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## TOXIC CULTURE: AN EMOTION AND SENTIMENT ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE FOOTBALL FANS IN RELATION TO CONTROVERSY AND WIN-LOSS RECORDS

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**TOXIC CULTURE: AN EMOTION AND SENTIMENT ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE  
FOOTBALL FANS IN RELATION TO CONTROVERSY AND WIN-LOSS RECORDS**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Masters in Mass Communication

in

The School of Mass Communication

by  
Joshua Rashad Jackson  
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2016  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Fans of certain college football teams will experience a wide array of emotions when their team is involved in a scandal. This study examined the fan bases of three university football teams as they learn about and react on social media to their schools and head coaches becoming implicated in controversies. Under the protection of those with similar likes and the secrecy of social media, users can voice opinions in favor of and against the football team's firing of a coach or handling of an investigation. Fan bases analyzed in the study are Ohio State University, Maryland University, and Baylor University. Using Crimson Hexagon, Tweets from the fans of each university are used to gauge emotion and sentiment from the time an incident was made public to when a final decision on the program or coach's punishment was made. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative efforts, findings revealed a moderate amount of sadness felt by each fan base regarding the incident as well as joy and disgust. While many Tweets were identified as neutral in emotion, Crimson Hexagon failed to detect those who were surprised by the news. These results show how fan bases have reacted to information that may jeopardize their team and hypothesizes how future scandals may affect fan base

## INTRODUCTION

The connection between a spectator and sport is strong -- potentially strong enough to overlook controversial issues as long as that team continues to win (Quinn 2009). From player misconduct to questionable coaching, teams on multiple levels often experience some form of issues that stand to impact the success of the organization.

In the age of social media, those who enjoy spectator sports will praise and critique their teams online (Brown & Billings 2013). When it comes to these controversies, I believe that fans of teams with winning records are more likely to display anger or frustration on social media when that team's win-loss record is in jeopardy. For this study, these controversies will center around college football coaches and the aftermath of the investigations into their programs.

Sports have become a daily occurrence in American culture (Bissell & Zhou 2004). From Sunday to Saturday, there is an opportunity for exposure to certain athletics, teams and athletes viewed as a form of spectacle. Within the industry, billions are spent on athletes, personnel, facilities and media to ensure a team or organization's success. This effort has made it one of the most watched and prominent forms of entertainment in the United States (Bennett, Henson & Zhang, 2003).

In the book "College Football: History, Spectacle, Controversy," John Sayle Watterson writes that college football is one of the most beloved sports in the country (pg. 143). There is a level of complexity and parity found in college sports that cannot be found in most other leagues. The National College Athletic Association implements divisional and ranking systems to separate teams based on assumed size and skill. In terms of college football, there is the FCS (Football Championship Subdivision) and FBS (Football Bowl Subdivision). The FCS is commonly viewed as the division for smaller universities with athletics teams. Members of the

FCS include historically black colleges or universities (HBCU) such as Alcorn State or Southern University, Ivy League colleges such as Yale and Harvard, as well as other schools such as North Dakota State University and James Madison University. The FBS is filled with teams from larger schools who compete for what's known as the Bowl Championship Series National Title. Ten conferences comprise the FBS with the five largest known commonly as the "Power 5" (Olson, 2018). Those five include the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference and the Southeastern Conference.

The Power 5 are considered the high bar for college football, seeing high amounts of fandom and revenue (Eckard, 1998). Large amounts of money and effort are put into the facilities, teams and recruitment of athletes in these conferences. Fans of teams in these conferences have been cited as having more expectations for team success (Olson, 2018). Hiring coaches, roster changes and game days have become an event followed by local and national media. These teams are expected to win and win often, but there are situations where those victories may be impacted by incidents off of the field. Those displaying a high level of fanship do not take well to losing, some threatening to "abandon" supporting the team or pulling funding if they are considered a financial contributor to that program (Keaton, 2013). College football coaches have been accused of contributing to or condoning a culture that could be considered dangerous for the sake of winning. I believe that some fans of those programs will remain in support of a certain coach, despite allegations of wrongdoing, in a desire to keep a winning team.

In this study, I plan to identify three specific moments where a college football program's head coach found themselves in the middle of a controversy and explore how fans on social media reacted to the initial news and outcome of the incident. A qualitative software known as Crimson Hexagon will analyze Tweets from the fan bases of three different college football



teams. That same procedure will supply a base to answer research questions regarding how/if a fan is worried about wins and losses during a time of controversy and if those fans attempt to place blame on someone other than the head coach. Utilizing an approach informed by grounded theory, with initial research questions provided by Spiral of Silence, BIRGing and CORFing theories this study will provide insight on how college football fans handle scandals as they happen to their own team.

## Fandom

Fandom is derived from the word fanatic. Arpan and Raney say there is no concrete definition, but fandom is broadly defined as the state or attitude of being a fan (2003). A fan is defined as someone with a personal commitment and emotional involvement with a sports organization (Sutton Et al, 1997). Collectively, the fans of a particular object or person constitute its fanbase or fandom. They may show their enthusiasm in a variety of ways, such as by promoting the object of their interest, being members of a fan club, holding or participating in fan conventions, or writing fan mail (Wann, 2001). Fandom can also be considered an obsession. (Roberts et al. 2016).

Fandom and fanship are not the same, and are often confused in research (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010). *Fanship* is considered as a connection to one team or player in particular while fandom is the identification with others who connect with the same sport such as the WhoDats Individuals may be high in fandom, but lack strong fanship.

I will examine fanship and how it can potentially impact reactions to college football scandals. Fans hold a psychological and emotional connection to sports teams, venues and events (Tobar, 2006). As a result, the decisions they make are occasionally fueled by those emotions

instead of logic or what some constitute as morals. My research looks to determine if these incidents reflect such a process in some fans.

### **Statement of Purpose**

There is minimal research on fanship and how it is expressed on social media. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are still being navigated for scientific purposes. The research that has been conducted usually lends itself to the entertainment industry (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2011). In terms of sports research, much of it focuses on the athletes, but rarely the staff that surrounds them or the trouble the players find themselves in (Williams & Kendall, 2007). Results of this study could be used to predict the reaction to the next big college football scandal, further showing how to identify emotional posts on Twitter and open a dialogue on domestic violence, sexual assault and other issues in regards to college sport culture.

### **Background**

In this section, I will explore three cases of NCAA college football head coaches involved in controversies that had an effect on their respective schools. Ohio State University's Urban Meyer, Maryland University's DJ Durkin and Baylor University's Art Briles. Each coach has since either stepped down or been fired from those schools since the controversy broke. I selected these three cases because of their current relevance to social movements such as #MeToo, the potential abuse of players by coaches and the high amount of coverage they received online and in traditional media.

#### **Urban Meyer and Ohio State**

Urban Meyer retired as Ohio State's head coach at the end of the Buckeyes' 2018 season, and although the three-time national champion cites a cyst in his brain as the reason for his second retirement (Salle, 2018), domestic violence highlighted Meyer's final season in the Big

10. During the 2018 offseason, Stadium College Football Insider reporter Brett McMurphy released information showing Meyer knew of Ohio State's former assistant coach Zach Smith's domestic violence allegations towards his now ex-wife Courtney Smith (Crawford, 2018). In 2018, Smith was charged with misdemeanor criminal trespassing. This incident shed light on Zach's 2009 domestic violence charge, where he was arrested for aggravated battery, allegedly grabbing and pushing Courtney while she was pregnant (Biddle, 2018). Meyer initially denied knowing any incident of Zach domestically abusing Courtney, but the former Buckeye head coach released a statement admitting he knew of the former wide receiver coach's actions (Axelrod, 2018). Meyer released this statement while on paid administrative leave (Axelrod, 2018), and his biggest punishment for knowledge of the incident was a three-game suspension (Culpepper & Bonesteel, 2018). The university fired Smith in June 2018 (Sallee, 2018), but a recurring issue surfaced in the Meyer-Ohio State domestic violence timeline: fanship over morality.

A Twitter account named Derek Firestone created a petition addressed to the President of Ohio State University Michael Drake to "save" Meyer. "Urban Meyer is on the hot seat and can be wrongfully fired from Ohio State it is up to us Buckeye Nation to help him not just for him but for THE Ohio State University and the great state of Ohio!" was Firestone's reasoning (Change, 2018). This petition had more than 36,000 supporters, and nearly 5,000 people promoted it on social media (Change, 2018).

OSU fans emailed Drake in the wake of Meyer's suspension, and the 167 emails showed a split, where fans were on opposing sides. However, the emails in support of Meyer showcased intense support. "You are a feckless coward who only ever plays 'cover my behind' in tough situations. 'Oh, the PR in the media will be bad if I don't give a suspension,'" a Mr. Davis wrote.

“Gutless. That’s what you are. Time for YOU to resign. If I were Urban, I’d tell you where to stick your suspension. What a joke you are,” he continued. “Terrible decision. University reputation irreparably damaged,” Eunice Viola sent to Mr. Drake. (Rowland, 2018). The majority of Drake’s emails condemned the university president and the school for a punishment less severe than they expected, but the Meyer-support mail is a third example of sports fans looking the other way or showing lack of empathy/concern when a successful coach is punished.

