SCROLLING AND SPORT: EXAMINING THE MENTAL HEALTH OF GOAN ATHLETES IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

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Abstract:

In the digital era, athletes face the dual demands of competitive training and constant social media engagement. This mixed-method study explores the psychological impact of social media on 117 athletes from Goa, India, across football, cricket, taekwondo, swimming and athletics. Using a structured questionnaire and open-ended responses, the study combines quantitative analysis (Likert-scale ratings, correlation tests) with qualitative thematic analysis. Results show that while social media offers motivation, emotional support and career visibility, it also leads to increased stress, anxiety, body image issues and sleep disruption. Most athletes reported a neutral to negative overall impact, with only a minority experiencing strong benefits. Statistically, heavier usage was significantly associated with higher psychological distress, supporting the hypothesis that social media intensity affects mental health. Athletes reported coping strategies such as setting boundaries, limiting exposure to negativity and relying on peer and coach support. The study highlights the importance of balanced engagement, mental health awareness and media literacy for athletes. It offers practical recommendations for sports organizations, coaches and athletes to harness social media as a boon while minimizing its potential bane. This research adds to growing literature on athlete well-being, calling for supportive systems in high-performance environments.

Keywords: *Athlete, Mental Health, Social Media, Digital-Wellbeing, Coping Strategies.*

Introduction:

Now a days social media appears to be tightly woven to athletes' lives, which serves as a platform for self-promotion, fan interaction and community building. Studies show over 80% of athletes engage at least two hours daily on social media, mostly to celebrate their success with their followers. However, this exposure is subject to continuous scrutiny and judgment by the public. While online praise can boost morale on good performances, trolling, criticism and hate; especially after below par performances can have a direct effect on mental well-being. International athletes like Simone Biles and K. L. Rahul have openly shared about how pressure created by social media resulted to their mental health struggles.

These opposite experiences raise a vital question: Is social media ultimately a boon or a bane for athletes' mental health? For some, who only look at the positive feedback and receive support from digital networks, gather motivation and feel loved. For the rest, comparison, criticism and the pressure of being an idol add to existing stressors like training, competition and life balance which affects his performance. Budding athletes, in particular, are more prone to succumb to the pressure due to their age and the emotional toll of constant feedback.

Although this seems alarming, there is limited research, especially in the Indian context, on how athletes' mental health is affected by social media. Majority of the studies focus on general populations or adolescents, ignoring the stress and pressure competitive athletes

face. This study aims to address that gap by focusing on athletes from Goa, although the smallest state in the country but with a rich sporting culture and growing digital presence. Athletes in Goa, like elsewhere, actively engage on social media platforms, making them vulnerable to both positive and negative online interactions. The main issue addressed here is whether social media acts as a boon or a bane to Goan athletes' mental health. While it may offer a sense of belonging and motivation, it may also lead to stress, anxiety and comparisons which are unhealthy. This study explores these dual effects through a mixed-methods approach involving athletes from various sports and levels from beginner to professional.

Research Objectives:

The study aimed to:

1. Assess the positive and negative effects of social media on athletes' mental health.
2. Understand how athletes perceive online criticism and validation.
3. Explore coping strategies used to manage social media pressure.
4. Recommend approaches for healthier digital engagement among athletes and stakeholders.

Research Questions:

1. What is the perceived impact of social media on Goan athletes' mental health?
2. How do athletes emotionally respond to online praise and criticism?
3. Do mental health effects vary by level of competition (amateur vs. elite)?
4. What can the coaches, organizations and psychologists do to promote healthier online behaviour?

Hypotheses:

For the quantitative component, the study tested:

- **Null Hypothesis (H_0):** No significant relationship between social media use and the mental health of Goan athletes.

- **Alternative Hypothesis (H_1):** A significant relationship exists, with greater use linked to poorer mental health outcomes.

In essence, aligning with existing research trends, H_1 predicts that higher social media use will correlate with increased stress and reduced well-being.

