on how to specifically define social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), the foundation of the theory is based on the idea that individuals classify themselves into specific categories, defined by shared characteristics, beliefs, motivations, and attitudes (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1985). Once an individual chooses to identify with a group, the individual seeks to align the attributes of the self with the attributes of the group (Sedikides & Brewer, 2001).

Sports have provided especially fertile ground for academic inquiry into social identity theory—specifically the BIRGing and CORFing processes—in large part because sports allegiances are often divisive by nature, pitting one group of fans against another. For example, college students are more likely to wear clothing displaying their team’s insignia after their football team’s victory than they were following a game where their team lost (Cialdini et al., 1976). Follow-up studies revealed that students were more likely to refer to their team as “we” after a win, while using “they” after a defeat. On a group level, football fans, by rooting for a conference or division, increase BIRGing possibilities substantially, especially if that particular conference is highly successful or has particular teams that achieve high levels of success (Spinda et al., 2016).

Campbell et al. (2004) extended the original conceptual model of BIRGing and CORFing to include two additional areas of fan behavior in relationship to team success and failure: (a) BIRFing, or basking in spite of reflected failure and (b) CORSing, or cutting off reflected success. In this update, BIRFing reflects how fans revel in their loyalty, camaraderie, rebelliousness, and other alternative reasons for fanship when their team is underperforming. That Chicago Cubs fans commonly referred to their team as “lovable losers” provides a clear case in point. Alternatively, CORSing occurs when, for example, a fan dissociates from the team, despite the team having a winning record. When a team that has historically underperformed suddenly starts winning, it threatens the fan’s sense of individuality by no longer embodying the underdog role. The evolution of BIRGing, CORFing, and its various iterations reflect that both the level and valence of fan involvement is determined by whether team wins and losses either embody or challenge prior expectations (Diel, 2017). Research on how fans respond to winning and losing is growing more and more popular in sports communication research, “as it is becoming increasingly clear that social identity threat affects team identification and sport fan behavior” (Mansfield et al. 2020, p. 12).
More recent studies have explored BIRGing and CORFing processes (e.g., Fan et al., 2020; Mudrick et al., 2016) and fan identification (e.g., Mastromartino et al., 2019; Vergeer & Mulder, 2019) on social media in the context of sport. Of particular relevance to the current study, Kim and Kim (2019) conducted a survey among college students from a public research university with a highly ranked college football team to explore how social media use for sporting events related to group identity and collective self-esteem. The authors found that students who used social media to discuss college sports were more likely to develop group identity as well as collective self-esteem than other students. Assuming students and, by extension, alumni of colleges and universities experience a common bond over athletics during their time in school, it stands to reason that as fans they would have a vested interest in the ongoing and/or future success of their favorite teams.

Consequently, the current study uses the context of recruiting to explore how fans of college football programs respond on Twitter to high school athletes’ decisions to commit to NCAA Division I programs. The growing significance of college football recruiting to fans lends itself to be a fertile area to explore the aforementioned psychological processes fans utilize to (a) engage with an athlete before they commit to play for a particular program (b) and either associate with or dissociate from an athlete after they commit. Thus, we advance the following two research questions:

**RQ1**: How do fans initiate PSIs with high school football recruits prior to commitment via Twitter?

**RQ2**: How do fans participate in BIRGing or CORFing behavior on Twitter after athletes commit?

**Method**

In order to address the proposed research questions, researchers opted to collect direct mentions of highly-ranked high school athletes before their commitment announcement and after their public decision in order to evaluate fans’ PSI and BIRGing/CORFing behavior, respectively. Using theoretical thematic analysis, researchers evaluated the data to identify various themes associated with fan behavior during these two time periods—leading up to and immediately following a player’s commitment.

**Data Collection**

Researchers harvested tweets using Salesforce Social Studio technology that included direct mentions of Twitter handles of the top five remaining members of the Rivals Top 100 recruits for the class of 2020, who were uncommitted to a college football program prior to National Signing Day: Justin Flowe (@justin_flowe), CJ Stroud (@CJ7Stroud), Phillip Webb (@PhillipWebb_), Avantae Williams (@SlowDownBoy7), and McKinnley Jackson (@macFresco99). Data were collected up to 2 months prior to each player’s commitment date, and for 48 hr after each player made their commitment. Three players (Justin Flowe, CJ Stroud,
and Phillip Webb) publicly announced their commitments on December 18, 2019, marking the end of the early signing period. The other two (Avantae Williams and McKinnley Jackson) announced their commitments on February 5, 2020, marking the end of the late signing period. Table 1 summarizes the data collection period, total number of mentions, and college commitment for each recruit.

