

Racism in the Electronic Age: Role of Online Forums in Expressing Racial Attitudes About American Indians

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This study investigated racial attitudes about American Indians that are electronically expressed in newspaper online forums by examining the University of North Dakota's *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo used for their athletic teams. Using a modified Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology to analyze over 1,000 online forum comments, the research team generated themes, domains, and core ideas from the data. The core ideas included (a) *surprise*, (b) *power and privilege*, (c) *trivialization*, and (d) *denigration*. The findings indicated that a critical mass of online forum comments represented ignorance about American Indian culture and even disdain toward American Indians by providing misinformation, perpetuating stereotypes, and expressing overtly racist attitudes toward American Indians. Results of this study were explained through the lens of White power and privilege, as well as through the framework of two-faced racism (Picca & Feagin, 2007). Results provide support to previous findings that indicate the presence of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, or logos can negatively impact the psychological well-being of American Indians.

Keywords: racial attitudes, Native-themed sports mascots, white privilege, internet online forums, two-faced racism, status, American Indian/Native American

As the world changes, becoming smaller and more connected, our forms of communication are also changing. The emergence of the Internet has provided people with direct access to information and multiple modes of communication (Suarez-Balcazar, Balcazar, & Taylor-Ritzler, 2009). Approximately 92 million Americans log on to the Internet on an average day to watch and read the news, take advantage of search engines, and check Web-based electronic mail accounts (Rainie & Shermak, 2005). Society's need for rapid and far-reaching communication has resulted in two new popular forms of online communication: blogs and online forums. Blogs are considered convenient, online journals that allow the creators to update information (i.e., posts) while also responding to other online users' responses, thus creating online interaction among participants (Chau & Xu, 2007). Like blogs, online forums also facilitate discussion, but they are not necessarily associated with a single individual. Online forums are often focused around a topic of discussion that may have been created by an individual or a group of people (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007). Online versions of newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*) gen-

erally include an online forum component for readers to react to an article and to facilitate asynchronous interactive discussion.

Online forums can serve as a useful tool for spreading information and sharing ideas. However, those who communicate through this medium sometimes use it to propagate racist literature, symbols, and ideologies, while simultaneously providing ways to discuss these ideas (Gerstenfeld, Grant, & Chiang, 2003; Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). The use of online forums for the expression of racial ideologies paradoxically allows for a sense of relative anonymity within an otherwise public context (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Glaser et al., 2002; Melican & Dixon, 2008). Because public opinion has shifted to condemn blatant racist attitudes and behaviors in public settings (Picca & Feagin, 2007), explicit expressions of racist attitudes have begun to find a home in electronic communication formats (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Melican & Dixon, 2008). These types of racist messages, perhaps because of lower standards of nontraditional Internet news sites (e.g., blogs, online forums), are able to spread out to a larger audience, with greater ease.

Online forums are powerful and popular contemporary forms of communication, and their ability to facilitate potentially racist messages warrants further investigation. This study intends to examine racial attitudes expressed toward American Indians in online forums. In meeting this goal, this study will analyze newspaper online forums from a community with a Native-themed sports nickname and logo (i.e., University of North Dakota *Fighting Sioux*). This analysis will examine the perspectives of those who support Native-themed nicknames and logos in an effort to provide a better understanding of how online forums are used to express attitudes toward American Indian people and communities.

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Native-Themed Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos

In 2005, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued a resolution recommending the immediate retirement of American Indian mascots, symbols, imagery, and personalities in sporting endeavors. According to the resolution, this practice should be discontinued because it undermines the educational experiences of members of all communities, establishes an unwelcome and hostile learning environment for American Indian students, has a negative impact on the self-esteem of American Indian children, undermines the ability of American Indian Nations to portray accurate and respectful images of their culture, and may represent a violation of the civil rights of American Indian people (APA, 2005). In addition to the APA, an estimated 117 organizations (e.g., American Counseling Association, Society of Indian Psychologists, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) have produced resolutions against Native-themed mascots, yet no single comparable organization has produced a resolution in support of this practice (American Indian Sports Team Mascots [AISTM], 2009).

Emerging research supports the contentions of these resolutions. Fryberg, Markus, Oyserman, and Stone (2008) found that Native-themed sports mascots have an impact on the psychological functioning of both American Indian and European American students. After viewing images of Native-themed mascots, American Indian students reported significantly higher levels of depressed state self-esteem, lower levels of community worth, and fewer achievement related possible selves. These findings suggest that Native-themed mascots remind American Indians of the narrow view society has of them, which limits the possibilities they see for themselves and negatively affects their psychological well-being (Fryberg et al., 2008). Results also demonstrated that European American students who were exposed to images of Native-themed mascots reported higher levels of self-esteem. This finding indicates a potentially insidious level of privilege enjoyed by majority culture participants whose culture is not subjected to racialized mascotry.

