

BEYOND THE FIELD: EXPLORING DIGITAL PARASOCIAL BEHAVIOR IN SPORTS
FAN SOCIAL MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS FROM A PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

by

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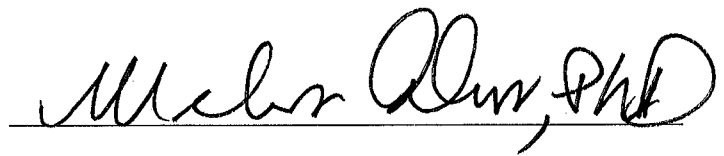
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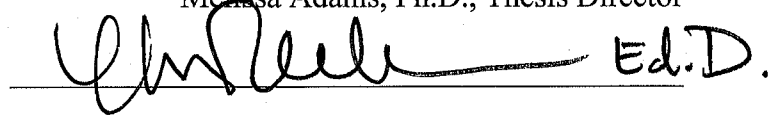
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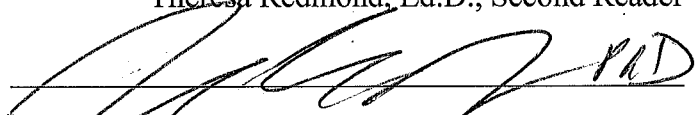
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Abstract

This exploratory study investigates the phenomenon of parasocial relationships between athletes and fans from a public relations perspective. Through an interdisciplinary literature review looking at practical and academic articles, several insights were drawn as to how public relations practitioners are addressing parasocial issues in fan management, what strategies and tactics are being used to manage online fan engagements, and the use of emerging technologies in the practice of fan relationship management. These research questions led to the conclusion of four practical applications: personal branding for athletes, capitalizing on the good, fulfilling fan desires, and mitigation of negative engagement.

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Introduction

In a society where hours are spent consuming social media content, social connection has shifted from solely face-to-face interactions to largely virtual ones. Due to social media, which has an international reach and connects people from around the world, distances between individuals have been minimized. In a sporting context, fans' relationships and connections to teams and athletes have grown beyond the field of play into everyday life. Through this level of increased social connection and interaction with celebrity athletes, parasocial behavior has thrived and continues to grow, shaping the online fandom space. From a public relations perspective, harnessing the positive factors of these behaviors and relationships while navigating the negative and harmful consequences is essential to promoting and protecting athletes in a digital culture. Understanding the psychological impact of fandom on fans in sports is crucial to developing best industry practices. Exploring the current literature and industry practices is a stepping stone to ensuring the improvements and growth of sports public relations in a digitally connected world.

Literature Review

What is a parasocial relationship?

Parasocial relationships are social relationships with one-sided and unreciprocated behavior from a fan toward a popular media figure (Sanderson et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2016). In these one-sided relationships, the fan knows significant information about and feels a deep connection to the media figure, even though they have never met the person. Fans can develop parasocial relationships with fictional characters and real people, such as public figures, personalities, sports stars and celebrities (Lee et al., 2018). Typically, parasocial

relationships begin with media consumption that develops further, so the fan sees themselves as “friends” with the media figure (Scherer et al., 2022).

Traditional social interaction and parasocial interaction are experienced similarly, inducing feelings through both verbal and non-verbal cues. When a media figure makes eye contact with a viewer, the viewer feels seen and addressed, which leads to increased feelings of parasocial connection. Those seeking parasocial interactions and relationships often do so as a form of entertainment, which ultimately increases their enjoyment of the event (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011). In sports, when fans feel a parasocial connection with an athlete, as if they are part of the athlete’s inner circle, their enjoyment of the sporting event increases (Harrison et al., 2024).

While parasocial relationships may be seen as abstract and less important than interpersonal relationships, they are real to the individual engaged in one and can offer similarities and benefits similar to those of a real relationship. Parasocial relationships can provide fans with a sense of belonging, be an alternative to interpersonal relationships and allow individuals to receive benefits of engaging in idealized versions of daily or social situations without the demands of genuine interactions (Lee et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2022).