Literature Review:

The swift expansion of social media has changed the way athletes engage with others, showcase themselves and cope with pressure. According to Auxier et al. (2022), extensive U.S. datasets indicate that nearly all young adults now use social media, creating a constantly connected environment that influences identity, social relationships and stress levels. Abrams (2022) asserts that this digital landscape is emerging alongside a broader crisis in youth mental health, prompting universities and sports organizations to reconsider how they support students. In the realm of sports, Reardon (2023) discusses a "perfect storm" of performance expectations, commercialization, public scrutiny and exposure on social media that heightens athletes' psychological vulnerability.

Research indicates that social media can both benefit and hinder athletes' well-being. Vaingankar et al. (2022) point out positive mental health pathways stemming from social media, such as peer support and motivation, while Bashir and Bhat (2017) emphasize connections between excessive use, anxiety and depressive symptoms among young users. Concentrating on body image, Aparicio-Martinez et al. (2019) reveal that content promoting a thin ideal and appearance-focused interactions foster dissatisfaction with body image and disordered eating behaviors, a risk particularly pertinent to sports focused on aesthetics or weight. Lam et al. (2022) demonstrate a close link between cyberbullying, social comparison and anxiety in the online experiences of college students.

Research specific to athletes indicates that social media may bring unique pressures. Aries et al. (2004) and Lopes Dos Santos et al. (2020) highlight that student-athletes must manage both academic and athletic stressors, while Weber et al. (2023) report alarming rates of depression and anxiety among collegiate athletes. Kim and Kim (2020) find that the impact of social media on the psychological well-being of collegiate athletes depends on their usage patterns and Merrill and Faustin (2023) suggest that online branding and performance narratives can blur the lines between personal and professional identities. In a mixed-methods thesis, Blasco Maurici (2023) discovered that college student-athletes frequently seek validation, engage in comparisons and experience mood fluctuations related to their social media interactions. Brougham (2021) also noted that online criticism and high visibility increase stress across NCAA divisions.

Recent empirical studies have begun to unravel mechanisms affecting youth and adolescent athletes. Fiedler et al. (2024) found that the mental well-being of young athletes correlates with their use of social networking on smartphones, with effects varying by performance level and app type. Zhang et al. (2023) indicated that passive consumption of social media content negatively affects mental health through social comparison processes, while Chen et al. (2025) showed that social media addiction in adolescent athletes aggravates negative emotions via appearance comparisons and disrupted sleep. Yehya (2024) and the interview with Faustin emphasize that trolling, abuse and performance-related remarks can be particularly damaging, a sentiment reflected in Indian media when KL Rahul openly spoke about the mental impact of online criticism (Indian Express Lifestyle Desk, 2023). Collectively, this body of research highlights that the social media environment is a crucial, yet insufficiently explored, factor influencing mental health in athletes,

highlighting the necessity for focused studies within specific regions like Goan athletes.

Athletes use social media frequently to connect with followers, celebrate and build an image for themselves. However, this presence on social media invites continuous scrutiny of their performance and appearance. A single poor performance can result in online criticism, hate or trolling. Reardon (2023) describes this as a double-edged sword, where social media will give you, fan following and build an image but also draw unhealthy comparisons and amplify. For young athletes in their developmental years, this convergence of athletic and digital pressures has been described as a "perfect storm" for psychological risks.

Negative Psychological Impacts:

- **Stress, Anxiety and Emotional Fatigue**: Studies have shown that use of social media results in increased stress and anxiety among athletes. Chen et al. (2025) found social media addiction in adolescent athletes was strongly linked to emotional distress, caused by social unhealthy comparison and poor sleep. The situation was worsened by passive browsing which fuelled jealousy and insecurity.

- **Body Image and Appearance Concerns**: Female athletes are found to be more vulnerable to appearance-based judgement. Merrill and Faustin (2023) found that, athletes often find themselves dissatisfied when they compare themselves to an athlete with ideal body type. This feeling is worsened by objectifying online and offline comments, that results in increased risks of unhealthy eating habits and anxiety, even for male athletes who face pressure to appear strong or fit.

- **Sleep Disruption**: Surfing beyond the normal sleeping time results in disturbed sleep, which is a crucial component of recovery. Athletes reportedly using social media within an hour of bedtime have reported sleep disorders or disturbed sleep. This

results in stress and reduces cognitive ability, affecting both mood and performance.