In spite of research and institutional resolutions, the omnipresence of stereotypic American Indian images in society contributes to public belief that Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos must be acceptable (King, Davis-Delano, Staurowsky, & Baca, 2006). However, the unquestioned acceptance of this practice cloaks racism in a seemingly benign disguise (Staurowsky, 2007). Those opposed to racialized mascots, nicknames, and logos contend that using American Indian imagery in sports-related endeavors misuses sacred cultural symbols and spiritual practices (e.g., eagle feathers, drums, chanting), perpetuates stereotypes of American Indians (e.g., bloodthirsty savage, noble savage, a historical race that only exists in past-tense status), and denies American Indians control over societal definitions of themselves (Baca, 2004; King, 2004; King et al., 2006; King et al., 2002; Pewewardy, 1991; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 1999; Staurowsky, 2004; Staurowsky, 2007; Vanderford, 1996; Williams, 2007). In addition, Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos can create a racially hostile educational environment for all students (Baca, 2004; King et al., 2002). American Indian students at institutions with Native-themed mascots are subjected to overt acts of racism (e.g., being spat upon, called derogatory names) and covert racial microaggressions (i.e., cumulative effects of being singled out to be

mocked through racial mascotry), while European American children are given an implicit sense of racial superiority because their race is not singled out for racial mascotry in a state-sanctioned institution (i.e., school; Baca, 2004; King et al., 2002).

For these reasons, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2005) enacted a policy that precludes member institutions from hosting NCAA championships if they utilize American Indian imagery, mascots, or nicknames in their athletic program. The NCAA policy (2005) states:

A human dignity issue, racial stereotyping dehumanizes and results in a perpetuation of institutional racism and negative treatment. With this in mind, after four years of careful review, the NCAA Executive Committee enacted a policy that aligns the organization's core principles of cultural diversity, civility, respect and nondiscrimination with the practice of creating a nonhostile and educational environment for its championships. (para. 2)

The NCAA identified 19 colleges with American Indian imagery that needed to comply with the policy (Staurowsky, 2007). Subsequently, one institution (i.e., University of North Dakota [UND]) sued the NCAA to keep its Native-themed nickname and logo.

UND Fighting Sioux

In 1930, UND changed its sports nickname from the *Flickertails* (i.e., small prairie rodent) to the *Fighting Sioux*. According to Williams (2006), few records exist to explain the nickname change, despite contemporary claims that the nickname was created to honor the Dakota/Nakota/Lakota (i.e., Sioux) people. However, editorials written in the UND student newspaper at the time of the name change discuss the merits of the new nickname. These editorials enumerate the beliefs that Sioux are good at exterminating bison (i.e., team nickname of rival North Dakota State University), that Sioux are considered warlike and of fine physique, and that the word *Sioux* rhymes easily for the purpose of chants and songs (Annis, 1999).

With American Indians representing the largest racial minority group in North Dakota (e.g., nearly 5% of the North Dakota population, nearly 3% of the UND student population; Census Bureau, 2007; UND, 2008; Williams, 2007), the nickname and logo has been a source of ongoing controversy at UND. Calls for the removal of the nickname began in earnest in 1969 with the formation of the UND's first American Indian student organization, the University of North Dakota Indian Association (UNDIA; Annis, 1999). Since this time, continued resolutions for the removal of the name have been made by 21 separate American Indian related organizations at UND (Building Roads Into Diverse Groups Empowering Students (BRIDGES), 2000). Throughout this time period, American Indian students and nickname opponents have been the victims of ridicule and racial degradation by nickname supporters and individuals from rival institutions (Annis, 1999; Williams, 2006; Williams, 2007).

In response to the 2005 NCAA ruling, UND sued the NCAA in an effort to keep its nickname and logo. In October 2007, after 2 years of litigation, both sides reached a settlement agreement. According to the settlement, UND was given 3 years to obtain permission from the local tribes to continue to use the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. The day after the settlement, the tribal

chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation publicly reaffirmed their opposition to the nickname and logo (Kolpack, 2007), a stance that tribal leaders had maintained throughout the process. The issue has received heightened attention from the community in this time period, and continues to be a hotly contested issue to this day.

Current Study

By examining the context involving UND's use of the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo, this study intends to investigate racial attitudes toward American Indians that are electronically expressed in online forums. Analyzing online forum comments addressing this issue may yield results that provide insight into perspectives of those who support keeping Native-themed mascots, nicknames and logos. Proponents of this practice contend that they honor and respect American Indians with racialized mascotry (King, 2004; King et al., 2006; King et al., 2002; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 2004). The results of this study have the potential to empirically support (or refute) this contention, as well as highlight how contemporary communication mediums are being used to express racial attitudes.

Method

The research team analyzed online forum comments generated in response to newspaper articles about the UND *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. These comments were gathered using the online search function of two newspapers (one student-based and one community-based) that provide extensive coverage of events related to UND. The online forum comments for this study were posted over a 2-year period between August 2005 and October 2007. August 2005 marks the implementation of the NCAA policy, and October 2007 represents the date of the release of the settlement agreement in UND's lawsuit against the NCAA. Thus, examining the forum comments over this time period represents sustained salience and attention paid to an issue that has received heightened attention in the greater UND community over the past 30 years (Annis, 1999).