In all, 8,160 tweets were collected using the criteria outlined above for each athlete. Justin Flowe (n = 4,456) drew the most direct mentions, followed by Avantae Williams (n = 2,088), CJ Stroud (n = 740), McKinnley Jackson (n = 449), and Phillip Webb (n = 427). Tweets were organized by time stamps, and all posts before each athlete’s commitment were separated from tweets that were sent after the athlete’s announcement in order to examine the transition from PSI precommitment to BIRGing and CORFing behavior postcommitment.

Theoretical Thematic Analysis

Theoretical thematic analysis was used to examine tweets made by Twitter users who directed their tweets at the aforementioned high school football recruits. Braun and Clarke (2012) define thematic analysis as “a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset” (p. 57). Specifically, researchers employed a theoretical thematic analysis which tends to be guided

by the researcher’s theoretical or analytic interest in the area and is thus more explicitly analyst driven. This top-down form of thematic analysis tends to provide less rich description of the data overall, and more detailed analysis of some aspect of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84)

As such, this approach reflects a more deductive analysis that imposes a theoretical structure on the coding process.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) consider this analytic framework beneficial in that it offers “a theoretical reading of texts [which] can draw in new contexts regarding themes and bring forth the new dimensions of familiar phenomena” (p. 238). Analysis for this study followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2012) six-phase guide for doing thematic analysis: First, tweets were read and reread prior to the generation of initial codes in an effort to be fully immersed in the data set. Second, initial codes were created at the semantic level of meaning (i.e., within the explicit or surface meaning of the data). For example, the two initial codes were applied to the tweet from the introductory paragraph of this manuscript (“You know what dude. Dont bother coming to clemson if you’re not fr. Go suck at miami dumbass!”) as (a) precommitment and (b) distancing from the athlete. Third, researchers constructed themes through an iterative process, rather than mere discovery; themes were generated by collapsing and clustering codes that reflected meaningful and coherent patterns in the data. Fourth, researchers reviewed each theme as a recursive process. Each theme was checked against the collated extracts of data to explore whether the theme worked in relation to the entire data set. Fifth, themes were defined around a clear focus, scope, and purpose; taken together, the themes that were created offer a coherent story that directly addresses the specified research questions. Finally, the findings in the subsequent results section go

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<tr>
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<th>Rivals 100 Rank</th>
<th>Number of mentions prior to commitment</th>
<th>Commitment date</th>
<th>Number of mentions after commitment</th>
<th>Committed to</th>
<th>Total number of mentions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justin Flowe</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3,622</td>
<td>December 18, 2019</td>
<td>834</td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>4,456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avontae Williams</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1,212</td>
<td>February 5, 2020</td>
<td>876</td>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>2,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CJ Stroud</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>December 18, 2019</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>Ohio State</td>
<td>740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKinnley Jackson</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>February 5, 2020</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>Texas A&amp;M</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillip Webb</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>December 18, 2019</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>LSU</td>
<td>427</td>
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beyond mere description to make an argument that answers the research questions that were posed.

**Results**

An examination of each of the tweets in the observed data set revealed that none of the student-athletes made any type of response to users who tweeted at them prior to their announcements of where they would attend and play college football, yielding the themes found to PSI. Other results of each research question are addressed here, with examples drawn from the data. A comprehensive overview of each theme, with example tweets, is provided in Table 2. The following themes were determined to exist in the data observed.

**Parasocial Interactions**

RQ1 sought to explore how PSI manifests through Twitter before a high school football recruit announced their commitment via Twitter. Authors identified six themes related to how PSIs emerged through tweets: pleading, association, amplification, criticism (trolling), interfan trash talking, and preemptive distancing. Each theme will be addressed sequentially.