### **Maryland University and DJ Durkin**

19-year-old Jordan McNair was a player on the University of Maryland football team until June 13, 2018, the day he died the following heat stroke during practice two weeks prior (Shapiro & West, 2018). His passing was covered by large media outlets such as ABC, ESPN, CBS and CNN after reports of a “toxic culture” began appearing from the results of an investigation into the Terrapin football program. On May 29, McNair collapsed after a day of workouts where players were forced to run 110-yard sprints across the field. He showed signs of exhaustion and reportedly collapsed after the drill (Dinich, 2018). An attorney for McNair’s family says an hour passed before anyone called 911 to come to his aid. By that time, he had a body temperature of 106 degrees and was admitted to the hospital in critical condition. His liver had failed as a result of the conditions and had to be replaced on June 5, eight days before he died.

On June 14, Maryland’s athletic department held a press conference including the school’s athletic director Damon Evans, team physician Frank Henn and head coach D.J. Durkin. During that address to the media, the three expressed condolences and announced that an outside party would be conducting an external review of the Maryland Athletics program. After nearly a month, the university released a summary of the events leading to McNair’s death, noting that

Durkin was there at the time of practice. However, the school refused to release McNair's cause of death, leading to speculation from the media that there was more to the story than what officials had released (Richman & Donovan, 2018). McNair's parents and the state medical examiner listed the cause as heatstroke. Reports began to arise that players were persuaded to not speak to investigators about the culture of Maryland football, a claim Durkin and Evans would later deny. During the investigation, voluntary practices were still going on and eventually, full practices would resume with Durkin at the helm.

Maryland was met with heavy backlash as many felt there should have been a change in leadership following McNair's death (Dinich, 2018). All officials still held their respective offices and titles, and it was announced there would not be a criminal investigation into the matter. In August, ESPN published an expository piece highlighting the reports of toxic culture in College Park (Dinich, Rittenberg & VanHaaren, 2018). That article included details about how tough the practices were and signs of hazing on the team. Some of the players testified to situations that were seen as shocking to most analysts and reporters covering the case.

In one example, a player holding a meal while in a meeting had the meal slapped out of his hands in front of the team. Weights were reportedly thrown at other players as a sign of humiliation and embarrassment. In another instance, coaches forced a player to eat candy bars watch teammates work out as "motivation" to lose weight (Dinich, Rittenberg & VanHaaren, 2018).

"Extreme verbal abuse of players occurs often," the report said. "Players are routinely the targets of obscenity-laced epithets meant to mock their masculinity when they are unable to complete a workout or weight lift, for example. One player was belittled verbally after passing out during a drill" (Dinich 2018).

The same day that report was posted, Maryland announced that coach Durkin and three others in the athletics program were placed on administrative leave. The article quickly went viral in the college sports world. An attorney for McNair's family called for Durkin's firing and implied a civil suit could come against Maryland as well (Shapiro & West, 2018). University president Wallace Loh said they had fired Strength and Conditioning Coach Rick Court who was tasked with overseeing the player's vitals and health improvement or declines (Stubbs & Maese, 2018). He also said the ESPN report was the first time the university had heard about claims of a toxic culture at Maryland and another investigation would take place.

On October 25, nearly five months after McNair's death, the Maryland University Board of Regents publishes its report saying "the Athletics Department lacked a culture of accountability, did not provide adequate oversight of the football program." However, the board recommended not firing DJ Durkin, which was met with heavy controversy on social media. The Tuesday after that announcement, dozens of players reportedly walked out of a team meeting (Shapiro & West, 2018). The morning of October 30, Loh announced he would resign at the end of the year, but Durkin and Evans would retain their jobs. However, less than 24 hours after that announcement, Durkin was fired without cause. As a result, the Board of Regents Chairman, James T. Brady, stepped down as well.

Some fans and donors of Maryland's football program claimed McNair's death was unfortunate, but also a freak accident (Markus, 2018). Suspending and subsequently firing Durkin was met with heavy backlash from supporters of the Terrapins, but outside of that sphere, the decision was applauded. There were criticisms that the school only decided to fire Durkin after being swamped by calls, letters and social media posts, but that has not been proven as the actual reason.

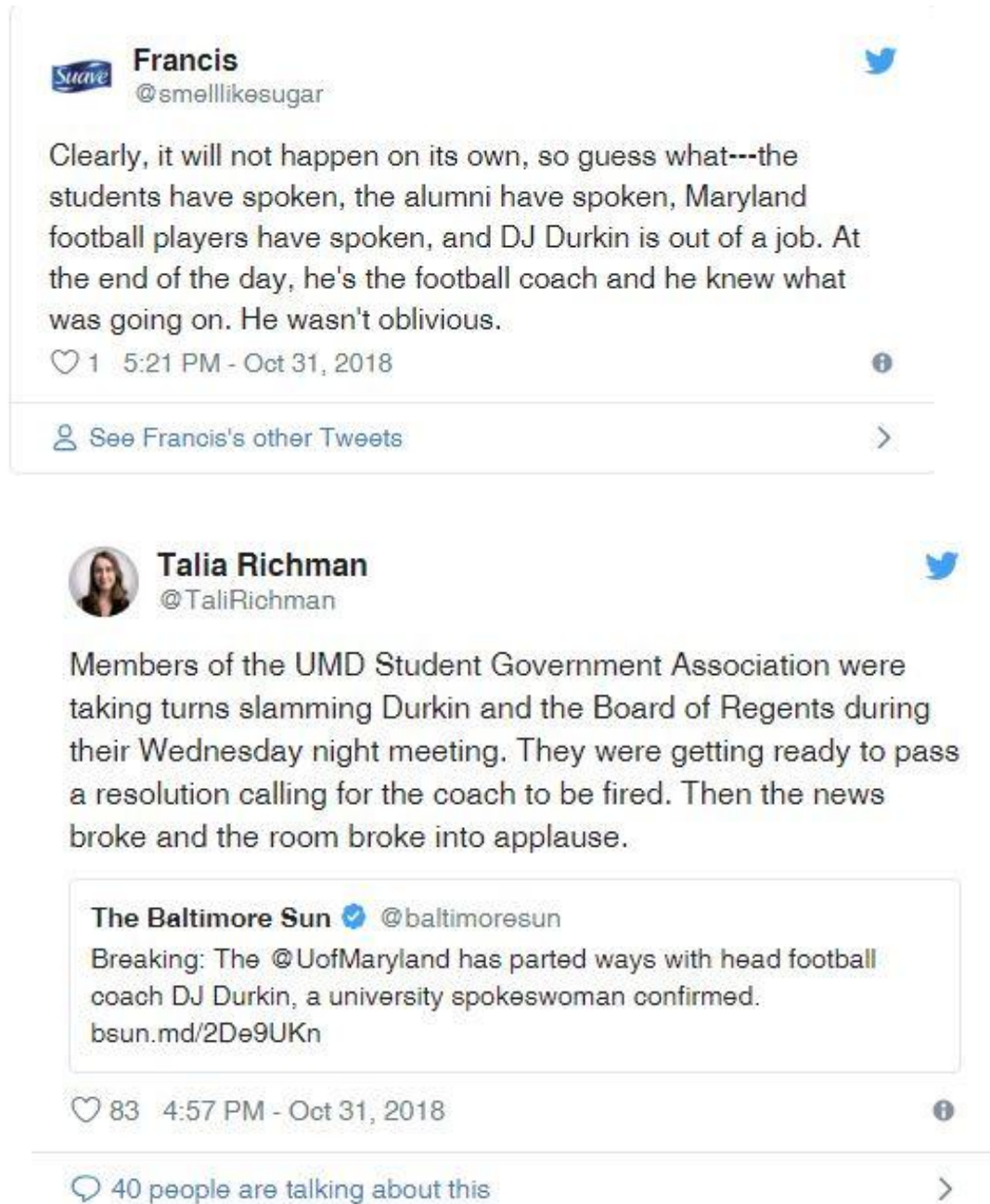


Figure 1. Tweets against former Maryland head coach DJ Durkin

The number of Tweets in support of Maryland's football program were far less in comparison to Ohio State. This may be in part due to the lack of a strong fan base for the

Terrapins. In comparison to Ohio State and Baylor, Maryland has fewer national championships, conference championships and a lower overall win record.

**Art Briles & Baylor University.** Baylor University, the private Christian college in Waco, Texas is another school that has found itself caught in a student-athlete scandal recently. In April 2012, Baylor linebacker Tevin Elliott was arrested for illegal sexual contact with a woman on campus (Witherspoon, 2014). He was convicted in 2014 after more women came forward with testimonies of them also being sexually assaulted. In the summer of that year, another player, defensive end Sam Ukwuachu was indicted on two counts of sexual assault against a female student athlete (Ellis, 2016). He was found guilty in August of 2015, sentenced to 180 days in jail and a decade of felony probation. In both of these instances, reports surfaced that Baylor Head Coach Art Briles was aware and tried to cover up the allegations.

The month after Ukwuachu sentencing, Baylor's Board of Regents hired an outside law firm to investigate the school's handling of alleged sexual violence cases (Ellis, 2016). In early 2016, ESPN reported several instances where Baylor "either failed to investigate, or adequately investigate, allegations of sexual violence." The report further states that the school took more than three years to hire a full time Title IX coordinator, failing to abide by federal rules (Lavine & Schlabach, 2014). Further complicating the investigation, a third defensive player, Shawn Oakman, was arrested for sexual assault in April 2016. The outside firm completed the report the next month and the Board of Regents decided to remove Baylor's president and chancellor from office, offering him a position at the law school. On May 26, 2016, the school released the full findings from the external review and announced the firing of Briles.