Out of the 1,699 online forum comments posted over this 2-year period, 1,009 (59%) of these comments were coded by independent reviewers as containing content that supported Native-themed mascots, nickname, and logos. Only 115 (7%) of the 1,699 comments were coded as containing content that opposed Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos, and 575 (34%) forum comments were coded as being neutral. The research team analyzed the 1,009 comments that supported Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos in an effort to meet the study's goals of (a) examining racial attitudes expressed toward American Indians in online forums and (b) analyzing the perspectives of those who support Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos, particularly those who live in a community with a Native-themed nickname and logo (i.e., *Fighting Sioux*). Each newspaper's online forum was monitored by an online editor who was responsible for reviewing comments for taste, tone, and language before posting. However, each publication had a different mechanism for the online editor to regulate this expectation. One newspaper posted comments after a brief delay, and the other newspaper posted

comments immediately but removed them if they were found to contain content that the online editor deemed inappropriate.

The research team analyzed these online forum comments using a modified Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). According to Sue and colleagues (2008), a modified version of CQR is an acceptable methodology to highlight the richness of qualitative research. The modified CQR process involved several steps, including identifying domains, constructing core ideas for each domain, and coding categories to determine the prevalence of each of the categories in the sample. The research team received feedback from external auditors, who are individuals independent of the research team that review the research team's initial coding results in an effort to provide external perspective and strengthen the CQR process. While CQR has been widely used in qualitative research of diversity and ethnic minority issues (e.g., Constantine, Alleyne, Caldwell, McRae, & Suzuki, 2005; Knox, Hess, Williams, & Hill, 2003; Park-Taylor et al., 2008), there has been an increased recent utilization of modified versions of CQR (e.g., Clark, Spanierman, Cabana, & Soble, 2008; Sanchez, Greenberg, Liu, & Vilain, 2009; Sue et al., 2008).

Researchers and External Auditors

There were four members on the research team. One member was a male biracial (European American and American Indian) counseling psychology faculty member. Two team members were female European American counseling psychology doctoral students, and one of the female team members attended UND as an undergraduate. The final member of the research team was a male European American master's level counseling student. The external auditors consisted of a male European American professor emeritus and his wife, a female American Indian retired professor. The external auditors were chosen because of their expertise and joint endeavors in the field of social justice, particularly as it relates to Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos.

Research team members discussed journal articles on conducting CQR (Hill et al., 2005, 1997) and examples of projects using both CQR and modified CQR methodologies. To ensure that biases do not unduly influence the results, it is recommended that researchers discuss potential values, assumptions, and biases prior to engaging in the CQR process (Fassinger, 2005; Hill et al., 1997). Assumptions of team members included a belief that there would be much support for the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo, that the level of relative anonymity would allow contributors to post their ideas in ways that they might not express verbally, and that there might be some racist rhetoric directed toward American Indians in the online forums. The purpose of acknowledging such assumptions is to minimize bias in the data analysis process. In addition, because the team consisted of one faculty member and three graduate students, the researchers explicitly acknowledged the role of power differential among team members, and continually monitored this dynamic throughout the process in order to minimize this potential bias.

Procedure

Research team members initially worked on their own to read the online forum comments, independently coding the data to identify

preliminary themes. The research team then came together to discuss their individually derived themes and to develop a consensus on emergent domains and categories. Domains represent clusters of common notions (i.e., categories) derived from the independently created themes. Core ideas (i.e., notions derived from the categories and domains) serve to detail and holistically integrate the data, while remaining close to the original data source (Hill et al., 2005, 1997). In extracting categories and domains from the data, the research team members presented, discussed, and negotiated their own analytical impressions of the data until a consensus was reached. These preliminary results (i.e., categories, domains, themes) were then sent to the external auditors for their feedback in an effort to curtail groupthink tendencies among research team members and to encourage diverse viewpoints. After receiving this feedback, the research team met to incorporate the perspectives of the external auditors in order to compile the final categorization of domains and categories through consensus. Additionally, two independent graduate students who were not involved in the research team's modified CQR process read through the online forum comments. In lieu of the cross-analysis (i.e., general, typical, variant) procedure of CQR (Hill et al., 1997), our modified version of CQR incorporated the independent coders' results as a reasonable proxy for this cross-analysis procedure. These two independent coders used the categories to code for the presence of each theme within the online forum comments, and corresponding percentages were calculated. These percentages provided an account of the prevalence of each category within the data in an effort to strengthen the methodological rigor of the study.

Results

In the modified CQR analysis of the 1,009 online forum comments that supported Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos, the research team members produced 117 overlapping yet independently derived themes. From these themes, the consensus building

process yielded 13 categories and four domains. The domains derived from the data included (a) *surprise*, (b) *power and privilege*, (c) *trivialization*, and (d) *denigration* (Table 1). Independent coders read through the online forum comments and coded for the presence of the 13 categories within the postings ($n = 1099$) that were initially coded as supporting Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos. Cohen's kappa among the independent coders was .90, indicating an acceptable level of interrater reliability. The differences among coders were reconciled, producing final percentages for each of the 13 categories within the entire sample ($n = 1,699$) of online forum comments (Table 1). We calculated category prevalence rates as a percentage of the total sample of 1,699 (rather than based on the subset of 1,099 comments from which the category themes were generated) to reflect the likelihood (i.e., prevalence) that a reader would come across these categories if they read the actual online forum comments.

