

CONSIDERATIONS ON THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE MEDIA ON ATHLETES' IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE: How Media Exposure Influences Self-Image, Psychological Pressure, and Sports Motivation

CONSIDERAÇÕES SOBRE O IMPACTO DAS MÍDIAS SOCIAIS E DA MÍDIA NA IDENTIDADE E NO DESEMPENHO DOS ATLETAS: como a exposição à mídia influencia a autoimagem, a pressão psicológica e a motivação esportiva

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the impact of social media and media exposure on athletes' identity, motivation and performance. Based on a theoretical review of recent studies in Sports Psychology, the text seeks to understand how the use of social networks affects the emotional well-being, sports self-image and competitive performance of athletes. The study explores three main axes: the construction of sports identity, the psychological pressure generated by constant exposure, and the effects on motivation and performance. As final considerations, the article proposes that coaches, sports psychologists and athletes develop strategies for the conscious use of social networks. It also suggests that future research explore individual differences in the way athletes deal with these exposures, in the long term and in different cultural contexts. In short, the strategic and regulated use of social networks can be an ally or a threat, depending on how it is conducted.

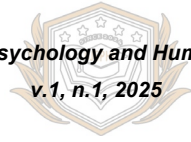
Keywords: Social media; Sports identity; Mental health; Emotional regulation.

Resumo

Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar o impacto das mídias sociais e da exposição midiática na identidade, motivação e desempenho de atletas. A partir de uma revisão teórica de estudos recentes em Psicologia do Esporte, o texto busca compreender como o uso das redes sociais afeta o bem-estar emocional, a autoimagem esportiva e a performance competitiva dos atletas. O estudo explora três eixos principais: a construção da identidade esportiva, a pressão psicológica gerada pela exposição constante, e os efeitos sobre a motivação e o desempenho. Como considerações finais, o artigo propõe que treinadores, psicólogos esportivos e atletas desenvolvam estratégias de uso consciente das redes sociais. Também sugere que futuras pesquisas explorem as diferenças individuais na forma como os atletas lidam com essas exposições, a longo prazo e em contextos culturais diversos. Em suma, o uso estratégico e regulado das redes sociais pode ser uma aliada ou uma ameaça, dependendo da forma como é conduzido.

Palavras-chave: Mídias sociais; Identidade esportiva; Saúde mental; Regulação emocional.

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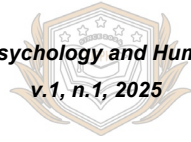


1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has revolutionized how athletes engage with fans, sponsors, and media. Today, thanks to platforms like Instagram and TikTok, sports individuals can directly control their public persona, posting everything from training sessions to personal milestones and victories. Despite such advantages, however, this constant visibility also creates profound challenges to both their mental well-being and sporting performance (Hayes; Filo; Riot; Geurin, 2019). As such, there is increasing interest across Sport Psychology in exploring how this new digital landscape influences essential domains like self-confidence, emotional control, and the psychological pressures faced by sports individuals (Rice et al., 2016).

This article aims to investigate the impact of social media and media exposure on athletes' identity and performance. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How does interaction on social media influence the way athletes construct their sporting identity? (2) In what way does media exposure affect the psychological pressure and mental health of these individuals? (3) What are the effects of this constant exposure on motivation and athletic performance? By addressing these questions, the intent is to shed light on the role of social media in athletes' lives and to suggest practical strategies for managing this exposure in a healthy manner.

The rapid growth of social media has provided athletes with an unprecedented opportunity to communicate directly with the public, allowing a closeness and authenticity previously impossible through traditional media. However, this more direct contact has brought additional pressure to maintain a perfect image under the constant scrutiny of followers (Filo; Lock; Karg, 2014). Anxiety and insecurity can increase, especially due to continual public evaluations and comments about their performance (Rice et al., 2016). Frequently, the comparison with other athletes and the need for online approval generate feelings of inadequacy and insecurity (Hayes; Filo; Riot; Geurin, 2019). On the other hand, when used strategically, social media has the potential to strengthen athletes' self-confidence, allowing them to construct inspiring and authentic personal narratives (Smith; Sanderson, 2015). Thus, understanding these dynamics becomes essential for proposing effective strategies that minimize negative impacts and maximize the benefits of digital presence in athletes' lives.



2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Media and the Construction of Athletic Identity: Challenges, Opportunities, and Psychological Implications

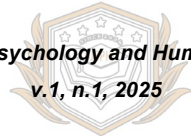
Social media has profoundly transformed how athletes communicate with the public, allowing them to showcase a more authentic sporting identity and rely less on traditional media (Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012). This direct connection with fans enhances emotional bonds and boosts engagement, as athletes can share everyday moments and interact in real time (Geurin-Eagleman; Burch, 2016). Yet, with this increased freedom also comes the constant pressure to maintain a flawless and consistent public image.