**Pleading.** One of the more common themes uncovered was that which the authors refer to as “pleading,” in which fans tweet at the student-athletes about how badly they want the student-athlete to play at the fan’s school of choice. This can take on varying forms, such as begging, ingratiating, and promising future success. For example, several users tweeted in an effort to convince Phillip Webb to commit to their program: “@_PhillipWebb_ @Gator_RoRo That’s a hell of a top 5. Good for you! Would be great to watch you destroy some RBs in The Swamp!” and “NAAAAAA WEBB A TIGER.” One Miami fan expressed how badly the program needs a talented athlete like Justin Flowe, “@justin_flowe Miami needs you man, come be a legend #TNM.” A considerable number of tweets in this theme were very direct in their requests, for example: “@CJ7STROUD PLEASE COME TO GEORGIA.”

**Association.** There are plenty of times when certain names hold more clout than others in specific circles. For instance, many people—sports fans or not—know Tom Brady as a highly talented football player. In tweets examined before the aforementioned high school football recruits announced their college intentions, many Twitter users posted messages in which they name-dropped specific players. This includes listing the recruit along with other successful former players from a specific team, or making a projection, in which a user mentioned the recruit along with other recruits, in an effort to motivate the targeted recruit to pick the football program with which they (the user) associate. The following tweet was made to McKinley Jackson and mentions him playing alongside another top 100 ranked recruit, Jacobian Guillory: “@j_samuelson88 @macFresco99 Man I sure hope we can get him in this class. Roy Jackson and guillory would be such a force to deal with for years.” Similarly, another user likened Jackson to former players at Ole Miss and other defensive line recruits in the 2020 class: @YancyPorter @macFresco99 Looking just like Benito and DJ Jones! Need this man to stay home and
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prior to commitment: RQ1—Parasocial interaction</td>
<td><strong>Pleading</strong></td>
<td>Fans express how badly they want the student-athlete to play at the fan’s favorite program.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>@<em>PhillipWebb</em> @Gator_RoRo That’s a hell of a top 5. Good for you! Would be great to watch you destroy some RBs in The Swamp!</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Association</strong></td>
<td>Mentioning the recruit along with other successful current or former players at a favored program.</td>
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<td>@j_samuelson88 @macFresco99 Man I sure hope we can get him in this class. Roy Jackson and guillary would be such a force to deal with for years.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Amplification</strong></td>
<td>An attempt to broaden the significance of a program by linking the prospective athlete with a notable figure affiliated with the program (e.g., coach, celebrity).</td>
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<td>“@SlowDownBoy7 neither bruh new Swag new era in the 850 #Fsu #Noles #Tribe21 @Coach_Norvell @KennyDillingham come see what we are building in Tally the empire strikes back in 2020</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Criticism (trolling)</strong></td>
<td>Includes fan comments critical of prospective athletes.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>@justin_flowe Kids egotistic</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Interfan trash talking</strong></td>
<td>Fans of different programs interact with one another by posting negative remarks about each other’s favored program while mentioning prospective student athletes.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>@20Orion @justin_flowe Bro leave dude alone He not even liking your tweets.</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Preemptive distancing</strong></td>
<td>Users attempted to distance themselves from their relationship with the prospective athlete in the event that the recruit did not choose their favored program.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>@MinTeO_OTF @justin_flowe He ain’t coming here fam lol</td>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>After commitment:</td>
<td>RQ2—BIRGing and CORFing</td>
<td>All my #lsufootball twitter family please celebrate these young men who decided to become part of the greatest FAMILY in the world!! #GeauxTigers #realonesonly</td>
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<td>Collective success</td>
<td>Fans posted content that reflected team affiliation and group accomplishment</td>
<td>Anticipation of future gloryFans began to anticipate future glory for the player and the program as a result of their commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anticipation of future glory</td>
<td>Fans described how an athlete’s ability and personal brand would be enhanced by their decision to sign with their team</td>
<td>Capacity for program to enhance abilityFans described how an athlete’s ability and personal brand would be enhanced by their decision to sign with their team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity for program to enhance ability</td>
<td>Gloating over rivalsUsers were quick to assert dominance over their competition with the addition of recruit commitments</td>
<td>Wishing success with new teamDespite disappointment, fans expressed well-wishes for the recruits at their new programs</td>
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<td>Lamenting a lost opportunity</td>
<td>Fans lamented the lost opportunity for their team by not signing a top recruit</td>
<td>Minimizing the athlete’s decisionFans would diminish or minimize the athlete’s decision to attend the program they chose; in doing so, the elevated their team above the program the recruit signed with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimizing the athlete</td>
<td>Fans engaged in more negative behavior by explicitly criticizing the athlete for their choice</td>
<td>“@CanesGoPro @justin_flowe We are going to find another good player Go Canes!”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Amplification. This theme is similar to the previous theme, in which users tweeted at the targeted recruit, and name-dropped other successful players, former players, and recruits. The key difference in this theme, however, is that the user also tweeted directly to someone of prominence. This could include a coach, a famous player, or in other instances, a famous nonathlete, who is publicly known to be affiliated with a specific football program. The user not only makes a plea to the targeted recruit, but also mentions one or more other prominent figures, including the following example tweet to Avantae Williams that included Florida State University Head Coach Mike Norvell and offensive coordinator Kenny Dillingham: “@SlowDownBoy7 neither bruh new Swag new era in the 850 #Fsu #Noles #Tribe21 @Coach_Norvell @KennyDillingham come see what we are building in Tally the empire strikes back in 2020.” Another user mentioned former Miami University stand-out and National Football League Hall-of-Famer, Ed Reed: “@SlowDownBoy7 @kappadawg2K Ed Reed is in the house!!!” Still others sought to leverage the longstanding tradition of certain programs to turn out talented athletes at a particular position. For example, one user put Justin Flowe in the same context as other notable athletes at the University of Miami: “Come make Miami Great! LBU. Armstead, Barrow, Lewis, Morgan, Vilma, Beason, Sharpton, Perryman, Quarterman, Pinckney. Add your name to the list of greats! No where treats their legends like The U does!”