Domain 1: Surprise

The first domain referred to a sense of surprise about the prospect of removing the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. These online forum comments reflected a critical mass of posts that expressed genuine disbelief that people could have a negative reaction to *Fighting Sioux*. This domain was supported by three categories, which were represented by the research team in interrogative form: (a) *What? This is a problem?*; (b) *Why now?*; and (c) *Why us?*. In a post in the first category, *What? This is a problem?*, one individual stated, "I'm trying to understand what it is about the Sioux logo at UND that hurts anyone?" Another individual posted, "During my years at UND, I never saw any 'hostile or abusive' behavior toward a tribe of Native Americans. In fact, I learned more about Native American culture and history in 4 years at UND than the other 24 years of my life." The online forum data suggest that there seems to be a prevalent sense of confusion over how the nickname and logo could be construed as negative. The comments in this category were found in 14% of the total sample of online

Table 1
Expressions of Attitudes That Support Native-Themed Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos (Domains, Themes, Core Ideas)

<i>Surprise</i>	<i>Power/privilege</i>	<i>Trivialization</i>	<i>Denigration</i>
1. What? This is a problem? ($n = 243$; 14%)	1. We are the victims ($n = 368$; 22%)	1. Minimize the issue ($n = 130$; 8%)	1. Attack credibility/ legitimacy of dissenters ($n = 552$; 32%)
How can the nickname be seen as negative?	We are being victimized by reverse racism and PC society	There are more important issues for Indians to focus on	These people just want attention for their own personal agendas
2. Why now? ($n = 163$; 10%)	2. Expectations of gratitude ($n = 364$; 21%)	2. Claim pragmatic opposition ($n = 338$; 20%)	2. Vilify Indians ($n = 125$; 7%)
The nickname wasn't a problem before	Indians should be thankful the nickname honors them	Changing the nickname and logo would cost too much	Indians are savages, drunks, red men, etc.
3. Why us? ($n = 183$; 11%)	Irish people aren't offended by the Notre Dame Fighting Irish nickname	3. Perpetuate misinformation about Indians ($n = 135$; 8%)	3. Punish Indians if nickname/logo removed ($n = 115$; 7%)
The NCAA allowed other schools to keep their nickname	3. Justification ($n = 285$; 17%)	Removing the nickname would cause Indians to lose the benefits extended to them	If the nickname is taken away, we should take away Indian educational programs and funding
	4. Paternalism ($n = 416$; 24%)		
	Just get over it		

Note. Percentages are calculated out of the total sample of 1,699 online forum comments. Percentages do not add up to 100% because many individual online forum comments contained more than one category theme. NCAA = National Collegiate Athletic Association.

forum comments ($n = 1,699$). Posts in the second category, *Why now?*, were found in 10% of the sample, and questioned why the opposition toward the use of *Fighting Sioux* is taking place now, and cited UND's history and permission to use the logo and nickname. One individual commented, "Honestly why now, UND has had this nickname for so long, why now." Another individual stated:

The point I tried to make (and a darn good one at that) is why weren't the native [sic] Americans offended 50 or 60 years ago by the name? Why be offended now if generations of native [sic] Americans before were not offended by the exact same thing.

The sense of surprise is reinforced because of the perception that "permission was granted at one time in history."

The third category, *Why us?*, involved posts that questioned why UND is being targeted by the NCAA, while other universities were not subjected to such treatment. The comments in this category were found in 11% of the sample of online forum comments. For example, one individual asked, "Why is the NCAA trying so hard to force UND to change and others to keep their name?" These comments often referenced Florida State University, who received permission from the Seminole Nation in Florida to continue to use their Seminole mascot, nickname, and logo. Comments in this category suggested that UND should also receive this special dispensation to keep their *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo.

Domain 2: Power and Privilege

The second domain involved comments that reflected power and privilege, both exerted over others and perceived to be denied to themselves. These online forum comments indicated a sense of ownership of the nickname and logo by commenters, combined with an expectation that all parties involved would be active participants in celebrating "being Sioux." Four categories were generated within the power and privilege domain (a) *We are the victims*, (b) *expectations of gratitude*, (c) *justification*, and (d) *paternalism*. The comments within the first category, *We are the victims*, took the stance that UND was being victimized by unfair societal pressures (e.g., "reverse racism," "double standards," "political correctness") that were threatening to take away this valued possession. The comments in this category were found in 22% of the sample of online forum comments. For instance, one individual posted:

What about American Indians calling me "whitey" and "racist"? There are always those on the extreme ends of the spectrum. In statistics, you call these "outliers" and disregard them, in this case, as morons. Our society is too PC right now. UND has a chance to reverse the trend of ultra PC and if the NCAA doesn't drop the issue, there is a team of legal gurus chomping at the bit (probably pro bono) to shoot down the NCAA as they have no case.