Nowadays, building a “personal brand” is key for athletes seeking visibility, sponsorships, and recognition, which often means carefully curating content that reflects personal values, lifestyle, and unique interests (Geurin-Eagleman; Burch, 2016). However, upholding such an idealized image can lead to significant emotional strain, particularly under constant public scrutiny—especially during challenging times such as defeats or injuries—and may result in internal conflicts and psychological distress (Rice et al., 2016).

Moreover, continuous exposure on social media can deeply affect athletes’ self-esteem and perception of performance. Regular commentary, comparisons with other athletes, and the pressure to display only moments of success contribute to anxiety and insecurity (Rice et al., 2016). This selective curation, which highlights only positive aspects, sets unrealistic expectations of uninterrupted achievement, increasing the likelihood of mental health issues like anxiety or depression when real outcomes fall short of the idealized online persona (Geurin-Eagleman; Burch, 2016; Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012).

2.2 Psychological Pressure and Media Exposure: Challenges, Impacts, and Coping Strategies for Athletes

Constant interaction with the public on social media can bring both considerable benefits and noteworthy challenges for athletes. On the one hand, positive feedback and encouraging remarks from fans can increase motivation and bolster athletes’



confidence, fostering a supportive environment of genuine engagement (Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012). On the other hand, repeated exposure to harsh criticism and unrealistic expectations can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and psychological strain.

Studies indicate that this relentless pressure to live up to the public's expectations heightens the risk of disorders such as anxiety and depression, particularly among elite athletes (Rice et al., 2016). Additionally, the obligation to maintain a flawless social media image can result in excessive self-imposed standards, increasing the likelihood of emotional and physical burnout. Continual comparisons with other athletes and public critiques can gradually erode self-confidence, directly undermining athletic performance (Rice et al., 2016).

In this environment, issues like cyberbullying and “cancel culture” become especially concerning. Cyberbullying involves ongoing virtual harassment—such as insults, humiliation, and threats—that can substantially harm athletes' emotional well-being, exacerbating symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kavanagh; Brown; Jones, 2017). Meanwhile, cancel culture, defined by collective boycotts in response to perceived inappropriate behaviors or statements, can lead to social isolation and tarnish an athlete's reputation, heightening negative emotions such as shame, guilt, and despair (Kavanagh; Brown; Jones, 2017). A telling recent example is the case of player Kirian Rodríguez, who chose to abandon his social media platforms after intense personal and professional criticism, illustrating the severe and damaging consequences of online harassment (López-González; Griffiths, 2016).

Given these challenges, it is crucial for athletes to develop effective coping strategies and carefully manage their social media interactions to safeguard their mental and emotional well-being.

2.3 Social Media as a Factor in Motivation and Performance: Potential Benefits, Risks, and Self-Regulation Strategies

Social media is playing an increasingly prominent role in athletes' lives, directly influencing their motivation and performance. Many athletes use these platforms to connect more closely with fans, gain inspiration, and reinforce their sporting identity. However, others face considerable challenges related to excessive exposure, constant negative feedback, and overreliance on external validation. The impact of social media

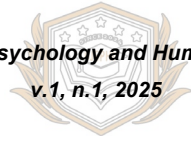


on athletic performance largely depends on how each individual athlete processes online responses and on their emotional capacity to cope with external criticisms and pressures.

Online feedback heavily affects athletes' motivation, and when it is positive and constructive, it can strengthen their confidence and sense of belonging. In these cases, encouraging comments, fan support, and public recognition often boost athletes' motivation and reinforce their sporting identity (Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012). However, when feedback is negative, critical, or marked by constant comparisons, it can trigger intense feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and inadequacy, seriously undermining self-esteem and sports performance (Rice et al., 2016). Furthermore, relying excessively on external online approval can weaken intrinsic motivation, making athletic performance overly influenced by public opinion (Rice et al., 2016).

The way athletes interact with the digital environment ultimately determines social media's effect on their performance. Some are able to use these platforms strategically, increasing motivation by building positive support networks and maintaining a healthy, inspiring focus (Hayes; Filo; Riot; Geurin, 2019). By contrast, athletes who continuously monitor online feedback risk experiencing high stress, competitive anxiety, reduced concentration, and significant drops in their performance—particularly when external expectations are not met (Filo; Lock; Karg, 2014; Rice et al., 2016).

Within this context, emotional self-regulation emerges as a vital skill for managing the challenges posed by social media in a healthy way. Athletes who adopt effective emotional self-regulation strategies—such as mindfulness (focused awareness), cognitive restructuring (positive reframing of criticism), and establishing clear boundaries for digital platform use—are better equipped to protect their self-confidence and emotional well-being (McGannon; Curtin; Schinke; Schweinbenz, 2012; Browning; Sanderson, 2012). The support of sport psychologists also plays a pivotal role, offering personalized emotional guidance and practical techniques to help athletes benefit from social media without compromising their mental health and athletic performance.