- **Cognitive Load and Performance Anxiety**: social media potentially can affect the concentration and cognitive ability of athletes. Research shows even short pre-training sessions on social platforms reduce focus and decision-making. Comments on social media platforms can spike anxiety, especially before competitions. In long run this leads to burnout and below par performances.

Positive Impacts and Opportunities:

Although there are risks but mindful use of social media shall offer meaningful benefits:

- **Motivation and Social Support**: Post-match encouragement can lift spirits and reinforce confidence. The support received online through social media from the followers and fans is appreciated and found to be beneficial by the athletes, especially during injury recovery or personal lows. Public disclosures by elite athletes like Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka have helped normalize mental health discussions, making younger athletes feel less alone.

- **Identity and Empowerment**: Athletes are able to express about their likes, dislikes, hobbies on social media. Social media provides them with a platform for advocacy, awareness and storytelling fostering purpose. This expression can reduce mental health risks by creating versatile identity beyond sports.

- **Career and Financial Growth**: A strong online presence can lead to creation of a name for the athletes resulting in sponsorships, wide publicity, especially beyond mainstream media coverage. Certain platforms allow the athletes to curate their content and attract scouts or brands. Although content creation is burdensome, the income generated reduces the financial stress.

Moderating Factors:

Social media's impact is not uniform. Several variables influence outcomes:

- **Competitive Level**: Fiedler et al. (2024) found that negative effects at elite level are lesser as compared to the beginner level, since the elite athletes have astronger support systems and training.

- **Gender**: Females are expected to appear more feminine, while males are expected to appear masculine.

- **Psychological Resilience**: Zhang et al. (2023) showed that athletes that are emotionally balanced were less affected by negative comparisons.

- **Education and Awareness**: Training athletes on healthy digital habits such as limiting screen can reduce emotional reactivity. Media literacy can help athletes use platforms responsibly.

The literature shows that social media can be a boon or a bane for athletes, it is imperative of the athletes to use the social media wisely and responsibly. This study contributes to the field by examining Goan athletes, integrating survey results with interviews to offer a nuanced view of social media's influence on mental health in this unique context.

Methodology:

Research Design:

A mixed-methods research design was employed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. Specifically, we adopted a convergent parallel mixed-method approach, wherein both quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, but separately and then merged to provide comprehensive understanding of the research problem. This design allowed us to triangulate findings; validating and elaborating the statistical results with personal insights from athletes. The need for using mixed methods arose due to multifaceted nature of the topic: while quantitative data could reveal

general patterns, qualitative data helped explore the *how* and *why* of those patterns from athlete's perspective.

Population and Sampling:

The population of interest was competitive athletes in Goa who actively use social media. "Competitive" was defined broadly to include athletes participating at various levels from local and university competitions up to national and international events. The sports represented in our sample were football, cricket, taekwondo, swimming and athletics. Using a stratified sampling strategy for the quantitative phase, we stratified by competition level (amateur, collegiate, professional) to ensure inclusion of voices from each group. Participants were then randomly selected from each group based on lists obtained through sports clubs, associations and coaches.

A total of **N = 117 athletes** (38 females, 79 males) participated in the survey. Within this sample, 88 athletes (75%) were aged 18–24 years and 29 athletes (25%) were aged 25–34, reflecting the focus on emerging adult athletes. The majority of participants were competing at state or national levels; only 8 of the athletes (7%) had experience at the international level. This distribution underscores that our sample was predominantly sub-elite athletes, with a small representation of elite performers. The median duration of athletic training was 6 years and all participants reported using at least one social media platform regularly (at least a few times per week). The most commonly used platforms among them were Instagram (85%), Facebook (60%) and Twitter (20%), followed by YouTube and WhatsApp for some.

For the qualitative component, a purposive sub-sample of athletes was selected for follow-up interviews and open-ended responses. We identified 15 individuals (6 female, 9 male) from the survey sample who indicated willingness to discuss their experiences in depth. Criteria for selection included: having a substantial social media presence (e.g., >5,000 followers or very active posting behaviour). This ensured the qualitative sample included athletes likely to provide rich information on the phenomena of interest. The qualitative sample included a mix of sport types and both some of the international level athletes and some amateurs, to capture diverse perspectives.