"We were horrified by the extent of these acts of sexual violence on our campus. This investigation revealed the University's mishandling of reports in what should have been a



supportive, responsive and caring environment for students,” said Richard Willis, chair of the Baylor Board of Regents (Ellis 2016).

In that report, Pepper Hamilton says it found that Baylor had failed to implement Title IX appropriately (Dinich, 2016). In addition, the firm determined school officials had discouraged victims from reporting sexual assault and the football program supported a “pattern of sexual violence.”

Briles had been the coach at Baylor since 2008. He claims he never knew about any of the allegations against his players until they made headlines. That same statement was met with disbelief by critics and sports analysts. Briles tried to become head coach at other schools in other conferences, only for those possible employers to deny his application time and time again. Eventually, a Canadian Football League team hired him, but pulled the offer off the table that same day after getting backlash (Dinich, 2016). Briles now coaches a football team in Italy. His name was rumored to fill multiple positions since his firing including a head coaching vacancy at Florida State University and the offensive coordinator spot at Louisiana State University. Each rumor starting a blaze of Tweets in opposition.



**Brenda Tracy**   
@brendatracy24

Follow



It disgusts me that Art Briles is part of this discussion and that anyone would even consider hiring him. Don't do it LSU.

**Gridiron Now** @GridironNow  
What we're all wanting to know -- who will LSU hire? And when?  
[gridironnow.com/lisu-football-w...](http://gridironnow.com/lisu-football-w...)

5:01 PM - 26 Sep 2016

9 Retweets 27 Likes



**Billy Gomila**  
@ATVS\_ChefBilly

Follow



There are some real garbage-ass LSU fans out there knighting for Art Briles, and y'all should be ashamed.

6:39 PM - 25 Sep 2016

24 Retweets 101 Likes



8

24

101

Figure 2. Tweets against former Baylor head coach Art Briles

In total, 10 Title IX lawsuits had been filed against Baylor as of 2018. A total of 22 women are a part of the allegations including 20 citing sexual or physical assault. Briles, never fully admitted to any wrongdoing, but his name is tied to a culture he's accused of creating (Ellis, 2016).

"I would have done more if I had known more," Briles said. "When these allegations came out, we found out at the same time you did. I had a meeting with the [Baylor] Board of Regents where I made suggestions that I never had the chance to fulfill; it would have been similar in the NFL that handles the discipline problems that took it out of the football coaches' hands," he said in a statement in 2018. Briles' statement speaks to the nearly cyclical nature of controversy, backlash, and action. However, the events unravel in a more complex process than the three stages. The goal of the literature review is to examine the variables at play and how they impact fan response to controversy.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Spiral of Silence**

Sports teams' fan bases often demonstrate a majority opinion one way or the other, which could decrease the likelihood that a fan challenges another's views about a pressing topic, such as if Meyer should've been suspended or not for his role in Smith's domestic violence case. Ohio State fans demonstrated varying opinions supporting and condemning Meyer. The spiral of silence likely influences the broadcasting, or lack thereof, of less popular opinions, such as those condemning Meyers' actions and Ohio State University's reaction to the incident.

Noelle-Neumann (1974) says public opinion comes from individuals interacting with their social environments. She said mass media's influence on public opinion cannot be studied without understanding the origin of public opinion itself (p. 51). Noelle-Neumann also said that one's fear of stating a minority opinion comes from a greater fear of isolation (p. 43). "Public opinion can be described as the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behavior in that it threatens the dissenting individual with isolation" (p. 44). These statements help define the spiral of silence. "People remain silent and do not exchange their views face-to-face against the majority view for fear of being isolated" (Dashti et. al, 2015, p. 42).

The spiral of silence is an issue that can also occur in sports. In 2015, Kevin Durant expressed his frustration with the media because he felt they had too much power with MVP voting. (Akil II, 2015). "I don't think you guys know as much as we do and I don't see why you have more power than we do," Durant said (Akil II, 2015). Durant expressed his minority opinions towards the media, his environment, and those who disagreed with him had enough power to force a chilling effect (Akil II, 2015). A chilling effect is when "speech or conduct is suppressed by fear of penalization at the interests of an individual or group" (US Legal, Inc.,

n.d.). In Durant's case, the chilling effect was the media's collective disagreement with his statements. Skip Bayless, formerly of ESPN, said Durant was "biting the hand that feeds him," and *Rolling Stone* suggested he was a "Bad Guy" (Akil II, 2015). Even Tony Kornheiser of ESPN's *Pardon the Interruption* said Durant should state his regret of the situation, even though Durant already had done so (Akil II, 2015). Media broadcasting content such as this could have an impact on public salience around topics such as athlete-journalist relations. Longer exposure to these blitzkrieg tactics towards outspoken athletes could create a chilling effect.

There is a limited depth of research regarding the spiral of silence and sports (Akil II, 2015). Although the spiral of silence is a phenomenon highly correlated to sports and its fans, the lack of research addresses the relationship leaves an important discussion untapped. Analyzing different issues in one study, as I do here, will further show if and how the spiral of silence works differently across different incidents. For example, Sherice Gearhart and Weiwu Zhang compared qualitative studies an enduring issue: abortion, an emerging issue: gay marriage and a transitory issue: immigration (2015). Using Facebook as a qualitative medium, the researchers looked at how opinions of these issues compare with that of the nation and how opinion congruence has an effect when it comes to refraining from posting on Facebook (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015).

Similar to this study, Gerhart and Zhang's research looks at three related, but separate subjects and how the spiral of silence influences conversations involving the topics. Using a professional survey company, researchers asked Facebook users a series of questions about their use of the social network and what they experience while online. After expressing their own opinion, respondents are asked a series of questions about what opinion they feel dominates the media.

Using the spiral of silence theory, the researchers found there is an issue-specific nature when it comes to the influence of opinions and opinion congruency. These findings are similar to the findings in this study.

“When people sense that their opinion is gaining momentum, they are emboldened to speak up even when they find themselves in an incongruent opinion climate ... Results also show that there are issue similarities in the spiral of silence. Those who are more willing to self-censor are less likely to post their truthful opinions on all three issues in both hostile and friendly conditions (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015, pg. 48-49).”

Researchers have also looked at the relationship between perceptions of opinion support and political opinion expression through the lens of the spiral of silence theory (Matthes, Knoll & Sikorski, 2018). Studies collected from two major databases, Communication and Mass Media Complete and PsychINFO, were used to provide the data. Keyword searches served as filtration to procure the latest literature regarding spiral of silence. Articles provided through those filters were coded to determine target audiences (i.e. politicians, family, media) and the opinion of the targets (i.e. agreeing, balanced, disagreeing). That study determined that the relationship between the variables is strong as online expression lends itself to the fear of isolation when voicing the unpopular opinion (Matthes, Knoll & Sikorski, 2018).

“People high in fear of isolation may especially monitor [the opinion environment] setting the spiral into motion ... even if there is no direct threat of social isolation online, it may exist offline ... even in anonymous opinion settings, online media allow direct interaction ... and personal attacks (Matthes, Knoll & Sikorski, 2018, pg. 22-23).

I believe the dominant opinion in this study has similar effect as in Gearhart and Weiwu’s study. The dominant emotion will reflect the highest level of opinion congruence and as a result,

other opinions will appear less often in the sample data. It's possible that those in the dominant majority shame those with an opposing opinion into posting less often in the world of sports as well.

### **Victim shaming on social media**

Social media sites can become homes for online misogyny and important places for activism (Rentschler, 2014). Salter says there are places where rape culture, domestic violence culture, and feminism is performed and resisted (2013). A study in New Zealand gathered the results of 17 young adults when asked about their exposure to rape culture on social media. (Sills Et. al, 2016). The participants “discussed examples they had witnessed, including victim-blaming, ‘slut-shaming,’ rape jokes, the celebration of male sexual conquest, and demeaning sexualized representations of women (Sills Et. Al, 2016, pg. 935).” Some of these same traits can be found in sports fan communities on social media (Porter, Benigni, & Wood, 2011, pg. 227-229). Prior research suggests men and women have different beliefs about sexual assault and potentially domestic violence (Hust , 2013). On social media, many users voice their opinions about allegations surrounding certain players, coaches or managers on a team. Some fans may begin to discuss or even virtually attack an accuser online (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). I believe some fans become so concerned with their team winning, that they choose to downplay any issue that may affect the status quo despite its serious nature.

Social media, along with the internet overall, has provided humans with a means of connecting those with similar beliefs and thought processes from a distance (Dredge et al., 2014). In the terms of this study, that notion also applies to sports and sports entertainment. Fans of certain athletes or teams create communities where they can discuss their praises, critiques and concerns. Websites such as SB Nation have created 320 sub-communities with individual

websites for college and professional sports teams such as LSU's "And The Valley Shook" and the Dallas Cowboys' "Blogging The Boys." On these sites, fans are free to discuss most topics relating to their beloved organization or players. However, policies do exist outlawing users from posting things such as hate speech and threats.