Criticism (Trolling). Not all users tweeted positively at the targeted recruits. It is unclear if these users were fans of a specific college football program, but their posts did not appear to be an attempt to direct the recruits toward a specific college football program. Perhaps counterintuitive to most tweets that included the targeted recruits, there were a small number that criticized the recruits for various reasons. These included claims that the recruits, through some perception formed by the user, were such critiques as narcissistic, selfish, and self-absorbed, such as this tweet directed at Flowe: “@justin_flowe Kids egotistic.” In a similar vein, one fan offered a criticism of CJ Stroud’s personality: “And he still doesn’t know how to be a professional. But honestly its to be expected. He’s prolly just happy he doesn’t play WR.” Still others poked fun at the athlete’s expense, for example: “@SlowDownBoy7 Guy sounds 13.”

Interfan Trash Talking. Trolling by users was also not directed at the recruits themselves. On multiple occasions, on tweets made at targeted recruits, Twitter users made critical posts directed at other users. In these instances, one user made a post directed at a targeted recruit. That post was critically replied to by another user. What resulted was a back-and-forth thread in which the users posted negative remarks about each other, stemming from the original post. Because the recruit was included on the original tweet and not manually taken off of subsequent posts, he was tagged and brought into the war waged between posters. One example is an exchange between users @jake_sooner and @_CF7 from the following response @_CF7 made to a post @jake_sooner directed at Flowe: “@20Orion @justin_flowe Bro leave dude alone He not even liking your tweets.” In response, @jake_sooner tweeted: “@_CF7 @justin_flowe I tell you what . . . You do you on your TL and
I’ll do me on Mine. Cool?” The resulting thread between the two users was 11 tweets, each with Flowe likely unintentionally tagged, because the original tweet was tweeted at him. A similar scenario played out in a conversation around Avantae Williams: “@VaughtersJohn @SlowDownBoy7 How can we be in the gutter but your seasons were irrelevant? Man your logic is horse shit. the game is played to be the best not a conference contender . . . you guys are forgetting what the real goals are here.” Whether the athlete noticed these exchanges or not, the fans’ public exchange of jabs places the recruit at the center of the argument.