Data Collection Tools:

Quantitative Data – Structured Questionnaire: A self-administered questionnaire was developed, consisting of mostly closed-ended questions divided into several sections:

- **Demographic and Sports Profile:** Questions capturing age, gender, sport, level of competition, years of experience and typical hours of training per week. This section also included items on social media usage patterns (e.g., platforms used, estimated hours per day on social media, whether they use social media around competitions).

- **Social Media Psychological Impact Scale:** A series of Likert-scale items (5-point scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") was designed to assess the athlete's perceived impact of social media on various aspects of their mental health. These items were informed by themes from literature and interviews. Such as: "Overall, social media has a positive effect on my mental health" (general sentiment), "Negative comments on social media make me feel anxious or depressed", "Positive feedback on social media motivates me to perform better", "I feel pressure to appear perfect on social media", "Using social media sometimes distracts me from training or academics" and "I have considered taking a break from social media due to stress". We also included items probing behaviour changes (e.g., "I avoid checking social media during competitions to reduce stress"). These statements were used to gauge both positive perceptions (boon aspects) and negative perceptions

(bane aspects). For analysis, some items were reverse-scored so that higher scores consistently indicated a more negative impact (positive impact items were examined separately).

- **Standardized Mental Health Measures:** To objectively quantify mental health status, a brief standardized scale was incorporated. Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 (DASS-21) was used as a validated measure of psychological distress. Athletes rated how they felt over the past week (e.g., "I felt nervous or anxious without good reason") on a 4-point scale. We also included the 12-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) as a screening tool for general mental well-being, which asks about recent psychological state (e.g., "Have you been able to concentrate on what you're doing?"). These scales provided continuous outcome variables for correlation with social media use. Finally, the questionnaire asked the athletes to rate the overall impact of social media on their mental health on a single item from 1 ("Very Negative") to 5 ("Very Positive"), summarizing their gut sense of whether social media has been a boon or bane for them.

The questionnaire was reviewed by two psychologists for content validity and piloted on 15 athletes for clarity and timing. On average, athletes took 15–20 minutes to complete the survey.

Qualitative Data – Interviews/Open-Ended Questions:

Qualitative data were gathered in two ways. First, at the end of the questionnaire, we provided an open-ended prompt: "Please describe in your own words how using social media has affected you mentally or emotionally as an athlete. You may share any positive experiences, negative experiences, or coping strategies that stand out." This allowed all survey participants to voice thoughts not captured by the Likert items. Many wrote a few sentences; these written comments were included in the qualitative analysis.

Second, semi-structured interviews (either in person or via video call) were conducted with the 15 purposively selected athletes. An interview guide was used, covering topics such as: *"Can you recount a time when social media use significantly impacted your mood or confidence in relation to your sport?"*, *"How do you handle critical or negative comments on your posts?"*, *"Do you do anything differently with social media during important competitions or after tough losses?"*, *"Have you found any benefits from using social media as an athlete?"* and *"What support or resources (if any) have helped you manage social media pressures?"* The interviews averaged 30–45 minutes each. With consent, they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The combination of written responses and interviews provided rich qualitative material reflecting athletes' personal stories and strategies.

Procedure:

Data collection took place over a 3-month period in early 2025. Sample was reached out through sports clubs, coaches and university sports departments to recruit participants. Interested athletes were sent the survey link or given paper copies (paper responses were later digitized). The survey was anonymous and participants could skip any question or stop at any time. At the survey's end, respondents indicated if they were willing to be interviewed; those who did were contacted to schedule interviews. Interviews were conducted by a researcher trained in qualitative methods (and who had a background in sports and physical education to establish rapport).

