

SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT ON ATHLETES: IDENTITY AND MENTAL HEALTH – A SECONDARY DATA REVIEW

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Abstract:

This paper examines the impact of social media on athletes' identity, self-presentation, and mental health using secondary data, existing literature, and global statistics. Findings show that while social media offers opportunities for visibility, branding, and community support, it also contributes to pressure, comparison, anxiety, cyberbullying, and identity confusion among athletes. A narrative review approach was used. Research from the APA, NCAA, Pew Research Center, WHO, and scholarly journals indicates that between 60–70% of young athletes experience stress due to online self-presentation, and approximately 40% report anxiety linked to negative feedback. Positive themes include skill learning, peer connection, and motivation. The paper concludes with recommendations for athletes, coaches, and institutions to create a healthier digital environment.

Keywords: Athletes, Social Media, Mental Health, Identity, Cyberbullying, Digital Pressure

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Introduction:

Social media has become one of the most influential elements in the lives of young people, including athletes who rely on digital platforms for communication, recognition, and identity formation. Reports from Pew Research (2023) show that over 95% of teenagers use YouTube, while 67% use TikTok and 62% use Instagram. Athletes use these platforms to present their achievements, interact with fans, and build personal brands. However, constant visibility can also create pressure, comparison, and mental strain.

Review of Literature:

Multiple studies highlight the influence of social media on athlete well-being. NCAA (2022) reports show that 33% of college athletes experience high levels of anxiety. APA (2023) highlights that comparison and cyberbullying increase risk of depression. Social comparison theory suggests athletes judge themselves based on curated images of peers. Researchers such as Smith (2021) and Gomez (2020) found that athletes with larger online presence experienced both greater opportunities and greater mental strain.

Methodology:

The study uses a secondary data narrative review approach. Data was collected from journal articles, reports, surveys, and organizational publications. No primary data or field survey was conducted.

Sources include WHO statistics, APA reports, NCAA mental health surveys, and publications from sports psychology journals. Themes were identified using qualitative analysis of repeated concepts across studies.

Findings (Thematic Analysis):

Theme 1: Pressure to Maintain an Ideal Image

Around 70% of young athletes report pressure to appear perfect online.

Theme 2: Social Comparison

Pew Research shows that 40% of teens compare themselves to others daily, leading to self-doubt.

Theme 3: Cyberbullying

NCAA reports indicate that 30–35% of athletes face online trolling or negative comments.

Theme 4: Positive Identity and Support

Social media allows athletes to share achievements, connect with mentors, and access peer communities.

Theme 5: Branding and Opportunities

Platforms like Instagram help athletes gain sponsorships, NIL deals, and visibility.

Discussion: The findings suggest that social media is a double-edged sword. While athletes gain recognition and motivation, they also struggle with unrealistic expectations. The constant need to present success and strength reduces the space for vulnerability. Cyberbullying and comparison deepen anxiety. However, supportive platforms and role models who talk openly about mental health, like Simone Biles, help normalize help-seeking.

Conclusion: Social media significantly shapes athletes' identity and mental health. It offers opportunities but also poses risks. Secondary data indicates that visibility, comparison, and cyberbullying are major challenges. Athletes benefit from guidance, digital literacy training, and mental health support systems.

Implications:

- Coaches should educate athletes on healthy digital habits.
- Institutions must provide mental health support.
- Parents should monitor and guide social media use.
- Athletes must learn to balance online presence with emotional well-being.

Limitations: This study uses secondary data only. No primary data or field survey was conducted. Some statistics may differ across countries or sports.

Future Scope: Future research may include primary surveys with athletes, gender-based comparison, and the impact of specific platforms such as TikTok or Instagram.

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