Preemptive Distancing. While fans’ expression of distancing themselves from disparaging news following a recruit’s announcement (Wann & Branscombe, 1990) has been discussed, the same exists prior to an announcement being made. In this case, fans likely were aware of media reports, rumors, or other conjectures made through various media channels. As a result, users made posts throwing in the towel, or giving up on the possibility of the targeted recruit choosing their school of choice. On multiple occasions, the recruit did choose one of those schools, leading to the assumption of misinformation, or perhaps the user attempting to use reverse psychology techniques toward the recruit. An example of this theme is this tweet directed at Flowe: “@MinTeO_OTF @justin_flowe He ain’t coming here fam lol.” Others expressed that they were unlikely to land a top recruit because of a program-level failure to attract them. For example, one user tweeted, “A week before ESD (Early Signing Day) had all yr to give this kid a offer smh lol @USC_Athletics.” Others acknowledged the long odds of a recruit committing to their program, but were excited just to be in the mix at one point. For instance, one fan said of Flowe: “Think this kid ends up at Clemson but love hearing we have momentum for him because Jesus Christ.” The preemptive distancing theme in this study appears to operate as a sort of precursor to an anticipated parasocial breakup (Cohen, 2003).

BIRGing and CORFing Behaviors

RQ2 asked how fans participate in BIRGing and CORFing behavior after an athlete made a formal commitment to a college football program. Analysis resulted in the identification of four themes for each of the processes. With regard to BIRGing, fans shared content that reflected (a) collective success, (b) anticipation of future glory, (c) the capacity for the program to enhance the athlete’s ability, and (d) gloating over rivals. Fans also participated in CORFing behavior when an athlete did not commit to their team. Content that constituted CORFing included (a) wishing success for the athlete with their new team, (b) lamenting a lost opportunity, (c) minimizing the athlete’s decision, and (d) minimizing the athlete himself. Descriptions of each theme are provided below.

Collective Success. Fans who participated in BIRGing behavior after an athlete’s commitment expressed a sense of collective success. Users frequently posted content that reflected team affiliation and group accomplishment. This clearly embodies a major tenet of social identity theory, which the user’s sense of self-identity is closely tied to the team’s success. For example, when Justin Flowe signed a letter of intent with the University of Oregon, many fans used hashtags that emphasized the “flock.” Examples of this type of content include: “So excited
to have @justin_flowe join the flock! Go Ducks,” “@oregonfootball @justin_flowe #CALIFLOCK,” and “#Welcome #WeSpeakQuack #ComeFlock #CaliFlock #DucksFlyHigh #LookGood #FeelGood #PlayGood.” Louisiana State University fans expressed similar sentiment with the signing of Phillip Webb: “All my #lsufootball twitter family please celebrate these young men who decided to become part of the greatest FAMILY in the world!! #GeauxTigers #realonesonly.”

**Anticipation of Future Glory.** Another form of BIRGing emerged as fans began to anticipate future glory for the player and the program as a result of the commitment. When CJ Stroud committed to Ohio State University, fans of the program fantasized about what might happen with him at the program. Rather than basking in the immediate glory of having signed a top recruit, fans quickly projected the level of success he would have and, consequently, the level of success the program would achieve with him. For example, “@CJ7STROUD Let’s go bro! Time to get some more rings. #GoBucks Welcome to #BuckeyeNation You’re upon one hell of a group of brothers bro!” Similarly, University of Miami fans expressed their excitement over Avontae Williams’ commitment, and envisioned him becoming one of the top players in the program’s history: “Congrats My GuY!! You bout to be the next Great Safety to come out of the U! Miami Got Better Today.” Texas A&M fans discussed how the signing of McKinley Jackson (@macFresco99) will help position their team to compete in the Southeastern Conference (SEC): “Speed and strength in the trenches wins championships in the SEC, and A&M signee McKinnley Jackson (@macFresco99) will provide just that.”

