

2023

Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of College Student Athletes

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COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF COLLEGE STUDENT-
ATHLETES

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

COLLEGE OF THE ARTS

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION

BY

MARIA BLASCO MAURICI

COLUMBUS, GEORGIA

2023

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IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF COLLEGE STUDENT-
ATHLETES

By

Maria Blasco Maurici

Committee Chair:

Dr. Ramesh Rao

Committee Members:

Dr. Kisun Kim

Dr. Benjamin Baker

Columbus State University

July 2023

Abstract

This thesis explores the influence of social media on the mental health of college student-athletes. With the adoption of social media platforms and the challenges faced by college student-athletes, understanding the implications of social media usage becomes a priority. This study examines the potential positive and negative effects of social media on the mental health of collegiate student-athletes and considers the role of social media in shaping their self-perception and identity. By comparing with existing research and conducting qualitative and quantitative analysis, this thesis aims to find answers on the relationship between social media and the mental health of college student-athletes.

To my grandmother

Acknowledgements

This project would not have been possible without the support of many people. Many thanks to my advisor, Ramesh Rao, who helped me throughout the process and offered guidance and support since the first day we met. Also, thanks to my committee members, Kisun Kim and Benjamin Baker, who taught me different skills during my master's program to make this project possible. Thanks to Columbus State University and their golf program for awarding me with a scholarship, providing me with the financial means to complete this project and my master's degree. And finally, thanks to my parents, grandmother, and brother who endured this long process with me, always offering support and love from many miles away.

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Introduction

In recent years, the rise of social media platforms has revolutionized the way people communicate, connect, and share information (Edosomwan et al., 2011). Social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of millions of individuals, including college students and student-athletes. College represents a critical developmental period where individuals face various challenges, including academic pressures, social adjustments, and the demands of participating in collegiate athletics (Santos et al., 2020). Additionally, extant findings demonstrate that student-athletes face unique stressors related to time management, performance expectations, and maintaining a balance between their athletic commitments and academic responsibilities (Santos et al., 2020).

The use of social media among college student-athletes has raised concerns regarding its potential impact on their mental health. While social media offers numerous benefits, such as facilitating communication, providing access to support networks, and enhancing social connections (Vaingankar et al., 2022), it also introduces new stressors and risks. The pressure to present an idealized self-image and constant social comparison are some of the factors that can contribute to mental health challenges among student-athletes (Fleps, 2021).

Understanding the relationship between social media use and the mental health of college student-athletes is crucial for several reasons. First, mental health concerns among student-athletes are prevalent, with research indicating higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout compared to their non-athlete peers (Weber et al., 2023). Second, social media platforms provide an influential environment that can shape self-perception, body image, and identity

formation, damaging even more existing mental health issues (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

Lastly, as social media continues to evolve rapidly, it is imperative to gain insights into the implications of these platforms on the well-being of student-athletes to develop targeted interventions and support strategies (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019).

By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between social media use and mental health among student-athletes, researchers, educators, coaches, and healthcare professionals will have the necessary data to analyze and develop strategies to minimize the negative effects and make use of the potential benefits of social media platforms. The insights obtained from this research will ultimately enhance the overall well-being of college student-athletes.

1.1 Problem Statement

Many researchers have tried to understand mental health among student-athletes and why it happens, but this study aims to find a correlation between the influence of social media and student-athletes' mental health.

Student-athletes are encouraged to use social media as a business to present a positive image and promote future earnings for themselves, but the incredible speed that information travels over social media magnifies the damage that an athlete's lapse in judgment can cause (Maryville University, 2021). Numerous studies have pointed out that social media use is related to negative mental health outcomes, such as depression and anxiety among college students (Primack, et al., 2017) and athletes (Brougham, 2021). In addition, more research has found that student-athletes may encounter pressure related to social media use, including comparison with

other student-athletes, cyberbullying, and the pressure to maintain a high-level online identity (Lam et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, there is a limited understanding of how social media use impacts the mental health of student-athletes. Existing literature focuses on general college students or a broad student-athlete population; however, this thesis examines unique experiences and challenges faced by a specific target population of student-athletes and provide insight into the impact of social media on their mental health.

1.2 Thesis Goals

This thesis aims to explore the impact of social media on the mental health of college student-athletes. By examining the existing literature and conducting qualitative and quantitative analysis, this research seeks to identify the potential positive and negative effects of social media use on the mental health of student-athletes. Additionally, this study will explore how social media shapes self-perception within this targeted population.

Ultimately, the findings of this research may help in developing new strategies to support student-athletes' well-being, create guidelines to promote positive social media use, and support educational programs to protect student-athletes' mental health in the new digital era.

1.3. Thesis Organization

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides a summary of the existing literature on the topic; Chapter 3 consists of the methods used to collect and analyze the data including the proposed approach, sampling and data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 provides the results obtained from the data collection, including all themes and patterns identified from the qualitative and quantitative analysis, and limitations. Chapter 5 consists of the

discussion section, including recommendations and future research directions. Finally, Chapter 6 provides the conclusion with a summary of the findings and final remarks.

Chapter I: Literature Review

2.1 Social Media Usage Patterns Among College Student-Athletes

Acknowledging and treating mental health issues among athletes creates some challenges. College athletes must perform at a high level, be highly energetic, and spend a considerable amount of time on their sport while excelling in their classes (Santos et al., 2020). The majority of student-athletes feel they have more than a full-time job when considering their academic and athletics expectations (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020) and this could lead to high levels of stress and anxiety.

