Abstract

Web 2.0 technologies such as social media platforms have allowed AFL players to interact, communicate and impact upon the daily lives of fans. This will be discussed by exploring what Web 2.0 is and how it used by AFL players today. It was found that the high pressure of playing AFL and the lack of training and education has led to male players having incidents involving alcohol, drugs, and sexual assault. These issues are further perpetuated by incidents being spread on social media, having a detrimental effect to the reputation of players, clubs and the AFL. Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow young fans to easily interact and follow AFL players but can be models for inappropriate behavior. These issues will be discussed by analyzing how AFL players use social media and the impacts upon society when they behave inappropriately.

AFL Players: Adjusting to life as a professional footballer and how inappropriate behavior spreads via Web 2.0

Many industries have adjusted to Web 2.0 and the Australian Football League (AFL) has embraced new technologies in order to connect with fans. People can follow AFL players online and many elite sports performers are seen as celebrities (Kelly, & Hickey, 2007). With this celebrity status comes a highly pressurized environment and sometimes male AFL players are seen doing the wrong thing. The misbehaviours of a small number of AFL players continue to make the news (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007). This bad behaviour can have a negative effect on the people that follow the AFL players. Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow young fans to easily interact and follow AFL players but can give be models for inappropriate behavior.

Web 2.0 introduced us to a completely different landscape when it comes to how we use the internet. The web has become a place where platforms are integrated together for communication and community (Fuchs, 2010, p.768). Existing technologies were taken and made to become places where people could interact with each other and collaborate. Services that are most characteristic of Web 2.0 are blogs, social media and wiki's (Aguiton, & Cardon, 2007, p.51). Of these social media

has had a profound effect on society and culture. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram allow people to connect in ways never before seen and people use social media to form new social connections (Grudz, Wellman, & Takhteyey, 2011, p.1294). It also allows people to form spaces online where people who follow AFL players or teams can go and communicate and collaborate together. Web 2.0 can create communities and friendships (Aguiton, & Cardon, 2007, p.55) and these friendships can extend to the real world. Players can communicate with fans online and then when fans see them in real life it enhances the experience. However social media and Web 2.0 are not always used in good ways and Web 2.0 can be seen as a risk to society that will destroy culture (Fuchs, 2010, p.766). It allows AFL players to share inappropriate content with millions of people instantly and it can spread quickly. Having an audience is power, an AFL audience can advertise their product (Fuchs, 2010, p.768) and if the product is bad it seems to spread faster. Social spaces are used to produce the qualities of the overall social system (Fuchs, 2010, p.769). AFL players can control the qualities that are displayed online to society and sometimes these behaviours are inappropriate. The AFL has embraced Web 2.0 and social media, but sometimes players display the wrong behaviours. Examples of AFL players behaving inappropriately on social media will be discussed and show the impact it can have on society.

AFL is not just a sport, it is one of the largest entertainment industries in Australia (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.5). Millions of people each year go to games and watch on TV which makes the AFL a lucrative business. Australian Rules Football has a long history and generates revenues of over $640 million dollars per year (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.5). Players behaved very differently before the introduction of Web 2.0 and social media. There was no one to share videos on Instagram, there were no team or fan pages on Facebook, and there weren't paparazzi at your door every minute of the day. Modern day journalists use Twitter, fan forums and Facebook to share information with audiences (Sherwood, & Nicholson, 2013, p.942). Things were different and if players got into trouble then it was rarely reported on or was seen as being cool. In the past the job of an AFL footballer was simply to play the game, but it has evolved to be professionals on and off the field (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.6). This can place a lot of pressure on players because being a professional requires

discipline and not every player can maintain this (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.7). It is obvious that society is changing due to web 2.0 and is creating social problems that need to be solved (Fuchs, 2010, p.767). This is particularly true for the AFL and if these social problems are not solved then it can have detrimental effects on the brand of the AFL. Fuchs (2010) suggests that Web 2.0 was likely created for marketing purposes, a way to sell itself and brand online (Fuchs, 2010, p.767). The AFL has fully embraced this idea and uses social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram to market the game and its players. With this marketing and promotion comes more pressure and spotlight on individual players, and this pressure can lead to inappropriate behaviour.