Therefore, it is not surprising that professional and popular sports figures and athletes are often the focus of parasocial fan relationships. Sports stars have become objects of popular praise, which fuels the desire for fans to keep watch on their favorite athletes. This desire to keep an eye on athletes is typically fulfilled through social media, which has placed athletes in the role of being surveilled by fans on social networking sites like Instagram or X (formerly Twitter). Essentially, social media has shifted public interaction away from the minority surveilling the majority to the majority surveilling the minority (Yoo, 2022). Online

social networking sites enable public figures to expand their audience and increase their reach of influence. These platforms allow the instant dissemination of news and provide fans with immediate access to information (Ke Yen & Soon Li, 2021).

Parasocial interactions are one-sided interactions between fans and athletes. A key factor in social media engagement is the interaction between users. These instances of parasocial interaction benefit the athlete through increased engagement with their personal brand and the fan through emotional connection (Mitchell et al., 2018). The more a fan is exposed to a public figure, the more likely they are to develop a parasocial experience, as active use of social networking sites is significantly linked to the development of parasocial experiences (Ke Yen & Soon Li, 2021).

Social exchange theory suggests humans have a natural tendency to share information, thus leading individuals to share their experiences on social networking platforms (Prado et al., 2017). This theory also suggests that athletes, due to human desire, seek to share information with public media outlets such as social media. Because social media is international, the effect of sporting events and impact of organizations has a broad reach beyond geographical limitations which allows fans to use sports as a way to shape their personal identities as they identify themselves with sports organizations, teams and athletes through sharing their experiences at games and events or interactions with the organization, team or athlete (Prado et al., 2017).

What is sports team identification?

Sports team identification can be defined as the “psychological attachment to a team to the degree that a sport fan treats that team’s success and failure as his or her own” (Yim & Byon, 2020, p. 3). Generally, individuals with sports team identification are considered sports

fans. When fans are highly identified with an organization, team or athlete, they believe their actions have the ability to influence the outcome of sporting events, show signs of aggression when it involves the harm of a rival team and are more engaged with sports organizations on all levels (Gong & Wang, 2021; Wann et al., 1999).

As sports fans engage with sports fandom, it becomes more integrated with both their daily and virtual lives, and they experience positive psychological benefits when their team experiences positive emotions or outcomes, which influences their team identification and self esteem (Gong & Wang, 2021). Past satisfaction, and dissatisfaction, with sports organizations directly impact sports fans' goal-directed behavior, such as purchasing merchandise, attending events or other consumer behaviors (Yim & Byon, 2020). All of these activities can increase or decrease team engagement and identification.

Establishing a strong community identity and relationship with fans is crucial for building brand awareness and engagement, which in turn fosters team identification (Yim & Byon, 2020). Part of establishing this community of fans is creating media content related to the organization, team or athlete. Individuals who spend more time consuming this content tend to have higher levels of team identification (Kim & Gower, 2023).

Understanding the relationship between fans and a sports organization or athlete allows public relations professionals to identify which fan characteristics are most valuable to their organization and aid in maintaining strong fan relationships, regardless of the team's performance. While fans tend to stick with their organization through the ups and downs, organizations and public relations professionals need to recognize the changing needs of their fans as the team's performance results fluctuate (Kim & Gower, 2023).

What is Basking in Reflected Glory (BIRGing)?

A key way fans identify themselves with an organization, team or athlete is through basking in reflected glory (BIRGing). BIRGing can be defined as associating oneself with successful organizations through means such as wearing team apparel, referring to the team as “we” highlighting an individual's perceived role in the team’s success, or posting on social media as an expert on the team (Larkin et al., 2022; Sanderson et al., 2020). The tendency of BIRGing allows fans to feel they are involved in a team’s success and a part of the organization, increasing their self-esteem by association with successful individuals (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021; Gong & Wang, 2021). Fans with high levels of team identification tend to bask in these feelings of glory more and are less likely to distance themselves from the organization after an unsuccessful event (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021).