Division I and II student-athletes commonly report using social media 4-8 hours a week, illustrating that social media is in most instances part of a student-athlete life (Snyder, 2013). In general, student-athletes feel it is important to use social media daily and report having an emotional attachment to social media (Snyder, 2013). For student-athletes, social media can be used to their benefit (Brougham, 2021), but it could also lead to other kinds of stress (Brougham, 2021), and taint their image if used without caution (Cutler & Dwyer, 2020.)

One of the reasons social media has had such an impact on society is due to the different features that each social media platform provides its users (Brougham, 2021). According to a Pew Research study (Atske, 2022) a majority of college students in 2021 said they use Instagram or Snapchat, and about half said they use TikTok. Those at the younger end of this cohort of ages 18 to 24 -- report using Instagram (76%), Snapchat (75%), or TikTok (55%).

2.2 Positive Effects of Social Media on Mental Health Among College Student-Athletes

In this new digital era, hardly anyone is free from to social media exposure. Kaur & Bashir (2015) explored the impact of social media on mental health and found several positive

effects such as socialization, enhanced communication, learning opportunities, and access to health information. Another study, conducted by Bashir and Bhat (2017), indicated that social media use among collegiate athletes positively influenced them to connect with other peers with similar interests. Having a network of support through social media can have a positive impact on student-athletes who may be struggling with their mental health. In addition, according to Kwon (2020), social media engages student-athletes with sports-related content and positively influences their psychological well-being by motivating them to use other professional athletes, sports teams, and fitness influencers who share their journey as a source of inspiration and motivation. This positive effect can lead to promoting student-athletes' drive, confidence, and self-belief.

Social media is a very powerful tool for raising awareness about mental health issues and providing educational information. For instance, Moreno et al. (2016) claimed that social media allows student-athletes to access information, articles, and personal stories that play a positive role in spreading mental health knowledge and encouraging the target population to seek professional help. Similarly, social media can also have positive effects regarding job networking for student-athletes. Since student-athletes spend most of their time dedicating hours to a sport, social media platforms like LinkedIn allow them to connect with professionals in their field of interest for future internships or jobs (Anderson et al., 2019). Social media allows student-athletes to have a future connection in the workplace, which can positively impact their overall mental well-being and confidence and help them be prepared for the next steps after ending their college athletics careers.

2.3 Negative Effects of Social Media on Mental Health Among College Student-Athletes

Research has shown that college students, in general, struggle with mental health issues (Abrams, 2022). According to the American College Health Association (2022), three-quarters of students suffer from moderate to severe psychological distress. Further, Strickland (2014) reports that college students are the most active users of social media and the ones at higher risk of developing severe mental health issues. Mirrored by these findings, a study based on the effects of social media on mental health by Bashir and Bhat (2017), clearly reveals that social media is the basic agent that promotes mental health problems among young adults. Student-athletes feel pressured to use social media to promote their idealized self-identity, which can cause anxiety and stress due to the pressure to maintain a positive image (Miller et al., 2009). Additionally, student-athletes are expected to maintain a certain persona on social media that promotes their athletics image, while also having a large following and engagement that sees them as a role model; this can, in turn, cause stress and anxiety if they fail to meet these expectations (Miller et al., 2009).

According to Brougham (2021), social media can lead to social comparison and negative self-perception. Student-athletes are exposed to constant online comparisons with other athletes, which leads to lower self-esteem and confidence, affecting their athletic performance and mental health.

Among student-athletes, research shows that they are more susceptible to suffering from depression, anxiety, and eating disorders than regular college students (Thompson & Sherman, 2007). Mental health issues also vary based on different sports types: individual athletes are more likely to report anxiety and depression than team sport athletes (Pluhar et al., 2019). In

addition to athletes in individual sports reporting higher numbers of mental health issues, female athletes present significantly higher levels of anxiety than male athletes (Correia & Rosado, 2019).

DeShazo (2017) also analyzed the results of a survey from more than 2,000 student-athletes across all three levels of the NCAA division and highlighted that their favorite social media platform is Snapchat (41%). Nevertheless, research has found that this platform impacts student-athletes mental health based on 14 mental health issues ranging from anxiety and loneliness to community building and body shaming (Hung, 2017).

2.4 Role of Social Media in Shaping Self-Perception and Self-Esteem

In the new digital era, posting on social media becomes much more than just sharing some information about us with a targeted community. Different aspects of self-presentation on social media such as feedback-seeking and strategic self-presentation may represent risk factors for experiencing negative mental health effects of social media use (Hjetland et al., 2022). In general, people tend to distort or emphasize desirable characteristics on social media, resulting in social media shaping self-perception by idealizing peoples' identities (Hjetland et al., 2022). One recent study found that increased levels of feedback-seeking were associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, and reduced well-being among adolescents (Skogen et al., 2021).

