The Impact of Social Media on the Mental Health of Student-Athletes

Jessica Brougham, Illinois State University
Rebecca Achen (Advisor), Illinois State University

Student Research Competition Finalist
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
Session: Student Research Competition Finalists

Abstract 2021-116
Mode: Synchronous
Friday June 4, 2021, 1:15 PM - 1:35 PM

The impact of social media on mental health has been studied topic in the general population. Previous research by Woods and Scott (2016) and Levenson et al. (2016) showed that social media has an impact on sleep quality, while Benitez and Gunstad (2012) were able to link poor sleep with mental health issues. Additionally, Fathima et al (2019) found that social media impacts anxiety. Conducting this research on student-athletes is important as they are part of an at-risk population to suffer from mental health issues (Etzel, 2010).

To achieve the purpose of identifying the impact of social media on the mental health of student-athletes, a survey was created. This survey included 11 scales measuring athletic identity, depression/anxiety, perceived stress, resilience, vitality, satisfaction with life, self-esteem, burnout, social networking sites frequency, online harassment and social media use. Nine institutions agreed to distribute the survey across the three NCAA divisions (5 Division I, 2 Division II and 2 Division III). This resulted in the survey being completed by 94 student-athletes. Analysis of the quantitative data took place in the form of multiple regression analysis. Results indicated that Division II and graduate student-athlete populations suffered from higher levels of depression and anxiety. Because regression analysis indicated that males and females used social media significantly differently, the file was split, and regression analyses were run for each group individually. A specific finding in the female population, in support of previous research conducted by Faraon & Kaipainen (2014), was a negative relationship between female student-athletes, self-esteem and Facebook use. This research project also identified a strong relationship between anxiety/depression and burnout, suggesting student-athletes with higher levels of anxiety or depression are at a higher risk of developing burnout. While this was exploratory research with a small sample size, the findings do suggest that social media can impact student-athlete mental health. Further research should be completed on the impact of social media on user's sleep and perceived stress. Additionally, further research on online harassment should be completed with a larger sample of non-freshman to determine if social media is putting student-athletes at risk. While future research should be completed on activities that positively impact student-athletes mental health, this initial study suggests that athletic departments should begin to educate student-athletes on safe social media use.