BIRGing can be beneficial for fans in the face of tragedy or traumatic events, as identifying with a successful organization and basking in that glory can aid in coping, increase self-efficacy and provide a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021). Due to the psychological connection fans develop with sporting organizations through team identification, in times of difficulty, fans can experience feelings of success through their associated sport organization, team or athlete which can increase their mood, self-esteem, outlook and motivation (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021; Yim & Byon, 2020). Sports organizations are more than just a form of entertainment to fans; they are an outlet for fans to experience success, even when it is not possible for them (Erlichman & Harrison, 2021).

How are athletes perceived and promoted through social media?

Previously, TV viewership was the key determining factor of fan engagement levels with organizations and teams. However, the media landscape has shifted to be dominated by

social media, changing how viewers and fans consume sports media (Li et al., 2018). In the current digital age, athletes communicate with the public on their own behalf and/or for their organizations, often being seen as the face of their organization or companies and brands with which they are associated through sponsorship or other means (Harrison et al., 2024).

As athletes' platforms for communication have shifted from press conferences to using their personal social media accounts, fans have greater access to the thoughts, opinions and stances of athletes and sporting individuals than ever before. Due to the creation of these personal platforms, athletes can have a significant impact on social change and activism (Mitchell et al., 2018). In 2016, Colin Kaepernick famously knelt during the National Anthem to raise awareness for, and open a conversation about, the unjustified death of black men at the hands of police. While he faced extreme backlash and was ultimately removed from the National Football League (NFL), his goal to start a conversation was successful. Kaepernick certainly lost fans over the issue, but he also gained significant support from many others, which led to him being featured on the cover of Time magazine. His social capital increased dramatically due to his willingness to share his thoughts and opinions on social issues and the subsequent support from fans (Cutaia Wilkinson, 2025; Johnson, 2019).

Social media provides opportunities for fans to directly interact with athletes who use these platforms to express their identity, engage with fans and advocate for social causes (Sanderson et al., 2020). While most fans have the ability to separate what athletes do on the field from what they do off the field, athletes are seen as a form of entertainment. If they are not fulfilling the expected level of entertainment value, fans begin to look for reasons athletes may be failing to perform (Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

Through social media, athletes can curate their personal brand image, or the image they present to the public, by sharing more of their personality (Yoo, 2022). A personal brand is described as the “intentional effort to create and influence public perception of an individual by positioning them as an authority in their industry, elevating their credibility, and differentiating themselves from the competition” (Yanzhen et al., 2021, p. 1). To build their personal brand image, athletes need to be aware of what information they share and how it is perceived. Self-surveillance is the awareness of how the self is perceived by others, and in the instance of social media, it is closely related to impression management, which is the process of continually managing information (Yoo, 2022). Daily use of social media has become a social norm, and social media and marketing have merged to create a more collaborative approach to managing customer relationships (Yuan et al., 2016).

Increasingly, popular athletes have begun promoting themselves more as celebrities than athletes (Yoo, 2022). Establishing a personal brand is key to promoting an athlete as a sports celebrity (Yanzhen et al., 2021). Creating a strong personal brand increases visibility on social media and in traditional media for sports celebrities. Creating a personal brand involves striking a balance between personal and professional content on social media platforms, using a logo or professional signature, and maintaining a website (Gomez-Vasquez et al., 2024).

Social media helps manage customer relationships through parasocial relationships, as it is an ideal platform for building these relationships. Parasocial relationships are used to manage customer and consumer relationships by increasing customer equity through meeting their needs via parasocial connections with brands, organizations, or media figures such as athletes (Yuan et al., 2016). Managing these relationships is key from an organizational

perspective, as supporters' confidence in and engagement with sports organizations influence consumer decisions (Prado et al., 2017).

What value do athletes have as celebrities?

For sports stars, their popularity is in part formed by image manipulation and characteristic charisma, and in part by their physical abilities within their sport; thus, as discussed before, popular and successful athletes are now promoting themselves mainly as celebrities. Athletes have begun to promote themselves through the promotion of their personality. As previously discussed, the inclusion of their personality aids in the creation of their personal brand image (Yoo, 2022).