Social Comparison Theory suggests that people value their own personal and social worth by assessing how they compare to others (Cherry, 2022). Social media has integrated a role of obsession among its users, followed by a culture of social comparison that has a huge impact on shaping our self-perception and self-esteem. Social media platform communities tend to create an idealized version of themselves that does not reflect reality. For example, athletes tend to

share themselves showcasing their beauty and fitness to be others' role models when in reality, social media is creating unrealistic beauty standards that can lead to body dissatisfaction, negative self-perception, and negative self-esteem (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

Previous research has found positive and negative impacts of using social media among student-athletes. This study aims to find answers about how social media affects college student-athletes' mental health. To determine if there is a correlation between the targeted population, social media use, and mental health, this study explored the answers to three research questions:

RQ1: Does social media use have a negative impact on student-athletes' body image or self-esteem?

RQ2: How does social media use impact the mental health of student-athletes participating in individual sports compared to those engaged in teams?

RQ3: What is the relationship between social media use and the pressure from student-athletes to present a certain image on social media platforms?

Chapter II: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This thesis follows a mixed methods research approach that focuses on examining the impact of social media on the mental health of student-athletes. The use of mixed methods allows a comprehensive understanding of the research topic by combining quantitative data from surveys with qualitative data from open-ended questions. This study aims to compare data, examine general trends, and analyze individual experiences of student-athletes with social media use and how it impacts their mental health.

This study uses survey methodology to seek answers from student-athletes. The survey tool (refer to Appendix I) was administered utilizing Qualtrics to participating college student-athletes. All data were collected through the software program Qualtrics, which was used to analyze the completed surveys to provide descriptive data.

This study follows the sequential explanatory design because it allows the researcher to collect and analyze quantitative data first, followed by qualitative data (Shiyanbola et al.,2021). The sequential explanatory design starts with quantitative data collection and analysis, and then follows up with qualitative data collection and analysis, which leads to interpretation. This design approach will allow the researcher to use qualitative data obtained from open-ended questions to help explain the quantitative data that needs further explanation. (Shiyanbola et al.,2021).

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, a survey of student-athletes was conducted. A total of 64 student-athletes participated in the completion of a survey

questionnaire to obtain qualitative and quantitative data. The targeted participants were enrolled full-time at a Division I or Division II university in the Southeast region of the U.S. at the time of data collection. Participants in the study, male and female, were also from different colleges, sports, and year in school. The primary researcher contacted potential participants via social media platforms commonly used by student-athletes like Instagram. Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information like age and gender, social media usage patterns, and self-reported mental health outcomes. The data collected was anonymous with no names, emails, IPs, or other identifiable characteristics being obtained.

Additionally, open-ended questions from the survey were used to collect qualitative data. Participants were asked to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences to generate comprehensive narratives. The answers were transcribed for data analysis using a thematic analysis approach.

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis is executed by analyzing the close-ended survey data using different appropriate statistical methods to answer each research question. This analysis helps identify trends, patterns, and statistical relationships within the data.

The qualitative data is analyzed from the open-ended survey data using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Among several qualitative approaches, a thematic analysis approach was adopted to explore social media's impact on college student-athletes. Thematic analysis suits this research because it instructs the researcher to look for patterns in the meaning of the responses and find themes and understand the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). Transcripts were coded and grouped into topics and subtopics related to social media use, mental

health, self-perception, and identity formation among student-athletes. The thematic analysis involved a process of coding, comparing codes, and identifying patterns and relationships in the data.

During the data analysis process, trustworthiness was ensured through constant comparative analysis, which consisted in the researcher sorting and comparing new data with previously data collected, looking for similarities and differences to answer the research questions for this study. Quantitative and qualitative data was synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media on the mental health of student-athletes.

Chapter III: Results

The survey questionnaire answered by 64 student-athletes, yielded several important statistical numbers from close-ended questions that allow the primary researcher to connect with interesting themes and sub-themes obtained from the open-ended questions regarding social media use and the impact on student-athletes' mental health. Here are the quantitative and qualitative data obtained from the survey, organized into sections that aim to be useful to answer the research questions for this study.

4.1 Quantitative Data from Close-Ended Questions

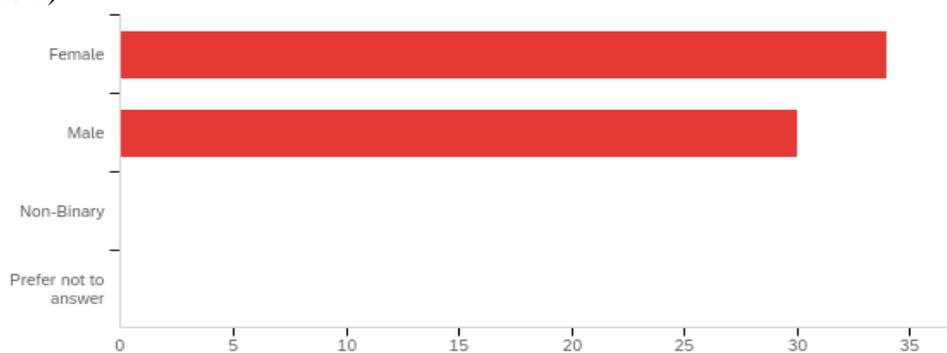
Demographic Results

(Table 1)

	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Age	18	25	22	1.85	3.41	64
2	Gender	1.00	2.00	1.47	0.50	0.25	64
3	Year of Study	1.00	5.00	4.00	1.29	1.66	64

Gender:

(Figure 1)