Similar forums and rules exist on Reddit, the self-proclaimed "front page of the internet" (Bergstrom, 2011). On this website, fandoms can be found by sport and communities known as subreddits. Also in the same vein as SB Nation, Reddit communities can be easily found with simple searches for that team or sport (i.e. r/Lakers is a forum for fans of the Los Angeles Lakers basketball team). As previously mentioned, these fans discuss topics including, but not limited to, upcoming games, probabilities of acquiring certain players, chances of winning championships and the overall state of the team. However, there are also people who negatively contribute to these forums by creating controversial conversation under the guise of being a fan, more commonly known as "trolling" (Bergstrom, 2011). Donath (1999), one of the first to arguably identify trolling explained a troll as "[One who] can disrupt the discussion on a newsgroup, disseminate bad advice, and damage the feeling of trust in the newsgroup community. Furthermore, in a group that has become sensitized to trolling — where the rate of deception is high — many honestly naïve questions may be quickly rejected as trollings ... Even if the accusation is unfounded, being branded a troll is quite damaging to one's online reputation (Donath, 2009, pg.31)." Bergstrom says trolls probably exist in more areas of the internet such as Facebook and Twitter, but some users may not realize they're trolling a community at all (2011). Trolls are often considered controversial for the sake of causing a rise and do not often represent the community they are involved in. Trolls are often identified in the frequency and nature of their posts and negative interactions with other members of those communities. Their follower to



following ratio is almost always low as well as the level of engagement within their posts. As a result, troll accounts will be discarded from the sample collected in Crimson Hexagon used for this study.

### **BIRGing and CORFing**

Depending on a sports team's success, the respective fan base tends to have a certain reaction (Wann and Branscombe, 1990). Following a win, fans will *bask in reflected glory* also known as BIRGing, but should the team lose, fans with strong emotions toward the team will try to put it behind them as quickly as possible. This *cut off in reflected failure* is also referred to as CORFing. Wann and Branscombe argue that these two processes assist in the maintenance of self-esteem (1990).

Teams that are known for success, such as Ohio State's football program, have large fan bases (Cialdini, 1976). Year after year, the team is expected to be in the running for the Big 10 Conference title and potentially the NCAA College Football National Championship. Maryland's football program is on the opposite side of football fandom. Historically, the team does not have a winning record, and the number of people following athletic accounts related to each university on Twitter reflect that.

As of February 2019, the Ohio State University Athletics Department's Twitter account (@OhioStAthletics) has more than 532,000 followers. The school's football account (@OhioStateFB), has around 289,000 followers and now-former coach Urban Meyer has more than 2 million people following him. In comparison, the Maryland Athletics Twitter (@umterps) has just over 146,000 followers. The university's football account has around 64,000 followers and former coach DJ Durkin has 14,000 followers.

In the replies of Tweets following wins, fans of the programs respond with comments such as “good job” and “great season.” In Tweets following losses, a brief analysis found much more irate responses such as “fire everyone,” “there goes the legacy,” and “get Urban Meyer out of there.” These juxtaposing responses shine a brief light onto how some fan bases react. This study also aims to analyze the Tweets of these respective fan bases and determine who influences the overall emotions. Using the spiral of silence theory in conjunction with BIRGing and CORFing, I hope to find the fans with the largest follower to following ratio and determine how/if they represent the popular opinion. I hypothesize that the fans with more influence tend to set the trend of emotions and sentiment following a win or loss in these controversial seasons.

### **Grounded Theory**

This study will use a form of qualitative research known as grounded theory to support the research questions proposed. Grounded theory allows for the development of new insights using general concepts through deep analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Grounded theory takes concepts derived from data from the actual research process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This theory also uses concepts from the data analysis to provide ideas for later data collection within the subject. According to Corbin and Strauss, Grounded theory allows researchers to explain why a certain event has or has not happened.

“The procedures can be used to uncover the beliefs and meanings that underlie action, to examine rational as well as nonrational aspects of behavior, and to demonstrate how logic and emotion combine to influence how persons respond to events or handle problems through action and interaction (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, pg. 11).”

Grounded theory is applicable in situations where little is known about the area of study and the research process can be done through theoretical sampling or coding -- both of which are

part of the method in this study. In the context of sports and fandom, few researchers have taken a qualitative approach. Much of the data compiled in this area is quantitative, survey-based or obtained through observation. However, because of what this research looks to obtain, quantitative analysis is only a part of the process. The nature of Grounded theory allows for more fluid research that abides by less rigid rules and contributes to the generation of other theories.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** What is the emotional experience of sports fans whose teams are involved in a scandal when the news breaks and following the outcome of the controversy?

**RQ2:** What is the frequency with which each fan base discusses winning and losing on social media during a scandal?

## **METHODOLOGY**

To further study sports fandom and the effect it has on a fan's point of view on certain situations, I propose using a social media content analysis, where the unit of analysis is individual Tweets from these respective fan bases. Tweets were using the software Crimson Hexagon (CH). The lone platform for study, Twitter, was chosen due to its ties to social movements such as #MeToo, which falls under the category of hashtag activism, and the platforms' ability to compile conversations around hashtags rather than personal connections (Thrift, 2014). Crimson Hexagon is an artificial intelligence powered technology that can find and analyze social media conversations as well as code individual Tweets with for sentiment and emotion.

For example, when looking at the domestic violence incident involving Zach Smith, keywords will include "Ohio State," "Zach Smith," "Courtney Smith," "Urban Meyer," "domestic," and "abuse." This method will follow suit for cases involving Baylor University and Maryland University.

To reduce the amount of dilution that may be found in the sample, I collected from the day the news broke of the incident to the decision to suspend/fire a coach for their role. This creates a concrete timeline where reactions to initial news and consequences can be examined. I filtered Tweets by English, decreasing the amount of spam or irrelevant posts that may enter the sample. To ensure a higher chance of receiving a data set from a sample that will likely reflect the fan base. I also filtered Tweets to come from the respective state of the university -- Ohio, Maryland and Texas.

Once collected, quantitative and qualitative analyses are applied. Quantitative methods help describe the data and determine the number of Tweets and within each of the three cases.

Qualitative methods better understand viewers opinions on the incident and gain further insight into what types of messages were coded as which emotions. A qualitative analysis answers the more comprehensive portions of this study and further explores the emotional sentiment and experiences of these fan bases, a holistic and comprehensive.

Based on the research questions, the qualitative method is an appropriate research method. For the second part of this study, there is a need to collect in-depth data to understand what emotions are displayed in the Tweets of fans and what is the dominating opinion of the fanbase. For the qualitative analyses, the three top and bottom fan accounts are highlighted from the 10,000 Tweets randomly selected by CH. Selection criteria for those accounts included the highest and lowest follower-following ratios. Those with a higher follower count tend to possess a larger reach and thus a greater influence on the fan base. Using those accounts, only Tweets from the day news of the sports scandal broke to the day a final decision was made are going to be analyzed. Keywords will categorize the posts based on emotions utilizing Paul Ekman's Atlas of Emotions (1992). Those words will include, but are not limited to "hate," "glad," "justice," "shame," "innocent," "guilty" and more. Based on Ekman's scale, each of those words will fall into one of the six categories: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness or surprise (1992). In order to address RQ1 keywords were separated into categories.

To answer RQ2, the Tweets from the top-three influencers in each fan base were examined in isolation. This time, the analysis will focus on the fans concern over wins and losses during the respective scandals. Using the same time frame as RQ1, Tweets including the words "win," "loss," "victory," or "upset." These posts should reflect how often the accounts spoke about wins and losses and how much that record mattered to the top influencers in that fan base.

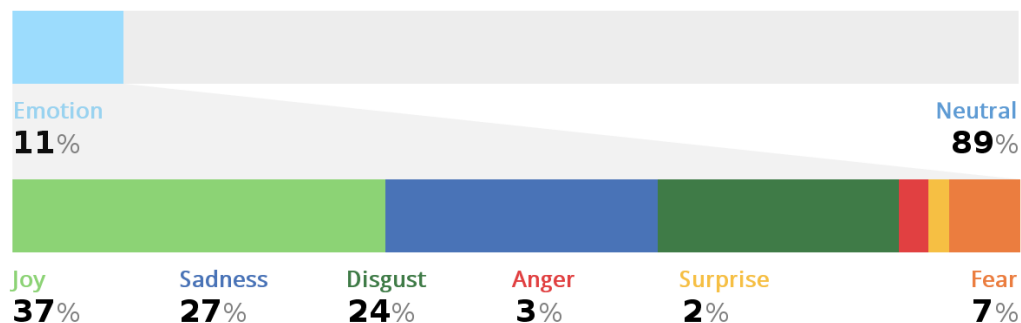
## RESULTS

The results of the analyses of data collected through Twitter are detailed in the following section. Themes identified within the data include: (a) the experience of sports fans when their team is involved in a controversy, (b) the discussion of win-loss records among college football fans.

**RQ1:** What is the emotional experience of sports fans whose teams are involved in a scandal when the news breaks and following the outcome of the controversy?

### Ohio State

The reports of Zach Smith's alleged domestic abuse first broke on July 23, 2018 and the decision to suspend head coach Urban Meyer for three days came on August 22, 2018 (Sallee, 2018). Based on this date range, the aforementioned method, and the keywords previously identified fans showed three major emotions during that time period: joy, disgust and sadness. In the sample of 982 Tweets, the overall sentiment was neutral. However, the emotional experience saw a consistent amount of the three top emotions through the 31-day frame.



Jackson\_CollegeFootball\_Buckeyes — Emotion from 7/23/18 to 8/22/18

Figure 3. Emotional reaction of Ohio State fans during scandal

In that analysis, only 108 Tweets displayed any emotion. Many remained neutral or said they would “not comment until the investigation was complete. Of the 108, three main emotions appeared: joy (37%), followed by sadness (27%) and disgust (24%). A majority of Tweets coded as joy during this time frame were not related to the scandal surrounding the Ohio State football program such as graduations of Ohio State students who happened to mention “football” in a post.