In a digital age with the power of social media at everyone's fingertips, there has been a shift in media content from trusted media outlets with planned interviews and game-related endeavors to direct conversations between fans and athletes sharing their own news, opinions and causes they support through personal media channels (Sanderson et al., 2020; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008). Because athletes can share their own news and information, they also have the ability to advocate for social change and causes that are close to their hearts. Athletes can advocate for change by opening up a conversation, often regarding a personal experience. In 2016, it was revealed that Joey Julius, an NCAA athlete at Penn State, struggled with an eating disorder. Similarly, in 2018, MLB player Mike Marjama's eating disorder was also publicly revealed (Mitchell et al., 2018). Talking about controversial and challenging topics can be both positive and negative for athletes' personal brands, depending on the surrounding conversation. Either way, athletes who encourage these types of conversations are advocates for change (Mitchell et al., 2018; Yoo, 2022).

How do communication professionals manage the narrative around athletes?

Celebrities dominate current culture, turning those celebrities into brands themselves and leading the public to place a high value on celebrities opinions (Ilicic & Baxter, 2014). Using social media to create a positive image for an athlete is a necessary part of career development as it helps grow sponsorship opportunities that financially support athletes, teams and organizations (Yoo, 2022). Within these sponsorships, it is vital that there is alignment between the athlete and brand (Ilicic & Baxter, 2014).

Parasocial relationships lead to increased engagement on social media, which public relations professionals can use to amplify the influence of public figures on their fans, leading to increased product sales, event attendance and social change. Overall, parasocial relationships can be used by public relations professionals to improve a public figure's marketability and value to brands and organizations (Ke Yen & Soon Li, 2021).

Sports leagues, corporations, teams and athletes are all influential in society, culturally, economically, socially and ethically. Because of their influence, Sport Social Responsibility (SSR), defined as "the recognition of sporting organizations that their actions and strategies can and do have a long-term social, cultural and ethical impact on their communities," has been established within the industry (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008, p. 6). Part of the reason behind this influence and impact is the connection they have to their local communities. Building and maintaining solid relationships with the local community is vital to a sports organization and its players. Local communities are major stakeholders for sports organizations as they are most often the largest audience from a promotional and purchasing perspective (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009).

What are the Negative Impacts of Parasocial Fan Fixations?

Fans around the world share the common belief that athletes are working for them as entertainment and should be held accountable for their ability to perform in a game, and if their off-field activities are perceived to impact their athletic performance, then fans see issues. For the most part, fans are able to separate what happens with athletes off the field from what happens on the field; however, there are ethical transgressions that fans find difficult to forgive (Lee et al., 2018; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008).

Three factors influence the likelihood of a fan to forgive an athlete in the case of ethical transgressions: the strength of the parasocial relationship, the intent behind the transgression of the athlete and the mindset of the fan. Those with strong parasocial relationships are more likely to forgive an athlete's mistakes due to the desire to protect and preserve the relationship. Typically, a lack of forgiveness results in distancing oneself from the relationship. In positive parasocial relationships, a lack of forgiveness can lead to avoidance of the relationship. However, in negative parasocial relationships, a lack of forgiveness can lead to fans avoiding and seeking vengeance against the celebrity. Understanding how and why fans forgive or do not forgive an athlete's transgressions is key for public relations practitioners when considering celebrity brand management and endorsement opportunities (Lee et al., 2018). At times, organizations can use parasocial relationships and programs as a way to mitigate negative reactions to decisions or actions by the organization or its players, both before and after a negative event occurs (Babiak & Wolfe, 2009).

As a majority of fans make their engagement decisions based on anticipated emotions and past satisfaction, it is vital to manage the narrative around athletes in a manner that encourages fan engagement (Yim & Byon, 2020). Understanding the psychological impacts

of sports on fans, such as parasocial interactions, BIRGing, and aggression, allows public relations professionals to make educated assumptions about fan emotions and actions that influence their level of engagement with an organization. Based on the level of assumed engagement, organizations can determine the best time to share news, information and other materials about the team to elicit peak fan engagement (Gong & Wang, 2021).

It is known that the outcome of sporting events directly influences fans' feelings of self-worth, aggression levels and decisions. Many fans, especially those who are highly identified with an organization, team or athlete, believe that they have the ability to influence the outcome of a sporting event through their actions and words. These fans are not inherently more violent than fans without high levels of identification, but they do show more signs of aggression toward opposing organizations, teams and athletes (Wann et al., 1999).