**Capacity for the Program to Enhance the Athlete’s Ability.** Others described how an athlete’s ability and personal brand would be enhanced by their decision to sign with their team. The belief that one’s team has the potential to mold players into even greater athletes is reflective of how closely an individual’s sense of success is tied to the team. Ohio State fans offered examples of this type of BIRGing behavior by describing how the program’s strength would become its commitment’s strength as well: “Iron sharpens iron. Congratulations on accomplishing your dreams of signing with THE Ohio State University! Block out the noise. Make each other better. What’s meant to be will be. I’m a happy Buckeye today! #GoBucks #NSD2020 @jackjamesmiller @CJ7STROUD.” Miami fans expressed their belief that Avontae Williams would thrive under the coaching of former Hurricane great, Ed Reed: Welcome to the family big fella @SlowDownBoy7. Can’t wait to see what you can do under the guidance of the GOAT himself @TwentyER. #MiamiHurricanes #NationalSigningDay2020.”

**Gloating Over Rivals.** Finally, the last theme identified as BIRGing behavior in the data was how users gloated over their rivals. Consistent with the in-group, out-group conflict in social identity theory, users were quick to assert dominance over their competition through these commitments. When Justin Flowe signed with Oregon, fans identified how his presence on the field would affect players from rival schools: “Every Washington running back is peeing their pants right now.” They also used recruiting as another way to establish themselves as better than their rivals: “Sorry, USC. Oregon owns recruiting in your state.” Miami fans
were especially prone to this behavior, as the competition between the University of Miami and the University of Florida for Avontae Williams stoked decades-long hostilities between the two programs: “But all my UF friends said he was going to Gainesville,” and “Gators crowing all day about having this kid locked down.”

**Wishing Success with the Athlete’s New Team.** While fans of teams that the players committed to were basking in the reflected glory of the announcements, fans of the teams spurned by recruits took to CORFing behaviors. Although disappointed, fans of opposing teams frequently expressed well wishes for the recruits at their new programs. For example, “@D_VanDyke8 @SlowDownBoy7 Youngblood, I REALLY WANTED YOU TO COME TO FLORIDA but I respect your decision and Wish you the Best,” “@PhillipWebb_ Really wanted to see you on The Plains this year, good luck in your decision … War Eagle …,” and “@justin_flowe Best of luck to you! Wish I could have seen you play in orange, but I know you are gonna be great for the ducks! #allin.” By wishing athletes luck on their journey, fans of opposing teams were symbolically ending their parasocial relationship they began during recruitment and thus cutting themselves loose from the rejection they perceived.

**Lamenting a Lost Opportunity.** Other fans lamented the lost opportunity for their team by not signing a top recruit. In many ways, fans considered a recruit’s commitment to another school a form of loss equivalent to losing on the field. In some cases, they would cast blame on coaches for missing out on opportunities or simply express their disappointment that their program failed to land a quality player: “This is on YOU @USCCoachHelton #BUM,” “Ouch … #USC misses out on bona fide STUD,” “Bummer for ASU, though we were an outside shot anyway. Top LB in the country stays in the conference.” Regardless of who might be to blame, users felt the sting of a missed opportunity to land a recruit in much the same way they would after an on-field loss.

**Minimizing the Athlete’s Decision.** Another behavior fans exhibited to cut themselves off from the reflected failure of not signing a top recruit was to diminish or minimize the athlete’s decision to attend the school they chose. In doing so, fans elevated their team above the program that the recruit signed with. Again, this reflects an attempt to alleviate the psychological effects of losing. Examples of tweets like this include: “LSU, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Clemson, and Ohio State … all these schools that are known for great defenses and you go with Oregon you are a duck,” “Where he will probably not be developed & will wind up the trash heap that The U is accustomed to. Have a nice day,” “@CanesFootball @SlowDownBoy7 This decision was clearly not about winning, it’s about playing time and starting early … #GoGators,” “Have fun getting coached by a dyke bartender @SlowDownBoy7” and “Just to go 6-6?”

**Minimizing the Athlete.** Finally, fans also attempted to alleviate the sense of failure by minimizing the athlete himself. Rather than express congratulations and wish the recruit well, others engaged in a more negative CORFing behavior by explicitly criticizing the recruit they previously hoped would be part of their team. Examples of these tweets include: “@CanesGoPro @justin_flowe We are going to find another good player Go Canes!” “Idiot,” and “Boy wtf.”
Discussion and Conclusion

Results from the current study shed light on two salient concepts related to sports fandom: PSI and social identity. With RQ1, we sought to explore how fans engage with their team’s high school recruits before they made an official announcement committing to a single program. Six themes emerged: pleading, amplification, association, criticism (trolling), fan trash-talking, and preemptive distancing. After recruits announced their intent to sign with a program, fans engaged in either BIRGing or CORFing behaviors depending on whether or not the recruit committed to their team. Findings from this study offer both theoretical and practical utility.