However, other posts categorized as joy did reference the scandal only to indicate that fans were happy to see practice resume for the team with or without head coach Urban Meyer. Other posts in the joy category referenced excitement for Meyer’s return to the field, but very few referenced the victim, the alleged attack, Meyer’s accused role or the investigation.



Figure 4. Tweets showing concern for Ohio State University

In posts identified as sadness, fans expressed disappointment that the university has been involved in such a controversy and how it reflects on Ohio State. Nick Fink, a self-proclaimed Buckeye fan took the side of the victim in saying the right thing to do would be to dismiss Meyer as head coach. “Were [sic] smug and talk about how OSU does things the “right” way. Well this is how we back up that talk. Urban [Meyer] lied just such as [Jim] Tressel and this lie was so

much worse. He has to go.” The greatest amount of sadness was found on August 1, 2018, the day Courtney Smith agreed to an interview explaining what she said happened during her husband’s attacks. Many of the Tweets categorized as sadness included an expression of disappointment such as the Tweets below.



Figure 5. Tweet sympathizing with victim Courtney Smith

On that same day, Crimson Hexagon noted the highest level of the third top emotion -- disgust. Tweets categorized as such found the most juxtaposition between fans. There are those such as @maiden\_rw who blamed Courtney Smith and alluded to her trying to “tear down the whole football program.” On the other side, @GABrownsGuy found disgust in how long Ohio State took to announce an investigation and reveal results saying if the allegations against Meyer



are true, then he needs to be removed as head coach. Similar to sadness, the number of disgust posts spiked on August 1, 2018.



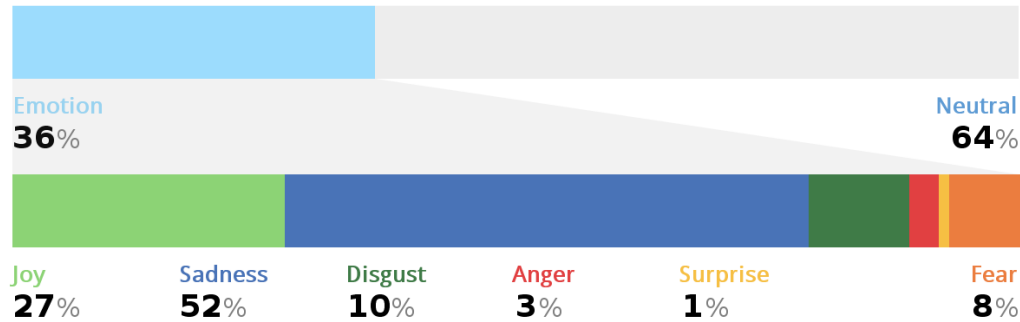
Figure 6. Tweets expressing disgust of Ohio State scandal

These categories show the Ohio State fan base experiencing a mixture of emotions that tended to peak when the victim's story was released. The categories of joy, sadness and disgust continue to dominate the incidents surrounding other universities involved in this study.

### **Maryland**

19-year-old Jordan McNair was sent to the hospital after collapsing during practice on May 29, 2018 (Shapiro & West, 2018). After days in the hospital, he died on June 13, 2018. That day is where the news began to cycle through major media outlets and is used as the start date for this study. Head coach D.J. Durkin was fired on November 2, 2018, one day after being reinstated following an outside investigation into the Maryland University football program. Crimson Hexagon detected 4,856 posts mentioning Maryland and Jordan McNair. Of that


number, 36% percent displayed some form of emotion with the top two being joy (27%) and sadness (52%). In total, 1,748 Tweets expressed one of the six emotions while the rest were neutral posts.



Jackson\_CollegeFootball\_Terps — Emotion from 6/13/18 to 11/2/18


Figure 7. Emotional reaction of Maryland fans during scandal

Of the Tweets expressing joy (n= 472), most were related to events honoring the life of McNair or sarcastic statements implying some were happy Maryland football had finally made national deadlines. The biggest display of joy was found in the week of August 19 - August 25, 2018 -- the same time the Maryland Board of Regents assumed control of the investigations. In that same week, a radio interview with Maryland football players, offensive lineman Oseh Saine and punter Wade Lees surfaced where the two players defended head coach D.J. Durkin. But in that interview, Saine mentioned there is a toxic culture surrounding the Maryland football program.



**Laurie-Anne Sayles** @LaurieASayles  
Proud to see my alma mater unifying the campus to pay respect and honor Maryland Football Student-Athlete Jordan McNair [youtu.be/cWyQX2rbGIQ](https://youtu.be/cWyQX2rbGIQ) via @YouTube #GoTerps  
7:48 AM - Aug 22, 2018

**Yasmin** @themeenqueen  
I ain't gonna defend my school if it did something wrong. Take the blame. You make enough money off the backs of athletes as it is.  
Investigation finds Maryland University football culpable for on-field death of Jordan McNair [twitter.com/i/events/10432...](https://twitter.com/i/events/10432...)  
11:06 PM - Sep 21, 2018



Investigation finds Maryland University football culpable ...

Figure 8. Tweets in support and honoring of Jordan McNair

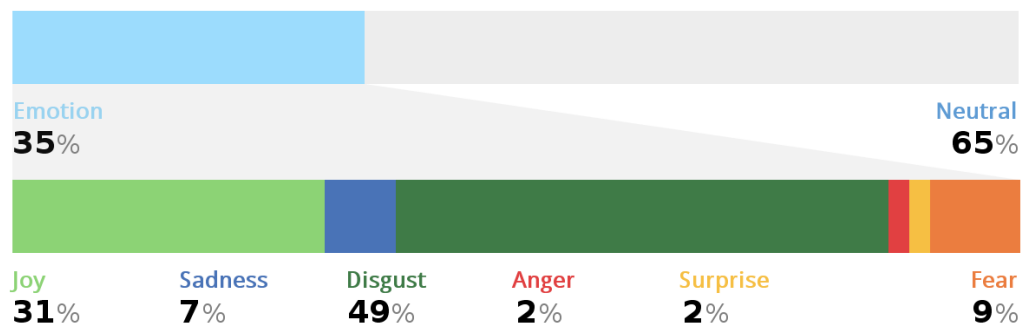
The Tweets that were identified as sadness (n=909) took a far different tone. Posts indicated high levels of disappointment with Maryland University, the football staff and their handling of McNair’s death. Account @LAMillennium said “this is so sad ... players should not get to this point.” @joshzele, a proclaimed alumni of the school had a similar sentiment. “I’ve fallen so out of love with football and now my alma mater only helps to reinforce my feelings. Similar to the joy category, there was one point in time where the number of sadness posts peaked. In the week of August 12-18, the number of Tweets (n=226) identified as sadness nearly tripled the next highest time period in the data set. This implies that most fans felt some sense of sadness that a young man lost his life or that the school had handled his death so poorly in respect to his parents and the treatment of other players. While sadness served as a large part of the data for Maryland University, joy did the same for Ohio State University, and the emotions experienced at Baylor University, were mostly dominated by another -- disgust.



Figure 9. Tweets in disgust of Maryland University and the football program

## Baylor

Baylor University announced it would hire an outside firm to investigate the university's handling of sexual violence cases on September 2, 2015 (Ellis, 2016). The decision to fire head coach Art Briles was announced on May 26, 2016 (Ellis 2016). Reports say Briles told his players about the firing over text message on this day, but the university would not confirm when he was actually dismissed. As a result, May 26, 2016, the end date for this research criteria, showed that most fans were disgusted at the allegations, the handling of the situation by Baylor University and the reported mishandling of the team by Briles.



Jackson\_CollegeFootball\_Bears — Emotion from 9/2/15 to 5/26/16

Figure 10. Emotional reaction of Baylor fans during scandal

Crimson Hexagon collected 7,165 posts between September 2, 2015 and May 26, 2016. Of that number, 35% (n = 2,508) were found to have some sort of emotion with the biggest category being disgust. The data pulled from CH show that most fans were more outraged by the series of allegations than any other emotion. Following disgust, joy was the only other category to hold a double-digit percentage using the sample set. This is different in comparison to the

other incidents where sadness is a sizable portion of the fan base's emotional reaction. It is also the highest amount of fear displayed between the three cases.

Continuing to look at the major emotions displayed, 1,229 Tweets identified as showing disgust toward Briles or Baylor University. Further examining the posts, many users question how long Baylor would be willing to neglect these reports in lieu of having a successful football program. User @miketag98 said "Heaven forbid one of the sexual assault victims at #Baylor 'tarnish the image of the football program' #disgusting #BaylorBold." Hundreds of Tweets follow suit in calling out the university for its reportedly poor management of this case. The week of January 31 to February 6 2016 saw the highest amount of disgust displayed in one week (n = 386). That was the same week ESPN's "Outside The Lines" reported "several instances in which Baylor either failed to investigate, or adequately investigate, allegations of sexual violence" (Ellis, 2016). Comparing this to the other incidents involved in this study, the amount of disgust is the largest display of emotion. This implies that, at least in the state of Texas, reports of sexual assault are not taken lightly or dismissed by Baylor fans. Looking at the other two cases, fans found somewhat of a grey area where they admitted a situation was unfortunate, but not in control of the head coach or the university. Such an area appears to exist less in this study. The three cases do all have a sizable percentage of joy as well, but the angle of that emotion is different for each incident.



Figure 11. Tweets showing disgust of Baylor University and football program

In the case of the Baylor football program joy was detected 31% of the time where emotions were involved (n = 777). Based on a deep reading of the Tweets, joy often stemmed from the results of a game or the success of the players while Briles was still at the helm. Before ESPN, Sports Illustrated and other news outlets began reporting on the large amount of sexual assault cases involving Baylor players, fans would Tweet and celebrate victories as normal, unaware of the allegations building in the background.