AFL players and teams are very active online through social media these days. For example, I follow Dyson Heppell on Instagram who is the captain of the Essendon Football Club. He posts daily updates about his life, his partner, his dog, the gym that he owns, his fitness regime, analysis on previous games, his leadership styles, and promoting the next game. Web 2.0 has given players like Dyson the chance to share their personal expression online and bring fans closer to them as a person. This is mostly a positive experience for fans as they get an insight into the lives of their favourite players and have a chance to connect with them. Online communities are created to engage with fans (Porter, 2015) and this is another chance for people to see what makes players tick and show that they are humans like the rest of us. Facebook fan pages like the one for the Essendon Football Club allow fans to ask the coach and players questions, interact with other fans, and discuss their opinions. It is easy as a fan to see how these interactions make me feel, but what affect does this have on the players? Today social media actively broadcasts any changes in a person's life or any activities that they have coming up (Thompson, 2008). Fans can see every little detail that is going on in a player's life and this can be dangerous. Fans can find out lots of details about players online. These small pieces of information are insignificant on their own, but when pieced together they start to show someone's whole life (Thompson, 2008). AFL players now have a private life and public life (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007). They have the life where they play AFL and the life outside of that. Players should be entitled to privacy, but it is becoming increasingly difficult due to social media. The pressure to perform on-field can lead to bad

behaviour off the field (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007) and that's where social media can have a negative impact for players.

With the high social pedestal that players are put up on they are seen as role models in the community. AFL players can have a really positive impact toward eradicating sexual assault (Swallow, 2015) and other social issues like gender equality. Aspiring AFL players look up to the players of today and want to be just like them. They follow them on social media and idolise what they do and who they are. Social media became the way that people found out what others were doing (Thompson, 2008) and fans can follow the daily lives of players which paints a picture of how a young person should behave. With this huge responsibility comes the expectation that players will behave correctly. The off-field behaviours of elite sports players are under public scrutiny (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.2) and one wrong move can be posted all over social media. When players behave badly, they hurt their own reputation, but they also hurt their club and the AFL (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.2). In late 2018 a video surfaced on social media showing Greater Western Sydney Giants player Shane Mumford snorting a white powder (ABC, 2018). This video spread quickly and had a damaging effect on the reputation of Mumford and the Giants. They were forced to apologise and informed fans that Mumford was in rehabilitation and was being supported. More recently Fremantle player Jesse Hogan was shown on social media in an inebriated state in April 2019, just four days out from the start of the AFL season (News.com.au, 2019). There was backlash online and the club was forced to suspend Hogan from the first game of the season. These incidents affect society and in particular young males. We need to teach them how to behave correctly and have the right values and what they see from AFL players on social media can have a significant impact.

Reports of AFL players behaving inappropriately are fairly common these days, with videos being shared on social media, and tweets or comments being scrutinised. Public scandals include the involvement of sex, drugs, fighting, and drunkenness (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.4). To give this some context here is an example; In 2006

Collingwood AFL player Chad Morrison was caught driving a motor scooter with an alcohol level of .093. At the time he was fined $314 and had his licence suspended, but as he is a public figure in the community the club was fined $200,000 by one of its sponsors and Chad was fined $20,000 by the club and his contract "put on notice" (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.3). Behaving badly can have huge repercussions on a player and club and their social reputation. If a young person sees a player on the news drunk or taking drugs, then they may think that this is the right thing to do. Social media has propagated these incidents and changed the social landscape. When a player behaves badly, they give a public apology and vow to do training and become a better person (Williamson, 2016). This feels rehearsed and scripted and not very genuine (Williamson, 2016). It feels more like something that the player has to do and once it is done then everything goes back to normal. This is not how things work in the real world and if a general member of the public behaved the same way they would lose their job (Williamson, 2016). It demonstrates irresponsible behaviour and provides inappropriate models for young people.