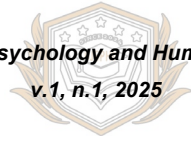
2.4 Final Considerations and Future Perspectives: Social Media, Athletic Identity, and Competitive Performance

Social media has become an integral part of athletes' lives, shaping their sporting identity, motivation, and performance. On the one hand, it offers opportunities for engagement, personal branding, and immediate feedback; on the other, it exposes athletes to serious challenges, including psychological pressure, constant criticism, and social comparisons. How athletes handle these digital interactions can ultimately determine whether social media's effects are beneficial or detrimental to their careers and well-being (Rice et al., 2016; Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012).

By examining the opportunities and pressures associated with social media, this article underscores that effective use of digital platforms can strengthen athletes' self-confidence and authenticity (Smith; Sanderson, 2015). However, the need to maintain a polished public image can also elevate anxiety and insecurity, particularly when performance dips or online feedback is overwhelmingly critical (Filo; Lock; Karg, 2014; Rice et al., 2016). Moreover, continued exposure and comparisons with peers can create a cycle of self-doubt and stress, amplifying the very pressures that social media was initially intended to alleviate (Hayes; Filo; Riot; Geurin, 2019).

In this context, the dual nature of social media becomes clear: its capacity to offer genuine connection and immediate fan support is offset by the potential for heightened scrutiny and the perpetuation of unrealistic expectations (Lebel; Danylchuk, 2012). Future investigations could, therefore, deepen our understanding of how athletes develop coping strategies—both psychological and practical—that enable them to benefit from the positive aspects of online visibility while minimizing its adverse effects (Rice et al., 2016). Beyond individual measures, studies might also explore broader support systems, including the roles of coaches, sports organizations, and mental health professionals in guiding athletes' healthy engagement with social media.

In sum, social media can be either an asset or a liability for athletes, depending on how they navigate its demands and opportunities. By continuing to refine our knowledge of the interplay between digital platforms, athletic identity, and mental well-being, we can help ensure that athletes capitalize on the motivational and branding benefits of social media without compromising their performance or psychological health.



3 SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS DISCUSSED IN THE ARTICLE

This article has provided an in-depth discussion on the relationship between social media and athletic performance, highlighting three key points:

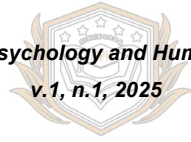
1. Identity and media exposure – Social media enables athletes to construct and project their sporting identities, but also places pressure on them to maintain a consistent public image. This exposure can affect their self-esteem and perceptions of sporting competence (Hayes; Filo; Riot; Geurin, 2019).
2. Psychological pressure and emotional impacts – Digital interaction can heighten stress and anxiety in athletes, particularly when they are targets of harsh criticism, cyberbullying, or cancel culture. Research shows that athletes' mental health is vulnerable to constant public scrutiny (Kavanagh; Brown; Jones, 2017; López-González; Griffiths, 2016).
3. Motivation and performance – Online feedback may be a source of motivation, but it can also undermine performance and foster discouragement, depending on the nature of the interaction and how effectively athletes can regulate their emotions. Athletes who filter out negative content tend to use social media in a healthier way (McGannon; Curtin; Schinke; Schweinbenz, 2012).

A central contribution of this article lies in merging perspectives on sporting identity, mental health, and competitive performance. It underscores the importance of emotional self-regulation as a fundamental strategy for optimizing athletes' use of social media, thereby maximizing its advantages and minimizing potential emotional and competitive setbacks.

3.1 Implications for Coaches, Sports Psychologists, and Athletes

The findings of this study offer direct implications for coaches, sports psychologists, and athletes:

- **Coaches** need to be aware of the potential impact social media can have on their athletes' performance and guide them toward establishing healthy boundaries in its use. Fostering a sports environment that prioritizes psychological well-being is key to alleviating external pressures stemming from the digital realm (Browning; Sanderson, 2012).



- **Sports psychologists** should incorporate media exposure management into their psychological training programs for athletes. Strengthening emotional self-regulation skills can help athletes cope with social media–related stress and build greater psychological resilience (Rice et al., 2016).
- **Athletes** are encouraged to adopt mindful strategies when using social media, filtering out harmful content while seeking interactions that reinforce their sporting identity and motivation. Moreover, professional support and psychological training can be indispensable in managing digital exposure and its emotional consequences (Filo; Lock; Karg, 2014).

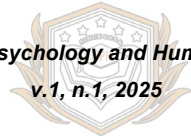
4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 Suggestions for Future Research on This Topic

Although scholarly interest in social media and athletic performance has grown in recent years, there are still gaps that warrant deeper investigation. Possible directions for future research include:

- **Individual differences in social media impact** – Examining how factors such as age, competitive level, and gender influence athletes' responses to media exposure.
- **Longitudinal studies** – Analyzing the long-term effects of social media use on athletes' careers, mental health, and performance over extended periods.
- **Effective psychological interventions** – Investigating the effectiveness of emotional regulation programs and training aimed at conscious, balanced social media use.
- **Cultural comparisons** – Exploring how athletes from different countries and sociocultural contexts manage the influence of social media and their public exposure.

By delving deeper into these areas, academic research can offer more robust recommendations for coaches, sports psychologists, and athletes, helping them navigate the challenges of the digital environment more effectively.



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