**BAYLOR FOOTBALL AND THE GREAT COACH ART BRILES DESERVE ALL THE AWARDS.**

— Leigh Parks (@LeighParks10) **Nov 22, 2015**

Figure 12. Tweets showing excitement for Baylor recruiting class during scandal

However, that form of joy would change once those reports were made public and Baylor announced an outside firm’s hiring to investigate the allegations. The week of January 31, 2016 - February 2, 2016, the levels of joy decreased as disgust became the dominant emotion. By this point, posts identified as joy were only related to the 2017 football recruiting class, who was recruited by Briles. Fans expressed joy in learning certain high school athletes would join the Bears in the fall, as Briles believed he had signed the best recruiting class the university ever had. This may show that despite the allegations, fans were still excited about the future of the program or at least supportive of star athletes going to Waco to play for their beloved team. By the time the full report was released, the levels of joy dwindled to nearly nonexistent. From March 27, 2016 - May 7, 2016, joy was rarely detected.

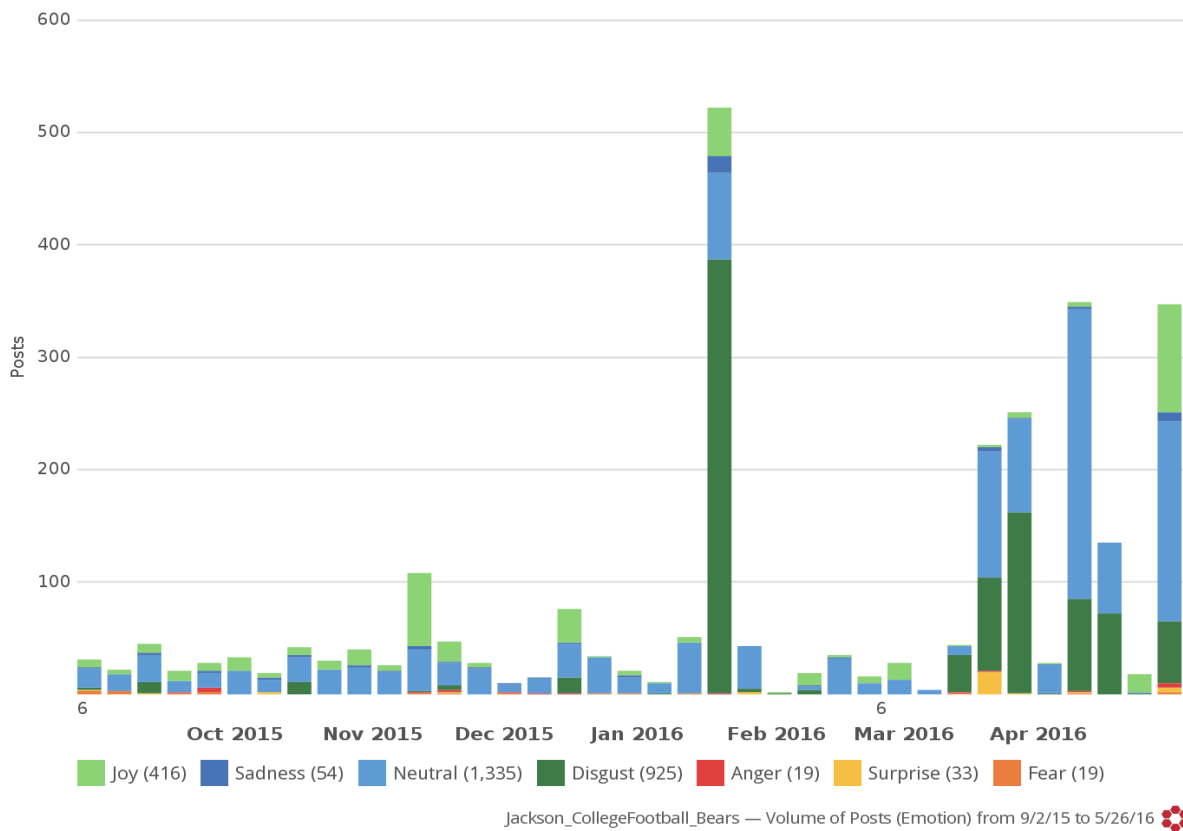


Figure 13. Volume of emotional posts from Baylor fans during scandal





Figure 14. Tweets celebrating firing of Art Briles

In that final two weeks, May 12, 2016 - May 26, 2016, joy resurfaced as a dominant emotion among Bears fans. This time, many were expressing joy because Briles had been fired from Baylor University. The report had finally been released showing how poorly Baylor handled the alleged attacks in lieu of keeping players on the field. Other users found joy that the situation was over and Baylor could work toward restoring its legacy.

The fans looking to bring Baylor back to glory are still holding on to that hope, years after Briles' dismissal. But the effect of the scandal and his departure trickled down to the success of the team which will be examined in the next section. Football is a game based on scoring points, winning and losing, and for some fans, that may matter more than anything off of the field.

**RQ2:** What is the frequency with which each fan base discusses winning and losing on social media during a scandal?

## **Ohio State**

Of the three universities in this study, Ohio State has arguably the largest tie to athletics. Teams in multiple sports have found repeated success and national media coverage. Some fans express joy or sadness when these teams win or lose or if they feel the legacy of the team is in danger. In regard to RQ2, using the sample data and time frame applied in the previous RQ, the data implies that Ohio State fans did not speak about winning or losing often during the scandal involving Urban Meyer.

Of the sample, 177 Tweets from Ohio State University fans referenced winning or losing between July 23, 2018 and August 22, 2018. As the college football season had not begun yet, the posts that did mention wins or losses were often in reference to how many wins fans thought the Buckeyes would have this season. The most popular Tweet in the sample appears to be a reference to the rivalry between the Ohio State Buckeyes and another Big 10 opponent, the Michigan Wolverines. The two schools have often thrown jabs at one another in an ongoing battle that has lasted since the late 1800s. In football, the yearly matchup between the two has often become known simply as “The Game” where the Buckeyes have won the last seven meetings. In the spirit of competition, one Ohio State fan controls an account known as @OhioStateClock which only Tweets about how many days it has been since Michigan last beat Ohio State. In the midst of the scandal surrounding the university’s football program, this was one of the most viewed and interacted with Tweets in the data set. @OhioStateClock also acts as the top influencer in the sample. CH identifies influencers based on a follower to following ratio as well as the level of interaction with one’s Tweets, this account which could be used as an example of trolling is the only account in the sample with an influencer score above 10. The influencer score scale goes to 100, where @OhioStateClock registered a 74. But no other

account in the sample came near that influence level providing no other top influencers to assist in answering RQ2. Additionally, few Tweets in this filtration included Urban Meyer or referenced the incident, implying the popular opinion is to keep the two separate.

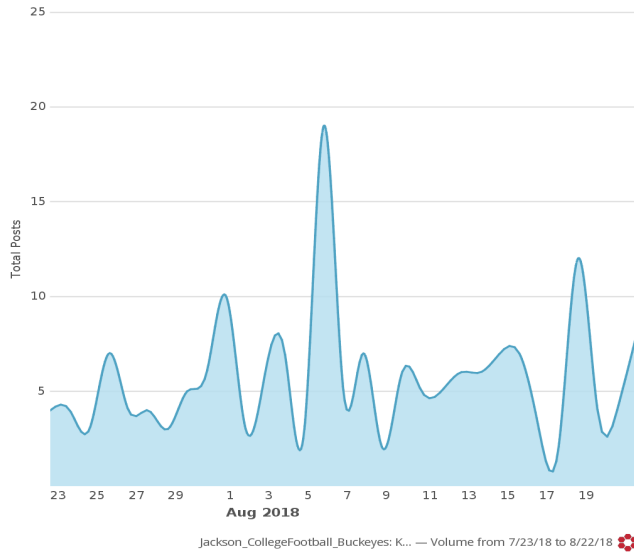


Figure 15. Volume of Ohio State football Tweets during scandal

## Maryland

For the University of Maryland, football has never been a high-profile sport. Since moving to the Big 10, the seasonal record of the team is just above average. The Jordan McNair incident covered the front half of Maryland’s 2018 season and cast a dark cloud even after the investigation was complete. Crimson Hexagon’s sample of win and loss discussion is a reflection of that sentiment.