Scholars have established a growing need to explore college athletics from a variety of communication approaches including athletic department social media policy (Sanderson et al., 2015; Sanderson, 2018; Smith & Watkins, 2018), social media use among college athletes (David et al., 2018; Hull, 2014; O’Connor et al., 2016), and fan behavior (Cranmer et al., 2019; Sanderson & Truax, 2014). Recruiting represents an increasingly relevant topic for scholarly consideration. To date, extant research on the subject tends to gravitate toward economic models and theories evaluating relationships between college football recruiting and university admissions (Sigelman, 1995), athletes’ professional trajectory (Hersch, 2012), and predictive analytics of team performance (Bergman & Logan, 2016; Peng et al., 2018). We contend that results from this study offer valuable insight into the recruiting process from a communication perspective. In the following sections, we address both the theoretical and practical implications of the current study and discuss avenues for future research in this area.

Theoretical Implications

Perhaps the most compelling finding to emerge from this research reinforces the notion of frivolity among sports fans. These findings echo those from Cialdini et al.’s (1976) seminal work on BIRGing and CORFing among collegiate sports fans; only instead of reacting to team success or failure, fans in this study reacted favorably (BIRG) or negatively (CORF) when prospective athletes either committed to their favorite team or spurned them in favor of another. What is unique about this study, however, is that fans had ostensibly spent weeks, months, and sometimes years following and engaging with teenage athletes with the hope of one day seeing them in their favorite college or university team’s uniform. Thus, there are two factors at work: (a) the fan’s identification with the team takes precedence over the fan’s relationship with the recruit and (b) the fan’s relationship with the recruit effectively terminates or, alternatively, transforms into one that serves to reinforce the fan’s identification with the team.

These factors reinforce Spinda et al.’s (2016) finding that college sports fans feel greater attachment to teams rather than individual players. Consequently, it stands to reason that fans are motivated to develop parasocial relationships with players during the recruiting process in order to advance the team’s standing should the recruit indeed commit. Interestingly, however, results from Cranmer et al.’s (2019) study on fan perceptions of college athlete’s early exits showed that social media users who openly expressed fandom were more likely to support the
athlete’s decision to leave the program early. It appears that fans are more willing to accept a player leaving early after (presumably) performing at a high enough level for their team in order to pursue a professional career. But in order to achieve that level of acceptance, they must represent the team and, by extension, the fan in a favorable light throughout their time with the program.

Given that team identification supersedes athlete attachment, the question remains: Why do fans invest so much time and energy to follow and engage with prospective athletes before they commit to a program? We contend that fan behavior during the recruiting period affords average fans the chance to consider themselves actors in the recruiting process. By developing parasocial relationships with recruits, fans take on a sense of agency by attempting to persuade the athlete to consider their program, diminish the reputation of others, and publicly display loyalty to their team. As a result, fans take on the role of a surrogate recruiter for their team. This finding falls in line with Turick et al. (2018) who analyzed fan opinion toward recruitment of prospective athletes with deviant pasts. Results from their work found that deviant behavior negatively impacts a prospective student-athlete’s fan support score. The fact that such behavior might affect fan perceptions of a recruit lends additional support to the premise that fans build parasocial relationships with prospective student-athletes in order to consider themselves active participants in the formation of their team. Indeed, as Pegoraro (2013) notes, interactions with celebrities—or, in this case, prospective student-athletes—“give fans the impression they are getting a candid and uncensored look at the lives of these individuals, perhaps revealing the person behind the celebrity” (p. 253). Developing a deeper personal attachment to an athlete who then commits to a fan’s preferred team serves to both integrate the player with the team and, at the same time, reaffirm the fan’s identity through their attachment with the team.

Results from this study shine new light on the role parasocial relationships and BIRGing/CORFing behaviors manifest on social media, specifically within the context of an event-specific success or failure via the recruitment process.