The second category, *expectations of gratitude*, involved comments that related to a belief that American Indians should be thankful that the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo exists to honor them. The comments in this category were found in 21% of the sample of online forum comments. One individual posted, "The Lakota/Dakota/Nakota people should be honored that 'Whites' thought highly enough of them to proudly take on the name 'they' felt so honorable." The postings in this category indicated that

people had difficulty understanding why American Indians could not be satisfied with this benevolent gesture of choosing to use an American Indian likeness in support of UND athletic teams. The third category, *justification*, involved comments that defended the use of the *Fighting Sioux* logo, and were found in 17% of the sample of online forum comments. Postings in this category justified the use of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos by, among other strategies, comparing the *Fighting Sioux* to how other ethnicities might feel if they were mascots. For example, one post stated, "What is the hub bub? Listen I am proud to be Irish and German. The Fighting Irish make me proud. Can't the fighting Sioux get some pride?" Another post stated:

You don't hear the Irish complaining about Notre Dame. You don't hear the short people complaining about the Dickinson Midgets. You don't hear the boilermakers complaining about Purdue's name. You don't hear any cowboys complaining about several universities using that nickname.

The forum comments represented in this category indicate a desire to elicit favorable comparisons that support the rationale of honor and respect underlying the practice of racial mascotry, according to majority culture perspectives. The fourth category, *paternalism*, conveyed the sentiment that those who were offended should stop being offended by "just getting over it." The comments in this category were found in 24% of the sample of online forum comments. For instance, one individual posted, "GET OVER IT leave everything the way it is your [sic] only hurting yourself!!!" This post, and others like it, conveys a sense that the majority culture knows what's best, and that everyone, particularly American Indians, would be better off if they heeded this advice. In that way, majority culture participants could continue to enjoy the benefits of the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo without having to bother with fully explaining themselves, analogous to an authoritarian parenting style, in which children are expected to do as they are told without asking questions.

Domain 3: Trivialization

A sense of trivialization and minimization of the issue represented the third domain. This domain was encapsulated by a sense that the nickname was insignificant in light of other more salient issues, and people should prioritize their concerns elsewhere. The comments within this domain served to control the dialogue by establishing priorities for American Indians that supersede concern about the nickname issue (rather than simply dismissing the issue with a "Because I said so" explanation, as demonstrated in the *paternalism* category). Trivialization was comprised of three categories: (a) *minimize the issue*, (b) *claim pragmatic opposition*, and (c) *perpetuate misinformation about Indians*. Online forum comments within the first category, *minimize the issue*, suggested that this nickname issue was not a big deal, particularly in relation to other issues facing American Indians. The comments in this category were found in 8% of the sample of online forum comments. One person posted, "How about fighting the problem of alcoholism/drugs on the reservation with as much vigor." Thus, time and energy spent on advocating for removal of the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo should not be a primary concern among American Indians. Comments within the second category, *claim pragmatic opposition*, warned of perceived consequences (e.g.,

decrease in alumni donations, loss of the Engelstad hockey arena) of removing the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. These comments, found in 20% of the sample, highlighted the seemingly prohibitive costs associated with changing the nickname and logo. One individual commented, “Can you imagine the costs of replacing everything plus the Alumni donations lost.” These comments intended to elicit a sense of pragmatism in the decision-making process. Because of the perceived costs associated with changing the nickname and logo, maintaining the status quo would be the most feasible and financially responsible course of action.

The third category, *perpetuate misinformation about Indians*, was comprised of comments that described perceived benefits afforded to American Indians that would become endangered if the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo were removed. Many of the comments indicated that these benefits were directly related to funds received from the nickname and logo, so removing the nickname and logo would risk losing this perceived revenue stream. These online forum comments enumerated perceived undeserved things that American Indians receive, such as free schooling and government funding. The comments in this category were found in 8% of the sample of online forum comments. One individual commented:

And as far as UND not giving the “Native Americans” anything, take a look. How many of them pay for college? Unlike 90% of other students. I pay my dues to go to school here and if they get free schooling why can’t we use their name?

Another post stated:

I pay taxes just like everyone else and we all know that a percentage of that is still going toward reservations today to still pay reparations [sic] that went into effect 120 years ago. Native Americans living on the reservation have had free housing, free money, and even though they claim to be the “true americans” [sic] pay little to no taxes.

These online forum comments portrayed a sense of undeserved entitlement among American Indians, while simultaneously misrepresenting the experience of American Indians by portraying them as a group that collectively receives widespread economic advantages, resulting in a prosperity largely funded and provided by the majority culture. Some forum comments even described amenities (e.g., “luxuries of the reservations”) enjoyed by American Indians that were denied to European Americans. Controlling the dialogue and establishing priorities for American Indian communities allows majority culture participants to trivialize the issue without needing to be factually accurate (e.g., reservations are not luxurious, American Indians do not financially benefit from Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos).