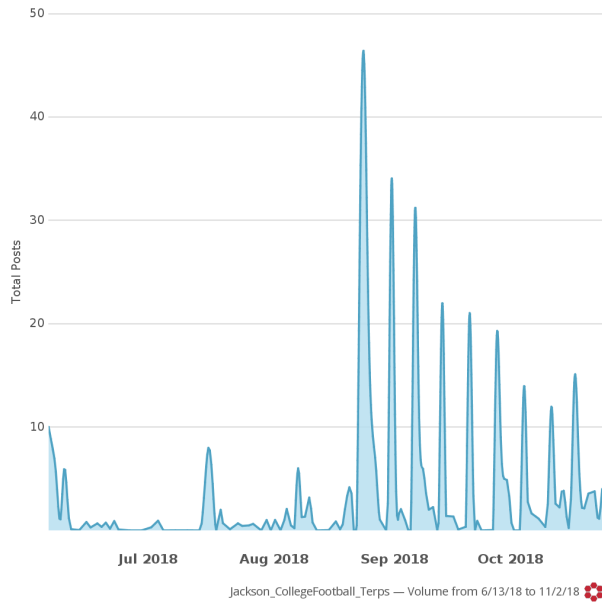


Figure 16. Volume of Maryland football Tweets during scandal



Figure 17. Tweets expressing joy in Maryland football victory over Texas during scandal

Of the sample, 484 posts referenced wins or losses for the Terrapin football program. In that number, the greatest discussion of wins and losses came on September 1, 2018, the first game of the season where they upset the then-top-25 Texas Longhorns. It was a game where they

were not projected to win based on skill and what was happening with the investigation, but that moment of victory appears to have shown the largest amount of conversation regarding wins and losses. Tweets like the ones excerpted here are examples of how proud the Maryland fanbase was to get a victory considering all the controversy surrounding the program. Many of the Tweets follow suit with @hollidaykid being one of the top influencers in the group. He along with @kylefstackpole and @michaelcornejo led the Maryland top influencer category, with each of their Tweets showing an excitement of a Maryland victory and the reverence of the passing of Jordan McNair the opposite of Ohio State where the victim or the coach's names were rarely mentioned in the data.

### **Baylor**

Baylor University saw the greatest amount of sample Tweets regarding win-loss conversations in respect to the scandal surrounding the football program. In the sample, 3,669 Tweets were collected in respect to wins and losses. There were three large spikes of win-loss references in that sample: the week of November 22, 2015 where the Bears defeated Texas Christian University, the week of January 31, 2016 where Baylor landed a top recruiting class and the week of May 15, 2016 where the investigation into Baylor's handling of student sexual assault cases was coming to a close.

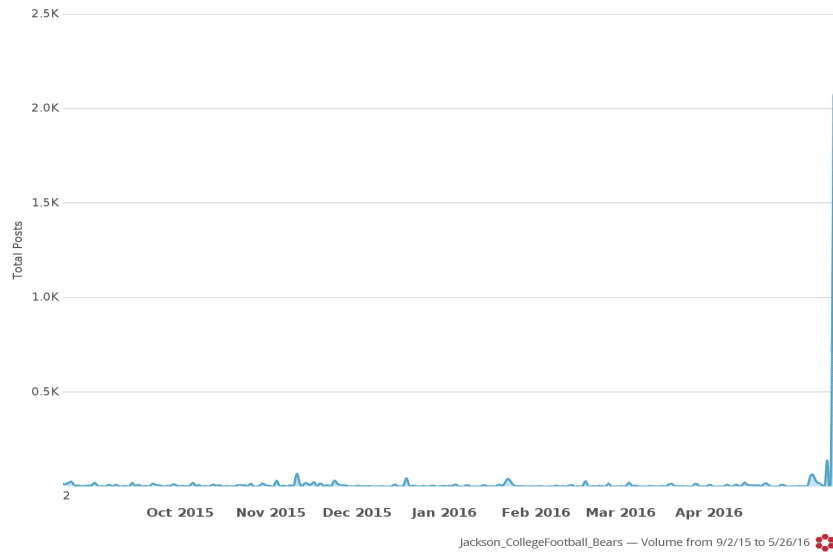


Figure 18. Volume of Baylor football Tweets during scandal

In the first two situations, there are minimal mentions of the actual scandal which is drowned out by the talks of Baylor beating an in-state rival and the opportunity to have another winning season with a top recruiting class. The popular opinion shifts once the season ends to focus on the sexual assault investigation and the notion from some residents that the school cares more about football than it does the students.

The most influential accounts @LopezOnSports, @BaylorBearsFans and @BaylorBearnada all voiced disappointment with how the university handled the investigation and that appears to be the dominant opinion of the sample size. The greatest influence came during the week of the decision to fire Art Briles from Baylor University. Few users disagreed with the decision, and the congruent opinion supports the notion that the disgust found in RQ1 turned into joy when the university made their decision. However, the popular opinion still failed to directly address win-loss concerns. Similar to Maryland, there were conversations surrounding the actual issue, but like Ohio State, the talk of on-field success seemed to be separated from the off-field incidents.



Figure 19. Tweets urging the firing of former Baylor head coach Art Briles

## DISCUSSION

For Louisiana State University (LSU), this notion is currently in practice. In October 2018, reports arose that LSU's men's basketball coach Will Wade was involved in illegal recruiting practices by working with a recruiting middleman known as Christian Dawkins (Just, 2018). Wade was allegedly caught on wiretap holding a conversation with Dawkins where the two discussed what would need to be done to get a certain player to come to LSU. That practice is a violation of National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) recruiting rules and could have possible legal implications for those involved.

In February 2019, Wade was issued a subpoena to appear in court in April for witness testimony for another trial related to the case (Mickles, 2019). Wade who has served as the head coach of LSU's men's basketball team since 2017, has often deflected conversation regarding the subject. In March 2019, LSU announced it would suspend Wade as part of an investigation between LSU and the NCAA into the allegations. (Bonesteel, 2019) At the time of this study, the team is seeing great success as the Southeastern Conference regular season champions and are competing in the SEC tournament in Nashville, Tennessee. Wade is not allowed to coach the team at this time and a player on the team Javonte Smart was also tied to the recruiting investigation and was benched as the investigation continued.

During that time, the fans of the program began to call outrage that the team had finally started build a winning season and the scandal broke at a convenient time. Some fans are upset at Wade's suspension and the investigation saying there's no proof Wade did anything wrong (Bonesteel, 2019). On social media, fans are rallying on his behalf, seemingly willing to ignore the allegations against him because of his leadership. Strong statements of anger are targeted at LSU and the LSU Athletics Department for deciding to suspend him, painting LSU as the villain and Wade as the hero. Using previous scandals, I examine this emotional reaction from fans, and how the concept of winning plays into that reaction and what that means for fandom and sports in the future.

The goal of this study, through Crimson Hexagon (CH), was to explore the emotional relationship between college football fans and the team they support when that team is involved in a scandal making national headlines. This study examines three college football scandals: Ohio State University's alleged cover-up of an assistant football coach's domestic abuse history, Maryland University's handling of the death of a player and subsequent handling of the investigation surrounding the rumored toxic culture, and Baylor University's multi-year investigation into accusations of player's sexually assaulting other students with no immediate discipline from coaches or administrators. Examined Tweets were delineated by CH Tweets from residents inside the state of each respective team. Ekman's Atlas of Emotions (1992) which identifies six key feelings: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness or surprise defined the emotion categories used in this study.

A large part of the data from each fanbase resulted in neutral Tweets. According to Crimson Hexagon, neutral sentiments are those which do not appear to take side on an argument



or show a certain emotion. Ohio State's sample produced the largest percentage of neutral Tweets at 89%, that was followed by Baylor University at 65% neutral and Maryland's neutral sentiment percentage at 64%. That level of neutrality presents the notion that a majority of sports fans approach scandals with a sense of rational and wait for information to be released before reacting. Fans may find the initial news disappointing or unfortunate, but most remain objective in passing judgement on the university, head coach or the victim. If this neutrality is constant through other fan bases and across other sports, it's possible that a few opinion leaders are amplifying one emotion or sentiment and that is what becomes most discussed in the media. Those who often cover these stories nationally, such as ESPN, Bleacher Report and Sports Illustrated may find one small group's reaction and exacerbate that to be the dominant opinion. Or it's also possible those large entities have an opinion on the situation that is then publicized as the congruent opinion of the fanbase.

Based upon the deep reading done of both neutral and emotional Tweets, I disagree with the large percentage of neutrality detected by CH. Some Tweets inside the neutral classification still seemed to express some emotion regarding the incidents of the respective universities. Those posts often included words that indicated surprise, sadness or disgust. While surprise is not an emotion on Ekman's scale, the level of shock some users had indicates an avenue for an emotion CH could not code. For example, some "neutral" Tweets related to D.J. Durkin's reinstatement and subsequent firing mentioned surprise or uneasiness about his return. Those posts also indicated shock about the board's final decision. Such Tweets, while classified as neutral, are not considered neutral when analyzed.

Further analysis did show that CH correctly categorized the Tweets that were emotional. Levels of sadness, disgust and joy from CH appear to match what was identified on a qualitative

level for all three colleges. This proves there are a wide array of emotions experienced by college football fans during a scandal, but the percentage of emotional levels varies. Deep reading indicated these variables may include, but are not limited to: location, severity of the crime/incident, size of the fan base, and level at which it jeopardizes the team's success.

Data collected suggests that the experience varies pending the allegations, the fan base and the success of the team. Ohio State fans expressed higher levels of joy and sadness during the period of the scandal involving coach Urban Meyer, but many of those Tweets identified as joy were unrelated to the incident being studied. In that same time frame, graduations were being held and those posts filtered into the search.

The results indicate that some Ohio State fans connect graduation and the academic experience to the football experience. In nearly 50 percent of the joy posts in the sample, Tweets about graduating also gave appreciation to the Ohio State Buckeyes for giving that student an enjoyable experience in college. Despite being in the middle of a scandal, these fans chose to BIRG by celebrating their accomplishments and attributing part of that success to football instead of mentioning anything about Urban Meyer or the domestic violence investigation. This shows that there may be a portion of a fan base which knowingly chooses to avoid discussions that could be seen as negative or controversial for a program, but includes that program in posts when it comes to success.

CH identified Tweets representative of sadness of which, fans did reference Meyer, the Ohio State football program, and the alleged cover-up. Many were disappointed that Meyer was implicated as a part of the scandal, believing he had nothing to do with what happens in another person's relationship and blamed the victim for trying to ruin the football program. Serving as

the dominant opinion, those posts drowned out other Tweets sympathizing with the victim or calling for the firing of Meyer and other coaches.