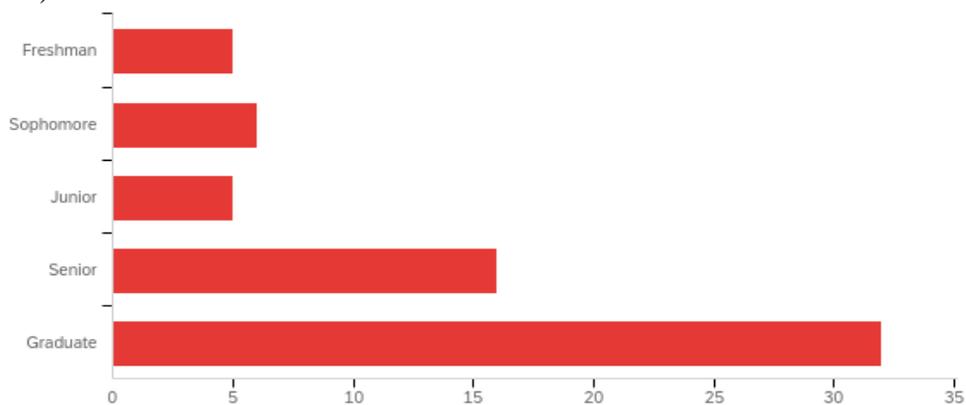


(Table 2)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Female	53.13%	34
2	Male	46.88%	30
3	Non-Binary	0.00%	0
4	Prefer not to answer	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	64

Year of study:

(Figure 2)

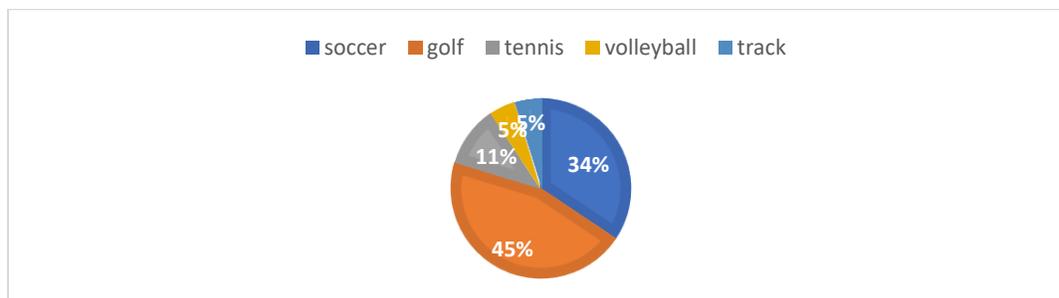


(Table 3)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Freshman	7.81%	5
2	Sophomore	9.38%	6
3	Junior	7.81%	5
4	Senior	25.00%	16
5	Graduate	50.00%	32
	Total	100%	64

Sport

(Figure 3)



(Table 4)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Soccer	34%	22
2	Golf	45%	29
3	Tennis	11%	7
4	Track and Field	5%	3
5	Volleyball	5%	3
	Total	100%	64

Descriptive Demographic Characteristics

In Table 1 and Table 2, we see that the sample consisted of 64 student-athletes, with 53.13% (n=34) identifying as female and 46.88% (n=30) as male. The participants median age was 22 years old, with the youngest participants being 18 and the oldest 25. In Figure 3 we see that participants represented various sports, leading golf with 45% (n=29), followed by soccer with 34% (n=22), tennis with 11% (n=7), and lastly volleyball with 5% (n=3) and track and field with also 5% (n=3). In terms of year of study, Table 3 shows us that graduate students led the

field with 50% (n=32), followed by seniors with a 25.00% (n=16), then sophomores with a 9.38% (n=6), and lastly freshmen and juniors with a 7.81% (n=5).

Social Media Usage Results

1. Hours spent on social media per day:

(Table 5)

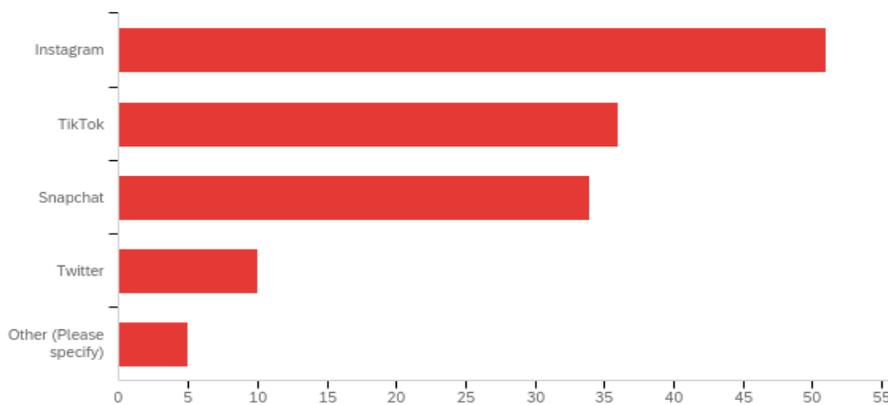
#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Hour spent using social media per day	1.00	5.00	3.4	1.07	1.14	64

(Table 6)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	0-1	3.13%	2
2	1-2	17.19%	11
3	2-3	35.94%	23
4	3-4	25.00%	16
5	4+	18.75%	12
	Total	100%	64

2. Most used social media platforms:

(Figure 4)