Major sporting events have become elements of society, and the global reach of these events is heavily dependent on digital media (Kharouf et al., 2020). Sports fans tend to use social media to express their thoughts and feelings about and to athletes, as well as sporting events and game-related information (Lim et al., 2015). Online communities are a vital aspect of sports as fans follow events and interact with fellow fans online via mobile devices. Social media has allowed these spaces for interaction to rapidly grow within fandoms (Kharouf et al., 2020). While there is good that comes from the use of social media, there is also a significant amount of harm that comes from social media, with the use of abusive words and behaviors directed at athletes. Often, these conversations are not only about an athlete but directed to the athlete through tagging their official account (Sanderson et al., 2020).

Typical standard social norms are often not followed on social media due to the anonymity available to users of some platforms such as X, Instagram or TikTok. However, highly engaged fans often feel a connection to athletes, believing they have a genuine social relationship with them, which can lead to strong emotions directed toward those athletes (Sanderson et al., 2020). Because highly identified fans find major aspects of their self-identity in their sports team, they are more likely to go to great lengths, even engaging in illegal behaviors or activities, for the betterment of their team at the expense of a rival (Wann et al., 1999). These strong emotions and abusive behaviors can cause psychological, behavioral and performance issues for athletes (Sanderson et al., 2020). The expectation is that athletes are above the hate and strong enough to ignore the harmful words directed at them. Often, this abuse is not only directed toward professional athletes but also collegiate athletes (Sanderson et al., 2020). Without managing these negative interactions, athletes can experience extreme psychological impacts that may adversely alter their careers and future sponsorship opportunities. Therefore, public relations or sports communication professionals might need to become involved with a strategic response when such engagements become negative in order to protect the well-being of celebrity athlete(s) involved and their carefully cultivated positive brand image.

Research Questions

Building on these findings about online parasocial relationships and sports fans, this research seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1 - How are public relations professionals and sports organizations addressing parasocial issues in fan management?

RQ2 - What strategies and tactics are being used to address parasocial fan engagement in online spaces?

RQ3 - Are any emerging technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), being used to help manage parasocial relationships between sports organizations, figures and fans?

Method

To answer the research questions, an in-depth literature review was conducted, including both practical and academic articles, to find the latest research on this topic and form the basis for future studies. The goal of this project is to define the issues and identify current best practices regarding parasocial relationships, public relations and sports. After a thorough review, 26 articles were identified that related directly to this thesis and they were analyzed for potential responses to the research questions. Additionally, three North Carolina-based sports organizations were asked for input on how, if experiencing these issues, they are handling or managing them (Appendix A). However, only one responded for comment on the topic. This is an exploratory study to identify current and emerging best practices, and therefore, no generalizable findings are claimed.

Findings

Parasocial relationships exist beyond geographical boundaries, often manifesting in online communities through social media, which then translates to online and offline interactions with media figures such as well-known athletes (Prado et al., 2017). These relationships provide social and emotional stimulation for individuals who engage in and experience parasocial interactions (Lee et al., 2018; Scherer et al., 2022). In the sports industry context, these relationships often manifest through high levels of team identification,

leading to increased engagement on social media and in person, purchasing of merchandise, attendance at sporting events and increased social and emotional well-being for fans (Erllichman & Harrison, 2021; Gong & Wang; Larkin et al., 2022; Sanderson et al., 2020; Yim & Byon., 2020). Based on these understandings, several practical applications for public relations practitioners in the sports industry have been identified.

Practical Application 1: Personal Branding for Athletes

Given that sporting events and athletes are seen as forms of entertainment meant to serve fans' needs (Erllichman & Harrison, 2021; Summers & Johnson Morgan, 2008), creating a brand for sports entities that can be promoted as elements of entertainment and influence fans' future purchasing actions is vital. Tapping into the current celebrity influence culture, promoting athletes through their personality and defining factors outside their sporting ability helps establish a clear personal brand that is recognizable beyond the confines of their sport. By doing so, public relations practitioners provide their clients with increased potential engagement through social media sites, which expands their audience and level of influence. These increased levels of engagement can lead to lucrative sponsorship opportunities inside and outside standard sporting contexts. In an interview conducted by Yoo (2022, p. 10), an athlete said:

I used to have no main sponsor before. In addition to my improved performance, I created my own unique image and posted it on my social media account, which the sponsors loved. Thanks to that, I now have a contract with a leading sponsor.