In regard to Maryland's scandal involving the death of player Jordan McNair, most Twitter users who showed emotion expressed sadness. Many posts were targeted at how the university handled the investigation and the outrage at the initial decision to retain head coach D.J. Durkin after the investigation was over. Following sadness, joy was the second most popular emotion. Those Tweets came from times where McNair was being honored by other players or community members as well as the day Durkin was finally fired from the university.

Data from Baylor University's sexual assault saga displayed more disgust than any other emotion. Other than joy, disgust was the only other category to register a double-digit percentage in the sample set. In the cases of the other two universities, sadness was the dominant negative emotion. The change in results implies that the severity of the allegations prompted a different response from fans. The accusations of multiple players sexually assaulting women on the campus with no punishment created a sense of disdain for coach Art Briles and the football program as well as an increased amount of fear compared to the other cases.

This study also looked to explore if the discussions of winning or losing still appeared when these scandals were being investigated. Overall, the discussion did not come up often in the samples. Ohio State fans only discussed winning or losing when predicting how many games they would win that season or how many years it had been since rival Michigan beat them in football. The team is known as a powerhouse in college football and finished the 2018 season with a record of 13-1 including a bowl game victory.

Maryland rarely been in the big discussions of college football's elite teams, and does not receive the national attention that other schools in this study do. Conversation peaked on the day

Maryland beat Texas, who was nationally ranked in the top-25 at the start of the 2018 season. Following the news of McNair's death, the victory was dedicated to him by many players and staff members. After that, the discussion quickly dropped once again, and Maryland finished the season 5-7.

Baylor had the most talk of win-loss records in the sample data. Much of the conversation surrounded recruiting as the team landed a top recruiting class in the midst of the scandal. Toward the end of the investigation, the discussion turned into a matter of how Baylor would perform next season should Briles be fired. Other Tweets discussed the school's priorities accusing them of valuing winning over the safety of students. The season the scandal broke out, the Bears finished 7-6.

The data collected presents a theory that programs more known for success in football have fans with higher expectations and therefore, find more concerns with winning and losing than smaller programs. Results also suggest there is a difference in discussions and attitudes depending on the allegations surrounding an investigation and the facts released through the media.

Of the three incidents, Ohio State's gained the most attention on social media. Per the media outlets filtered in this study through CH, the domestic violence case had nearly twice as many articles on it as the death of Jordan McNair and found more coverage on television. Part of this reason likely involves the pedigree of the programs and the historic success behind them. Ohio State, as mentioned before, is the most successful of the three in terms of national championships and successful players going on to the NFL. That level of success likely contributes to how often Ohio State came up in discussion.

Baylor University has also seen some sense of success in its football program making it to bowl games consistently under Art Briles and winning two conference championships. However, despite sexual assault being a crime that carries more legal punishment than what Zach Smith was initially charged with Baylor received less media coverage. Smith was originally charged with aggravated battery which was then downgraded to disorderly conduct. It's possible, due to the pedigree of Baylor that the traction was not as much as Ohio State, despite charges that could be seen as more severe in a court of law.

## LIMITATIONS

As is the issue with any qualitative research, the data compiled here is highly subjective based on the Tweets pulled, their place on the emotional spectrum and the researcher's interpretation. The data in these types of studies is intertwined with individual perspectives and therefore more difficult to assess due to a lack of exact structure or rule on how to analyze the information. It is possible that another researcher and a different set of Tweets would come to a different conclusion than what was found here. Because this study is qualitative, it's possible I missed a certain group of Tweets or other form of data that would possibly led to a different result.

Using different filters could also provide different Tweets if the study were to be recreated. Removing some keywords from the search or creating the monitor to look for one keyword "or" another compared to the keyword "and" keyword search that happened here. It's possible there are other keywords I didn't think of related to each team or that people use fewer keywords than expected when Tweeting to their audience. I believe those fans living near each other understand when one of their own is referencing a certain person, place or incident meaning the context of the Tweet is different than what was found in this study.

Crimson Hexagon, while serving as a leading social listening platform, is not a perfect program. The algorithm for identifying sentiment and emotion in Tweets is not completely clear. CH fails to note why one Tweet may be considered neutral over emotional or why a Tweet expresses anger instead of disgust. CH cannot identify the intent of a Tweet and only what it is taught that post could mean. CH undergoes constant updates to clarify that algorithm and ensure thorough results, but the program, for now still has flaws.

To adjust for this potential for error, a deep reading of the selected Tweets must occur. This process includes reading and categorizing each post based on the user's Tweets before and after the selected post on the timeline. Examining the posts surrounding the one highlights a user's intention and level of fandom. Tweets that mention keywords such as "unfortunate" or "disappointing" became part of the sadness sentiment. Posts saying something about "celebration" or "hope" classified as joy. Following the same method surrounding Tweets expressing disgust include words such as "violation" or "disgrace."

Additionally, the use of local media outlets heavily impacted the filtration system for this study. Having to rid all of the Tweets and ReTweets from the data set adjusted the percentage of emotions displayed. Including the responses to Tweets from these outlets as well as original content may also have an effect on the data.

Rivalry may also play a factor into how the data was processed and interpreted. Schools like Baylor come from a large state with many in-state rivals such as Texas Christian University and University of Texas. Tweets from fans of these other universities may have fallen into the data sample using the right keywords. Future studies would have to find a way to ensure the Tweets collected come from actual fans of the team and not others that could express a different emotion such as finding joy in another school's struggle.

This study does not prove that fans of a sports team care more or less about the team compared to the victims in these attacks, but it does provide an idea of where these fans place their priorities when it comes to situations such as these. Further studies such as surveys and linear designed tests should be conducted to determine what the true correlation between fans and these sports scandals actually is.

Future research should also use other social networking sites to gain a better perspective

of how fans react to incidents on each platform and if there is a difference based on the format of posting or level of privacy. Instagram and Facebook have been in the news often for security breaches whereas Twitter appears less often.



## CONCLUSION

College football fans of teams involved in scandals vary in the context of their Tweets and the emotional responses. The results of the study support the theories of BIRGing and CORFing presented by Wann and Branscombe (1990). As the schools won major games, discussion of wins and losses increased, but drastically plummeted when news involving certain allegations broker or were updated. Additionally, Tweets about accomplishments like graduations were connected to football despite a scandal unfolding at the same time. Twitter users speak more about the success of the programs than the toxic culture that may exist within them. Those who do voice concerns are seen as the dissenting opinion while most decide to refrain from taking sides. This further supports the spiral of silence theory as the unpopular opinion is suppressed while the other opinion rises (Noelle-Neumann 1974).

Neutrality occurred in a majority of the sample data, indicating many sports fans do not publicly voice their opinion on a scandal and understand the severity of the allegations. It's possible the showings of emotion seen in the media stem from a small group's opinion that is then exploited to be the feelings of the majority. Future study should compare the media opinion to that of the actual fan base during a scandal.

Fans who did show emotion expressed either joy, sadness or disgust when discussing these incidents on Twitter. There are those who become upset with the program for the method of handling the investigations and others who place more blame on the victim (Rentschler, 2014). Results show there may be a small correlation between the emotion expressed and how fans believe it will impact the program or coach. Some fans claim Urban Meyer had no reason to intervene in a domestic violence case involving his assistant coach, citing it as a personal matter. As a result, Meyer should stay and continue the success he had at Ohio State. Fans in Maryland

say although it is unfortunate, that McNair's death was a freak accident, and Durkin should not have been punished. In that same vein, as reports came out that there were other cases of abuse in the program, that sentiment changed and became the dissenting opinion. Some Baylor fans appreciate and still do appreciate Art Briles, saying he could not control the actions of his players when not on the field and shouldn't be held responsible for the sexual assault investigations. But as more reports came out, the level of sadness and disgust rose as allegations appeared that he knew about the attacks and did nothing about it.

Those three emotions are the most frequent during this study. If that trend carries to other investigations, then it implies fans will BIRG the positive things that happen during a scandal, taking to social media to discuss them. However, fans will likely CORF if negative information is publicized such as the firing of a beloved coach. Negative information and unpopular opinions continue to be surprised as supported by spiral of silence. These emotions are a window into what fans are more likely to BIRG or CORF and as such, what conversations get lost in the spiral such as the severity of a situation.

The social climate happening during a scandal may play into how much traction it receives. Ohio State's domestic abuse scandal happened at the height of #MeToo receiving the most media attention of the three. Baylor's sexual assault investigation was wrapping up as #MeToo began to find an identity in the media. While it did gain attention for the severity of the allegations, it was not as heavily covered as OSU. Of the three Maryland's incident is the only one to involve a loss of life, yet it was the least covered of them all. This indicates that social climate and pedigree could work together to shape how media coverage of an incident will unfold.

With this information, we can conclude that fans of certain sports teams do not often refer

to the victims or express emotion toward them, only focusing on how these scandals impact the program. This data could serve in future studies about the prioritization of sports in regard to human conflict.

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## **VITA**

Joshua Rashad Jackson, born in Marrero, Louisiana, received his bachelor's degree from Louisiana State University while working as a journalist covering arts and culture. As his interests in the workings of mass communication grew, he would then continue pursuing higher education by returning to Louisiana State University and enrolling in the master's program for mass communication. Upon completion of his master's degree, he will begin working on his doctorate while continuing his pursuit of doctoral degree.