Domain 4: Denigration

The fourth domain involved comments that denigrated American Indians. The online forum comments in this domain strayed from the issue (i.e., *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo), and comments were instead directed toward American Indian people and communities. These posts provided some of the most virulent racial rhetoric found in the data. This final domain was comprised of three categories: (a) *attack credibility and legitimacy of dissenters*, (b) *vilify Indians*, and (c) *punish Indians if nickname/logo removed*. The first domain, *attack credibility and legitimacy of*

dissenters, was represented by comments that questioned the intentions, motives, and integrity of those who oppose the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. The comments in this category were found in 32% of the sample of online forum comments. For instance, one individual commented, “To [tribal chairman]. What do you say? Are you speaking for the majority of your constituents or were your comments based on behalf of just a few of your cronies. Just answer that question, sir.” While using conventional polite language, there is an impolite implication that the tribal chairman is prioritizing his own interests over those of the tribe. Other posts, using less polite language, questioned the authenticity of the tribal chairman’s American Indian heritage. The second category, *vilify Indians*, took the denigration a step further by utilizing stereotypic language to depict American Indians in a highly unfavorable manner. Forum comments in this category referred to American Indians with derogatory terms (e.g., “drunks,” “Indian givers,” “savages”) that elicit negative stereotypes. The comments in this category were found in 7% of the sample of online forum comments. For example, one individual posted:

If the native (who are no more native than I am because they immigrated from Asia over the Bering Strait ice bridge to North America) are so concerned over tarnishing their image, they need to begin in their proverbial “teepee.” A gang of 4 or 5 “savages” brutally attacked a young man down on the “Desert” in Kimball Bottoms. They surrounded him, got him down and proceeded to kick him in the face 4 or 5 times. My son and his friends stepped in and got the young man to safety, and tried to avoid further confrontation. But yet the “kind, gentle fun-loving” thugs continued to threaten my son’s friends. Eventually a “brave (?)” drunk red man (if I can be called a White man, you can be called red) grabbed my son, threw him against a car and threatened to stab him. My son, a highly trained United States soldier, warned him that if he planned to stab my son, it better be good, or he would have to protect himself. The thug backed off, but then mamma stepped in and began to push my son around (I suppose this was a mommas [sic] boy!) [Son’s name] warned sonny to tell his mom to back off. My son did what a true man would do and walked away. He could have legitimately fought back, but didn’t. Now if he would have, no matter what the circumstances, his actions would be considered a hate crime. The tribal council would sue, the ACLU would say my son violated the savages [sic] rights, whatever. So why isn’t it a hate crime when Caucasian (the correct term) young men are attacked by the noble warriors?

The anecdote in this post conveys a dangerous encounter. It is unknown whether the details of the story represent a full and accurate account of the incident, or a romanticized version that portrays the commenter’s son in an altruistic and heroic light, or some combination thereof. However, it is obvious that the person contributing this comment to the online forum chose to use stereotypic and race-based terminology (e.g., savages, teepee, drunk red man, noble warrior) to describe the situation, while also expressing some loose racial ideologies (e.g., a preferred color-based vernacular for racial references, the definition of what historically should constitute being considered “native”). This post, similar to others found in the data, seems to represent an activation of underlying racist attitudes and beliefs. These online forum comments subject readers to stereotypic and pejorative views of American Indians, regardless of who was at fault in the incident. The third category, *punish Indians if nickname/logo removed*,

involved comments that pledged to punish American Indians for their opposition to the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. A number of forum comments described retaliatory and preemptive punitive strikes, such as boycotting American Indian casinos and businesses, as well as threatening to remove funding for American Indian educational programs. The comments in this category were found in 7% of the sample of online forum comments. One individual commented:

Let's cancel the programs and subsidies that are given to these people at the University level as well as at the state level! No more monthly checks, no more free tuition, no more INMED, no more housing subsidies, no more native american [sic] programs. Reservations, gone! Free Health Care, gone! You want equality, you got it!

Another individual posted:

You are all crazy, thinking that we need to change this name! I agree fully that if the name goes then so do the programs. You native americans [sic] can fend for yourselves. I will not go to the casinos, I will lose respect for you. I will not donate any more money, the rink will be demolished, the school will lose its honor, enrollment will undoubtedly drop, and grand forks will become just a cold town the world forgets about, because the hockey team will suffer! And sorry to inform you all, but that's about all Grand forks has going for it! Ive [sic] never been racist until now! Im [sic] tired of all your guy's [sic] crying over this! Perhaps you should spend your time cleaning up the sess pool [sic] of reservations you have created and destroyed. You don't take pride in your reservations, why would you take pride in a logo?

Discussion

This study examined the contemporary medium of online forums, an emerging form of electronic communication and a context that may afford relative anonymity for people to express racial attitudes without as much concern with social desirability (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Glaser et al., 2002; Melican & Dixon, 2008). The expressions of racial attitudes toward American Indians in this study were facilitated by newspaper articles about the UND *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. Within this context, our findings indicated that a critical mass of online forum comments represented ignorance and even disdain toward American Indian culture by providing misinformation about American Indians, perpetuating stereotypes, and expressing overtly racist attitudes.

The first two domains (i.e., *surprise, power, and privilege*) convey a sense of defensiveness on the part of those who support the *Fighting Sioux* nickname and logo. These comments reflect both surprise and attempts to defend a possession that is assumed to be the property of the majority culture. However, in this context, this defensible commodity is *being Indian*. According to Staurowsky (2007), this process of majority culture participants fighting to retain *Indian* status, as they choose to define it, is fueled by White privilege and power. The existence of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos affords European Americans the power to pretend to be American Indian for their own social and economic gain (Staurowsky, 2007). This practice of appropriating another group's culture serves to "exclude contemporary Native Americans from full citizenship by treating them as signs rather than as speakers, as caricatures rather than as players and consumers, as commodities rather than citizens" (Strong, 2004, p. 83).