This athlete's testimony exemplifies the power of establishing a strong personal brand and promoting it publicly.

Addressing RQ1 and RQ2, public relations practitioners address parasocial issues in fan management and online engagement through the establishment of a consistent and recognizable personal brand for athletes. Public relations professionals are clearly leveraging social media for this purpose and the literature reflects this practice. By establishing a clear personal brand, fans can better understand an athlete's boundaries, leading to self-management by fans and community management through fan interaction. This can mitigate a portion of potentially harmful parasocial behavior by utilizing positive parasocial relationships as a management tactic.

Practical Application 2: Capitalizing on the Good

Part of fan management is the alleviation of negative experiences and the augmentation of positive experiences. A factor in alleviating constant discussions about negative experiences is providing opportunities for discussing positive experiences. At sporting events, these moments can be created through opportunities provided by the host facility, teams and athletes. For example, opportunities like photo stations provide fans with a tangible experience and a piece of media they can share on social media, talking about their experiences at a sporting event or with an organization. Creating these moments increases opportunities for fans to develop a strong sense of team identification and leads to BIRGing when the organization succeeds. Yim & Byon (2020, p. 6) explain that:

Scholars have shown that team identification predicted sport behavioral intention.

Yim and Byon (2017, as cited in Yim & Byon, 2020) found that team identification was an important antecedent of millennial fans' desire to attend an event. Many of the participants who identified themselves as highly identified fans mentioned that they

wanted to go to the game, but their desires sometimes did not move to the intention level due to travel inconvenience, lack of time and lack of money.

Jeff Merritt, Executive Director at The Centennial Authority, explains the purpose of creating positive fan experiences at major sporting events from a branding and marketing perspective as this:

We had the March Madness logo blown up in an inflatable, and people took tons of pictures. And so the strategy there is, it is a great fan experience thing, but what we are trying to do is, I want you to tweet, X or whatever you do to say I was at Lenovo Center, love it and had a great time. Boom that goes out to all of your followers and then somebody might retweet it. We have a naming rights sponsor, they want to be magnified, because you and 5,000 other people did the same thing, and between you and those 5,000 other people who have 20 million followers. (E. Rice, personal communication, April 1, 2025)

Essentially, the purpose of creating positive fan opportunities is to increase the public discussion of an event, space, team or athlete to improve the status of public opinion and ensure there are more positive than negative topics of discussion in the media. This addresses RQ1 and how public relations professionals are confronting parasocial issues in fan management.

Practical Application 3: Fulfilling Fan Desires

Further addressing RQ1, another way public relations practitioners and sports organizations could manage fan engagement is by meeting the needs of fans to the best of their ability. Parasocial relationships are largely formed by an elevated amount of media consumption. These relationships are often developed as a form of entertainment with

individuals, athletes, who are seen as entertainment. Creating social media content that focuses on the entertainment value of organizations, teams and athletes helps build the social connection, leading to the development of parasocial relationships. These relationships can be used in further forms of fan management such as mitigating negative experiences, increasing fan engagement and creating positive sharing on social media. As these relationships are built and team identification increases, fans become more attached to their teams and athletes, and are less likely to separate from them in the case of a lack of success.

Understanding that fans' previous experiences greatly determine their future actions in relation to an organization, team or athlete further highlights the importance of meeting the needs of fans when possible. Parasocial relationships provide a sense of belonging and connection, increase self-esteem and sense of success. Allowing fans to engage in these relationships is beneficial to fans on a psychological level, and can lead to increased engagement with the organization, team or athlete. As a result of increased engagement and previous positive experiences, fans are more likely to purchase merchandise and tickets, promote their associated organization, and provide additional support, leading to financial benefits for the organization, team, athlete or sponsors.

