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**Examining the Influence of Social Media Engagement and Its Effect on “Mental Well-Being” and Performance of College Athletes**

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## **Abstract**

This research focused on how social media can affect the performance and mental health of athletes. Social media is used world-wide each day and athletes are included in the list of users. This study examined if social media contributed to the well-being of university athletes. Burnout and mental toughness are discussed and athletes' academic and sport performance is presented. Also, athletes' emotional intelligence and connection to sports performance is explored as is their work-life balance concerns.

**Keywords:** Burnout, mental well-being, athlete engagement, mental toughness, emotional intelligence

## **Introduction**

Mental health can be defined broadly as it encompasses one's emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It includes how people conduct themselves in various situations, their feelings about themselves and others. According to Merino et al., (2024), mental health manifests itself in athletes in the context of self-esteem, body image satisfaction, and the psychological pressure experienced by the athletes due to social media exposure. College athletes experience changes in mental health due to the added stressors associated with strenuous academics while being an athlete in one or more sports, maintaining the training schedules, as well as balancing other life activities such as family, church and leisure activities. Athletes' use of social media may affect their performance and developing and identity (Maurici, 2023). Therefore, the ideal well-being of athletes would be a state of being free from psychological disorders and achieving mental health wellness during sports engagements and afterwards.

## **Literature Review**

Social media is a widely used phenomenon that affects every aspect of one's daily lives. College athletes, similar to most college students, use social media to connect with others about a variety of topics but especially their favorite sports. There are mixed-methods research that show how using social media affects college athletes' mental health and their performance in sports. Athletes often feel pressure from being a student first and then a participant in sports. As such research show social media can cause feelings of anxiety, low self-esteem issues, and even poor academic performance. With a focus on important parts of mental health such as managing

emotions, staying strong mentally, and having good social connections, research confirms the challenges college athletes face in today's digital world.

Discussed below is a sample of the vast amount of literature with a focus on the relationship between mental health and sports, especially on college athletes who are at a higher risk of maintaining satisfactory grades than that of the general population of their peers. First, Liu et al. (2022) identified a link among mental stress, basic mental needs, and sports burnout with college football players during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study showed that when athletes' basic psychological needs are not met, the players tend to feel anxious and stressed which can lead to burnout. Second, Ozcan (2022) investigated burnout and mental health in a sporting context by following athlete engagements and mental resilience as moderate variables. The results showed that athletes with stronger mental resilience, proper engagement, and dedication to their activities are least likely to experience burnout and stress-related issues. In other words, they tend to perform well even though they live in the two worlds, school and sports, football, track or basketball, to name a few. According to Maurici (2023), the use of social media increases the mental stresses of student-athletes because of the need to compare themselves to others and assume different performance standards which soon leads to anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression.

Finally, Kelly O'Neill (2021), reports on the connection between emotional intelligence and how college athletes feel about their mental health. O'Neil refers to emotional intelligence as the ability to regulate one's feelings/emotions. They found that higher emotional intelligence is linked to lower levels of stress and anxiety as reported by the athletes themselves. Effectively handling emotions and relationships was linked to an improvement of both physical performance and mental health. Highlighted here is the significance of emotional intelligence and athletes'

counterproductive engagements that tend to leave them with elevated anxiety, alcohol abuse and even pure exhaustion. Using their emotional intelligence would help them to seek help when needed and to have positive experiences coupled with better mental health.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Models Related to Mental Well-Being**

There are various theories and conceptual models that describe mental well-being in athletes, specifically athletic burnout prevention and assessment. One of the more popular models is the Six Factor Model of Athletic Mental Energy (Singh et al., 2024). Singh et al used this model in a study of 50 male athletes. A profile questionnaire was used as was an 18-item scale to assess the Psychological Well-Being (PWB) of each athlete. Findings showed that when an athlete's direct mental energy, positivity, and motivation are enhanced their performance is heightened and mental health wellness is observed. Hammoudi et al. (2020) proposed another role models. Their findings showed that athletes who demonstrated high enthusiasm for their sport and were also surrounded by influential people have positive well-being and tend to perform above average. This addresses the importance of powerful mentoring factors that would help enhance a sportsman's psychophysical state and provide the necessary psychological support. A third model comes from Ozcan (2022) (presented earlier) who proposed a burnout model where burnout and mental well-being in sports was studied with the mediating role of athlete engagement and mental toughness. Ozcan collected data from 103 females and 148 males at a selected university. His findings showed that weak athlete engagement and mental toughness may cause social isolation and lower academic performance and even more stress and insomnia. Moreover, athlete engagement mediates the relationships between burnout and mental well-being. That is, athletes who work harder to excel in sports, experience less burnout. Mental toughness though was not found to be significant.

## **Discussion**

Aforementioned studies suggest that there is a connection between use of social media, especially passive activities like scrolling through feeds and athletes' performance. Athletes who spend considerable time on social media without interacting with others online were more likely to perform poorly (Correia, 2018). Similar to other studies, social media usage has been found to distract learners/athletes during training and competitive events (Maurici, 2023). For instance, posting content and interacting with fans or teammates were linked to positive performance improvement. Maurici used cross-sectional surveys with athletes who engaged in social media to interact with the teams and share their experiences. Of importance here is that the type of engagement that one has on social media greatly determines the effects realized regarding performance. In other words, social media is likely to yield positive outcomes rather than negative consequences.

More specifically, passive and active participation in social media continues to a topic that most organizations grapple with. Passive use of social media can lead to a state of unhealthy mental health and reduced performance, while actively participating in social media can create a feeling of togetherness and motivation and improved performance (Prasetya & Chow, 2023). Social media has shifted the potential impact on mental health through factors like emotional intelligence. For example, participants with greater counter-vailing resilience showed improved coping mechanisms and developed more exposure to stress from social media usage among athletes (Zuhair et al., 2020). Simply stated, adding emotional intelligence training to sports organizations could be helpful for mental health wellness and higher sports performance.

## **Conclusion**

This study presents important findings on the complex interactions between social media interaction, psychological health, and performance of college athletes. The research concludes that passive use of social media has adverse effects on mental health and reduces performance levels, while being active on social media can increase support and motivation. Such findings are evidence for the link between the state of psychological health and performance on the athletic field that enhances the understanding of the field in the branch of sports psychology. Since more and more athletes have social media as an inseparable part of their lives, it is high time that athletic programs pay special attention to developing mental health support and services as well as proper staff training on the recognition and management of emotional aspects related to a sport and the “social media connection”. To expand the knowledge and increase the validity of research results, future studies should examine the long-term effects of social media participation on athletes' well-being and their academic achievement and sports productivity.

### **Limitations of the Study and Areas for Future Research**

The use of self-responding data may yield biased answers. In some of the studies, some athletes may have failed to report negative encounters with social media. More research needs to be done over a longer period of time to see how changes in social media usage impact athletes' mental health and school athletic performance. There is a need to increase the sample size and include diverse populations.

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