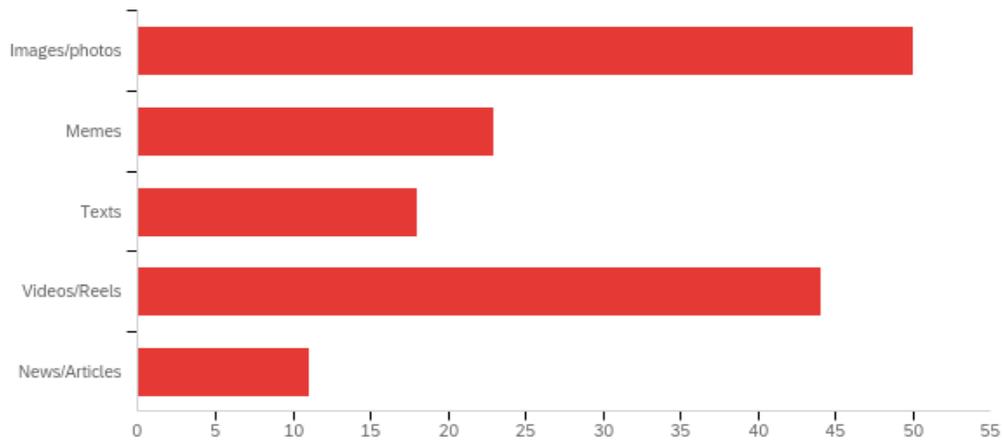


(Table 7)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Instagram	37.50%	51
2	TikTok	26.47%	36
3	Snapchat	25.00%	34
5	Twitter	7.35%	10
6	Other (Please specify)	3.68%	5
	Total	100%	136

3. Most engaged social media content:

(Figure 5)



(Table 8)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Images/photos	34.25%	50
2	Memes	15.75%	23
3	Texts	12.33%	18
4	Videos/Reels	30.14%	44
5	News/Articles	7.53%	11
	Total	100%	146

Descriptive Social Media Usage Results

In Tables 5 and 6 we can see that on average, participants reported spending 3.4 hours per day using social media (SD=1.07). Most participants (35.94%, n=23) reported spending 2-3 hours per day on social media, while 25% (n=16) reported spending 3-4 hours per day. Only 3.13% (n=2) reported spending 0-1 hour per day, and 18.75% (n=12) reported spending 4 or more hours per day on social media.

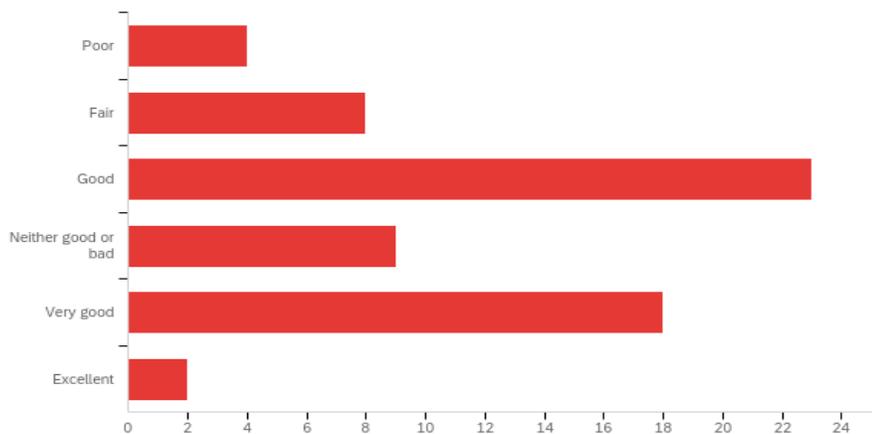
Figure 4 shows us that Instagram was the most used social media platform among participants. In Table 7, Instagram is leading with 37.5% (n=51) indicating it as the participants' primary platform. TikTok (26.47%, n=36) and Snapchat (25%, n=34) were also popular choices. Twitter (7.35%, n=10) and other platforms such as Discord, LinkedIn, and BeReal were less commonly used.

Lastly, if we look at Figure 5 and Table 8, participants were asked to select the type of content that participants engage the most on social media. As a result, the Images/Photos choice led with 34.25% (n=50), followed by Videos/Reels with 30.14% (n=44).

Impact of Social Media on Mental Health

1. Overall mental health rate results:

(Figure 6)



(Table 9)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Poor	6.25%	4
2	Fair	12.50%	8
3	Good	35.94%	23
4	Neither good or bad	14.06%	9
5	Very good	28.13%	18
6	Excellent	3.13%	2
	Total	100%	64

2. Social media impact on overall mental health results:

(Table 10)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Positive	43.75%	28
2	Negative	56.25%	36
	Total	100%	64

3. Mental health issues from participants in the past year:

(Table 11)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Depression	13.57%	19
2	Anxiety	25.71%	36
3	Stress	30.00%	42
4	Sleep difficulties	20.71%	29
5	Eating disorders	8.57%	12
6	Other (please specify)	1.43%	2
	Total	100%	140

Descriptive Social Media Impact on Mental Health Results

In Table 10, regarding the impact of social media on their mental health, we find that participants believed social media had a negative impact with a 56.25% (n=36), while 43.75% (n=28) of participants reported a positive impact.

When asked to rate their overall mental health, in Figure 7 we see that “Good” led the participants’ answers with 35.94% (n=23) (Table 9), followed by 28.13% (n=18) rating it as very good. Only 6.25% (n=4) rated their mental health as poor (Table 9).