Practical Implications

The practical significance of these findings is threefold: Athlete motivations for social media use has shifted, fan behavior on social media is associated with schools, teams, and athletic programs, and further insight is provided into how fans cope with abrupt losses or unexpected events.

It is apparent that personal branding is now on the minds of not only college athletes, but high school football players (Gorney, 2020). It is far too soon to know the effects from the NCAA ruling that allows student-athletes to profit from use of their name, image, or likeness (Booker, 2020). But younger athletes clearly have some understanding of this decision, which has long been discussed in amateur athletics. It could be safe to assume that this knowledge has translated to social media use, where athletes recognize the importance of developing a large following in order to establish a brand, and are careful to build, cultivate, and expand that brand. In many ways, how recruits present themselves online is often a first impression for fans and serves as the basis for how fans perceive prospective recruits that will represent their team.

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For collegiate athletic departments, this is important to know when instructing and monitoring social media use of their student-athletes. How these departments, as well as college coaches, perceive social media use has some bearing on where high school recruits choose to attend school and play football (Gorney, 2020). Collegiate athletic departments, as well as other media scholars, should also benefit in further understanding fan behaviors toward student-athletes, and in this case, high school recruits. These departments would also be wise to monitor fan behavior through social media conversations during the recruiting process to better position themselves to leverage the popularity of incoming players in order to generate enthusiasm around the future of the program and, consequently, add to their growing revenue stream. In addition, athletic departments would do well to provide social media training and support to prospective athletes from the moment they commit to a program in order to prepare them for how to engage (or not engage) with fans online, particularly in the face of negative fan behavior.

While results show some understanding of the life decisions student-athletes make with their “commitments” and subsequent national letter of intent signatures, there are still a myriad of examples of lewd behavior toward recruit choices. These fan reactions could partially explain the reputations some fan bases receive and factor into whether or not a student-athlete chooses to attend and play football at the school with which these fans associate. In addition, fan reactions could provide an understanding of how they handle unexpected loss stemming from the perceived interactions and relationships they might have developed with a prospective athlete over time, frequently referred to as a parasocial breakup. In many cases, the signing of a national letter of intent effectively ends the only recruitment an athlete will have in their lifetime toward where they will play football. But the advent of the transfer portal has put many of these athletes back in a situation to reexperience that situation.

Limitations and Future Research

Because this is a qualitative study, it cannot claim generalizability. The study examined only five of the highest-profiled football recruits that were not committed to a program prior to signing day and are not representative of all football recruits. For instance, nearly half of the entire data set revolves around one athlete in particular, Justin Flowe. This is likely due to the fact that Flowe was ranked sixth overall in the 2020 recruiting class and remained uncommitted prior to signing day, thus fueling speculation about his ultimate decision. Rather, the results provide a snapshot of the recruiting process via social media and is a starting point for further exploration into related topics.

Moving forward, research should delve deeper into the prospective college recruit’s perceptions, as well as the perspective of college athletes who intend to transfer to other colleges. These angles would provide context, particularly for the observed PSI from this study. Further in-depth communication with recruits is needed to determine whether they are receiving instruction from coaches, parents, high school administration, or another source, on how they should utilize social media. This type of research would also open doors for further scholarship around branding perceptions and how that factors into the persona a student-athlete

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exhibits on social media. The next step in doing so should occur through in-depth interviews, to understand the process of student-athlete social media use.

Additional research may also focus on the effects of rivalry and competition as influences of fan behavior. Previous research on rivalry and fan behavior has shown that rivalry can influence the ways fans consume sports (Havard & Hutchinson, 2017) and can lead people to pay more to attend an event (Sanford & Scott, 2016). Rivalry has also been shown to increase animosity between fans and teams (Cobbs et al., 2017). It would appear that the concept of rivalry might also extend to the recruiting process as high-profile student-athletes are often courted by various programs whose fan bases have high levels of animosity between them.

In all, the present study provides a unique framework for exploring the ways in which fans establish, maintain, and dissolve relationships with athletes of teams they support via Twitter. It also brings to light an important process—surrogate recruiting—that has largely been left unexplored in academic research despite the rich potential for research on sports fans. The results reveal that fans are both eager to feel a sense of connection with prospective athletes and willing to invest their own sense of identity in this process.

References


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