The AFL has several policies in place for players and one of them relates to young people. This policy sets out the behaviours required of AFL players towards children and young people (AFL, 2019). It highlights their responsibility of being role models to young people and the potential impacts their behaviour can have. Some of the highlights are that AFL players should encourage positive behaviour (AFL, 2019), AFL players should promote equality and diversity (AFL, 2019), and AFL players should not accept or request to be friends using a personal social media account (AFL, 2019). This shows that players need to be instilling the right values in young people and nurturing them. As young people follow the lives of players on social media, they start to form an emotional connection (Grudz, Wellman, & Takhteyey, 2011, p.1311). This connection is important as social media sites allow the creation of two-way channels between AFL players/teams and fans (Hopkins, 2013). The goal of players and teams connecting with fans is to improve the relationship and connection that fans have. AFL teams have implemented social media pages like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to improve the communication they have with fans (Hopkins, 2013). They wanted fans to be more engaged and feel a more personal connection. As team's improve their social media communication it increases memberships,

attendances at games, TV audiences and merchandise sales (Hopkins, 2013). This means more money and recognition for players and clubs. This is great but needs to be balanced with the social responsibility that players have with young people.

In the early 2000's there were countless incidents of bad behaviour by players and due to this there has been a variety of education and training introduced (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.2). The catalyst for the education programs was in 2004 when two players from St Kilda were investigated for an alleged sexual assault (Swallow, 2015). This was the final straw for the AFL, and it was forced to take drastic action. It was easy for all the clubs to get on board with more training and education for players as they wanted to protect themselves and their players. Players are often not aware of how they should behave when they start playing AFL at a young age (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.3). It can all be a bit overwhelming and if left unchecked players can do the wrong thing. Training is provided on an ongoing basis to modern day players surrounding the topics of gambling, drugs and alcohol, racism and harassment, and sexual harassment (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.7). AFL players behaving badly has drawn unwanted attention to the game, but for over 10 years the AFL has been teaching young players about their responsibilities and respect for others (Swallow, 2015). Former players are training young players in a range of topics and one of those is sexual harassment towards women. Young players are presented with education where they are asked "what do you do on a daily basis to avoid sexual assault?" Most of the time the answer is "nothing". They are then asked, "I want you to go home and ask your sister, mother, or girlfriend what they do on a daily basis to avoid sexual assault" (Swallow, 2015). This is a powerful message and really asks the players to think about how their behaviour affects others. The AFL has another policy in regard to respect and the policy outlines the AFL's commitment to gender equality (AFL, 2019). Things seem to be going in the right direction for training and education for male AFL players and this can only be a good thing.

Web 2.0 has introduced a number of ways that AFL players and teams can interact with their fans. Web 2.0 is a place for people to connect, an environment where

people can form communities and have discussions (Forman, Kern, & Gil-Egui, 2012). The AFL has embraced this culture and leveraged off it to increase revenue. Social media has introduced ways for players to directly connect with fans and give them an insight into their daily lives. AFL players are seen as celebrities and their actions can have a huge impact on society. Young fans follow AFL players on social media and see them as role models for how they should act. Talent is not the only thing recruiters look for these days, they are also looking at the character of a player and if they think they will stay out of trouble (Hickey, & Kelly, 2007, p.10). The impacts of bad behaviours can be detrimental for clubs and something that they can avoid by choosing the right players. Training and education programs are very common in the AFL today and seem to be having a positive impact. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow young fans to easily interact and follow AFL players but what they see can shape the person they become, what their values are, and how they behave. AFL players have a responsibility to behave correctly and show young people how to be successful and positive members of the community.

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