Lastly, Table 11 shows us that the most reported mental health issues experienced by participants in the past year were stress (30%, n=42) and anxiety (25.71%, n=36), followed by depression (13.57%, n=19) and sleep difficulties (20.71%, n=29). Eating disorders were reported by 8.57% (n=12) of participants.

Role of Social Media on Self-Esteem and Self-Identity

1. Overall rate of participants comparing themselves on social media:

(Table 12)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Never	9.38%	6
2	Rarely	23.44%	15
3	Sometimes	32.81%	21
4	Often	23.44%	15
5	Always	10.94%	7
	Total	100%	64

2. Impact of social media on body image and self-esteem:

(Table 13)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Extremely negative	10.94%	7
2	Somewhat negative	43.75%	28
3	Neither positive nor negative	34.38%	22
4	Somewhat positive	6.25%	4
5	Extremely positive	4.69%	3
	Total	100%	64

3. Pressure to maintain an idealized image or persona on social media as a student-athlete:

(Table 14)

#	Answer	%	Count
1	No	53.13%	34
2	Yes	46.88%	30
	Total	100%	64

4. The feeling of receiving negative comments or feedback on social media regarding self-esteem and self-identity:

(Table 15)

Answer	%	Count
Sad	18.42%	14
Anxious	23.68%	18
Angry	6.58%	5
Indifferent	42.11%	32
Other (Please specify)	9.21%	7
Total	100%	76

Descriptive Social Media Role on Self-Esteem and Self-Identity Results

In terms of participants comparing themselves to others of social media, we see in Table 12 that 32.81% (n=21) reported doing so sometimes, followed by 23.44% (n=15) who reported doing it often.

Table 13 shows us that a leading 43.75% (n=28) of participants reported social media having a somewhat negative impact of their body image or self-esteem, followed by a 34.38% (n=22), who reported neither positive nor negative impact, while only a 6.25% (n=4) reported a somewhat positive impact.

On the other hand, Table 14 shows us how 53.13% (n=34) reported not feeling pressure to present a certain image or persona on social media as student-athletes. However, a close 46.88% (n=30) reported having such a pressure.

Lastly, Table 15 remarks that most participants reported feeling indifferent (42.11% n=32) when asked about the impact of negative comments or feedback on social media towards their self-esteem and self-identity. Other responses included feeling sad (18.42%, n=14), anxious (23.68%, n=18), and angry (6.58%, n=5).

4.2 Qualitative Data from Open-Ended Questions

Based on the obtained qualitative data from the open-ended responses, I have identified several themes, sub-themes, and codes that emerged from the participants' responses:

Theme 1: Social Media Impact on Mental Health

Sub-theme 1.1: Comparison and Pressure

Code: Feeling overwhelmed by comparisons

Code: Pressure to meet unrealistic standards

Sub-theme 1.2: Relaxation and Distraction

Code: Using social media to relax

Code: Using social media as an escape from reality/stress

Sub-theme 1.4: Positive Effects

Code: Using social media for motivation and inspiration

Sub-theme 1.5: Negative Effects

Code: Causes devaluation in real life outside social media

Code: Social media as a mind-numbing entertainment

Theme 2: Social Media Influence on Self-esteem and Body Image

Sub-theme 2.1: Negative Influence

Code: Negative impact on body image

Code: Negative impact on self-esteem and confidence

Sub-theme 2.2: Positive Influence

Code: Using social media as a motivation to work harder

Code: Learning from other athletes and perspectives

Theme 3: Social Media and its Pressure to Present a Certain Image

Sub-theme 3.1: Expectations and Perfection

Code: Feeling pressured to maintain a perfect image

Code: Posting content for others, not oneself

Sub-theme 3.2: Authenticity and Personal Challenges

Code: Struggling with portraying only the positives

Code: False expectations

Theme 4: Social Media as an Educational Resource for Student-Athletes

Sub-theme 4.1: Increasing Awareness of News and Current Events

Code 1: Engaging with current events

Code 2: Keep up with Sports Industry News

Sub-theme 4.1: Helps with Communication and Connection

Code 1: Social connection and support systems

Code 2: Using social media to build networks

Chapter IV: Discussion

5.1 Integrating Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The goal of this study was to explore the impact of social media use on college student-athletes' mental health. This section of the study will integrate the findings from the participants' answers, following a sequential exploratory design, which consisted in using qualitative data to explain the quantitative data and have deeper comprehensive answers for the research questions of this study. Results revealed several themes to discuss, including, social media influence on self-esteem and body image, social media impact on student-athletes' mental health, and social media pressure to present a certain image. The researcher believes these findings will fill the existing research gap to have a better understanding about how social media use impacts college student-athletes' mental health.

Social Media Influence on Self-Esteem and Body Image

The first research question asked was if social media use has a negative impact on student-athletes' body image or self-esteem. Findings of this research project identified a strong negative correlation between social media use and the impact on self-esteem and identity.

From the results, an overall 32.81% (n=21) of participants admitted comparing themselves on social media, with a 43.75% (n=28) of them stating that social media use has a negative impact on their body image and self-esteem. Additionally, from the qualitative responses, one of the participants stated: "social media pressures me to compare myself to other athletes and sometimes makes me feel unhappy with my own body. It definitely causes me to pay closer attention to small body details I wouldn't otherwise consider." Another participant stated, "It only worsens it due to seeing only the highlights peaks of fellow athletes rather than

the ups and downs.” These findings could be explained through the lens of Social Comparison Theory and its core components of comparison and idealization (Cherry, 2022). These student-athletes acknowledged the more time they spend using social media, the false expectations and unrealistic standards arise, which caused them to devalue themselves.