Practical Application 4: Mitigation of Negative Engagement

As previously mentioned, part of fan management is reducing negative experiences. However, moments with negative implications will happen, and public relations professionals need to be prepared in advance. One strategy for effectively dealing with adverse situations is to anticipate a downward trend in the future. As Jeff Merritt explains:

You have to also be ready for those times when the team isn't doing really, really well. They might go through a couple losing seasons. It happens in professional

sports all the time. And what you hope to do is that you've created such an environment here and you've also kept yourself out of trouble. You know, you did jump on something that should have been caught or should have been taken care of, and you fixed it so that you don't get a reputation for being a lousy place to go. (E. Rice, personal communication, April 1, 2025)

Creating a positive environment for fans when the organization, team or athlete is performing at a top level is vital for retaining that same fan when the level of performance lowers relative to competitors. Jeff Merritt further explains:

I mean, you kind of go, all right, that's just part of sports, but, at the same time, if you create a reputation of being an easy place, a safe place, and a fun place, then those seasons when the team isn't doing so well, you might say well, I'm still gonna go because I have a good time. It's you know, we may not win, but I'm still gonna get my money's worth and that's also really important. (E. Rice, personal communication, April 1, 2025)

Looking at RQ2, public relations practitioners are using strategic planning and leveraging positive parasocial relationships to build the experience for fans into a positive, safe and fun occurrence. Fans with strong parasocial relationships are known to forgive athlete mistakes at a higher rate, and those types of parasocial relationships are built through sports team identification, which is the goal of creating positive and fulfilling experiences through social media content and in-person interactions on the field and off the field.

Considering the future of the industry, RQ3 seeks understanding of how new technologies are currently being implemented. As technology continues to improve, AI programs and software continue to improve and become more accessible to the general

public. Based on current known information about AI use in industry, managing parasocial relationships is not the top concern; instead, managing one's image in light of potential AI use. According to Jeff Merritt,

I think one of the things that sort of jumps out when you say that is that, you know, AI can create, as we're talking about some people who have put fake, you know, made fake controversies. And so AI scares me in a little bit of a way, because I am afraid somebody might AI something that never happened here. So, you know, some horrible experience, and I'm like, well, that never happened, and that picture was a fake, but 20 million people saw it, and half of them or more than that, didn't even know it was a fake. (E. Rice, personal communication, April 1, 2025)

Due to the rapid development of new technologies, such as AI, there is currently limited information known about its uses in managing parasocial relationships. However, as AI continues to expand in capability and become more common, the potential for public relations professionals to use AI and other similar technologies in parasocial relationship management is likely. As technology continues to develop, AI can be used to monitor social media interactions and engagements based on keywords or phrases, alerting professionals to potentially beneficial or harmful parasocial relationships. This allows them to manage the relationship from its early stages of development.

Limitations and Future Research

As this is an exploratory study, the purpose of this work is to analyze the current literature on parasocial relationships in sports and how sports organizations address these issues. Within this study, as with all studies, limitations exist. This exploratory study was limited by time, along with the limited availability of individuals in the sports PR industry

who were willing to confer about parasocial relationships, social media and other industry-related issues.

To further understand this topic, continued research could involve interviewing current public relations professionals from various sporting organizations, including leagues, teams and athletes' personal management teams. These interviews should focus on experiences of parasocial behavior, how these behaviors are managed and any ways professionals use these behaviors to benefit their organization. Additionally, future research could analyze social media pages of leagues, teams and athletes to determine trends or behaviors of public parasocial interaction with sports celebrities. Finally, future research should explore how AI technologies are used to manage parasocial relationships from an industry perspective. Currently, little is known about this topic, specifically how AI may be used to aid in managing these behaviors, relationships and issues.

Appendix A - Interview Questions

1. We know that fans can express troublesome behavior online, considering this, do you have any experiences or witnessed anything that you would like to share?
2. How are PR/communication professionals and sports organizations addressing these parasocial issues in fan management?
3. What strategies and tactics are being used to address online (parasocial) fan engagements?
4. Are any emerging technologies such as AI being used to help manage parasocial relationships between sports organizations/figures and fans?
5. Do you have any advice for someone like me who wants to start working in this area?

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