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Analysis:

The survey data was analyzed using SPSS. First, descriptive statistics were conducted to characterize the

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sample and summarize responses to each Likert-scale item. This included computing mean and standard deviation for each psychological impact item, frequency distributions of responses and average scores on the DASS-21 and GHQ-12. Charts were generated for key variables to visualize the distribution of perceptions. For example, the overall impact rating were plotted; revealing what percentage viewed social media as mostly positive versus mostly negative. The proportion of athletes agreeing with certain statements were also examined to identify common experiences.
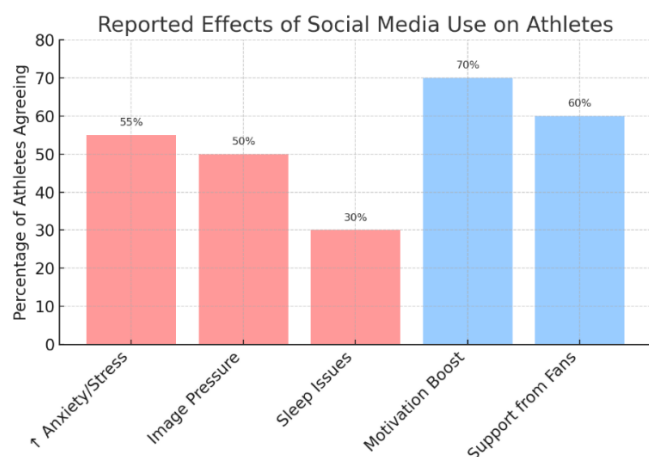

Figure 1: Reported effects of social media use on athletes (percent agreeing with each statement). Pink bars denote negative experiences (stress/anxiety, image pressure, sleep loss) and blue bars denote positive experiences (motivation boost, support from fans).

This illustrates the mix of outcomes: for instance, 55% of athletes agreed that social media increased their anxiety/stress, while an even larger 70% agreed that positive interactions on social media boosted their motivation.

To test the hypothesis, we applied inferential statistics. Pearson's correlation measured the relationship between social media use (hours per day and usage intensity index) and mental health scores from the DASS-21 and GHQ-12. A composite "negative impact score" (based on Likert items regarding anxiety,

distraction, pressure, etc.) was also correlated with usage. t-tests were performed to compare negative-impact scores across gender and competition level and used chi-square tests to explore demographic differences, such as body image concerns in female athletes. ANOVA comparisons across competition levels were attempted but treated cautiously due to small subgroup sizes.

For qualitative data, thematic analysis were used. After familiarizing with transcripts, segments were coded, both deductively (based on literature and interview questions) and inductively (allowing new insights). Codes were grouped into key themes including: Emotional Rollercoaster, Validation and Motivation, Public Pressure and Expectation, Coping and Boundary-Setting, Community Support and Body Image and Appearance (specific to females). Themes were validated with supporting quotes.

Quantitative and qualitative data were then integrated in the discussion. Survey trends (e.g., anxiety rates) were enriched with narratives explaining emotional responses and coping strategies, offering a comprehensive view of social media's impact on athlete mental health.

Results:

Quantitative Findings:

The study surveyed 117 athletes from Goa across football (30%), cricket (25%), athletics (20%), taekwondo (15%) and swimming (10%). The group comprised 68% males and 32% females, with a mean age of 22.5 years. Most athletes competed at the state or national level (70%), with 10% at the amateur level and 7% international.

All athletes reported daily social media use, with Instagram being most common (85%), followed by Facebook (60%) and Twitter (20%). The average time spent was 2.8 hours per day. While 20% were heavy users (>4 hours/day), 15% kept usage below 1 hour. Many reported increasing usage during off-seasons and

reducing it before competitions.

When asked about overall mental health impact, responses centered around "neutral/mixed" (mean = 2.99 on a 5-point scale). About 27% viewed the impact as positive, while 39% leaned negative, indicating a slight tilt toward adverse experiences.

Psychological Effects revealed by Likert items include:

- **Anxiety & Stress**: 58% reported anxiety from negative comments and 50% feared judgment on posts.
- **Mood & Self-esteem**: Around 45% felt discouraged by social media; 48% felt uplifted by praise.
- **Image Pressure**: 60% felt pressured to maintain a certain image, especially females (74% vs. 52% males).
- **Distraction**: 53% reported distractions from training; however, 55% also used it to relax.
- **Support**: 65% found emotional support through online communities and fans.