The analysis of qualitative results also showed similarities to the findings of Jitosa et al. (2021) who noted that athletes tend to share themselves showcasing their beauty and fitness to others, when what they do is create standards impossible to achieve for most people, which creates body dissatisfaction, negative self-perception, and negative self-esteem.

Social Media Impact on Student-Athletes' Mental health

The second research question aimed to find answers about how social media use impacts differently student-athletes participating in individual sports from those engaged in team sports.

The quantitative findings show that student-athletes playing an individual sport reported using social media an average of 2-3 hours per day, while student-athletes playing in a team sport reported using it an average of 1-2 hours per day. Accordingly, a higher number of student-athletes who play an individual sport reported a negative social media use towards their mental health than those who played a team sport. In addition, a higher number of participants who play individual sports reported experiencing a higher number in stress and anxiety during the past year compared to those who played in a team sport. These findings support Pluhar et al. (2019) who states that individual sport athletes are more likely to report mental health issues than team sport athletes. This result could be explained because student-athletes who play in team sports spend less time alone than those who play individual sports, and also can rely on their teammates who may be experiencing the same challenges and serve as a support system.

On the other hand, qualitative analysis revealed that the use of social media negatively impacts student-athletes who play a team sport. One of the participants stated: “I feel like social media itself, not the content but the apps, take a lot of time and attention away from my teammates. Instead of chatting in the locker rooms, often times my teammates are all on their phones scrolling through social media.” Another participant quoted “I feel social media causes obsession and isolates us from our teammates and from possible real-life conversations that may help us deal with mental illnesses.”

Nevertheless, qualitative research identified that while social media could have a negative impact on mental health for both individual and team sport student-athletes, it also could have a positive impact. Positive findings include the use of social media for motivation and inspiration, stress relief, and to communicate and connect with others. One participant quoted “Social media gives me motivation to do more, keeps me connected and talking to people, and makes you see other athletes as role models.” These findings are supported by Kwon (2020) who states that social media engages student-athletes with sports-related content and positively influences their psychological well-being by motivating them to use other professional athletes, sports teams, and fitness influencers who share their journey as a source of inspiration and motivation

Overall, the findings from the study support the literature review that states how student-athletes that play an individual sport suffer more from social media use and its impact on their mental health. Nevertheless, positive findings were also encountered by analyzing qualitative responses from the participants.

Social Media and its Pressure to Maintain a Certain Image

The last finding from the current study was the pressure on student-athletes to maintain a certain image on social media. The quantitative results were very similar, with 53.13% saying they felt no pressure to maintain an idealized image on social media as a student-athlete, and 46.88% of participants feeling that pressure. Additionally, quantitative responses showed that most of the participants feel indifferent toward negative comments or feedback on social media about their image. The findings do not support the literature found during the study, which states that most of student-athletes may experience stress and anxiety if they fail to meet expectations from its followers (Miller et al. 2009).

Nonetheless, the mixed-methods approach employed in this investigation allowed for a deeper exploration of this topic. Participants responses revealed that social media creates pressure to maintain a certain image because an idealized image is expected to meet expectations set by others. One participant stated, "I feel as a student-athlete there are things we can and can't do compared to non-athletic students in college, so I double check everything twice to make a good appearance." Another participant quoted "I feel there is an extreme pressure to present yourself in the most perfect way you can. People want "likes" and "comments", so you're constantly posting for other people, not for yourself." These findings support Miller et al. (2009) which states that student-athletes feel pressured to use social media to promote their idealized self-identity.

Overall, the findings to the third research question highlighted both negative and positive relationship between social media use and the pressure from student-athletes to present a certain

image of social media platforms. Further research should include a larger sample size to have more data on the topic.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

One limitation of this research was the sample size and limited time to complete data collection and analysis. This is a topic that is growing in importance, and while efforts were made to ensure diversity within the sample, a small sample size may have limited the findings compared to a larger population of student-athletes. In addition, the study was conducted over a short time of two months and had to limit the sample size of participants as it would have not been possible to conduct a proper thematic analysis to collect qualitative results.

Further, the data collected in this study relied on college student-athlete experiences and self-perceptions on how social media affects their mental health and well-being, which is subject to participant bias and inaccuracies. Perhaps, if time was not an issue to conduct this study, the use of observational methods would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of social media use and its impact on student-athletes' mental health.

Moving forward, future research should consider using qualitative work such as conducting focus groups and interviews with a larger sample size of student-athletes to have more specific data about the impact of social media on their mental health. By gathering more specific data, the research results will be more accurate and will serve as a tool for athletic departments to promote awareness, develop coping strategies, and create social media training programs to help student-athletes learn how to use social media to their benefit.

Future research should focus on NIL (Name Image and Likelihood) because it is based on the idea that student-athletes must see social media as their only resource to profit when in

contrast we should be finding ways for them to not be so attached to a screen and enjoy their career outside a digital platform. Lastly, after gathering the research findings, I believe that intercollegiate athletics should create policies or regulations to limit social media screen time among athletes to keep them in the present and not create mind-numbing habits.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Going into this study was such a motivation since I was extremely interested in this topic because of how relatable it was to my everyday life. Social media plays a huge role in my life as a student-athlete, and I wanted to find out how others were impacted by it. Before starting this research study, I thought student-athletes had different perspectives about how social media affects their mental health and well-being, but I was legitimately surprised by the results because it turned out that most of them had similar opinions and were aware of how social media use is affecting them.