Sports fans get to be *Indian* without having to *be* Indian, thus avoiding the need to ever deal with issues facing American Indian communities (e.g., societal marginalization, poverty on reservations, securing treaty rights, Type II diabetes, alcoholism).

Because sports fans have the power to *play Indian* without the consent of American Indians, relations between both groups are negatively affected (King et al., 2006; Staurowsky, 2007; Williams, 2006; Williams, 2007). Within the context of college sporting events, the "scripted form of White people "becoming" Indian renders invisible the ignominious history of American Indian genocide by the U.S. government, replacing it with a culturally comfortable and comforting myth of the 'American Indian warrior'" (Staurowsky, 2007, p. 62). Thus, majority culture participants can disengage themselves from historic and ongoing marginalization of American Indians. In its place, a false sense of unity is forged between American Indians and European Americans through the assumption that American Indians feel honored and respected by racialized mascotry (Black, 2002).

The third domain, *trivialization*, also reflects a sense of entitlement and power, but the online forum comments in these categories serve to defend their possession (i.e., *Fighting Sioux* identity) by minimizing the nickname and logo issue, based on majority culture (mis)perception of salient issues facing American Indian communities. The results suggest that the comments within this core idea provide misinformation about American Indians, perpetuate stereotypes about American Indians, and continue to fuel societal ignorance about American Indian culture. The results further suggest that these outcomes may be influenced by majority culture participants exacting control over societal portrayals and definitions of American Indians, and by presuming to define priorities for issues on which American Indian communities should focus their attention.

The findings of this study support contentions of anti-mascot activists and organizations that Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos perpetuate stereotypes and deny American Indians control over societal representations of their culture (King et al., 2006; King et al., 2002; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 1999; Staurowsky, 2007). "White students at UND pay homage to unrealistic, romanticized, dated, and irrelevant interpretations of Native people as if they were the norm" (Williams, 2006, p. 334), leading to the misperception that these images are representative of contemporary American Indians. Doing so perpetuates stereotypes of American Indians (i.e., historical race that only exists in past-tense status), which contributes to majority culture's ignorance of American Indian culture (Staurowsky, 1999). If majority culture participants cannot understand the problem of Native-themed mascots, they cannot understand sovereignty or other issues affecting the quality of life for American Indian communities (Davis, 2002). "An increase in accurate information about Native Americans is viewed as necessary for the achievement of other goals such as poverty reduction, educational advancements, and securing treaty rights" (King et al., 2002, p. 392). Trivializing and minimizing the issue serves the purpose of diverting attention and controlling the discourse so that maintaining the status quo appears to be the best course of action, regardless of the implications it has for American Indian communities.

The final domain, *denigration*, provided the most explicit expressions of racial attitudes. Online forum comments in this domain resonate with the tenets of Two-Faced Racism theory

(Picca & Feagin, 2007). According to this framework, our society has experienced a spatial shift in race relations wherein the boundaries for the expression of racial attitudes are based on shifting social contexts. Thus, racial ideologies, particularly those about societal out-group members (e.g., African Americans), still exist but take place in private (i.e., backstage) settings as opposed to public (i.e., frontstage) settings. Online forums present a unique context to examine racial attitudes because the spatial boundaries delineated by Picca and Feagin (2007) appear to be blurred in this electronic domain. Instead, the relative anonymity afforded to participants of online forums appear to provide the benefits of privacy experienced in backstage settings without the negative social consequences such attitudes would receive in physical frontstage settings. Thus, an online forum commenter may find it easier to call an American Indian a derogatory name in a forum post rather than saying it aloud at a cocktail party. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that those expressing racist attitudes found in the *denigration* core idea seem to be aware that individuals from the out-group (i.e., American Indians) are active members of the online forum community, as evidenced by posts that are directed toward individuals claiming American Indian ancestry who have previously posted comments. However, the results of this study indicate that this awareness did not deter online forum participants from presenting these traditional backstage ideologies within electronic frontstage settings.

Our thematic analysis identified several defensive and offensive positions taken against American Indians that resemble racial microaggressions toward African Americans in the original conceptualization of the two-faced racism framework (Picca & Feagin, 2007). This framework accounts for spatial (i.e., physical) locations where traditional societal norms persist, yet the responses in online mediums explored in this study do not seem to conform to social norms that usually govern racial performances in the frontstage and backstage settings. Thus, the results of this study suggest that the nature of electronic communication (i.e., online forums) may create a new frontier for blatant expression of racist attitudes and beliefs (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Glaser et al., 2002; Melican & Dixon, 2008).