Mental health assessments (DASS-21, GHQ-12) showed mild average stress and anxiety, but 15–25% exhibited moderate to high distress. Importantly, time spent on social media correlated positively with stress ($r = .29$, $p = .002$) and anxiety ($r = .26$, $p = .006$). Heavy users had significantly higher psychological strain (GHQ-12 mean = 16.2 vs 13.1; $p = .025$).

Group comparisons showed older athletes (25–34) reported less stress and used social media less frequently. International athletes reported slightly fewer negative impacts than state/amateur players, though the difference was not statistically significant.

In conclusion, findings support the hypothesis that social media use relates to mental health outcomes in athletes, particularly stress and anxiety; while also revealing positive aspects like motivation and support.

Qualitative Findings:

Thematic analysis of interviews and open-ended responses revealed six key themes highlighting athletes' lived experiences with social media.

1. Emotional Rollercoaster: Athletes described fluctuation between motivation and distress based on online feedback. While praise boosted morale, criticism, even a single negative comment often had a deeper emotional impact, leading to anxiety and mood swings. Social media engagement felt like an unpredictable ride that affected self-esteem and emotional stability.

2. Public Pressure and Hypervisibility: Many athletes felt constantly judged, both in performance and in their personal lives. They feared backlash over seemingly harmless posts and described self-censorship to avoid criticism. Even casual posts, like a night out or a smiling photo after a loss, drew negative reactions, adding to performance and image-related stress.

3. Coping and Boundaries: Athletes developed various strategies to manage social media stress—logging off before competitions, muting or blocking negative accounts, or delegating account access. They leaned on teammates, coaches and family for support. Some also practiced mental skills like reframing criticism and setting screen-time limits, although a few resorted to escapist scrolling.

4. Validation and Identity: Despite challenges, many athletes found motivation, identity and opportunities through social media. Supportive comments, connections with role models and showcasing personal interests beyond sport contributed positively to mental well-being. Some gained exposure or career opportunities via their online presence.

5. Gendered Experiences: Female athletes reported more appearance-related stress, objectification and

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unsolicited advice, while male athletes faced pressure to appear mentally strong. This suggests that mental health interventions should consider gender-specific challenges linked to social media.

6. Detox and Maturity: Over time, athletes refined their relationship with social media. Some took intentional "detox" breaks after negative experiences and returned with healthier habits. Older athletes often felt less impacted, having learned to ignore or block negativity.

To summarise, athletes experience both support and strain online. They are actively adapting, drawing boundaries and seeking balance. Their stories add emotional depth to the data, illustrating how social media can empower or overwhelm depending on usage, mindset and available support.

Discussion:

This study found that social media plays a dual role in athletes' mental health, both a source of support and a cause of stress. Athletes reported that it influences mood, self-esteem and focus, with both positive and negative outcomes. Frequent use was moderately linked to anxiety and stress, supporting the view that social media is a significant psychological factor in sport.

Negative interactions often outweighed positives, echoing the concept of negativity bias. Harsh comments, fear of judgment and the pressure to present a perfect image led many athletes to feel anxious or discouraged. Social media created a "24/7 competition" where athletes felt constantly evaluated, increasing performance anxiety and mental fatigue.

Body image pressures were more common among female athletes, while males faced performance-related scrutiny. Despite challenges, many athletes reported benefits—such as motivation, social support and identity building, especially when using social media mindfully.

Encouragingly, several athletes employed effective coping strategies like content curation, screen-time limits and seeking support. Elite athletes seemed more resilient, possibly due to experience and resources. The need for training in social media literacy and psychological resilience was evident across all levels.

Ultimately, the impact of social media is usage and context-dependent. Balanced engagement, guided by education and support, can help athletes harness its benefits while minimizing harm.

Conclusion:

Social media has both positive and negative effects on athletes' mental health. While it provides motivation, connection and identity, it also increases anxiety, pressure and distraction. Most athletes experience a mix of both, with younger and heavier users more prone to stress. The overall impact depends on usage habits, coping strategies and support systems. Educating athletes and integrating mental health care into training are essential to managing these effects.

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