Overall, I believe this study achieved the goal of having a better understanding of the correlation between social media use and mental health among college student-athletes. If I could do one thing differently it would be to increase the participant sample size and expand it by including coaches and athletic staff to get another perspective on the topic to have external feedback. Understanding the findings from this study will help college athletic departments to develop self-awareness and coping strategies to teach college student-athletes that social media can be used as a tool to maximize their potential and not as something that can damage their well-being.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Survey

Research Study: Understanding the Impact of Social Media on Student Athletes' Mental Health

Thank you for participating in our research study. Your valuable insights will contribute to our understanding of the impact of social media on the mental health of student athletes. Please complete the following survey to the best of your ability. All responses will be kept confidential and anonymous.

Demographic Information:

Age: [Open-ended response]

Gender: [Male / Female / Non-binary / Prefer not to say]

Sport(s) played: [Open-ended response]

Year of study: [Freshman / Sophomore / Junior / Senior / Graduate student]

Social Media Use:

On average, how many hours per day do you spend using social media? [0-1 / 1-2 / 2-3 / 3-4 / 4+]

Which social media platforms do you use regularly? [Multiple choice: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, TikTok, LinkedIn, YouTube, Other (please specify)]

What type of content do you engage with the most on social media? [Text posts, Images/photos, Videos, Memes, News/articles, Other (please specify)]

Do you feel that social media has a positive impact on your overall mental health? [Yes / No / Unsure]

In what ways do you believe social media use impacts your mental health as a student-athlete? [Open-ended response]

Mental Health Outcomes:

How would you rate your overall mental health? [Poor / Fair / Good / Very good / Excellent]

Have you experienced any of the following mental health issues in the past year? (Check all that apply)

Depression

Anxiety

Stress

Sleep difficulties

Eating disorders

Other (please specify)

On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate the impact of social media on your mental health?

[1 = Very negative impact, 10 = Very positive impact]

Have you ever sought professional help or counseling for mental health concerns? [Yes / No]

How do you perceive the influence of social media on your self-esteem and body image as a student athlete? [Open-ended response]

Perceived Social Media Effects:

How often do you compare yourself to others on social media? [Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Always]

Do you believe that social media negatively impacts your body image or self-esteem? [Yes / No / Unsure]

Have you ever felt pressured to present a certain image or persona on social media as a student-athlete? [Yes / No] If yes, how does this influence your mental health?

How do you feel when you receive negative comments or feedback on social media? [Sad / Anxious / Angry / Indifferent / Other (please specify)]

Can you provide an example of a time when social media had a positive impact on your mental health or provided support during a challenging period as a student athlete?

From your perspective, what kind of social media policies or guidelines would be beneficial for student athletes to protect their mental health?

Additional Comments: Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences with social media and its impact on your mental health? [Open-ended response]

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your contribution is greatly appreciated. If you have any further comments or concerns, please feel free to share them below.

Appendix II: Informed Consent**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Maria Blasco, a graduate student in the Communications Department at Columbus State University. Professor Ramesh Rao is the faculty member supervising the study.

I. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to investigate the relationships between social media use and mental health outcomes among college student-athletes.

II. Procedures:

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey. The survey will assess your social media usage patterns, mental health outcomes, and demographic information. The survey should take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. Your responses will be kept confidential and anonymous, and the data collected will be used solely for research purposes.

It is important to note that while the data collected in this study will primarily be used for the specific research mentioned above, there is a possibility that the data may be utilized for future research projects with similar objectives. However, any data used for future research will continue to be treated with the same level of confidentiality and anonymity as outlined in this consent form.

III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:

Participating in this study may involve minimal risks, such as potential discomfort or emotional distress when reflecting on mental health experiences. However, we have taken measures to minimize any potential harm and ensure your well-being throughout the study.

IV. Potential Benefits:

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, the benefits of participating will include contributing to a better understanding of the impact of social media on the mental health of college student-athletes, which can inform future support systems and interventions tailored to your needs.

V. Costs and Compensation:

There is no compensation for the participants. It is voluntary for the participants to answer the survey.

VI. Confidentiality:

All information collected during this study will be treated confidentially. Your individual responses will be stored securely on password-protected computers or secure servers, and will not be linked to your personally identifiable information. Data will be reported in aggregate form, ensuring that your anonymity is maintained. Only the research team will have access to the data, and the findings will be presented in a way that prevents the identification of individual participants. The data will be retained for 5 years. After the retention period, the data will be securely deleted from all storage devices, including backups. To ensure that data will be protected from unauthorized access, the research team will implement appropriate technical and organizational measures such as firewalls, secure login credentials, and access controls to safeguard the data. In addition, the research team will periodically review and assess the security measures to identify and address any vulnerabilities.

VII. Withdrawal:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal will not involve penalty or loss of benefits.

For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Maria Blasco at 470-708-4196 or blasco_maria@students.columbusstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu.

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By selecting the *I agree* radial and *Submit*, I agree to participate in this research project.

- I agree.
- I do not agree