Limitations

There were several limitations in our study. Our results appear to provide support for contemporary applications of the two-faced racism framework (Picca & Feagin, 2007). However, the implications of this application must be interpreted tentatively because the online environment represents a relatively new frontier for examining this theory. In addition, the data was collected exclusively from one institution. Although the results do provide empirical support for many of the contentions of those who oppose the use of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos (Baca, 2004; King, 2004; King et al., 2006; King et al., 2002; Pewewardy, 1991; Russel, 2003; Staurowsky, 1999; Staurowsky, 2004; Vanderford, 1996; Williams, 2007), the results may not be generalizable to other institutions, communities, or teams with a Native-themed mascot, nickname, or logo. The nature of the *Fighting Sioux* controversy embodies a unique context, with a specific sociocultural history between the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Nations, the people who live in North Dakota, and those who attend UND. For example, Clark and colleagues (2008) have investigated the atti-

tudes toward the University of Illinois' defunct mascot, Chief Illiniwik. Their findings may reflect similar processes identified in this study, but the nature of the mascot issue in that particular community may yield nuanced or even different results. Thus, the generalizability of the results of this study should be interpreted accordingly.

Second, in reviewing the modified CQR process employed in this study, the research team reflected on their observations that the more racially virulent posts seemed to resonate strongest in their minds. The research team continued to monitor the original data to ensure that these posts were not overrepresented in the analysis. The iterative process of continuing to check the data with emerging results did warrant the coding of this critical mass of online forum comments as a domain (i.e., *denigration*). Of interest, the categories with the lowest percentages (i.e., *vilify Indians*, *punish Indians if nickname/logo removed*) had similar prevalence rates (7%) to the amount of comments in the entire sample that were coded as containing content that opposed Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos. In spite of the prevalence of these *denigration*-themed posts, it is possible that this domain is underrepresented in the analysis because of the role of the online editor. There were references in the online forum to a number of posts that were deleted. Despite apparent efforts by online editors to monitor the discussion, a contributor to the online forum (not an online editor for the specific periodical) posted the following:

I agree. WAY out of hand . . . I will never, ever write a letter to the editor and I will not blog here ever again. I am ashamed at how cruel and awful people are here. I have managed online communities as a profession for almost 8 years now and I have never seen anything like this.

This sentiment was found in other posts in the online forum, which may be considered an indictment on the tone of the discussion. Posts that were deleted by the online editor (and those that were outright rejected before ever being posted) that contributed to this characterization of cruelty would have likely been categorized in the *denigration* category. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the posts that we identified as the most racially virulent may represent a partially censored version of the attitudes that are expressed about American Indians. In light of both of these limitations (i.e., results matching research team assumptions, potential censoring of explicitly racist content), the reader should interpret the findings with relative caution.

Third, although our results represent racial attitudes expressed about American Indians in this sample, our study cannot speak definitively to the etiology or progression of these attitudes. Future research could benefit from using alternative methodologies (e.g., quantitative, longitudinal) to examine the progression and development of societal attitudes about American Indians, including those that support the continued practice of racial mascotry. Future exploration of such attitudes and behaviors may be valuable in understanding and developing more efficacious strategies to employ in the pursuit of educating majority culture participants about American Indians, while also attempting to end the misappropriation of American Indian culture brought about by the presence of Native-themed mascots, nicknames, and logos.

Conclusions

When taken together, the results of this study indicate that American Indians are subjected to not only continued societal ignorance and misinformation about their culture, they are also being actively excluded from the process of prioritizing which issues they need to address. Furthermore, the presence of a Native-themed nickname and logo can facilitate the posting of virulent racist rhetoric in online forums, a practice which may flourish in a domain that exists between frontstage and backstage performances (Picca & Feagin, 2007). A daily ritual such as reading the newspaper can subject American Indians to distressing stereotypic representations of their culture. Contexts that activate stereotypic representations of racial groups are likely to threaten group members' psychological functioning (Fryberg et al., 2008). Thus, the results of this study provide support to the findings of Fryberg and colleagues (2008) and LaRocque (2004) that indicate the presence of a Native-themed nickname or logo (i.e., *Fighting Sioux*) can negatively affect the psychological well-being of American Indians on campus at UND, in the North Dakota community, and beyond.

Although some of the online forum comments do utilize the words *honor* and *respect* in text, the results of this study indicate that the sentiment underlying and surrounding these comments does not reflect a genuine sense of honor or respect. Instead, the online forum comments convey a sense of entitlement, privilege, power, and even subjugation and oppression. If sports fans believe that creating and supporting a hyper-aggressive and inaccurate stereotypic image allows them to honor American Indians, they are ignoring the probability that they are imposing their own attitudes and norms upon American Indian culture (Williams, 2006). The ultimate power is the ability to define reality for another group of people (Sue, 2005). Majority culture participants are defining the reality of American Indians by choosing to honor them on their terms, not on the terms of American Indians.

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AUTHOR QUERIES

AUTHOR PLEASE ANSWER ALL QUERIES

1

AQ1: Author: Please provide a running head with 50 characters or less (including spaces) if the one provided is not correct.

AQ2: Author: Please reduce to 5 keywords.

AQ3: Author: Please spell out BRIDGES.

AQ4: Author: For Clark et al (2008), please provide the month in which the conference took place.

AQ5: Author: Please cite Evans et al (2003) in text or delete from References.

AQ6: Author: In author affiliation footnote, please provide departmental information for each author, as well as city for Texas A & M.
